



**THE CHICAGO
LITERARY HALL OF FAME**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
THE POETRY FOUNDATION

PRESENTS

The Fuller Award
FOR LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT TO

*Patricia
Smith*

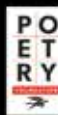
Thursday, July 11, 2024

THE POETRY FOUNDATION

61 WEST SUPERIOR | CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

RECEPTION AT 6:00 P.M.

CEREMONY STARTING PROMPTLY AT 7:00 P.M.



Contents

Tonight's Lineup	2
The Fuller Award	3-4
Bibliography	5
Awards & Recognitions	6-7
Tonight's Participants.....	8-10
There is nothing that can't become a poem	11-21
Patricia & the Fiery Furnaces on America's Bandstand	22
Patricia Smith, The Architect	23-25
Patricia.....	26-27
I Remember (to Patricia Smith).....	28-30
Teach As I Have Learned	31-32
Do Something Beautiful	33-34
I Be's An Act of Grammar in Black Literature.....	35
Patricia Smith: Written in the Stars.....	36
to the black girl who waits on the bench, to the black boy who spends nights shooting the ball,	37-38
Patricia Smith: Muse, Magic, and Mythology	39-42
Before Orphan Unearthed the Mirror	43-44
Uncanny Powers	45
Documenting Marginalized Voices	46
Chicago Literary Hall of Fame	47
Our Host: The Poetry Foundation	48
A Most Wonderful Beginning.....	49
Special Thanks	50
Partner Tributes.....	Back
Continuing Support	Back

Tonight's Lineup

Adrian Matejka	Welcome to the Poetry Foundation
Reginald Gibbons	About the Fuller Award and CLHOF
avery r. young	Emcee
Jamila Woods	Reading "Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah"
Niveah Glover	Performing Patricia Smith's "Hip Hop Ghazal"
Marc Kelly Smith	"Thru the Mill"
Nora Brooks Blakely	Presentation of Fuller Award Statue
Patricia Smith	Acceptance Speech
Lynne Thompson	In Conversation with Patricia Smith
avery r. young	Thanks

Program Editor: Donald G. Evans
Assistant Program Editor: Barry Jung
Cover Design: Denise Billups
Program Design: Jeff Waggoner

Audience Participation Survey

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



The Fuller Award

by Valya Dudycz Lupescu

“The Fuller” is awarded by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame to a Chicago author who has made an outstanding lifetime contribution to literature. The tradition began in 2012, when the CLHOF honored Gene Wolfe at Sanfilippo Estate in Barrington. Patricia Smith will be our 16th honoree. These ceremonies have been held in various institutions, including the American Writers Museum, Chopin Theatre, Harold Washington Library Center, National Hellenic Museum, National Museum of Mexican Art, Newberry Library, and tonight’s host, The Poetry Foundation. With the passing of Wolfe in 2019 and Harry Mark Petrakis in 2021, the CLHOF established a policy of elevating all deceased Fuller Award winners to induction status, pending board approval. Harriette Gillem Robinet, who passed away earlier this year, on May 17, will soon join our historical canon.

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 sculptures.

www.resculpture.net

2024 Fuller Award Selection Committee

Gerald Butters
Richard Guzman
Shanti Nagarkatti
Leah von Essen
Michael Welch

Past Fuller Award Recipients

Gene Wolfe (2012)
Harry Mark Petrakis (2014)
Haki Madhubuti (2015)
Rosellen Brown (2016)
Angela Jackson (2018)
Stuart Dybek (2018)
Sara Paretsky (2019)
Sterling Plumpp (2019)
Sandra Cisneros (2021)
Reginald Gibbons (2021)
Luis Alberto Urrea (2021)
Ana Castillo (2022)
Rick Kogan (2022)
Harriette Gillem Robinet (2023)
Scott Turow (2023)



Bibliography

Poetry collections

Life According to Motown (1991)

Big Towns, Big Talk (1992)

Close to Death (1993)

Teahouse of the Almighty (2006)

Blood Dazzler (2008)

Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah (2012)

Incendiary Art: Poems (2017)

Unshuttered (2023)

Non-fiction

Africans in America: America's Journey Through Slavery, co-authored with Charles Johnson (1998)

Children's books

Janna and the Kings (2003)

Theatre

Professional Suicide (a one-woman show)

Life According to Motown (a play featuring a selection of poems)

Other

Editor of the crime fiction anthology *Staten Island Noir* (2012)

Gotta Go Gotta Flow: Life, Love, and Lust on Chicago's South Side, co-authored with photographer Michael Abramson (2015)

Co-editor of *The Golden Shovel Anthology—New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks* (2017)

Crowns, co-authored with photographer Sandro Miller (2021)

Death in the Desert, co-authored with photographer Sandro Miller (2021).



"Writing prods me relentlessly, and whenever I'm not writing or teaching writing everything else feels pointless." from Chicago Review of Books interview with Mandanna Chaffa, March 13, 2023

Awards & Recognitions

1990, 91, 93, 95 Individual Champion of the National Poetry Slam

1992 Carl Sandburg Literary Award for *Big Towns, Big Talk*

2003 New Voices Award for *Janna and the Kings*

2006 National Poetry Series selection for *Teahouse of the Almighty*

2006 Inductee of the International Literary Hall of Fame for Writers of African Descent

2007 Hurston/Wright Legacy Award in poetry for *Teahouse of the Almighty*

2007 Paterson Poetry Prize for *Teahouse of the Almighty*

2008 National Book Award finalist for *Blood Dazzler*

2010 Rattle Poetry Prize for "Tavern. Tavern. Church. Shuttered Tavern"

2012 MacDowell fellowship

2012 Yaddo fellowship

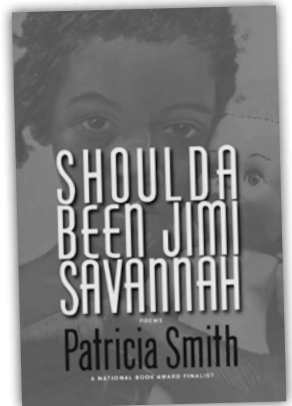
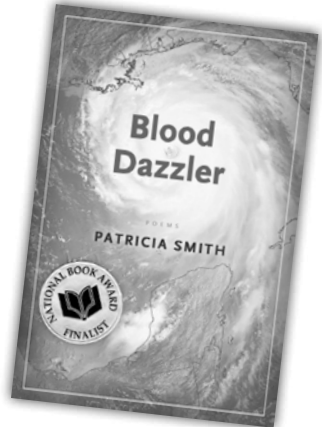
2013 Academy of American Poets Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize for *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*

2013 Mystery Writers of America Robert L. Fish Memorial Award for short story writing for "When They Are Done with Us"

2014 Phillis Wheatley Book Award in poetry for *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*

2014 Rebekah Johnson Bobbitt Award for *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*

2014 Guggenheim fellowship



2014 Lannan fellowship

2016 Civitella Ranieri fellowship

2017 Los Angeles Times Book Prize for poetry for
Incendiary Art

2017 National Endowment for the Arts grant
recipient

2018 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding
Literary Work – Poetry for *Incendiary Art*

2018 Kingsley and Kate Tufts Poetry Award for
Incendiary Art

2018 Pulitzer Prize for poetry finalist for *Incendiary Art*

2018 Paterson Poetry Prize for *Incendiary Art*

2018 Neustadt International Prize for Literature finalist

2021 Poetry Foundation Ruth Lilly Poetry Award for Lifetime Achievement

2022 Inductee of the American Academy of Arts & Sciences

2023 Aiken Taylor Award for exceptional contributions to poetry

2023 Elected a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets

2024 Chicago Literary Hall of Fame Fuller Award for lifetime achievement

Two-time Pushcart Prize winner for the poems “The Way Pilots Walk” and
“Laugh Your Troubles Away!”



