Chicago Literary Hall of Fame

REGINALD GIBBONS

Fuller Award for Lifetime Achievement

Reservations Required
ChicagoLiteraryHOF.org
September 30th, 2021 6-7:15pm
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“THEY and THEY and more THEYS, the world must be full of THEM. And for someone, at some time, perhaps WE (there is no WE any longer) were THEY, and THEY were WE. But there must always have been, there must always be the difference that divides—divides one way, divides two ways or a dozen ways.”

– from Sweetbitter
TONIGHT’S PROGRAM

Liesl Olson
Randall Albers
Ray Santisteban
Ydalmi V. Noriega
Michael Warr
Stuart Dybek
Angela Jackson
Chris Abani
Donald G. Evans
Reginald Gibbons
Alex Kotlowitz & Reginald Gibbons
Randall Albers

Our Host: The Newberry Library
About the Fuller Award
Mini Documentary
Host
Tribute
Tribute
Tribute
Tribute
Presenting the Fuller Award for Lifetime Achievement
Acceptance Speech
In Conversation
Closing

Reg at Warren Wilson with the faculty
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 first nine Fuller Awards were presented to 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), and Sandra Cisneros (2021).

With the passing of Wolfe in 2019 and Petrakis earlier this year, the CLHOF established a policy of elevating all Fuller Award winners to induction status, pending board approval.

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

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**Writing a Book**

*He must prosecute it yet further, he must sequester himself with its intrinsics (and extrinsics), he must designate and assign it sufficiently and properly, then when he has finished he must dissociate himself from it and throw it to others.*

– from “Change the Goddamn Thing”
BIBLIOGRAPHY

POETRY:

Roofs, Voices, Roads (Quarterly Review of Literature, 1979; Quarterly Review of Literature Prize).


Saints (Persea Books, winner of the National Poetry Series competition, 1986).

Maybe It Was So (University of Chicago Press, 1991; Carl Sandburg Award).

Sparrow: New and Selected Poems (Louisiana State University Press, 1997; Balcones Poetry Prize).

Homage to Longshot O’Leary (Holy Cow! Press, 1999).

It’s Time (Louisiana State University Press, 2002; Texas Institute of Letters Best Book of Poetry Award).

Creatures of a Day (Louisiana State University Press, 2008; Finalist for the National Book Award in poetry).

Slow Trains Overhead: Chicago Poems and Stories (University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Last Lake (University of Chicago Press, 2016).


FICTION:

Five Pears or Peaches (Broken Moon Press, 1991).


CRITICISM:


Also many literary essays, critical articles, and book reviews published in literary journals and anthologies.

TRANSLATIONS:


Sophocles, *Antigone* (Oxford University Press, 2003; co-translated with Charles Segal)


“In his telling and her responding there was some third thing created, more of a tale than a truth, more than he could have told of himself if he had only thought it to himself, inside himself. Yet, given this almost love-making of talk, back and forth, item and question, memory and interpretation, was it not her story rather than his? Was it a story that belonged to either him or her?”

– from *Sweetbitter*
EDITED VOLUMES:


Special two-volume issue of TriQuarterly: A Window on Poland (co-edited with Timothy Wiles, 1983) and Prose from Spain (1983).

Chicago (special issue of TriQuarterly, 1984).

Criticism in the University (Northwestern University Press, 1985; co-edited with Gerald Graff).


From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs & Art (special issue of TriQuarterly; co-edited with David Bunn, Jane Taylor, and Sterling Plumpp; reprinted by Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988).


Writing and Well-Being (special issue of TriQuarterly, 1989).


New Writing from Mexico (special issue of TriQuarterly, also published in cloth edition by TriQuarterly Books, 1992)

AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

1969-70: Woodrow Wilson Fellowship for graduate study at Stanford University.

1971-1972: Fulbright Program Fellowship (Spain).


1984-85: Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

1991: Poem, “From a Paper Boat” (published in Maybe It Was So), winner of the Poetry Society of America’s John Masefield Award.

1999-2000: Fellowship from Kaplan Humanities Institute at Northwestern University.

2003: Poetry Magazine’s John Frederick Nims Memorial Prize for a poem in translation (a passage of Sophocles).


2009: Named Chicago Tribune’s Chicagoan of the Year for Literature.


Gibbons has also had work included in Best American Poetry and The Pushcart Prize anthologies, and received The Denver Quarterly translation award for a translation of prose by Spanish poet Antonio Machado.
Chris Abani is an acclaimed novelist and poet. His most recent books are *The Secret History of Las Vegas*, *The Face: A Memoir*, and *Sanctificum*. He is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, the PEN/Hemingway Award, an Edgar Prize, a United States Artists Ford Fellowship, the PEN Beyond the Margins Award, a Prince Claus Award, the Hurston Wright Legacy Award, and a Lannan Literary Fellowship. Born in Nigeria, he is a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Board of Trustees professor of English and Comparative Literary Studies at Northwestern University. He lives in Chicago.

Randall Albers is Professor and Chair Emeritus of Fiction Writing at Columbia College Chicago, and founding producer of the long-running Story Week Festival of Writers. He received the Columbia College Teaching Excellence Award. As chair of the Fiction Writing Department, Albers fostered innovative interdisciplinary and community-based arts work in Chicago, and led development of abroad programs in Moscow, Prague, Florence, Bath, and Rome. A Story Workshop® Master Teacher, he has been a visiting professor at England’s Bath Spa University, lectured at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, and presented at numerous national and international conferences on teaching creative writing. His fiction, creative nonfiction, and scholarly work have appeared in a variety of literary journals. He is president of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame’s board of directors.

Stuart Dybek is the author of *The Coast of Chicago* and five other books of fiction, as well as two collections of poetry. His work is widely anthologized, and magazine publications have included *The New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *The Atlantic*, *Granta*, *Zoetrope*, *Ploughshares*, and *Poetry*. Dybek has received several literary awards including a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship.
**Donald G. Evans** is the author of three books, most recently the story collection *An Off-White Christmas*, and Founding Executive Director of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame.

**Angela Jackson** is an award-winning poet, novelist, and playwright who has published three chapbooks and four volumes of poetry. Born in Greenville, Mississippi and raised on Chicago’s South Side, she was educated at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. Jackson’s collections of poetry include *And All These Roads Be Luminous: Poems Selected and New* (TriQuarterly, 1998), which was nominated for the National Book Award; and *It Seems Like a Mighty Long Time* (TriQuarterly, 2015), nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and the PEN/Open Book Award, and a finalist for the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award and the Milt Kessler Poetry Prize. Jackson received a Pushcart Prize and an American Book Award for her chapbook *Solo in the Boxcar Third Floor E* (1985). Her forthcoming collection, *More Than Meat and Raiment: Poems*, will be published by Northwestern University Press in 2022.

**Alex Kotlowitz** is the author of four books including his most recent, *An American Summer*, which won the J. Anthony Lukas Book Prize. His first book, the national bestseller *There Are No Children Here*, was selected by the New York Public Library as one of the 150 most important books of the twentieth century. His second book, *The Other Side of the River*, received *The Chicago Tribune’s* Heartland Prize for Nonfiction. Kotlowitz, who has been honored in all three mediums, is the recipient of an Emmy, two Peabodys, the George Polk Award and the Harold Washington Literary Award. He was recently honored by the American Academy of Arts and Letters with the Harold D. Vursell Memorial Award for his lifetime of work, “which illuminates astonishing national inequities through the lens of individual experience.” Kotlowitz is a professor at Northwestern’s Medill School of Journalism.

**Ydalmi V. Noriega**, a writer and arts administrator, serves as director of programs and community engagement at the Poetry Foundation, overseeing live programming and organizational partnerships in Chicago and beyond.

Ray Santisteban has been an independent documentary filmmaker for over 31 years. A graduate of NYU’s film and TV production program, his work consistently gravitates towards issues of civil rights and artist profiles, addressing the themes of justice, memory and political transformation.

Kevin Theis has been an actor, writer, director and voice actor in Chicago for over thirty years. He has worked at the Goodman Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Oak Park Festival, Irish Theatre of Chicago and Next Theatre, among many others, and was most recently seen as Prospero in *The Tempest* for the Oak Park Festival this summer.

Michael Warr is a 2021 San Francisco Artist Grant and 2020 Berkeley Lifetime Achievement Award recipient. His books include *Of Poetry & Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin* (W.W. Norton), *The Armageddon of Funk*, and *We Are All The Black Boy* (Tia Chucha Press). Recognition for his writing and literary activity includes the San Francisco Library Laureate, Creative Work Fund Award for his multimedia project *Tracing Poetic Memory*, PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature, Black Caucus of the American Library Association Award, Gwendolyn Brooks Significant Illinois Poets Award, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship.
Reginald Gibbons: Who He Is

By Donald G. Evans

Really all that a writer can do is to keep reminding himself or herself to be who he is or who she is. That and the world that forms you is all you’ve got to work with.

– Reginald Gibbons in a 2011 conversation with WBEZ’s Alison Cuddy

While Chicago now has a long list of local literary luminaries, Reginald Gibbons has managed for four decades to remain among the city’s most important writers. Yet the world began for young Reg in Texas, in 1947. Texas remains part of the fabric of his life and work, just as Chicago has become rooted in his public and private consciousness.

In February 1953, when Reg had just turned six years old, his family moved from their modest Houston neighborhood into “the new house” including two acres of land, well outside the city in Spring Branch. His father managed the upgrade by working two jobs, weekdays selling small items to independent grocery stories and weekends selling model homes.

The new house was much larger and nicer. In the seldom-used dining room, the mural wallpaper showed Reg an idyllic small pond with banks rising to gentle green slopes under handsome trees, a landscape he’d never seen firsthand. Reg would later write that it was a vision of another kind of summer, somewhere much farther north.

Reg explored the empty Texas fields nearby, learned to ride and helped feed and brush the cheap, sometimes worn-out or “unmannered” horses that his father would buy, bring back to health and sell. Reg and his siblings fed the chickens and fetched their eggs. But he also began violin at age five, quickly switching to piano. He treated school as “a contest” in which an A was proof of winning. There was no public library nearby, but his mother provided the children with many used books from a Goodwill store. He also borrowed books from school friends.

Reg read those books greedily. The adventurous fantasies formed
and fed him when he was very young, and later he devoured more advanced books, stories of “utter boy-independence on some faraway expedition, or in some mythical American town of two-story houses, elm trees, snowfalls, and bravery, or in a room furnished with tables, bookshelves, cabinets, mounted animal heads, amateur scientific apparatuses, paleontological specimens, a shortwave radio, souvenirs of exploration and other such boy-dreamed paraphernalia.”

In Reg’s high school of 2,400 students, fewer than a dozen were not white. The schools, churches and everything else in his part of Texas were segregated and predominantly fundamentalist. It was literature and music that gave Reg a sense of a larger world and other ways of life.

Reg played clarinet in the high school band and Houston’s all-city youth symphony, and still played piano in a rock band, some contests, and once as a concerto soloist with the high school band. Yet he found, early on, that he could not truly enjoy performing.

College was a challenge when Reg got into Princeton, where tuition and board totaled $3,000, half his family’s annual income. He was determined to pay for college himself, and managed to get a dining hall job and a scholarship based on his grades and high standardized test scores. He planned to major in English, but back then Princeton required an interview with a member of the faculty before declaring a major. The English professor made Reg feel so unwelcome as a public-school graduate, that afterwards he walked across the courtyard to the Romance Languages Department and declared a major in Spanish and Portuguese.

After Princeton, Reg went on to Stanford, a place that confirmed his love of writing and scholarship as he worked with the English poets Donald Davie and Thom Gunn. He won a fellowship from the Woodrow Wilson Foundation to fund his MA in English and creative writing, then studied poetry for his PhD in comparative literature. In his third year at Stanford, he won a Fulbright Fellowship to Spain, where he began work on his translations of the Spanish poet Luis Cernuda (1902-1963) and also visited Yugoslavia, Turkey, Italy, Switzerland, and Berlin (west and east).

After receiving his PhD in 1974, Reg worked adjunct teaching gigs at Trenton College, Princeton and Columbia, and a year teaching Spanish at Rutgers, as he began publishing poems and translations. His Selected Poems of Luis Cernuda
came out in 1977, followed by his first book of poems, 1979’s *Roofs Voices Roads*. He published poems and stories in many journals, but he wanted more than a good resumé. He was ready for a real career.

One day, on the sidewalk in front of the creative arts building at Princeton, Reg happened to talk for a few minutes with new faculty member Joyce Carol Oates. “*TriQuarterly*'s looking for a new editor,” she said. “Would you like me to nominate you?”

Oates’ letter no doubt helped Reg onto the list of finalists, but he knew his competitors were also armed with glowing recommendations. He headed to the Princeton library and rifled through all 11,000 pages of *TriQuarterly*. He looked for what the magazine’s editors had accomplished, and what they had not attempted. And after his meeting with the *TriQuarterly* search committee, Reg’s story moved to Chicago via Evanston in 1981.

Reg began a long, startlingly productive period that has yet to slow down. He was thrilled to be part of what he considered one of the truly great American cities, and in an idyllic campus setting--the lake in sight, the campus grounds a majestic park. Northwestern came close to realizing the dining room wallpaper scene he’d lived with as a boy.

The move to Evanston marked another beginning, as Reg and his first wife parted ways and he started anew with Cornelia Spelman and her two small children. That same year, Reg’s second collection of poems, *The Ruined Motel*, was published by Houghton Mifflin.

In a study crammed with books, art, manuscripts, photos, and ephemera representing everything Reg loved, and a piano in the living room, he set to work. Reg had his flesh-and-blood family, and his other family: books, piano scores and LPs. This is where Reg could be found, working, drawing, rewriting, creating, in seemingly every spare hour. Never a coffee-shop writer, Reg spread out his notes and notebooks, the printed hard copies of drafts and other manuscripts, and kept his many projects going, like a high-wire juggler keeping a number of balls in the air.