Tonight's Participants



A lover of laughter and legacy, folklore and rational human beings, **Nora Brooks Blakely** founded Chocolate Chips Theatre Company in Chicago and was its Producing Artistic Director for twenty-nine years. She has written plays and musicals for young people for decades and is the author of the picture book, *Moyenda and The Golden Heart*, an origin tale for Kwanzaa. Ms. Blakely taught for 11 years in the Chicago Public Schools and at the DuSable Leadership Academy. Blakely also spent more than twenty years teaching drama and writing workshops for students and teachers. Nora has served on boards and committees for several youth and arts organizations and her readings and lectures have been conducted in several states. The daughter of two writers, Henry Blakely and Gwendolyn Brooks, she founded Brooks Permissions, a company which manages her mother's body of work and promotes its continued relevance in the 21st century and beyond.



Reginald Gibbons is the author of eleven books of poetry, including *Renditions* (Four Way Books, 2021), as well as *Slow Trains Overhead: Chicago Poems and Stories* (University of Chicago Press), and *Creatures of a Day* (Finalist for the National Book Award, LSU Press). He has published a book of very short fiction, *An Orchard in the Street* (BOA Editions, 2017), and translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* and Euripides' *Bakkhai*, and many other books. He was the editor of *TriQuarterly* magazine from 1981-to 1997, taught for many years in the Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers and at Northwestern University. He received the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award in 2021.



Niveah Glover is a young Black American poet and playwright from Jacksonville, Florida. With a vivid imagination, a strong sense of community, and a close examination of her surroundings, she often creates works that are expressive, thought-provoking, and deeply personal. Niveah has achieved a number of accolades that demonstrate her dedication to poetry. These include being named the 2018 Jacksonville Youth Poet Laureate, one of Folio Weekly's 18 under 18 in 2019, a 2022 YoungArts recipient, a two-time Poetry Out Loud Florida Champion, the

2024 Poetry Out Loud Champion, and a 2024 U.S. Presidential Scholar. Her full-length play *Callas* is scheduled to make its stage debut in the summer of 2025, having recently completed its last developmental workshop. As an artist she lives by James Baldwin's quote, "You write in order to change the world. If you alter, even by a millimeter, the way people look at reality, then you can change it."



Adrian Matejka is the author of several collections of poems, most recently *Somebody Else Sold the World* (Penguin, 2021), which was a finalist for the UNT 2022 Rilke Prize. His graphic novel *Last On His Feet: Jack Johnson and the Battle of the Century* (Liveright, 2023) was selected as one of the 10 Best Books of 2023 by the New York Public Library. Among Matejka's other honors are fellowships from the Academy of American Poets, the Guggenheim Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, and a Simon Fellowship from United States Artists. He is Editor of *Poetry* magazine.



Chicago born and bred, **Marc Kelly Smith** is creator/founder of what has become an international phenomenon, the Poetry Slam. As stated in the PBS television series, *The United States of Poetry*, a "strand of new poetry began at Chicago's Green Mill Tavern in 1987 when Marc Smith found a home for the Uptown Poetry Slam." In 2021 he was named a Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Letters by Madame Roselyne Bachelor, ambassador to the French Ministry of Cultural, and has received the Key to the City of Tours where the Ligue de Slam France established the Museum de Slam dedicated to the origins of Poetry Slam. In 2023 he performed in Portugal as an honored guest at their 9th year celebration of slam and in Brazil at the 15th year anniversary of poetry slam there. Marc's current performance project, the Last Word Quintet, plays periodically at Space in Evanston and Fitzgerald's in Berwyn. His book *Ground Zero* was published by Northwestern University Press in 2021.



Lynne Thompson served as Los Angeles' 4th Poet Laureate and received a Poet Laureate Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets. She is the author of four collections of poetry, *Beg No Pardon*, winner of the Perugia Press Prize and the Great Lakes Colleges New Writers Award; *Start*

With A Small Guitar (What Books Press); *Fretwork*, winner of the 2019 Marsh Hawk Poetry Prize selected by Jane Hirshfield; and, *Blue on a Blue Palette*, published by BOA Editions in April 2024. A Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net nominee, Thompson is the recipient of multiple awards including the George Drury Smith Award for Outstanding Achievement in Poetry, an Individual Artist Fellowship from the City of Los Angeles, the Tucson Literary Festival Poetry Prize, and the Steven Dunn Poetry Prize, as well as fellowships from the Summer Literary Series (Kenya) and the Vermont Studio Center. Thompson's recent work can be found or is forthcoming in the literary journals *Best American Poetry 2020*, *Kenyon Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Copper Nickel*, and *Gulf Coast*, as well as the anthology *Dear Yusef: Essays, Letters, and Poems For and About One Mr. Komunyakaa*, among others.



Jamila Woods is a poet, songwriter, and performing artist from the South Side of Chicago. Her poetry has been published in *Poetry* and *The Offing*, and was featured in the 2020 Library of America anthology *African American Poetry: 250 Years of Struggle & Song*. She has been awarded writing residencies at Millay Arts, Hedgebrook, BLKSPACE on Ryder Farm, and Civitella Ranieri. Jamila has released three studio albums, *HEAVN*, *LEGACY! LEGACY!* and, most recently, *Water Made Us*, in October 2023. Her work often blurs boundaries between poem and song. As cultural critic Doreen St. Felix writes in her review of *HEAVN*, “It makes you wish all singers were poets.”



avery r. young, Chicago's inaugural Poet Laureate, interdisciplinary artist and educator is a Leader for a New Chicago 2022 awardee, a Cave Canem fellow and a co-director of The Floating Museum. His poetry and prose have been featured in *BreakBeat Poets*, *Teaching Black*, *Poetry Magazine* and alongside images in photographer Cecil McDonald Jr's, *In The Company of Black*. He is the composer and librettist for a new commissioned work from The Lyric Opera of Chicago titled *safronia*. His full length recording *tubman*. is the soundtrack to his collection of poetry, *neckbone: visual verses*.

“There is nothing that can’t become a poem”: The Work of Patricia Smith

by Barbara Egel

I couldn't *stop* writing.
I wrote myself angled and tress-topped
I wrote myself hero, I wrote myself white,
Cherokee, cheerleader, distressed damsel in Alan Ladd's arms,
I wrote myself winged, worshipped.
– “Related to the Buttercup, Blooms in Spring”

In this poem from her 2006 collection, *Teahouse of the Almighty*, Patricia Smith falls desperately in love. She is a child in elementary school, and she meets the word “anemone” and is captivated thereafter by words and what they can do, how they feel on the tongue and flowing out of a pen. We are very lucky that she encountered “anemone” and “couldn't *stop* writing” because we now have so much of that writing to educate and discomfit us, to make us rage, to make us feel hot and bothered, to make us guffaw unexpectedly even as she refuses to let us turn away from hard truths.

Patricia Smith started her professional life as a journalist, and that sensibility informs every stanza she writes as a poet. She has said many times that “the primary job of a poet is as witness,” and if you are privileged to read her poetry, you, too, become a witness. Whether writing about a Motown bop heard on the streets of Chicago's West Side in the '60s or headline-making catastrophes, Smith keeps readers infused with the blood of a moment, shortening the distance between us and people we are usually prompted to see as other. She is a historian of both the times she lives in and her own growth as a poet. Read all of her work at once, as I just did, and you see her returning to key themes and topics, not only sharpening her own take on them but also requiring readers not to forget. It's as if she's saying, “You thought you were done reading about Emmett Till/Smokey Robinson/George W. Bush in these pages? We are not done with that story, and we never will be.”

“[Poetry is] like a second throat; it's another way to speak.”