“*I respect and appreciate his gentleness, his caring about other people even outside of family,*” Cornelia has said. “*He goes to bat for people that have not*
gotten a fair shake. That comes not only from his integrity but also from having been an outsider himself. His plan was to figure out how to write and to be a midwife for other people’s work.”

Soon after arriving at TriQuarterly, Reg began working with Fred Shafer on a special Chicago issue. If there were any question whether Reg’s TriQuarterly would connect strongly to the city, even as the magazine expanded its boundaries far and wide, that Chicago issue was the resounding answer. The 1984 Chicago issue featured a roundtable discussion from the previous winter in Studs Terkel’s studio, including panelists Cyrus Colter, Maxine Chernoff, and Stuart Dybek. Ultimately the many contributions included work by Gwendolyn Brooks, Saul Bellow, Leon Forrest, Norman Maclean, and even a chapter from the deceased Lorraine Hansberry’s unpublished novel.

Long before diversity became a buzz word and quest in academia, publishing, and even the corporate world, Reg instinctively sought out a great range of voices. He knew there was, literally, a world of literature that American audiences had never heard or seen. Perhaps Reg’s experience as an outsider at Princeton—a smart Texas kid without a whiff of wealth or privilege—had sharpened his sensitivity, helped him hear the gentle raps at the door that others ignored.

Reg implemented his vision for TriQuarterly immediately, though some changes took longer and were more difficult. TriQuarterly started publishing more Black and other minority writers. The magazine reinstated poetry, all but eliminated during the previous editorship, and added book reviews. Under Reg’s stewardship, the magazine took on a more international appeal, with poems, stories and essays translated from a number of languages. Issues focused on Poland under martial law, Spain after the end of censorship, and the first U.S. anthology of Mexican writing since the 1950s. Reg organized an editorial team for a massive South African-themed issue during Apartheid. He staged a conference of South African writers, and another which became a special issue focused on the social and political positions of writers, “The Writer in Our World.” Other special issues included “Writing and Well-Being” and “Thomas McGrath: Life and the Poem.”

“Reg was always looking for new writers,” said Fred, who as a graduate student started working at the magazine a year before Reg’s arrival and continued as a key staff member, serving as Special Projects Editor, through Reg’s entire tenure. “He would pay attention to the quality of the writings, the rhythm, the
language. What always impressed me was the respect he paid to the writer and the work. Even with all those manuscripts flowing in, care was shown to each one. He really set a good example for all of us. It really was an office in which the things we feared about other offices weren’t true.”

“He has the ability to recognize excellence in many shapes,” said poet Sterling Plumpp, whose poems appeared regularly in *TriQuarterly* during Reg’s editorship. “Reginald’s greatest asset is an incredibly diverse ear. There is a great deal of wisdom and generosity there. Even in conversation, he searches for knowledge, refined points of view in dialogue, and he is committed and generous with his time.”

Soon after joining *TriQuarterly*, Reg was invited to join the Association of Writers & Writing Programs board of directors. He served for three years, having been brought onto the board, along with Ellen Bryant Voigt, to help solve the AWP’s financial crisis.

With other Chicago writers, Reg began work on creating The Guild Literary Complex, starting with events at Guild Books, owned by Richard Bray, located on the then-great 2400 block of Lincoln Avenue—the Biograph Theatre when it ran classic and indie movies every week, three bookstores, a French café, and The Red Lion Pub. Around 1989, the Guild attained its tax exempt nonprofit status. Foundations helped sustain the Guild Literary Complex for many years, but every dollar—as any literary-arts fundraiser knows—was hard to get.

From the beginning, the Guild reached out to underserved audiences and on behalf of under-represented minority writers. Programming included music and collaborative presentations. The Guild’s example may have led to the creation of many new reading series in Chicago, not only at bookstores but also other venues as well. The brilliant maestro of all this was poet, cultural critic and institutional guru Michael Warr, without whom the Guild Literary Complex would not have flourished and sustained itself. *TriQuarterly* frequently co-sponsored readings and other literary events with the Guild. And for a while, *TriQuarterly* published a small free newsprint magazine named *Quick Take*, containing excerpts from the most recent issue. *QT* was distributed at coffee houses, bookstores, music venues, and other spots. For a while, Reg served as the editor of Luis Rodriguez’s Tia Chucha Press, publishing books by A. Van Jordan, Terrance Hayes, Anne-Marie Cusac, and Tony Fitzpatrick.

“Reg would come into the bookstore and talk to everybody,” said poet Julie
Parson Nesbitt, then a manager at the Guild. “He’s such an incredibly modest, nice, wonderful person. He helps everybody but never takes the credit. When I was a young poet in my twenties, Reg just gave me a copy of his book. It was so generous of him, to encourage me as a writer that way, to see me. A bookstore clerk is not always visible to a lot of writers. Reg acknowledged and tried to help everybody.”

Reg left *TriQuarterly* in 1997, the same year Louisiana State University published his fifth book of poetry, *Sparrow*. He had accomplished an extraordinary amount in his time as editor. In addition to innovations at *TriQuarterly*, Reg acquired and edited William Meredith’s *Effort at Speech: New and Selected Poems* for the TriQuarterly Books imprint of Northwestern University Press, a book that won the 1997 National Book Award— the first time in over 15 years that a Chicago-area publisher had taken that prize. The TriQuarterly Books poetry collection by Linda McCarriston, *Eva-Mary*, was finalist for the National Book Award. In 2010, Reg led the process of moving the magazine online, a decision that gave *TriQuarterly* ten times more readers with its very first digital issue.

While Reg claims no “discoveries” in *TriQuarterly*, he published the early work of many important writers including Patricia Smith, Aleksandar Hemon, Mark Turcotte, Amy Hempel, C. D. Wright, Reginald Shepherd, Robert Boswell, Luis Rodriguez, Tony Hoagland, Rita Dove, Bruce Weigl, Ha Jin, Antonya Nelson, Mary Karr, Dan Chaon, Jianying Zha, Susan Straight, Tino Villanueva, Carol Frost, Campbell McGrath, Kay Ryan, Perri Klass, Li-Young Lee, B. H. Fairchild, and the first U.S.-published writing by the extraordinary Romanian writer Norman Manea. Reg also helped bring back into print the complete works of two remarkable American fiction writers, William Goyen and Cyrus Colter, through Northwestern University Press.

After many years helping sustain the Guild Literary Complex, Reg became engaged in creating the American Writers’ Museum. He was invited to join the team that would conceptualize what a literary museum could or should be—from what it would physically contain, to what visitors would do there—and from how it would present itself to the world digitally, to how it would sponsor in-person literary events and provide entertaining and substantial resources for readers at all levels. This really was the enterprise of great secular “people of the book.”

“I think it was the Guild that brought more people who were not even writers yet into thinking about writing, and starting to do it, and into feeling that there
was a friendly place, if they were Black or brown or Asian or from the Middle East or of any other minoritized group,” Reg has said. “Beginning with the Guild Literary Complex and the big Neutral Turf readings, and some other literary events, Chicago has developed the most active and broad-based literary culture it’s ever had. And partly that’s because Chicago itself, and our country, and the world, are different from what they were.”

In 1995 Reg published his first and only novel, *Sweetbitter*, an enormously ambitious, sweeping story of forbidden love and hideously racist practices in turn-of-the-century America, specifically East Texas. That novel, which took seven years to complete, won the prestigious 1995 Anisfield-Wolf Award.

Among his former student writers at Northwestern, Reg has said he takes pride in the tremendous talent, sense of purpose, dedication, and publications of such poets and fiction writers as Evie Shockley, Heidy Steidlmayer, Tara Stringfellow, Nick Reding, Dan Chaon, YZ Chin, Cristina Henriquez, Josh Weiner, and many others. At the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson, Reg’s students included Reginald Dwane Betts, Elizabeth Arnold, Martha Zweig, Dilruba Ahmed, Catherine Barnett, Beverley Brie Brahic, Elizabeth T. Gray, Jr., Martha Rhodes, and many others.

As a writer, “Reg is extremely erudite and has absolutely mastered the western canon from the Greeks all the way down to the expression of the day,” Sterling Plumpp has said. “He is a superb linguist whose best lines always aspire to a greater literacy. There is intent and precision in all his writing. He is extremely precise in his language.”

Reg just celebrated his 40th wedding anniversary with Cornelia. He is a step-grandfather four times over. While his newest poetry collection, *Renditions*, celebrates a symphony of international voices, he has often explored Chicago in his poetry and stories, especially in the 2010 collection *Slow Trains Overhead: Chicago Poems and Stories*. And the southern curl that Cornelia detected in his voice when they first met can still be heard, now and then.

“There is no slowing down for him,” Cornelia said. “He has a lot of projects and always will.”
“Tristesse, Tendresse”: The Poetry of Reginald Gibbons

by Barbara Egel

“Poems are one of the ways we speak ourselves to life—our own poems and those of others”


The words in the title of this essay are borrowed wares taken from the love poetry of one of Reginald Gibbons’ poetic forefathers, Osip Mandelstam. Not only are they from another poet, they’re in a language native to neither Mandelstam nor Gibbons. Somehow, I think the Fuller Award honoree will not mind. He has borrowed the words himself in his own work, which is so openly and joyously colored and guided by his vast reading that his poetry collections, especially the later ones, feel more like the best salon you’ve ever attended, with guests from Tu Fu to Neruda to Whitman, moderated and enriched by Gibbons’ own voice.

The title words also capture the atmosphere of Gibbons’ work. He catalogs the variations in tristesse: the lingering generational byproduct of the rage and pain of global tragedies such as colonization and genocide and the hopelessness of an encounter with a homeless veteran in a doorway on Belmont whose PTSD keeps him constantly fearful of remembered attacks. But there is tendresse, too, as Gibbons, in his poems, responds to the world’s joys and tragedies with such specificity and self-awareness that to be the object of his gaze must require great courage—and yield an even greater reward. To linger awhile at Milwaukee and Division on a cold day in the company of Reg Gibbons is to be unnerved by “an avid desire to be awestruck” and to know that this poet will make a kind of miracle of even a moment this small.

To read as Gibbons reads makes writing inevitable. The volume—in the sense of both size and aural intensity—of the literary voices he has absorbed generates the gorgeous spillover that is his own poetry. In translations, dedicated homages, and responses, he engages with poets across a broad swath of time and space, ensuring that in his work, readers hear the music of ancient Greece, Stalinist Russia, and contemporary Mexico, among many others. Every good writer teaches you how to read their work, and Gibbons invites rather than demands us to embrace the intertext in his poetry. There is tremendous nourishment and satisfaction in reading Gibbons’ poetry as though he’s the first poet you’ve ever
encountered, but to read a poem in concert with its influences adds richness that deepens with each rereading. This poet is a teacher, after all, and teaching us to love what he loves is one of the many gifts he gives his readers. Gibbons’ “On Argyle Street” is an atmospheric, modern poem about his adopted city:

Smoky, cold, broken late-afternoon clouds
mob eastward. Walking west, I see on sidewalks no one I know, no one who knows me,
yet from all our wandering at this same hour come shared underthoughts that we can hear. Then once again that which is not darkness un-darken our obscurity, slants rightly from sky to make bleak slush-ice meekly gleam.

But to have at hand a poem by Wang Wei (701-761), whose poetry sparks Gibbons’ work, not only introduces the source but showcases the originality of Gibbons’ homage:

Farewell to Hsin Chien at Hibiscus Pavilion

A cold rain mingled with the river
at evening, when I entered Wu;
In the clear dawn I bid you farewell,
lonely as Ch’u Mountain.
My kinsfolk in Loyang,
should they ask about me,
Tell them: “My heart is a piece of ice in a jade cup!”

The T’ang Dynasty poet represents extremes of time and geography among Gibbons’ influences, but the obvious ease with which Gibbons incorporates atmosphere, subject matter, and even poetic structure is an indication of how comfortable he is in drawing on the past while living wholly in the present. There is nothing of the forced exercise of mimicry, only the intimacy of one poet whispering to another.

Gibbons’ easy conversation with the past extends to his subject matter. The connections he makes among the deep time of the cosmos, historic human timelines, and the individual moments of ordinary days may be the most striking element of his work. In Mandelstam’s essay, “The Word & Culture,”
which Gibbons included in his craft anthology, *The Poet’s Work*, we encounter what must be a fundamental tenet in Gibbons’s *ars poetica*:

Poetry is the plow that turns up time so that deep layers of time, the black soil, appear on top. . . . One often hears: that might be good, but it belongs to yesterday. But I say: yesterday hasn't been born yet. It has not yet really come to pass. I want Ovid, Pushkin, Catullus afresh, and I will not be satisfied with the historical Ovid, Pushkin, Catullus.¹

Thus inspired (instructed? commanded?) to plow up the soil of time, Gibbons does just that in poems like, “Image of a Young Man, c. 1994,” in which the title character is living an ordinary life (perhaps in Bosnia; there are clues, but we are never told) of weightlifting with friends, trysts with forbidden women, and dreaming about his future. Suddenly he's thrust into history, locked in a prison camp and caught by a camera broadcasting to the speaker's television a world away. The nauseating speed of his change in circumstances brings home the fact that everything is uncertain, that we could be the next ones staring into that camera, the faces in the history books of great-grandchildren we'll never have. Or the deceptively gentler seeming “Hide from Time,” which turns a quiet Sunday with wife and daughter into a reflection on cosmic signficance and interconnection.

*Are you coming?*

You call to me. This universe is still creating itself and like all mere matter maybe we come from four billion years ago til we three

spin into being and braid our courses.

Perhaps the reason that this poet can step so fearlessly into the full span of history stems from his obvious comfort with dizzying changes in proportion. Reg Gibbons is a Texan by birth and upbringing, and from his poems about that time, it may be inferred that the prodigious size of that state, with its endless dome of sky and misleading promises of opportunity, has inured him to disorientation based on scale. (His other literary father, Thomas McGrath, was similarly comfortable with the agoraphobic's nightmare that is North Dakota.) Often in the poems, we zoom from a tiny moment, a small detail,

to a vertigo-inducing altitude away from the original situation, or a poem dives from the lofty to the specific with such speed it’s sure to crash, but a steady hand controlling it stops us, hovering just above the key detail that brings it together. “Refuge” begins with bigness: commercial development destroys the nature whose space it demands, but Gibbons is in on nature’s secrets. The enormity of bulldozers and inevitability of blueprints loses to the power of a blade of grass that knows its place in the grander plan:

. . . and each grass
Stem no different from
  innumerable others happens
To move in the soft sweet
  air in such a way as
To be fully itself, singular,
  it sways gracefully,
Alone now, alone, unafraid, at
  the center of the universal hour.

As you can see, even the form whirls away from its solid center, tossing us left to right, perhaps inviting a vertical reading down each side to make new poems of the words we’ve been given. In his more recent books, Gibbons adopts this form frequently, and the effect can vary depending on the subject. Sometimes, as in “Swear,” the central column is solid, and it steadies the poem so that it can ricochet out from itself and still maintain its integrity. Sometimes, as in “An Aching Young Man,” the connection from line to line feels fragile, the lines overlapping by just a few letters as the lost and injured boy tries feebly to talk his way into a few dollars.

Gibbons’ language, the vehicle for these vast and specific observations, surprises with each turn of the page. In “Afterward,” he puts us in the midst of the terrifying physicality of an undefined attack, replete with assault rifle reports, from which
the speaker and his friends flee. The line “Everyone’s lungs were bleating like smoke alarms—” offers so much to unpack even as the poem resists slowing down or relaxing its vigilance. “Everyone” is breathing hard, bleating like sheep to the slaughter, screeching loudly into the night while trying to remain hushed and hidden. A few careful, hurried words ramp up the tension, complicate the imagery, and set up the devastating final lines. But the love poems are where Gibbons’ specificity of language and image sticks and leaves its mark. These are love poems for adults who understand that imperfection is one of the things that makes love interesting. “Away From You” interlaces nature imagery with flashes of the beloved, “I think of holding gently a tight fistful of your / black hair and kissing you.” The simultaneous care and fervor of “gently” and “tight” is love in a nutshell. It is also particularly in the love poems that sound takes flight. “The Story” is an episodic love poem in which “horses graze and gorse blazes, / Money argues, dogs darken, bogs bark, warps woof.” The mouthfeel of such passages when read aloud makes up so much of the mood of the poem. Rhythm, alliteration, assonance, and the glide from one syllable to the next are part of the lesson of the work.

Finally, among the love poems is the one poem that may sum up the work of Reg Gibbons, if such a poet can be represented by a single piece. “Last Lake” narrates a canoe trip the couple in the poem has made many times before, and the speaker notes the changes in the surroundings as they travel. Gibbons the lover, the nature poet, and the poet of time beyond calendars is wholly present here. The poem lulls with its meandering dailiness: sleeping bags, canned beans, the mundanities of a campsite. Then the couple makes their way to a

“"It’s one of the deep realities of urban experience that the crowding of sensations and encounters whenever one is in the midst of it brings a lot of things into the mind, it’s not just memories, it is partly memories, there are strange matchups that happen in the psyche somewhere because of something seen, someone seen, a place, a sound, a smell, and there are also real present-moment experiences of what it’s like to live in a place that’s dense with people as opposed to what it’s like to live in a rural village or out in the real wilderness."

– Reginald Gibbons
lake off the expected path, and the context of being human in a place so loud with nature that it mutes humanity takes over the poem.

One of the loons
cries through the last of the twilight
with what would be grief if we, not it,
were to make that sound. But it's not.

There is no need to blazon or even address the beloved here. Simply being open to those thoughts and reaching for those words in the presence of one's companion is paean enough. *Tendresse* takes many forms.

This must all sound very daunting to the uninitiated, but the reason the poems can stretch as far as they do is the voice in and of them that manages themes large and small and generates the language. Gibbons' lyric persona—from his debut collection in 1979, *Roofs, Voices, Roads*, to this year's *Renditions*—is observant, melancholic, and in spite of self-doubt, has been tested and proven reliable. We can trust him not only to be honest but to continually question his place as a poet relative to the world and adjust as best he can. It's a very American voice, one that grew up on the unromantic side of the American west, educated itself into discomfort with its birthplace, and wants at once to wander continuously and to belong absolutely. It's a voice of late autumn and early spring when the cold penetrates without the illumination of holidays. It's a crepuscular voice, seeing full sun mostly between the buildings in the Loop or being seared by it in a Texas summer.

This poet-observer plies his varied skills with particular poignance in portraits of individuals, mostly unnamed, whose inner and outer lives are sometimes in sharp contrast, but Gibbons builds the bridge between them to show a whole, complex character. “A Meeting,” from *Homage to Longshot O'Leary*, tells of a tribute to a “hero,” an elderly woman being lauded at an event. But Gibbons also gives us her sharply contrasting thoughts.

thirty or so are gathered to honor the undaunted
long-lived hero

(while she thinks of her secret despair from time to time, of retreats she did not let others see, of rising again and again in the teeth of cold winds, of the campaign that is about to begin)
The idea that someone—a woman, in particular—who has reached the age of veneration also still harbors regrets, ambitions, even perhaps destructive impulses, invites continual rereading because we sense that Gibbons has planted more for us to find each time. Such portraits turn into comprehensive scenes in Gibbons’ odes, which appear primarily in Creatures of a Day (2008). These are long poems that wander on the page but not in the speaker’s attention. No detail goes unnoticed, and few go unconnected. “Ode: Citizens” pulls the random people on downtown streets and in Uptown diners into a larger cohort: street musicians, construction workers, laborers on the other side of oceans. The merciless waiting to be told what to do next, to be known enough to be told specifically, to hatch a plan to make things different, draws them into this poem together where the speaker is certainly one of them—but with the power to make art from the missed opportunities.

The voice also takes us masterfully through persona poems, such as “The Blue Dress,” in which a woman whose husband beats her, who is “not good / at telling a story”—her perspective, limited by terror and confusion—explains patiently to her now dead husband how she continually tried and failed to preempt his anger, and it is all the more affecting for its prosaic directness. Gibbons doesn’t ventriloquize or preach through her. She is real and whole and heartbreaking. There’s something of Nathanael West’s Miss Lonelyhearts here and in the rest of Saints, the collection in which it appears: characters stuck in anticipation of something they don’t know how to ask for.

In spite of this poetic power to bring others to life, the voice of these poems continually questions itself. In Homage to Longshot O’Leary (1999), a book in tribute to Thomas McGrath, these questions are most urgent as Gibbons occupies the older poet’s orbit. “Poetry After the Recent War” questions whether it is complete folly to spend one’s time on verse technique as the world falls apart, and “In a Bar with CNN on TV” ends a shabbily macabre scene with the line, “I watch myself watching myself thinking about writing something down.” This doubt about the usefulness of poetry, of writing, adds complexity to a poetic voice that also confidently incorporates enormous pieces of literary history. This persona is doubtful of individual moments, certain of eternity. In the end, Gibbons is a Chicagoan with a job to do, like every other Grabowski on the L. That job, though, is “to make, / to make speech whole, to heal,” (“At the Temple of Asklepios on Kos”) and in chronicling those crucial moments, he does just that.
And how do Gibbons’ poems capture the people, history, alleys, and taverns of his adopted hometown? With a Sandburg-like fascination at its ability to create and destroy communities, feed ambition, and generate money, but also with respect for the odd little spaces it makes for those who live in the canyons of downtown streets, only rarely seeing the sun. The concentration-wrecking din of the Loop is the background for the eavesdropped music of “Elsewhere Children,” with its scuttled potential for connection, and “On Belmont,” a prose poem, brings us into contact with a PTSD-cursed veteran who is so certain of the danger of imaginary machine guns that the speaker of the poem is overwhelmed by the man’s concern for him. “Maybe to him, still squatting and leaning there, not ready to stand up, or able, it seemed like he was the one who would get to where things made sense and were safe, and I was walking foolishly in a place of danger.”

But the quiet Chicago, the two-flats with back gardens scratched out of the dust in neighborhoods far from Michigan Avenue, is part of Gibbons’ purview, too. “A Neighborhood in Chicago” lauds the creatures that survive the city, noting there’s “no escape—but / there’s luck, grace.” “Rich, Pale Pink” captures the moment when at dawn and dusk the clouds put on a show of color, and the citizens of a busy street are all inside, so the quiet, abandoned things of the day can get the undistracted celebration they are due.

I praise this spectacle that makes me small at our two back-of-the-house upstairs windows

Chicago is a city that almost never stops talking, so when it does, the tenderness is breathtaking. That we have it so perfectly captured here is a gift.

The legacy of Reginald Gibbons—poet, fiction writer, translator, editor, critic, teacher, and now Fuller Award winner—has yet to be determined because he is still writing, still hungry to bring his rich, vast, multilingual world into ours through his words. We readers of poetry and of Chicago literature eagerly anticipate the next place he will take us, the next complex conversation we will have with his tender, singular voice.
Titled
by Ed Roberson

homage to long
time friend with his renditions
of sophocles all these
creatures of the day

when how poems think
was an orchard in the street
the sweet in slow trains overhead
sparrows commuted in

like five pears tree or was it peaches
maybe it was so
in its time

but in the warhouse of chicago’s
room in the ruined motel of our literature
by the last lake even the fern texts praise this creature

Reg Gibbons

[Note: all the words in this poem, except for a few prepositions, are the list of titles from Reg Gibbons’ published books of poems, more evidence of that gift of the always open lyric mind that Reg has.]
On Reginald Gibbons

by Michael Anania

I met Reginald Gibbons, shortly after he came to Northwestern in 1981. Our earliest meetings were urged on both of us by Cyrus Colter, who simply required in a Cyrus sort of way that we become friends. Since then we have shared friends, literary enthusiasms and literary anxieties, an amazing trip through northern Germany and countless brilliant lunches. When he took over the editorship of *TriQuarterly*, a position he held for sixteen years, he was surrounded by the usual academic fret and resentment, a situation he managed with grace and generosity. *TriQuarterly* had become the premier literary magazine in the U.S., a model for subsequent publications. Reg maintained its prominence and expanded its range both in the balance of each regular issue and in the content of the special issues to include South Africa, Poland, Spain, Mexico and even Chicago. It is one of the most distinguished editorships of our time.

Through all of Reg’s work as a poet, translator, novelist, critic, editor and literary activist there is a quite palpable sense of responsibility. It manifests itself in his poetry’s scrupulous attentiveness to perception and immediate experience, in the sense that language is larger and more capacious than the poet (“I must/crawl like a bug along a line of words bigger than I am.”) offering, at once, the precision of the well-crafted image and the sway and freedom of music. His translations, first of Spanish, then of Classical Greek and Russian, are based in extended periods of studying not only the poems at hand, but the traditions that helped create them. I remember the sheer wonder of his description in conversation of the intricate rhyming patterns of Russian poetry and how those subtleties might be at least insinuated in English and of course, recall the huge undertaking of *New Writing from Mexico*, work he gathered and edited but also frequently translated. His fiction ranges from short, impressionistic views of Chicago to the sweep of *Sweetbitter*, his beautifully crafted novel of place and family, as indelibly American as Styron and Wright Morris. I wish that Reg’s critical book, *How Poems Think*, had been available when I was still teaching. It proposes that poetry is a mode of thought and should be read and written as more than mere expression, a unique conjunction of memory, meditation and reflection; it would certainly have made my job easier.

Reg also has a sense of responsibility to the community of writers, nationally and internationally through the magazine and TriQuarterly Books and locally
as one of Chicago’s principle “community organizers.” He was a founding board member of the Guild Complex and has supported it for more than thirty years. Recently, he helped create the American Writers Museum in Chicago and served with me on the board of The Illinois Center for the Book. All of this, to good effect, requires an incredible amount of patience and a sacrifice of time, the writer’s only real resource. His enthusiasm for writers in his own circle—Cyrus Colter, William Goyen, Ed Roberson, Thomas McGrath, Roland Flint, and Angela Jackson—has been consistent and sustaining.

His enthusiasms are at the center of Renditions, his newest poetry book. Each of its poems is a deliberate and carefully noted “rendition” of an earlier poem. Some are ancient, some modern, and are drawn from several languages, tributes to “the arduous wakefulness of reading.” The response to a 1922 Eugenio Montale poem takes Reg forward to “a heat-stroke exurb of Houston,” the literary source eliciting the personal. Elsewhere, these poems from the past engage the political—always an important strain in Reg’s work—most notably in the collection’s longest poem, a rendition of Pindar, which takes up the America of 2017, Trump and Trumpism and is the best poem yet to deal with these matters. It does this while always keeping Pindar in view and ancient Greece, an extraordinary achievement.

“It was his childhood nickname, a name for all of his being that is hidden inside his adult life, not the name anyone calls him by now, it would be a misnaming in anyone’s mouth, and he looks here and there and sees no one he might know from back then, no one he recognizes. Maybe it’s someone he can’t recognize now. Above the street are a few faces in windows; in this one and that, someone is looking down.”

– from “In the City"
The Gods Must Do as We Ask

by Elizabeth T. Gray

Reg has been a deeply important mentor to me, as teacher, fellow-translator, and ongoing interlocutor. It gives me the greatest pleasure to have been invited to share the enormous impact he has had on my life and work.

I entered the low-residency MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College in 2006, at the age of 54. Reg was my first faculty advisor.

He took seriously my obsession with The Long Poem, while carefully pointing me toward an abyss or two I had been avoiding in my own work. He was, literally, the first poet I’d met who was familiar with the vast work of the little known poet John Peck, whose work I had fallen for in the 1970s and whom Reg had published at TriQuarterly. He introduced me to the work of H. D., Mina Loy, and the astonishing “long song” of Nate Mackey, the Song of the Andoumboulou. I am a Recovering Formalist; he had thought deeply about prosody, how one identified, measured, and scored it.