Patricia Smith didn't set out to be a poet. As she tells it, one evening a journalist friend invited her to a poetry event at a blues bar. She agreed to come

along to “drink and laugh at the poets.” Instead, in a room with Gwendolyn Brooks herself in attendance, she fell in love with the power of spoken word poetry. She dove in and became a slam national champion several times over and found that the slam scene in Chicago was open to whatever approach, tactic, or technique told the story. In an interview with poet Lynn Thompson, Smith recalls that flexibility. “I think the early days of performance and poetry competitions, particularly in the hotbed of Chicago, just nixed any pesky boundaries when it came to creation. ... The goal was to disappear ourselves so that there was no boundary between the poet and the audience.” The habit of reaching for whatever tool of word, rhythm, voice, gesture, medium would deliver the greatest impact has stuck with her throughout her career, even as she moved to the page.

That move was prompted in the ‘90s by a question from Luis Rodriguez of Tia Chucha Press when he asked her whether she had a manuscript. (Her sage advice from this moment: “When someone asks you if you have a manuscript, say yes, and then go home and worry about it because you don’t have one.”) That first manuscript became *Life According to Motown*. She published a book a year for the next three years, bringing her spoken word magic to print and somehow being just as captivating without her actual voice behind the poems. Read “Skinhead” from *Big Towns, Big Talk* and then find her performance of it on YouTube. Both will leave you shattered.

But Smith wanted more tools to express her complex vision. She studied in the Stonecoast MFA program with master prosodist, Annie Finch, learning the connection between meter and meaning, finding new shapes for the stories she wanted to tell. “A poem,” she says in an interview with Saeed Jones in *Poetry*, “is sometimes asking for something you don’t yet know how to do. And you owe it to your poems to broaden your skill set.” Armed with the mechanics of sonnets, sestinas, villanelles, and other received forms, Smith produced *Blood Dazzler* as her MFA thesis. She says her MFA gave her “a sense of being part of that [poetic] lineage somehow—that was really empowering. Then I felt the books had more of a back to them. ... It’s so wonderful to have those things at your disposal and let the poem tell you what it needs.”

Now Smith is not only a poet but a teacher of poets, at City Colleges of New York, at Cave Canem, at StoryStudio here in Chicago, and most recently, at Princeton. The collection of awards won along the way would take up more page space than I have here. We are lucky that rising poets are being infused with her particular approaches to subject, audience, and voice, and that they are measuring themselves against the high standard she’s set. The bounty of

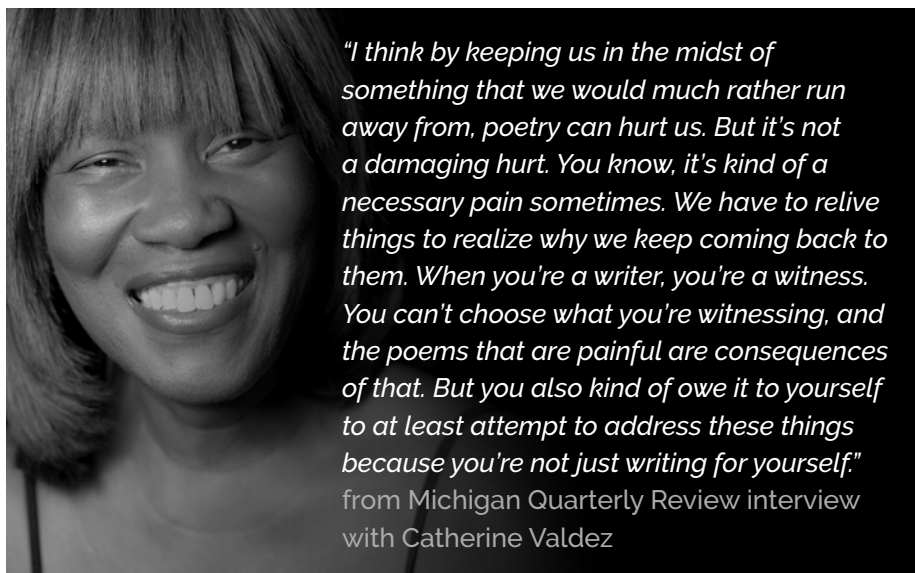
Patricia Smith continues in books that don't even bear her name on the cover.

"[Patricia Smith] demands that we understand our histories don't just live in us; in fact, our histories have heat, and many of us are already on fire."

– Saeed Jones

The histories illuminated in Smith's work are both the history of our country—those on fire and those choosing to ignore the smoke—and the history of Smith's work as poet and witness. Smith is radical and political, not through declarations of dogma but through forcing readers to bear witness beside her. A Black woman poet from a Chicago neighborhood that has not gentrified in her lifetime, Smith is unapologetic about causing necessary discomfort. "I think a lot of white folks, in particular, come to my work looking to hear a Black person say that it's OK not to pay attention." Those white folks could not be more wrong. In her book, *Gotta Go Gotta Flow*, that pairs poems with Michael Abramson's photos of South Side nightlife, Smith starts the closing essay with, "I'm black, so I can tell you and you can believe it. Here's what happens when a white person walks (stumbles, strides, sashays, trudges, wanders, traipses) into one of our spaces." She's talking about physical spaces, but she might as well be talking about her poems, too.

Smith's wisdom as a poet overcomes the difficulty of writing so that a poem both speaks truth *and* holds the attention of those whose first impulse is to look away from that truth. Her prime directive: find the unexpected approach. In an interview, she says, "A lot of the research is: What has no one heard? What



has no one read? What's a detail that might be on the periphery of the story? That's a great entry point. You're trying to upend expectations for the poem, from both the reader and from yourself." This is why even in her mood-setting Motown poems, there's more attention paid to Florence Ballard than Diana Ross, why the story of a made-up mutt in *Blood Dazzler* can have you on the edge of your seat even as you know his fate, why a persona poem that gives you Olive Oyl's origin story can make you cry.

Smith's focus on emotional truth also means she's a practitioner of close-up magic. I dare you to find a broad generalization anywhere in her pages. Instead, we can smell the heat of the asphalt as the double-dutch ropes hit it, feel the itch of the polyester dress, taste the sour pickle pierced by a peppermint stick (swear to god, that's a thing). When it comes to bodies and everything they do, Smith is necessarily relentless. "What You Pray Toward" explicates the orgasm, the body's needs and capacities. Many of her poems, leading up to and including *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah*, argue the quirks of bodies and what to do with them from hair to heels. The poem "34" in *Blood Dazzler* cements the memory of the thirty-four bodies found at a nursing home near New Orleans where Katrina's floodwaters overwhelmed the building. Choosing taste as the primary sense in stanza four is both an unexpected approach and an example of how sensory detail pins the reader to the page.

If you knew my alley, it's stink and blue,
if you knew dirt-gritted collard greens
salt-pork slick and doused with Tabasco,
then you knew me.
I know that you've come
with my engine, and the rest of my skin.
You will rise me.

Smith has stated that her purpose in this is at least in part to keep historical events alive and in the forefront of memory. In an interview with Joseph Ross, she recalls a moment when she read from *Blood Dazzler* and realized that the children in front of her didn't know about Hurricane Katrina, so "[Poets are] basically teaching what the history books that go into schools aren't teaching." She preserves the culture of Madison Street in defiance of the crime statistics with which the media defines the neighborhood. The crash of United flight 232 happened within my conscious lifetime, but I had to google the details when reading "Mayday" because the event, which dominated the news for weeks and changed the aviation industry, had slipped from memory. Will people a generation from now know the name of Rekia Boyd? Sandra Bland? They will

because Patricia Smith has captured them and made them eternally important, eternally voiced.

“If you don’t tell your story, someone else will.”

Smith’s sense of history is pegged to her own history. *Shoulda Been Jimi Savannah* is the book that chronicles the growing up of Patricia Smith. *Jimi Savannah* captures not just the story of a girl raised in a house with a disappointed mother and a loving father who couldn’t stay faithful, a girl who is too good in school and not quite good enough at school dances, a girl who sees and remembers what passes right by most people in the dailiness of growing up. Smith’s parents came up from the south as part of the Great Migration, but like a lot of immigrants, they didn’t know how to teach their city-born daughter what she needed to learn. Even when Smith directly asked her mother about her Alabama childhood, the reply was, “Girl, why you wanna know about all that country stuff? We’re better than that now.” As Smith says, “A lot is written about *that* generation, but not much about that first confounded group of city-dwellers, children whose parents had traded creeks and front porches for fire hydrants and tenements.” “True That” a short, pointed poem in a book full of long, lush narratives and descriptions, captures that confusion.