Here’s what I wrote in my assessment of that first semester: “The quantity, quality, detail, and thoroughness of the feedback from Reg has been mind-boggling. It has been clear, detailed, and responsive—both to questions I had asked and to questions I had not yet formulated. The combination of concrete suggestions, insight, encouragement, and challenge from him has been transformative. I can’t imagine how the exchange (at least in terms of its value to me) could be more useful unless it could go on for 20 years.”

Lucky me: Reg’s and my conversation has continued ever since. We have shared what we’ve learned about writing English poetry from the impossibilities of translating from disparate and un-English-like languages: he at home with Spanish, Ancient Greek, Russian; I grappling with classical and contemporary Persian. He introduced me to Indo-European chants, charms, and poetics, which became central to my work. I introduced him to contemporary Indian poets and to Tibetan amulets, talismans, and rituals of protective magic (in case he ever runs into trouble). He introduced me to the work of World War II poet Keith Douglas, I welcomed him into my weird world of World War I military field manuals as poetic material. His essays on how poets think changed how I think, and how my poems think.
Reg’s understanding of poetry runs deep—into archaic thought, the roots of languages, the places in the breath and body where poetry begins and settles. His creative, pedagogical, and critical contributions to poetry are indeed a lifetime achievement. I am delighted that he is being honored with the Fuller Award. Who else shares his knowledge, and mastery, of such a wide range of ancient and contemporary global poetry, and poetics, with such attentive candor and so little arrogance? At some level I think he shares my belief that if the words are chosen and arranged correctly, and resonate with the right music, then the gods must do as we ask.

“
This craft of the ear’s
not seen as so fine
or hard to learn as
it was. Even so,
what’s most difficult
is the cruel weight of
what’s waiting to be
put in a poem and
can’t make its way in
if the maker can’t
sense it, can’t wish to
sense it, can’t listen.”
– from “Dark Honey”
University Hall 404  
*Reg Gibbons’ office at Northwestern*

by Katie Hartsock

Here they sat while we spoke of them—Medea, Demeter, the Greek ships fringed with a fire singeing poets in Ohio, Wales, any new world. They watched us talk, watched me scribble in sheaves of legal pads gone now who knows where, but into this life those talks gave me. Thank you, teacher, friend, Mentor—as Athena named herself for the young one searching.

Even she didn’t have an office so well-matched to her mind—shelves filled to the ceiling, with stacks more on the floor, to mirror the measure of words’ abundance, in the top story of a Joliet limestone hall, lit by its gabled dormer looking out to a Great Lake’s depths, and heights.

Bruce Weigl and Reg
August

by Jordi Doce

for my friend the poet Reg Gibbons,

con admiración y cariño

is no man’s land between two fronts:

sun like a white-hot stone,

iron heat on eyelids.

We go down glittering sidewalks

with words in search of an oasis,

our buds of breath pecked by sparrows.

Our footsteps ache of their own weight

under the rigid sky that rules the street.

There’s no beginning or end,

only this moment blinded by light,

ripples of air rising from asphalt.

If there were clouds, we’d be their shadows.

Translated from the Spanish by Reginald Gibbons

I am deeply moved by the news that Reginald Gibbons is being honored with the Fuller Award for lifetime achievement by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. It is a wholly deserved award, a recognition of his multiple talents as a teacher and critic of literature, as a translator, and most of all as a poet of the highest order, one in which a pure lyrical impulse is modulated and tempered by moral, political, and philosophical concerns. I met him in México City in the fall of 2002, during an international conference on Luis Cernuda’s poetry, which he had translated masterfully back in the 1970s, and I was struck by his kind attentiveness and his clarity of mind—his conversation was both wide-ranging and thoughtful, and we hit it off instantly. I was youthful and naïve in many ways, but he made me feel at ease from the start and treated me as an equal—the mark of the true teacher (and the fact that only two years later he volunteered to translate my short poem ‘August’ bears witness to this). I have been following his work very closely ever since, and even had the privilege of translating a selection of his poems into Spanish, and I have always felt a deep kinship not only with the work itself, but with the way it has evolved.
and responded to the challenges imposed by the ever-changing conditions of reality. He has a deep moral fiber, and he’s shown it. His poetry is all the better for it, because he knows it is all about words and the way we preserve them from misuse, abuse, or willful distortion. But he is also a deeply emotional poet, engaged with notions of place, memory, and community. That Chicago, his adopted city, and one which has inspired some of his greatest poetry, is honoring him, is nothing short of poetic justice, and I’m thankful that I have the opportunity of joining his many friends and colleagues in sending our most heartfelt congratulations. Felicidades, querido Reg, con un fuerte abrazo y mis mejores deseos.

“I’d never been through a long period when my own being was being formed every day by the experience of being in an urban place, and it was this place, as it turned out, which became extremely important to me. I came to Chicago, the area, and to the city, when I was 34. And at 34 I at least was still trying to mature as a writer. I had a long way to go. But immediately these things, these materials of city life, started to get into my poems. And it was really a very important part of my development as a human being and as a writer that I came fully of age at least artistically in Chicago.”

– Reginald Gibbons
My Reminiscence of Reg Gibbons

by Joyce Carol Oates

“Reginald Gibbons” was at first a formidable name, an imperial-sounding amalgam of syllables attached to beautifully crafted poems which we—(my husband Raymond Smith and me, then editors of the *Ontario Review*)—must have received in the mail, sometime in the late 1970s when we were living in Windsor, Ontario, and were delighted to publish in our literary magazine. Imagine our surprise when, a few years later, we met the very young, indeed boyish “Reg Gibbons” in Princeton!—as totally unlike our image of stately staid gentlemanly gray-haired “Reginald” as possible, and a thoroughly delightful Creative Writing colleague and friend.

Reg was a particular friend of Princeton poet-professor Ted Weiss who, with his wife Renee, had founded and edited the distinguished *Quarterly Review of Literature* in which both Reg and I would publish work. Since Reg had been an undergraduate student of Ted’s at Princeton, and something of a protege, he was perhaps Ted’s most cherished younger friend; and, with me, may be alone now in 2021 in recalling “Hoppy”— (the Weiss’s elderly cat—named for Gerard Manley Hopkins…) Already at Princeton, Reg was becoming an accomplished poet, with a wide and eclectic interest in the poetry of many languages; we bonded, too, over a mutual interest in the mysterious, haunted prose fiction of William Goyen. (Following Goyen’s death, Reg became executor of his estate, and subsequently edited and annotated several of Goyen’s novels.)

At Northwestern, Reg went on to an astonishingly productive career, which Ray and I viewed, with admiration, mostly from afar. Continuing to write beautifully crafted and passionate poetry which one might encounter in *Poetry* or *American Poetry Review*—editing one of North America’s most substantial literary magazines, *TriQuarterly*—author of a debut novel, *Sweetbitter* which won an Anisfield-Wolf Award for its depiction of a society tragically rift by racist ignorance and violence—publishing essays on poetic technique — translating work by Mandelstam, Montale, Vallejo, Neruda, Sophocles, to be gathered together in the unique recent collection *Renditions*: Reg Gibbons has been a model of literary verve and generosity, a friend to so many, beloved and deservedly honored by this distinguished award.
Celebrating Reg

by Lawrence Lipking

I first got to know Reg Gibbons in Princeton days, a long time ago, when he was a gifted young poet and we were both attached to the much-honored poet Ted Weiss and his wife Renee, who together edited the Quarterly Review of Literature. They were a couple to love, and Reg and I basked in their friendship. Ever since then we too have been friends. Over the years it has been a pleasure to see him grow, from a promising student to a bright star. There are many ways to celebrate what Reg has accomplished, but I will focus on one: his amazing versatility. Reg has never been afraid to try something new, to explore another field or language or style. Above all, he is creative, for others as well as himself. As an editor he has had a distinguished career, not only presiding over TriQuarterly but selflessly nurturing and promoting many writers, from William Goyen to innumerable students. Creative writers have often been shrugged aside by deans and English departments, but Reg persisted until he became a prized academic--and Chair of the Northwestern English Department. Some poets write versions of the same poem again and again, but each of Reg’s many books is different--another voice, another sense of play. And often another language. His masterful translations include works in Spanish, the classical Greek of Sophocles and Euripides, the Russian of Pasternak and Mandelstam; because he works so well with other people, and is ready to defer to their expertise, he has also mastered the art of collaboration. That in itself could be someone’s vocation. But Reg always does more. He makes art with his hands as well as his mind. He tells stories in prose as well as in verse, and his powerful novel Sweetbitter draws on memories of a Southwestern boyhood to chronicle lives and loves that have nothing in common with privileged, respectable folk. A critic and anthologist of poetry he loves, he is open both to classical literature and to modern revolutionary strains. And much of his own work is unclassifiable--for instance, Fern-Texts, an “Autobiographical Essay” that somehow merges his life story with early Coleridge notebooks. I do not know what Reg will write next, but I bet it will be unexpected: serious, humorous, maybe something of both. And always creative. I celebrate a wonderful friend and a wonderful life.
Tribute for Reginald Gibbons

by Luis J. Rodriguez

There are ample reasons to commemorate Reginald Gibbons: his extensive and impressive poetry work, fiction, translations, and other writings, as well as his prowess as a critic, professor, and editor. If I may, I want to honor his great heart. The way he helped struggling unknown persons, such as me, and guided a totally broke street press to become one of the leading small presses in the country.

Young writers need help. This is not a bad thing. I also understand it’s not always available. But I’m of the mind that other writers, especially those who’ve made their way, recognized in the literary world, should lend a hand, provide a leg up, open doors. I’m aware how flawed this multi-layered literary world may be, but amazing people and majestic works still claw their way in. And even if writing is mostly a solitary artistic endeavor, often against great odds, we can all benefit from community.

This is where Reginald comes in—a person to whom I owe much of my early growth as a poet and publisher.

I began my writing life in jail and juvenile hall as a teen. Due to a strong political social justice orientation, my love of books, and finding a powerful way to express whatever ailed me, I let go of the heavy drugs, jail cells, and street life early on. By age 20, when my oldest son Ramiro was born, I promised I’d never return to “The Crazy Life.” A promise I’ve kept for my daughter Andrea, who came two years later, and my younger sons Ruben and Luis from my last and current wife Trini.

To keep money and family going, I worked in industry and construction. During off hours, which were few, I wrote. In the late 70s and early 80s, still in my twenties, I took part in East Los Angeles writing workshops, readings, and magazine publishing. When I moved to Chicago in 1985, I was in my 31st year of life. I no longer worked in industry; I’d become a writer and editor. I worked for political, journalistic, and literary publications. I was also a writer/reporter for news radio. I even managed to typeset in the printing industry.

In 1988, I took part in open mics and slam poetry events that had sprung up all over Chicago. I was a founding member of the Guild Complex, the literary
arts nonprofit adjunct to the remarkable Guild Books, run by every writer’s friend, Richard Bray. I, among others, helped visionary and first director, Michael Warr, lead the Guild Complex to great heights. In this circle I met wonderful writers, including the renowned Mr. Gibbons, as well as luminaries like Gwendolyn Brooks, our sage “mother,” and Haki Madhubuti, Sandra Cisneros, Ana Castillo, Carlos Cumpian, David Hernandez, Mark C. Smith, Achy Obejas, Deborah Pintonelli, Patricia Smith, Quraysh Ali Lansana, and Tony Fitzpatrick, among others. All were gracious. All were generous.

Now… there was a community!

Reginald helped me with my first poetry book, “Poems Across the Pavement.”

I sent Reg an early draft. Suprisingly, Reginald red-penciled every line of every poem. At first unnerving, this also showed he cared enough to provide clarity and skill. He told me as much—he felt the poems deserved deep scrutiny.

After I re-shaped and revised everything, “Poems Across the Pavement” garnered grants from the state of Illinois and the city of Chicago. This 19-poem collection saw the light of day in 1989. It became the first book under a new imprint I started called Tia Chucha Press. My friend, the artist and writer Jane Brunette, designed the book (and all TCP books ever since). The late great Puerto Rican artist Gamaliel Ramirez provided the cover art. I was 35 years old.

That year, the book won the San Francisco State University Poetry Center’s Poetry Book Award, selected by the Chicano poet Jimmy Santiago Baca; I was also selected as one of the “Next Generation” of writers for the PEN World Congress held in Montreal and Toronto. Tia Chucha Press became the press of the slam poets of Chicago. Later other poets in slams and beyond got published through TCP. I produced the first poetry books of Chicago’s best, but also national writers like Terrance Hayes, Elizabeth Alexander, Virgil Suarez, Kyoko Mori, Patricia Spears Jones, Peter J. Harris, Luivette Resto, and Mayda Del Valle. Many have gone on to larger publishing houses. Some later won a National Book Award, Pulitzer Prize nominations, a Kingsley Tufts Book Award, a Ruth Lilly Lifetime Achievement Award, a Whiting Writers Award, a Lila Wallace/Reader’s Digest Writers Award, Lannan fellowships, Jackson Memorial prizes, and more.

Reg not only helped shepherd my first book; he helmed Tia Chucha Press’ first editorial board. In 1991, TCP became the publishing wing of the Guild
Complex. Reg also made the invaluable connection to Northwestern University Press of Evanston, Illinois, which became our national distributor. In deep gratitude, they continue to do this today.

With Reginald, Tia Chucha Press birthed the works of some of the strongest voices in poetry as well as chapbooks and anthologies. He always lent a hand, provided a leg up, opened doors.


In 2001, my wife Trini and I started Tia Chucha’s Centro Cultural & Bookstore a year after we returned to Los Angeles from Chicago. In 2005, Tia Chucha Press became the publishing wing of this comprehensive cultural space in the San Fernando Valley—a bookstore, performance space, art gallery, workshop center, and media center.

We’re now over 30 years publishing books and 20 years as a bookstore/cultural center. Reginald Gibbons was there at the beginning as my mentor, teacher, and friend.