In my neighborhood
I got jumped
because my daddy lived at home.
Then,
when he didn’t live at home anymore,
I got jumped
because he had the nerve
to visit.

A huge part of the story of Patricia Smith is soundtracked by Motown. Her first book is called *Life According to Motown*, and throughout her books, the music and the artists recur. Motown isn’t just music for Smith, it’s a metonym of the sensuality, terror, and joy of adolescence: the thrill of fandom and the blush of fantasy. Motown is sensation: Fontella Bass shows up in a few poems, and you taste the sparkling/sour of her hit, “Rescue Me” and the brass lozenge of her name on your tongue. “Motown Crown” is a crown of sonnets, each poem focusing on a different artist. Smith uses juxtaposition to show, among other insights, the clash of glamour and talent. A poem about idolizing Diana Ross hinges into a sonnet about Mary Wells: all talent, little glamour.

But Mary Wells, so drained of self-esteem,

was a pudgy, barstool-ridin' bucktoothed dream
who none of us would dare to idolize
out loud. She had our nightmares memorized
and like or like it not, she wailed our theme
while her too-blackness made us ill at ease

...

When Mary's *My Guy* blared, we didn't think race,
cause there was all that romance, and the keys
that Motown held. Unlocked, we'd soon ignite.
We stockpiled extra sequins, just in case.

"I'm trying to take the reader through the experience of a mother."

But that West Side childhood also introduced the themes that underpin nearly all of Smith's writing, even the funny ones: the violence of communities struggling to make a new northern history out of scraps and anger, the violence of indifference from the dominant white culture that easily turns away from stories and toward statistics to feel better about itself, the violence of loving someone wholly knowing that skin color and zip code lengthen the odds of that love having the luxury of a whole lifetime. These themes play out in all of Smith's books, but *Close to Death* and the even darker and tighter *Incendiary Art* lock onto readers like handcuffs, pinning us to the moment and leaving marks when we're released. These books are ostensibly about how America sees young Black men as disposable and interchangeable, which (as white America intends?) leads them to see themselves that way, too. In her introduction, Smith writes that young Black men are wearing clothes emblazoned with "C2D" or "close to death" because "so many of them are." For all the poems about the young men themselves, two other often ignored constituencies come into the frame in these books: Black men who have made it to old age and who don't seem to be grounded in how to be old because it's so unexpected (see "Waiting for Louis to Spill the Beans" in *Close to Death*), and the mothers of these men.

Smith's unexpected entry point, her way of circumventing the anonymization of countless murdered Black men, is through their mothers, for whom each dead boy is an individual with a kindergarten school picture, a favorite food, a way of smiling that she will see until the day she dies. Smith notes that "in the case of the people that were lost, often at the hands of the police, the mother's voice was the one that you didn't hear often. You hear [her voice] twice: [She's] at the beginning of the story when they tell her that her child is gone and then at the end when they say that the person responsible for her child's death is not responsible. Then she goes away." The poem, "Undertaker," sits at the

intersection of love and poverty as the undertaker of the title has to manage these women's grief while also making a living.

I know that she has sold
everything she owns, that cousins and uncles
have emptied their empty bank accounts,
that she dreams of her baby
in tuxedoed satin, flawless in an open casket,
a cross or blood red rose tacked to his fingers
his halo set at a cocky angle.
I write a figure on a piece of paper
and push it across to her
while her chest heaves with hoping.
She stares at the number, pulls in
a slow weepy breath: "Jesus."

Whether it's the mother of a boy whose name you know--Emmett Till, Michael Brown, Rodney King--or a boy who represents multitudes that don't make the news, Smith, by foregrounding the voice of the mothers, makes us unable to look away.