I’ve not been able to stay in touch with Reg since my time back in Los Angeles. For this I apologize. But I’ll always appreciate the great gift he gave me and my press, a gift without asking for anything in return, for the love of the craft and a more vibrant publishing world, for new voices, new suns, new moons, and the regeneration of new verses. Something I’ve now done for up-and-coming young writers whenever possible.

My life-long thanks, Reginald. I’ve never forgotten.

“Though he picks up where Carl Sandburg left off, both Gibbons’s voice and his project are Whitmanian in scale.”

– Publisher’s Weekly
Warm Demanding

by Rosellen Brown

Reg and I met briefly in the early 90’s and for some hard-to-fathom reason, out of the raft of writers he knew, he invited me to teach in Italy with him. I’ve always considered that blind choice the way I think of chicken-sexing: Some instinct is at work though no one knows exactly how. And indeed we worked seamlessly, without as much as a tinge of disagreement, for the first happy summers of the Spoleto Writers Workshop. My best memory of Reg, who was there with Cornelia and daughter Kate, beautiful at 15, was how he shadowed Kate when she got more than 10 feet away from him because of the predictable way the Umbrian men and boys tried to shadow her.

But, more to the point, what I was lucky enough to see, as we taught side-by-side, was the way Reg engaged his students with his mix of what elementary school teachers like to call “warm demanding.” That’s rigor that encourages rather than threatens, that models the way a practicing and prolific poet can use his privileged comprehension how work emerges and then, rethought, is pruned, its edges buffed.

His own poems make music out of a huge variety of disparate and often unlikely subjects. He is a deeply attentive watcher and listener, whose entire oeuvre, essays included, bespeaks a generous, forgiving, committedly democratic spirit. And now he’s daring to take on the intricacies of translation, for which he not only has had to master language but historical context and the intent of another mind at work.

So, congratulations to you on this honor, Reg, for bringing to us what you celebrate in one of my favorite of your poems (set on a street corner very familiar to me, Adams and Wabash). In it, you catalog with typical gusto and empathy those “whose labor [represents] imagination/ ambition, skill, greed,/ folly, courage, cost,/ error, story….” Your work takes detailed and respectful note of all that desire and hope and I, among so many admirers, thank you for that.
I published my first book, *Rise*, because Reg Gibbons didn’t give up on me. To some, this might ring out as hyperbole, but, I assure you, it isn’t. I had recently graduated from the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College, where Reg taught in the late ‘90s, when I attended. After I had graduated, not long after I had graduated, I would get encouraging, *handwritten* letters from him, letters in which he would ask about my poems. I say “letters,” plural, because he had to nudge me more than once. I was on a post graduate fellowship, living in Asheville, NC, teaching undergrad classes at Warren Wilson.

I want to take a beat to remind folks that this wasn’t on Facebook or Instagram or even email. These were letters that were written, stamps that were licked, and then, once pulled together, walked over to a post office. These letters were sent with intention, more than just a notion.

Reg had been familiar with my poems because he had not only heard me read them aloud, but he’d also led a workshop in which one of my poems was up for critique. At Warren Wilson, we had—and, I believe, they still have—workshops in which two faculty members work as a duo to lead the discussion. In my case, I had been taking the mixed genre workshop, so I had a fiction writer and a poet. In my last workshop, Reg was one of the conveners.

I had a long, sectioned poem about the legend of John Henry. It kinda straddled the line between a short story and a poem. I was wrestling with it, but I liked it even in its early, misshapen stage of development. The workshop didn’t have a great response to it, though. To put it mildly, the fiction writer hated my poem. At this point in my development, that was fine, though; it didn’t discourage me, even though this writer was pretty harsh with their comments. (Who this was is unimportant; I’m actually cool with this writer now.) Back then, I never got bent out of shape about a harsh critique; I always saw it as a form of tough love. It was how I was raised, so there was little that could happen in a workshop that would send me running out. What blew me away, though, is that this fiction writer let in on me for a while, taking up all the oxygen in the room. No one else had a chance to speak for about 10 to 15 minutes. When anyone else tried to say anything remotely encouraging, the fiction writer shut it down. Reg hadn’t spoken yet.
Then, after a beat of silence, Reg says, “Well, I’m a poet. And this is a good poem.” And from then on, it was like watching my parents fight. Also something I was used to, so I rolled with it. Afterward, Reg came over and put his hand on my shoulder and said again, “You know that’s a good poem, right?” At that point, I had a humility that was deeply, awkwardly sincere. I don’t even remember how I responded to that. I just figured I had some work to do.

I carried that into that fellowship year, and I spent many months just staring into my poems, putting them through their paces. In my mind, I still held a lot of the imposter syndrome that I had in undergrad, despite being a National Merit Scholar. When I got to grad school, I still had that first-generation college student feel, even though this was my second graduate degree. I come from a very working-class family and community, and college always felt like a foreign land to me, no matter how much education I got. Insecurity is hard to wash off when you’re a young man.

Reg came into my life when he had more confidence in me than I had in myself. I didn’t send my manuscript to Tia Chucha Press until maybe close to a year later, when Luis Rodriguez himself sent me a letter, which began by mentioning that, “Reg Gibbons tells me you have a manuscript.” So, I pulled my poems together and sent them off to Tia Chucha Press. Reg served as my editor on the manuscript, which was comprised mostly of poems from my thesis.

I know many people who have similar stories about Reg Gibbons. He’s the most soulful, generous, and erudite guy I know, just a good spirit among us mortals. I’m glad he’s being honored here not only for his body of work, which has been as inspiring to me as his deeds, but also for the beautiful way he walks through this world.

“But the poet has to be responsive also to the sheer possibilities of language and feeling and thinking. Audiences need to learn from poets; poets may learn from audiences, too, but I don’t believe that poets should be obliged to hold themselves back so that audiences can catch up.”

– Reginald Gibbons
A Sense of Joy and Living in the World

By Michael Warr

I was extremely fortunate as a young founding Executive Director at the Guild Literary Complex to have a group of co-founders and board members who already carried wisdom, experience, social consciousness, deep community connections, and a passionate commitment to culture and social change. Reginald Gibbons was one of those founders and was essential to the vision, praxis, and success of the Complex. For me, he became a mentor, advisor, editor, and dear friend. There is not enough space to convey all that I have learned from him, all his generosity, and all that I owe him. I hope that the following excerpt from an exchange that Reginald and I had about his most recent book Renditions conveys the connection we created over decades. Reginald’s contributions as a poet, translator, professor, and cultural worker are ineffable.

Me: Thanks so much for Renditions. I will have to read the book a few times, but among my favorites so far on the first read are “Paris…Moscow, 1925,” “But What Does He Do?,” “Triage,” and “Ambular y deambular.”

I am struck by the simultaneous universality and specificity of the poems. I tell myself that you have probably been carrying the craft, voices, scope, and relevance of these poets and their poems in your mind and soul for decades. Still to create your poems after those poets with such depth, care, and beauty must have been exhausting. Not that exhaustion comes across in the poems (I just cannot help but consider the labor). Instead, there is a sense of joy and living in the world. Not just segments of the world. A sense of knowing. Not just knowledge. I also imagine your exhilaration as you chiseled your art like a master. I hope you receive the praise and acknowledgment that you and this book deserve. Whether that happens or not, this book is leaving a mark.

Reginald Gibbons: What a blessing your letter is…. I’m very grateful for your kind and *eloquent* comments about my book! You *see* and *hear* the poems fully, and that’s so exciting to know. Those four poems you mention are among my favorites, too. And the Neruda allowed me to write in a way I never have, before. (But that’s true of lots of those poems.) And I’m so glad that what you feel in the book is that “there is a sense of joy and living in the world. Not just segments of the world. A sense of knowing. Not just knowledge.” I know some of
the poems are melancholy (if that’s the right word; maybe it’s just the grief of life that everyone must experience and that is the nature of living), or they’re simply struck, even half-stunned, by a sense of the ungraspable scope of the world, and of people’s suffering. So for you to tell me that you sense joy in the book is so important to me. I wanted the book to encompass a very big range of feeling and human situations, and that took me a long time to do. Some of the poems I first published as translations, years ago, and then as I began working on many of the new (or almost new) poems in the book in early 2017, I realized that I could bring those poems in Spanish or Greek or whatever into a space where they could say something, they were capable of saying something more, that’s relevant to this era, this place, these crises. In early 2017, our Mussolini-man was being inaugurated, and I felt compelled to try to address everything—or at least some of—what I felt about it all—my dread, anxiety, fear for so many people in this country and abroad... And I *think* part of what I was doing was leaning on some of the greatest poets ever (that I happen to know) to help me say something in response to what I felt was the damage already done, and damage to come, in years of crisis which now we’re into. And there’s no way to know what will happen as things keep unfolding. I know what I hope, and I expect the next five years are going to be contradictory, with the religious crazies and the Nazis and the “Proud Boys”, and all the others like them stirring things up, going violent, while at the same time Stacy Abrams and others of her courage and *brilliance* will be trying to protect minoritized voters and push the gerrymandering, hate-spewing, zombie politics of the right-wingers. So I am sort of carrying this book with me, I feel, into the next years...

Thanks for letting me share this, Reginald. Thanks for all that you have done and continue to do.

Love and respect.

“There was an empire of unknowing, and here was a little door opened on it...”
– from Sweetbitter
Tribute for Reginald Gibbons

by Sterling D. Plumpp

I have known Reginald Gibbons nearly thirty-five years and there are three aspects of my relationship with him that exhibit distinction. I initially encountered him when two South African scholars, David Bunn and Jane Taylor, had a seminal work for a special issue of TriQuarterly. Gibbons requested my input and subsequently when From South Africa: New Writing, Photographs & Art was published, David Bunn and Jane Taylor were editors with Reginald Gibbons and Sterling Plumpp.

From South Africa is important because it is a window into Apartheid South Africa from the literary visions of multi-racial voices from South Africa. I had previously edited an anthology of mainly South African writers in exile: Brutus, Kgositsile and Serote, whom I had known for nearly two decades. I also knew the work of Mazisi Kunene. A salient aspect of From South Africa, later published as a book by University of Chicago Press, is the revelation that Afrikaans is not simply the language of Boers. It is also the language of the so-called Coloreds. I believe the first schools to instruct in Afrikaans were Colored. I would suggest that the From South Africa special issue/book is an excellent and probing anthology.

I also knew Gibbons as editor of TriQuarterly. Between 1989 and 1997, he published more poetry by me in TriQuarterly than anyone else. Furthermore, let the record show that he published the work of a range of African American literary voices. I never asked him though I can assert that he possesses a sensibility that lends itself to a recognition that excellence in literature can come in great diversity.

I am unapologetically African American. The roots of my culture and identity lay somewhere in West Africa. They survived the reign of chains and violence to emerge in improvised idioms as Negro spirituals, jazz, blues and gospel. I was delighted to see The Collected Poems of Sterling A. Brown brought out by TriQuarterly Books. In a way, the publication of From South Africa and motley African American writers demonstrates a commitment from the editor of TriQuarterly to open pages of that fine magazine to diverse voices.

Gibbons is a superb poet whose highly individualized volumes exude originality.
and a rare mastery. He is someone who reveres iconic literary texts of the West and his poetry aspires to that exuberance.

Finally, Gibbons is a scholar and I believe his work was distinguished before Northwestern University conferred that title on him in a professorship. Once he requested that he interview me and he did. It seems we spent at least three sessions of five hours each in the process of that interview. The product of the interview was first published in *TriQuarterly Online* and reappears in *Conversations with Sterling Plumpp* edited by John Zheng and published by University Press of Mississippi. The willingness of major scholars to dedicate time and therefore compose letters for those in pursuit of tenure or promotion to professorships is absolutely necessary for the success of these academic candidates. I am told that Gibbons’ pen supported my quest for a professorship at the University of Illinois at Chicago and I know that he has done the same for several others. He is an invaluable asset for those in the humanities and letters. He lends his erudite perceptions to many who aspire to publication, awards or celebrated faculty positions. I can say that he is someone who seems to recognize excellence and always supports it.

Congratulations. I am indebted to him.

“We shift and settle
our hips and shoulders
till they’ll accept their
own weight. It’s only a
little, what we know or
hope to know.”

– from “Teacher”
MORE TRIBUTES

If there was ever a defining luminary pioneer and saving grace for the literary community, the undisputed champion, Reginald Gibbons, should take a bow. Very few live in the glory and on the ropes of doing their own artistic work, while championing the work of so many. It takes a thick skin, walk-outside-the-line, futuristic kind of human who makes beautiful words and beautiful bridges so others have a chance to cross over. Giving breath to *TriQuarterly*, speaking a universal creative language, and remembering that his brilliance still comes from his own words—how lucky are we that Reg Gibbons knows the lines of poetry and prose, but sees no lines between the artist and the world.

**Parneshia Jones**

As translator, editor, essayist, novelist, teacher and, most important of all, as poet, Reg Gibbons has few equals and none better. His work is inventive, wide-ranging, humane; it’s steeped in literary history and utterly responsive to the systemic injustices and stupidities of the present moment. As with so few others, the quality of his prodigious accomplishments reflects the life he’s lived. He is a great man, a good man, an inspiration to his fellow writers, and a national treasure.

**Alan Shapiro**

Dear Reg, you let the world keep you company, slush in Chicago streets, red ants in heat-cracked Texas earth, Sophocles’s Antigone, Mandelstam’s bees, junkies and loiterers and exiled poets. Writing is all translation: Cernuda and Brecht and Vallejo and Tsvetaeva all find a home in your English and your wandering soul finds a home in their visions. Your heart is one big welcome. You make shelters for writers, schools, magazines, programs where they bide for a while and grow, as if life were an immense anthology and your task were to gather together the makers and the making for all to celebrate. See, the Word is infinite and it’s still taking shape.