"The closer I can move the lens in, the bigger story I can tell."

Smith has few rivals in her mastery of the persona poem as a vehicle for bearing witness. In a video conversation with Tyehimba Jess, Smith notes that "in slam, you're working on both your inner and your outer voice." In her persona poems, Smith intensifies that inner/outer tension by considering subjects where the only hard evidence is the outside—a news story, a daguerreotype, a funeral notice—and from that, creating a fully realized life and voice that hews to its emotional truth, somehow being wholly made up and unassailable fact at the same time. The biggest story Smith has told is in *Blood Dazzler*, which is about the people in and around New Orleans at the time of Hurricane Katrina. The multitude of voices is breathtaking. One example: M'Dear is a woman who has to evacuate, leaving her dog, Luther B, behind to fend for himself. Luther B appears in five poems, and our investment in his survival grows with each one, even as we know Smith won't lie to us and say he made it. First, M'Dear reassures herself that he'll be okay: "Tie Luther B to that cypress. He gon' be all right. / That dog done been rained on before." As the water rises, her assurances that he'll weather the storm take on the quality of prayer. At the end, Luther B is alone, ascending and free from his tired, muddy body. Only because M'Dear's voice is so close-in and the details are

so clear—the porch, the can of Alpo, M'Dear's assertion that nobody needs to worry about the dog because "He harder to shake than a bucktoothed man"—does Smith avoid letting us off the hook. "The dog dies" is a clichéd conduit for cheap emotional release. "The woman who loved the dog and whom nobody would look at twice on the street worries herself to tatters over him even as her own life is in danger," that's a story you can't back away from.

The biggest voice in the book is that of Katrina herself. She feels herself coalescing into a storm and then growing, stoking her appetite on the Gulf and then coming in to devour the city. The Katrina-voiced poems each start with a weather update from a specific day in 2005. In "5 p.m. Thursday, August 25, 2005," the storm talks about her appetite:

My eye takes in so much—
what it craves, what I never hoped to see.
It doesn't care about pain, is eons away
from the ego's thump, doesn't hesitate
to scan the star, adjust for distance,
unravel the world for no reason at all, except that it
hungers.

Through Katrina's voice, it becomes clear that a storm is a storm, neither good nor evil no matter how devastating its effects. What the rest of the book demonstrates is that the evil visited upon the city emanated, not from the storm, but from the people who were supposed to help, to manage, to prevent death. A poem in the voice of FEMA director Michael Brown is chilling, and another in the anonymous voices of middle-class white people inconvenienced by the storm on their way out of town exemplifies the literal short-sightedness of those who have never had to *see* beyond their own neighborhoods. Smith's point in this book is to keep Katrina and its victims and survivors always in our sightlines, always a necessary irritation of conscience that keeps our lens focused where it ought to be.

And speaking of lenses, in her most recent book, *Unshuttered*, Smith zooms all the way in on photo portraits she's collected from the 19th and early 20th centuries, photos of African Americans who saved up to sit stiffly in photo studios from Maine to Montgomery and all points in between. These photos bear no names, and Smith simply numbers the poems, sometimes leaving the subjects nameless and sometimes weaving names into the narrative. At most, these portraits are in cardboard frames bearing the name and location of the studio at which they were taken. Many do not have even that much information.

The pictures ended up at flea markets, resale shops, and garage sales, out of the hands of family who could have identified the ancestor in the shot. Smith gives each of them a poem, an identity, using just a facial expression, a strip of lace on a blouse, the juxtaposition of people in the frame. It is a bold move, and it's clear that she takes the responsibility of these anonymous lives very seriously.

In some of the photos, Smith has used the location of the studio to connect the photo with a larger history of the place. A man and a young woman become in the poem father and daughter during the Memphis yellow fever outbreak of 1878. The man is a doctor and tells the story of his daughter's dwindling away with disease, the disconnection left in the family after her passing. Does Smith tell a verifiable story? Of course not. Does she tell a story that might have happened and been lost in the panic, the resistance against remembering, the fact that