**Rosanna Warren**
I could ruminate for hours about how Reg Gibbons has been an influence, a booster, cajoler and gentle mentor for me and my work — could speculate all night on the ways he has supported and spread word of what I do that I don’t even know about — I just sense it’s true — could share a simple observation he once made about my writing which enlightened forever my relationship with it — but maybe another time — could talk on and on about the real-world work and time he has devoted to providing access and outlets for poets, projects and organizations in Chicago and beyond — but instead I’ll remember one of the times we sat at an outdoor table at Water Street Cafe in Door County, WI when I was living there and Reg had a summer cottage — we sipped coffees and watched my six-year-old play on a low rock wall nearby — there was a storm coming slowly across the bay — my son was walking the spine of the wall, teetering, rhythmically jabbering to himself — the wind rose in the tree above us as Reg turned to me, a grin perched beneath his moustache, and he said, “You would write about this, if it weren’t already a poem.”

Mark Turcotte
A friend of mine who is a poet and scholar told me once that the best critics were generous. It was not Reginald Gibbons who said this, but it is Reg who personifies it as critic, and poet, and novelist and editor and friend. That generosity undergirded by a breathtaking brilliance makes for a manner of genius that is quiet and understated, never calling attention to himself, passing it to others. Which is not to say he is a wimp or absent-minded professor, for he is formidable --- a slayer of human dragons, especially the would-be tyrants. He speaks with ancient moral authority.

But let me go back to his generosity that is charged with the visionary. He has created or helped create BrooksDay, Guild Complex, anthologies of Chicago writing and South African writing. He brings to our attention works he deems worthy of continued regard. Some works he helps make ready as an editor. I know. And his works are worthy of being remembered.

Reg’s acts of kindness and decency prove his essential humanity. His care for less able poets and writers are testaments to his goodness. I would not embarrass him or his life-partner memoirist Cornelia Spelman by telling stories of extraordinary kindness and regard for fellow writers.

Reg as a novelist leaves us with the incredibly lush and resonant *SweetBitter*. As a poet his voice will linger and linger. One of my favorite lines of poetry from “Luckies,” a conversation with the poet’s father: “The years are smoke.” Oh, yes, it is true. The years are smoke.

*Angela Jackson*

“*Just to acknowledge someone else as a full human being is a really good thing for us to do.*”

– Reginald Gibbons

50  REGINALD GIBBONS
Much will be said about Reginald Gibbons’ excellence as a poet, novelist, essayist, and educator. I’d like to share my experience with him as a board member for the Guild Literary Complex. Reg, along with a handful of other socially conscious writers and activists, founded the Guild Complex 32 years ago. Its mission, then as now, is to present cross-cultural literary events that highlight underrepresented voices.

Throughout the years, Reg has been a constant and steadfast supporter of creativity and cultural diversity in Chicago’s literary scene. He has generously served the Guild Complex in many roles, including those of editor, panelist, and workshop leader. In fact, my first encounter with Reg, back in the 90s, was as a student in his Guild Complex poetry workshop. He became a mentor to me and is now a good friend.

I remember a board meeting some years ago, when Reg said there wasn’t enough attention given to Gwendolyn Brooks, lifelong Chicago resident and major American poet. He suggested the Guild Complex put on an annual tribute to honor her work and her influence. This resulted in the creation of our popular Brooks Day celebration, now in its eighth year. Other suggestions from Reg resulted in noteworthy events such as the International Writers Exchange and an exuberant tribute to the poet Sterling Plumpp at Rosa’s Blues Lounge.

I’ve been on the board with Reg Gibbons for many years and have witnessed the creativity, wise counsel, and good nature he brings to every endeavor. His dedication has been a true gift for the Guild Complex and the entire literary community in Chicago.

Mike Puican

Reg Gibbons lives the written word 360 degrees. There are so very few who can be brilliant on the stage, as a colleague, in the classroom, and advocating for the inclusion of all voices into the literary arena. Do not let his calm voice fool you about his fiery heart. There can be no better person to receive this award. Congratulations!

Ellen Placey Wadey
Reg’s focus has always been on the work. His work, certainly, but more on the work: of having the great good luck of having it to do, and having the gifts and wherewithal to do it, despite and including getting more than his share of the difficulties and impediments that life presents to every writer, every person. Reg usually has two or three books of his own composition going at a time, while simultaneously translating, editing, teaching, and chairing a writing program or English Department. But all those things are the byproducts of a practice, and a practice like this requires devotion, and devotion requires being clear about what you love and what sustains you and what you want and need to do: the work. How lovely to celebrate this award for Reg’s lifetime achievement of it.

Michael Ryan

Reginald Gibbons was an invaluable teacher and these are just a few of the gifts he gave me, among countless others that I have passed on to my own students and they to theirs! His words, example, and guidance have accompanied me through these last twenty years since he was my teacher:

1. carry a nice pen and a tiny notebook everywhere and use them, with abandon, to take notes— even mid-sentence, mid-bite!

2. to revise, try honoring the sound of the word and not its meaning

3. compassion, astute psychological insights, kindness, and the tender rewards of paying deep, close attention

Catherine Barnett

I am delighted that Reg Gibbons is being honored with the Fuller Award. Nobody is more deserving. This poet and scholar is a true champion of the literary arts. During the development of the American Writers Museum, Reg chaired the Content Leadership Team. Great demands were made on his deep literary knowledge and charming interpersonal skills. It is always fun and stimulating to be with Reg. I regret that I will not be present to enjoy his company and congratulate him in person. Thanks, Reg for your dedication and inspiration.

Malcolm O’Hagan
Loving congratulations to my friend Reg, as you receive the Chicago Hall of Literary Fame's Fuller Award. Though we both know it’s the work that counts, the respect of one’s peers is a fine thing, after all. “Faithful keeper of our hope,” dearly beloved colleague and pal, whose poems I’ve always loved ever since I discovered them in *The Ruined Motel*… “this was where we had brought/ the nation…” that rotting waystation, full of unhappy ghosts, always seemed an exact emblem for our itinerant, second-chance culture that never cared for what the first chance left behind. And especially I admire that great poem, “From a Paper Boat,” that opens into history and exile and folds back into words on paper but keeps on asking “when, oh when…?” *Sweetbitter* remains one of those moving novels that stay with me; few writers have such generosity and feeling for their characters—oh, and your orchards in the street vignettes, and your stories about the sadness of men whose author is himself so moved by kindness that he quietly invades the fiction to comfort the story’s troubled boy.

And thank you for all your translations (for saying, with Vallejo, “I don’t know, I just don’t know,”), for alleviating our American insularity, for being--in the classical sense—a man of letters, and for keeping emotion alive when reaching into the far archives of our tradition—*Renditions* (well, you know I think this) reopens the communal well and returns *gravitas* to poetry without losing its heart. Oh, and by the way—I am grateful that you laugh at my ruinous sense of humor, plus you have great hair—even better in silver. Congratulations once again, and here’s to a reunion—possibly in NYC, once the Covid virus (Alpha to Omega) is finished ridding us of Republicans. With love and cheers.

*Eleanor Wilner*

“Gusts rattle the half-closed upstairs window
in the old office building that’s going to be torn down.”
– from “Sparrow”
I pride myself on “finding” Reg Gibbons in October 2010 when we had just started our efforts to set up an American writers museum in Chicago. In our first telephone call he agreed to serve as a literary adviser. Reg became an invaluable guide in our efforts to capture the essence and diversity of American writing in a museum space. His deep knowledge of and passionate advocacy for minority and immigrant writers inspired our first grant proposal on Immigrant Writing to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Our first exhibit Writing Chicago, which featured Gwendolyn Brooks and Lorraine Hansberry, among others, and traveled to culturally underserved neighborhoods, was largely shaped by him. But what crowned his achievements for the AWM was the steering of the team that developed the literary content of the Museum. As the Board’s liaison to the content leadership team, I was not sure what to admire more: his broad and deep literary knowledge, his ability to form group consensus on the selection and presentation of writers in the museum, or his committed and efficient work habits. On a more personal level: his slim book Slow Trains Overhead, which he gave me then fresh from the printer, introduced me to the poetry of Chicago’s Loop. He opened a door to a new experience. Thank you, Reg.

Werner Hein

Reg is much more than a writer of unusual and sensitive, thought-provoking poetry (also prose) and an inspired editor--“We’ll publish what you have now then tend to the rest later.” He is foremost a man of integrity and love, generous with his time and talents, who has enriched and enlarged my life more than mere words can ever express.

Jacqueline Dougan Jackson
I was privileged to serve under Reg Gibbons throughout the years when he was the editor of *TriQuarterly* and it was the best literary journal in the country. In the years before he arrived at Northwestern, *TriQuarterly* had become known for publishing fiction by American writers. He elevated its position significantly by introducing poetry into its pages, widening the scope of the writers whose work he published, and by organizing single issues around writing from other countries and subjects like the social and political responsibilities of writers. He published an issue of Chicago writing and established *TriQuarterly* as a cultural entity on campus and in the city through symposiums, readings, lectures, and other public events. I was always impressed with the respect he paid to writers, no matter their level of attainment, and the care and patience he devoted to reading, selecting, and editing manuscripts. He was a thoughtful and sensitive leader, and I'm grateful for everything I learned from the example he set for us at *TriQuarterly*.

**Fred Shafer**

Reg Gibbons’ voice has a soft and even vibrato no matter the circumstances. He doesn’t seem to talk much but digests the conversation and then speaks. His eyes always tell the real story. His blue grey eyes have a certain animation in conversation. Maybe it comes with a bit of a smile. I know this from observing him from across the table, at many Guild Complex board meetings. Reg, founding member of the Guild Complex, has been sitting at the table since the very beginning, lending his wisdom, his quiet leadership in building relationships and providing his great intellectual capital in support of our programs and with Tia Chucha, our former publishing arm. His gift as a writer, editor and publisher continues to contribute greatly to not only Chicago’s literary landscape but to modern American literature. He has given so much to this city and to our organization all I can offer is my immense gratitude.

**Andrea Change**
When Reg joined the faculty at Warren Wilson, he gave a five-day class: translating and discussing major poets from five different countries. Faculty and students alike marveled over this master class in translation. The languages he knew! And the presentation was inviting and skillful. During that residency, Reg read powerful poems and prose poems. He was also working on a novel. I was director of the program at that time and told him that he encompassed an entire faculty, and could anchor any department. He is a poet, novelist, prose poet, translator, editor and essayist. And all at the highest level of accomplishment.

I feel privileged to have met and worked with Reg, a man of letters who I am also proud to call a friend.

John Skoyles

Reg’s mentorship has had a lasting impact on my writing practice. Through his teaching, he shared the generous gift of close attention to my work, with insightful feedback that has helped to carry my writing practice forward for a very long time. His comments were consistently respectful and detailed, offering support while encouraging me to take creative risks. With his willingness to share his wisdom and guidance, Reg has set an example for me and the kind of writing life I’d like to lead among fellow writers and as a mentor for younger writers. I’m forever indebted to Reg for the impact his kindness, expertise, and mentorship has had on my writing life.

Dilruba (Ruba) Ahmed

Reg Gibbons is the consummate scholar, author, educator and counselor. Ever knowledgeable yet always self-deprecating, many of Reg’s correspondences start with some version of an apology—“I didn’t have enough time to give this topic its due . . .” —and then he proceeds to write an eloquent thesis on whatever the original subject may have been, followed by numerous other beneficial and insightful suggestions that transform a meager first-blush idea into something relevant, layered and substantial. Working with Reg is pure joy. He asks good questions, listens well and offers sound arguments for the things he believes in. And with an author’s ear he plays back your ideas better than you could have imagined them. What a gift! Congratulations for this Lifetime Achievement Award, Reg. I can’t imagine anyone more deserving.

Andrew Anway
I came to know Reg Gibbons when he accepted my manuscript, *Still Waters in Niger*, for publication by the Northwestern University Press. Reg is a true internationalist. And as an editor, he is every writer’s dream: generous, painstaking, putting his great gifts as poet and novelist at the service of the work. I realize only now how much administrative skill it must have taken to shepherd the skills of everyone working at the press to perform at such a high level. Afterwards, to my great joy, I became friends of Cornelia and Reg and came to love Reg’s extraordinary poetry. I greet Reg today thanking him for his enormous generosity to so many.

**Kathleen Hill**

There is no one more deserving of this honor than Reg Gibbons, whose poetry, translations, editing, and teaching have made all the difference to several generations of poets and writers. He is not only a consummate craftsman whose ear is as finely tuned as that of anybody in contemporary letters but a kind man and an extraordinarily generous friend. I have had the good luck to teach his essay on translating rhyme for many years, and so I wish to mark this occasion with a translation I made with Won-Chung Kim and Lee Hyeonwu of a poem from Kim Ryŏ’s *Thinking Window Verses*:

**Yŏnhŭi’s House**

I ask, what do you think
of our beloved northern seaside?
The street east of the fortress is still vivid in my memory.
Yŏnhŭi lives by the second bridge on that street.
A clear stream flows in front of her house
and rugged rocks loom around the mountain.
Dozens of willows grow in the valley,
the one outside her door reflecting on the pavilion.
Her loom is set by the window on the pavilion,
a small stone mortar sits under the pavilion.
A cherry tree grows by the well south of the pavilion,
the road to Hoeryŏng stretches north, beyond the pavilion.

**Christopher Merrill**
Reg Gibbons is such a deserving honoree of this Lifetime Achievement Award! I have been lucky to have his example and his support from my earliest days as a poet. I can trace two of my abiding passions—my love for Gwendolyn Brooks and my fascination with long poems—to courses I took with him as an undergraduate at Northwestern University. Then, and in the many years since, Reg's work has served as a model of sharply observed, finely crafted writing; of wide-reaching, deeply impactful editing; of commitment to a multiracial, broadly inclusive literary community; and of inspired and inspiring teaching and mentorship. I am delighted to see his talents and accomplishments recognized in this way. Many congratulations to you, Reg!

Evie Shockley

I have known Reginald Gibbons for three decades. I have read all of his poetry I could get hold of as well as the memorable novel Sweetbitter, which is too often overlooked in recitations of his work. It is a powerful novel that foretells his increasing concern for the neglected and despised in our culture. I would also like to take readers back to the early 90s when Reg was the courageous and dedicated editor of TriQuarterly. He published both established writers and newcomers, and always with editorial perceptiveness and integrity. He got resources and published several works of fiction in the William Goyen Prize series. Of the wonders of his poetry--lyrics, portraits of the downtrodden, revisitations of Greek classics, transcriptions of modern poetic classics--others will no doubt treat in depth. But I wanted to make sure that his earlier achievements got proper credit.

Eugene K. Garber

I join the many others in congratulating Reg Gibbons on this well-deserved award. With best wishes to all, and congratulations.

Leigh Bienen
I first met Reg in 2006 when I began my MA in poetry at Northwestern, but I knew of him and his work many years prior through his former student and my college professor, Steve Fay. If I do the math, I suppose Reg has had an influence on my work for nearly half my life. It is without question that Reg is an accomplished poet, fiction writer, translator and critic, but he is also the kind of teacher every writer hopes to have, with his gentle way of helping one find and discover the heartbeat of one’s own poem. I have fond memories of meeting with Reg to discuss my thesis at Peet’s, where he would always order his coffee under a different name, and we would then dive into my work. One of my favorite memories of Reg occurred when he arrived at our class, announced that there was a recital happening on campus later that evening, and that he was buying us all tickets if we would like to join him. And that is Reg--the consummate professor--generous with his feedback and his time, and always a champion of the arts. Reg, I thank you for all you have done for me and so many others. Congratulations on this tremendous and well-deserved honor!

Christine Pacyk

Reg’s poetry and his life feel so openhearted. I won’t speak of his writings here, other than to say, if you haven’t already, please pick up his prose or poetry. It will seep into your bones – and you’ll be a better person for it. I want to talk about Reg as a friend, so deeply loyal and kind. I laughingly call him my godfather as for many years he headed Northwestern’s Center for the Writing Arts where I taught – and Reg watched out for me. He had my back. I miss those days when I’d be sitting in my office, and Reg would walk in, so dapperly dressed as always, and ask if I had a minute. And then he’d take a seat, get the business out of the way, and then ask questions, about my family, about my writing, about my travels. He was just curious – and he cared. And he was so encouraging, nudging me along when I had doubts about my work. I miss those days. I miss having Reg in the office next door. He’s one nurturing soul – and his legacy will of course be his poetry and prose, but he has also been an advocate and mentor for so many of us who have, I suspect, absorbed some of Reg’s kindness and his keen observations of the world around us. I like to think -- I like to hope -- I have a bit of Reg Gibbons in me.

Alex Kotlowitz
Reg Gibbons is an old friend of mine through The Book Stall at Chestnut Court in Winnetka. He came to the store as our featured author for several books, and he was our link to Northwestern’s *TriQuarterly*. When I spoke to him recently, he said he came to Northwestern about the time I started in the book business, 1981-82. Our friendship is of great value to me! I am very proud of Reg as a local author, Northwestern professor, and the recipient of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame’s Fuller Award in 2021.

**Roberta Rubin**

I’ve known Reg Gibbons since I moved to Chicago in 1987 to help manage Guild Books. He was one of the people responsible for beginning the conversations that year that led to the founding of the Guild Complex. Working with Reg has meant connecting blues music with a reading by John Edgar Wideman; it has meant lunch with Cyrus Colter and Eugene Redmond; it has meant watching his childlike enthusiasm at the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Awards. His dedication not just to the arts, but crucially to the arts that make a difference in society, in social movements, is what makes his contribution most significant. Guild has always prided itself on looking for what isn’t being offered and providing that opening; Reginald has also always sought what is necessary. But I also prize the imaginative scope that Reg has brought to every concept we have worked on together: not just do what we can, but stretch the limits of possibility. It’s been a minute, and it’s been a great honor.

**Lew Rosenbaum**

Twenty years ago, when I knew I would be moving to Chicago to take a visiting assistant professor position in Northwestern University’s creative writing program, my mentor John Skoyles said, “If I were starting my own writing program, the first person I’d hire would be Reg Gibbons. Because he can do anything!” John’s words are coming back to me now as I try to write a few sentences in appreciation of my friend Reg, an almost super-human person of letters. The task feels difficult, almost impossible, because how could I begin to do justice to Reg’s prolific and brilliant contributions in poetry, fiction, translation, and criticism – not to mention his program-building, administration, and indispensable role in creating, developing, and disseminating the literature of Chicago? It is hard to conceive how a single person can contain so much; even
Whitman's words about multitudes seem inadequate. But this is Reg’s vision: intellectual, social, epic, local, multilingual, trans-historical, and humane above all.

When I arrived in Evanston in the summer of 2002, Reg was the first person to invite me for coffee. He was chair of the Northwestern English Department then, but he made time for a visiting colleague who hadn’t yet published a book. When I left Northwestern and took a position at UIC, I remained in touch with Reg. He continued to make time for coffee and conversations about poetry, even though it always seemed to me that he was working in or chairing nearly every humanities department at Northwestern!

At the time of this writing, I am still breathless from reading Renditions, Reg’s latest collection of poems from Four Way Books. The depth and breadth of these poems’ literariness – and their myriad, capacious forms of lyricism – have given me succor, not to mention astonishment. I remember the day his Mandelstam “renditions” came across my desk at Poetry magazine; and the joy I myself felt as I read of the “rude / rustling necklace of / bees” and the “cranium dome” holding the brain with its “color wheel of / lucid and lulu.”

But I could equally laud his other collections, such as It’s Time, Creatures of A Day, Slow Trains Overhead, Last Lake, and my treasured hardbound copy of Saints. His How Poems Think has had a profound impact on my own thinking about rhyme as a generative and exploratory force (“the whisper / of the phonetic / attraction,” as he describes it in “Rhyme”). And to say that the city of Chicago has formed his poetry is also an understatement. His poetry and fiction are filled with the textures and humanity of our city. From his work we learn that we must turn toward, not away from, the people who need our help – both those known to us and those we are encountering for the first time, as he shows us in his unforgettable story “Money.” He models what we all should be.

I can say that my experience of Chicago would not have been the same without the support and friendship of Reg Gibbons, and that my reading and thinking life would have been infinitely poorer without his poetry, fiction, translations, and criticism in it. I will always be grateful that I had the good fortune to come into his orbit.

Thank you, Reg. And many joyous congratulations on the Fuller Award!

Christina Pugh
Reginald Gibbons really made me into a writer, publishing my first two short stories in *TriQuarterly*, teaching me how to edit and sharpen, never questioning that my characters were living in dire conditions trying to survive, and eventually those two stories were part of my first novel, *Aquaboogie*. I loved working with him. And in 1995, I was so proud to get a signed copy of his novel, *Sweetbitter*, which I have read several times. This year, I’m working on a literary map of the nation, *A New Library of America: 909 Novels*, and so happy *Sweetbitter* was an early choice, for the evocation of place and people that only Reg Gibbons could achieve. Congratulations to him!

*Susan Straight*

Let me say this first, so that there is no doubt: I love Reg Gibbons. I miss him as much as I miss Chicago. Reg is a kind, wise, and good person, but that’s no news to anyone who knows him. He is also my first and oldest literary friend in Chicago, and therefore in America. I took (physically) my story “The Life and Work of Alphonse Kauders” to him in 1995, when he was the editor of *TriQuarterly*, and he published it. Then he published the first story I ever wrote entirely in English “The Sorge Spy Ring.” We have been friends since. For years we would have lunches at Furama in Uptown, talk life, literature and politics. I have learned so much from him, though I will never be anywhere near his levels of wisdom and patience. He made me believe it was possible for me to write and publish in English. Even more importantly, he welcomed me to the Chicago of writers and readers. The city would become my literary and emotional hometown in America, for which I will be forever grateful.

*Alexsandar Hemon*
Reg Gibbons embodies the qualities that the Fuller Award for lifetime achievement seeks to honor. Poet, fiction writer, translator, critic, essayist, editor, teacher, mentor, curator, board member…. leader and friend to all. His contributions to the literary community here in Chicago and nationally are lasting and have impacted so many writers, readers and people who share a vision of how art can change the world. Reg is more than a bright star in the literary firmament – he’s a galaxy unto himself. Thank you, Reg!

Sheila Murphy

Salute to a bearer of light in verse, this Reginald Gibbons who has illuminated a dense and sacred mingling between the mind, the hand and the page, so many pages. Bringing to life, shepherding lines from surface, bearing them to higher living ground. He is a writer’s poet, one whose work is rightfully beyond a cartographer’s drawn space, some small and middling place, but is of the world wide at the least. As is the poet’s wont, he reaches beyond, tapping the sublime. Studying, loving, cultivating, teaching through being. His work is precise meter, beyond count . . .

Gibbons is an elegant, wise and dignified man of Babel and Tongues, duly ruffled in his bearing by the work of poeting and professing. A writer most deserving of time immemorial, honor and salutations. Thanks to him from afar for the sage advice, and clear direction, even the quiet correction over the years. And for the work. May the poet and his ongoing work continue its journey, beyond borders and boundaries, limits and binding. Shine light, keep the beat, and prosper along the way; in search of beauty in the margins, where the page can’t keep up.

Bayo Ojikutu
Reg Gibbons is a Chicago treasure. Sure, he hails from Texas. But the Chicago literary landscape has been powerfully shaped by his life and work in this city. I am so grateful that Reg has donated his papers to the Newberry Library, where generations of future scholars, poets, historians, and story-seekers can find material that will enrich our understanding of how poetry gets made and the networks of people who make it. Thanks to Reg, the Newberry now also holds the records of the Guild Literary Complex, the grassroots literary organization that for decades has organized some of the most innovative readings and events in the city. In looking through this material myself, I have been inspired by the passion and commitment Reg has brought to championing other poets. And, of course, I am awed by Reg’s own work, his verbal inventiveness, his translations of Greek and Spanish poetry, his sheer delight at the histories and meanings contained in single words and phrases. I am so thrilled he is being honored with the Fuller Award!

Liesl Olson - www.newberry.org

Reginald Gibbons, your friends and partners at the Poetry Foundation congratulate you upon receiving the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award. This is a well-deserved honor in recognition of your poetry, your dedication to your students, and your commitment to our literary community!

www.poetryfoundation.org/visit

The American Writers Museum congratulates Reginald Gibbons on this well-deserved honor. His skill as a writer is matched only by his generosity to the larger literary community and we are proud to call him a friend.

www.americanwritersmuseum.org

Reginald Gibbons has produced a masterful body of work and has enriched the lives of countless readers. His ability to powerfully craft words and phrases in support of social justice is especially noteworthy. Chicago Public Library is pleased to continue its long collaboration with the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame by presenting Mr. Gibbons with the Fuller Award.

www.chipublib.org
Not only is Reg Gibbons an extraordinary writer, but his writing spans what many consider the divide between creative writing and literary studies. As the Frances Hooper Professor of Arts and Humanities at Northwestern University, Reg has built bridges between creative and critical writers and, in fact, envisioned a new graduate degree that offers students both the MFA and MA under the auspices of the Litowitz Program in Creative Writing.

www.english.northwestern.edu/graduate/mfa-ma-program

I join everyone at the Guild Literary Complex in thanking Reg Gibbons for his commitment, enthusiasm, and leadership. He is one of the reasons the Guild Literary Complex continues its important work into its thirty-second year. Reg has edited a number of books for Tia Chucha while they were the publishing arm of the Guild Complex. He's been on many panels and hosted a number of our workshops. Still on the board today, Reg has made numerous contributions to the organization's mission.

guildcomplex.org

Congratulations, Reg, on this richly deserved honor! Your Warren Wilson MFA family sends warm wishes, affection, and gratitude for your decades of brilliant teaching in our program.

www.wwcmfa.org

Four Way Books congratulates Reginald Gibbons. We are proud to have ushered “Renditions” into the world. Thank you, Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, for recognizing Gibbons’ remarkable career.

www.fourwaybooks.com

Reginald Gibbons as poet, professor, editor, literary critic, cultural activist, institution supporter and one of the founders of the Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Day celebrations is in keeping with the best of conscientious world-class cultural stabilizers. Honoring Professor Gibbons with this year’s Fuller Award is in keeping with those who preceded him. He is a mature poet who deeply cares for young poets/writers and others. This is to say that he is a good man/artist who is overly needed in today’s troubled and divided nation. Congratulations Reg.

Haki R. Madhubuti & Third World Press staff and volunteers

www.thirdworldpressfoundation.org
AWP is proud to recognize and celebrate the award-winning writer Reginald Gibbons. His increasing focus on social and political injustice and the power and responsibility that writers have to engage their society and effect change, complements his prolific writing career. As a scholar, teacher, and institution builder, Gibbons is one of Literature’s Giants!

www.awpwriter.org

LSU Press congratulates Reginald Gibbons on his well-deserved recognition by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame. We’re honored to have published this National Book Award finalist and proud to be associated with his latest accolade.

www.lsupress.org

From an editor’s point of view, I would wish for everyone to experience publishing a book with Reginald Gibbons. His combined skills as a poet, translator, editor, and critic are such rare and wondrous things. I wasn’t around when the Press published *The Poet’s Work*, but I have had the privilege and pleasure of assisting him with four of his books since. My colleagues at the University of Chicago Press join me in congratulating Reg on this glorious achievement.

Randolph Petilos
www.press.uchicago.edu

Columbia College Chicago congratulates Reginald Gibbons on this prestigious and deserving honor.

www.colum.edu

Greater Reach Consulting, Inc. is a grateful supporter of the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, and fan of Mr. Gibbons. We offer him our congratulations on this recognition and are looking forward to the event to honor him.

www.GreaterReachConsulting.com

The National Museum of Mexican Art congratulates Reginald Gibbons on receiving the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame’s Fuller Award. May you continue to inspire many more generations through your poetry.

www.nationalmuseumofmexicanart.org
THE ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

by Reginald Gibbons

I thank Don and his selection committee for the heart-filling honor of this award, and I’m very grateful for it. And to those who have spoken tonight of me and my work, I offer my humbled and heartfelt thanks, as I do also to those who sent written tributes. I thank Cornelia Spelman. It’s from our life together with her children, and in more recent years with their children, that I have learned so much that I had not yet learned before she and I met—about life and love. And also, from her picture-and-story books for children and parents, I have learned much about the beauties and the vulnerabilities of childhood.

Before Chicago, my inner landscapes were in Texas, and in the Northeast and the Bay Area and in other countries. There are writers who are somehow mostly self-forming creatures, but I’m not one of those. I have needed all those kinds of encounters. The mature stage might be my becoming my full self as a writer when I moved to Chicago in 1981.

Not only because, after a sequence of adjunct teaching positions, I was taking on larger responsibilities as the editor of TriQuarterly. It was also because I began to live and to work and to understand what people call Chicagoland—in my case, mostly Evanston and Chicago. I’ve lived here within the immense complexity, the existential, political, cultural, racial, ethnic and ecological complexity of this metropolis on the shores of an immense body of water—the human city and the forces of nature as closest neighbors.

And immersing myself in all the variety of Chicago’s cultures and the wondrousness of the lake has been so important to me as a person, and a writer.

My many Chicago years have been the completion or at least the addition to (I hope I’m not finished) the completion of my education as an individual within history and within change and within nature, living and working and thinking and writing.

The mature stage of my continuing to become a person also began with a new life coming here with my wife Cornelia and her two children who were at that time, two-and-a-half and eleven years old.
So I learned a lot from their public-school days and their friends, their athletic pursuits, their joys, their accomplishments, and the inevitable sorrows and milestones of childhood and youth. This is all part of me finally becoming who I seem to have been able to become.

I’m thinking about all these years have gone by as snapshots in my mind, not pictures that were ever actually made:

I’d only been in Chicago for a short while when a friend elsewhere, told me to go to a small gallery—it doesn’t exist anymore—the next week, because the North Dakota poet Thomas McGrath was down from Minneapolis to give a reading. So I met him in Chicago and that great friendship lasted until he died.

Soon after starting work at *TriQuarterly* and Northwestern, I met Lee Webster, and also I heard from another friend, the poet Michael Harper, that the hardback edition of the *Collected Poems* of Sterling A. Brown, which Michael Harper had persuaded a publisher to bring back into print, was now going out of print. Lee and I put his Another Chicago Press and *TriQuarterly* together so that we could try to publish a paperback edition. We could not let this iconic American poet disappear again!

And we did publish it. Here’s the snapshot: Lee’s office for Another Chicago Press and for storing the books was in a huge warehouse way down Western Avenue. He’d rented a cheap but windowless space there, and he and I and his board members would meet there to work on projects. The almost uninhabited building was massive, dusty, and to get to the Another Chicago Press space, you had to take a gargantuan freight elevator—the kind where the massive heavy doors don’t slide open to left and right, but instead above and below, like some kind of incredibly huge trap for a mammoth, maybe, or like meeting in the cave of the Cyclops. This was what small-press publishing was like around 1990.

And there was Guild Books, the store with the wildest assortment of literary and other magazines I had ever seen—fantastic multicultural shelves of poetry and politics. And in the same block of Lincoln Avenue, I gave my first poetry reading in Chicago, at the Red Lion, with Michael Warr and Patricia Smith.

There was that one and only time that the AWP met in Chicago, in 1986,
at what was then called the Intercontinental Hotel, on Michigan Avenue, where I met Alice Munro, one of my goddesses of fiction. And I manned the *TriQuarterly* table in the book exhibition. I was so pleased that AWP had come to Chicago and I *think* it was because Lisel Mueller and I had urged them to do that. This snapshot is of me—rupturing a disc in my back while lifting heavy boxes of *TriQuarterly* out of the trunk of my car and heaving them onto a dolly because the bellhop who came out with the dolly to help me seemed to be about 82 years old and I didn’t want him to hurt himself.

That was small-press publishing, too—it was very physical!

There were unforgettable little Guild fundraising dinners with Anchee Min and with Adrienne Rich. There were all those different venues for Guild Complex events, and the best two of them: the old Hot House on Milwaukee Ave. and the basement (or I should say the lower level) of the Chopin Theater.

And sometimes it was the upstairs. It was upstairs where we had a full house of mostly teens that Luis Rodriguez gave a reading and talk from his autobiographical book, *Always Running*. A small teen boy with an edge in his voice, after Luis spoke about having been in prison, called out somewhat aggressively, “Were you ever afraid?” After a brief pause, Luis called back to him, “Every day!” Luis is a great man for reality. Having come up the hard way and transformed himself, he made it possible for others to do so. From him I learned a lot. Also at the Chopin Theater, there was an unforgettable reading by Gwendolyn Brooks. (She came to, and participated in, many events.) On that night, she sat on an old-fashioned upholstered chair on a low dais of wood, with a lamp at her side. As if she were in her own apartment, her own home, but reading aloud to a full house of guests, of listeners, bringing—as she certainly could—the full power of her work. And so many other events—like John Edgar Wideman reading from his most recent novel and accompanied by blues harmonica player Sugar Blue.

One day, I was downtown on Wabash and I was meeting the manager of the old Kroch’s and Brentano’s bookstore. I was waiting on the sidewalk and he came out the door. We were going to have lunch together. There was a line of people outside that door and going all the way back to the end of the block. I asked him, “Who’s signing books in there?”
“Oliver North,” he said. I thought to myself, “Welcome to America, yet again!” But in rich, pleasing, and disturbing ways both Chicago has been welcoming me again and again to the real America.

There were many tremendous events sponsored by the Guild Complex, but for me the most memorable was when a literacy center teacher brought seven or eight recent adult immigrants to the U.S., who were learning English from him. Each of them read to the audience their first composition in English. One paragraph. The topic: How I came to America. And then, on top of that, which was tremendous and moving, the feature reader was Angela Jackson.

On the day of Gwendolyn Brooks’ funeral in Hyde Park, there was a roaring Chicago blizzard. It had begun hours before dawn. Cornelia and I and our short-story-writing friend Eileen Cherry, who had somehow managed to get to our house in Evanston, shared a deep disappointment, because despite my shoveling snow frantically as it was still falling, I could barely get our car out onto our narrow side street, and then I couldn’t even drive it to the end of the block. And yet, the blizzard almost seemed to be the earthly marker of what a huge loss had befallen all of us. It was somber snow. It was funereal snow. It was almost ceremonial snow.

There was the great reading by Adrienne Rich and Patricia Smith in a full Preston Bradley Hall at the Cultural Center. There was Ralph Ellison signing books after reading and talking at the Harold Washington Library. There was Printers Row, year after year. There were the wonderful BrooksDay celebrations that began in 2013. To plan BrooksDay, Guild Complex board members and South Side writers, performers, and others, would meet a number of times at the invitation of Haki Madhubuti in a beautiful room at his Third World Press. Or we met in coffee shops. There were my long walks in Jackson park with Norman Maclean talking about novels and life. And then I’d pretend I also was a Hyde Parker for the afternoon and we’d go to Jimmy’s Woodlawn Tap for burgers and beer.

Another great Guild event and venue—the tremendously powerful reading by Carolyn Rodgers and Angela Jackson at the South Side Community Arts Center—the last such Center in America that was in the building where it had been founded. There was the reading where Studs
Terkel introduced Grace Paley and Michael Warr at what was then called the Chicago Historical Society. There was such a richness. All that was so inspiring and, as I said earlier, educating, for me.

There was the night I walked into Blue Chicago to meet Sterling Plumpp there and immediately my body was vibrating to the enormous volume of Willie Kent’s band—for which Sterling had written some blues lyrics that were among the numbers they played that night. I saw Sterling up at the front table, writing in a notebook. I went up and sat beside him and yelled into his ear, “I just understood something about you! This place is your Paris café.” He grinned a big yes.

There was the big party for the Chicago issue of *TriQuarterly* in 1984. I carried a copy of the issue around with me and got as many of the writers as I could to sign it. Gwendolyn Brooks signed, Harry Mark Petrakis, Lisel Mueller, Gene Wildman, the great photographer and sculptor Stephen Deutch (who taught me a lot), Norman Maclean, David Hernandez, Saul Bellow, Paul Carroll, Cyrus Colter, Leon Forrest, Art Shay, many others. All these snapshots have been part of my education—my Chicago years, the longest of my life in one place.

There were some negative moments. They’re kind of amusing to me. I hope they don’t sound not amusing to you. Dinner at a posh apartment on Lake Shore Drive, to which Cornelia and I had been invited. This was in the early 80s and Saul Bellow was there, and when all the guests were called to the very large dining table, I had to edge myself in between him and Cornelia. I saw where he was going. There was Mark Strand smiling at me mercilessly, triumphantly, before I was to introduce him at his reading at the Art Institute.

Stuart Dybek mentioned my fundraising. There were many scenes of me figuratively getting on my knees to ask for some money. But I learned a lot from this. If you’ve ever happened to be at least in the foyer of the Chicago Club, you will have noticed the three brass steps up, just a little, to the next level. The steps are polished to look like solid gold, and those steps seem to represent all the places where money’s not so often given to a small-organization arts-funding petitioner. I did get one room further in, that time. I was meeting a potential donor there. I made my pitch in a room big enough to be a house and only I and the donor were there, in armchairs in one corner, but the person I met lectured me
on how to raise money, naming every way in which I had already tried and sometimes succeeded. Just enough to keep *TriQuarterly* going. And after he had explained to me what I already knew how to do, he said no, and then he said he had to go upstairs for lunch with Henry Kissinger. OK. Chicago is a major metropolis, and you know, sometimes people who are not so great come to town.

My album has hundreds and hundreds of lived snapshots, and for me the excitement and the learning process of participating in the creation of the American Writers Museum here in Chicago was amazingly rich. There were big meetings of writers at which scholars, museum directors, museum builders, book reviewers, editors, publishers, visionaries, fundraisers, cultural presenters, sat around big tables and talked. It was all exciting.

On a more intimate scale I should mention an informal, sometimes hilarious, sometimes righteously outraged, seminar of friends who used to meet for lunch from time to time at Furama, a dim sum restaurant at Broadway and Argyle. Sasha Hemon, Stuart Dybek, Alex Kotlowitz, and me. I’m aware that this was kind of a boys club, but our perspectives on writing, politics, food, and Chicago itself and the multiple worlds we brought with us to the lunch table—for me, that was so Chicago.

And last, I’ll mention another mentor, this one regarding African American writers and writing—my friend and Northwestern colleague Leon Forrest. Not only in his books, which are dazzling, but also in many conversations, too. He was a walking encyclopedia of the South Side, of Hollywood movies, and the artistry of fiction. When we talked about books and writers, and what should have happened or might have happened, instead of what did happen here and there in Black Chicago or in the life of writer X or writer Y, Leon gave me the ultimate reminder to be humble and to learn. “Reg,” he would say, “you got to go there to know there.”

My life and my work wouldn’t be what it is, what it has been, without all this and so much more living, writing, talking, reading, planning, collaborating, publishing, attending and organizing literary events with friends, and teaching. I have been very lucky. And going there, around Chicago, as much as I could, I feel I’ve gotten much further in knowing there.
THE CHICAGO LITERARY HALL OF FAME’S MISSION

The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CLHOF) honors, celebrates, preserves, and promotes the development of Chicago’s great literary heritage--past, present, and future. We celebrate authors whose words have best captured the essence of our city; writers whose Chicago roots enabled them to create narrative worlds far beyond our boundaries; people who’ve built and maintained a supportive infrastructure; people who’ve played instrumental parts in enabling great artists to thrive. People who have made this city a better place in which to live. We walk and mark Chicago’s spectacular literary trails.

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SPECIAL THANKS

Cate Plys is an absolutely brilliant editor and Barry Jung a meticulous proofreader—these two are to credit for this commemorative program’s professional shine. Barry also performed dozens of other uncredited tasks that helped in the planning of the ceremony. Barbara Egel, in addition to her thoughtful analysis of Reg’s poetry, was instrumental in our outreach to the wonderful community of partners who joined us in this ceremony. Jill Zylke, created this beautiful program cover and Jeff Waggoner designed this program. Breaker Press did the printing. Angie Raney assisted in building the program content, and Ana Gore helped with a lot of bits and pieces. Floyd Sullivan generously loaned his time and talents to the promotion of this event. Randy Albers, Dave Stern, and Amy Danzer were especially busy behind the scenes.

Chicago Classics is an ongoing CLHOF series that features readings of our most cherished Chicago writers and their books. In addition to several themed virtual events scheduled this year, we frequently add new videos online.

We welcome your submission.

Contact Don Evans at dgevans@chicagoliteraryhof.org with your idea and details on how to submit.
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An Anthology of Chicago Poetry

Edited by Robin Mose and Donald G. Evans

Watch for updates and details about the launch of this important and exciting book. More to come! chicagoliteraryhof.org
SAVE THE DATE!

VIRTUAL FUNDRAISER

DEC 10
FRIDAY
7:00 P.M. (CST)

The program will include:
- Readings by Chicago authors
- Live auction
- Trivia prizes

More details to come!

Proceeds will help support three new CLHOF initiatives:
1. Educational programming for youth in Chicago
2. A poetry anthology
3. A video series

The money raised will also go toward costs to coordinate induction ceremonies, lifetime achievement awards, and special exhibits.

If you would like to donate something - an antique typewriter, artwork, first editions, sports memorabilia, company swag, a weekend writing escape – contact Amy Danzer at amydanzer@gmail.com.

If you are interested in donating directly to the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, visit chicagoliteraryhof.org/support.

GAYLORD AND DOROTHY DONNELLEY FOUNDATION

Provides ongoing support to the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame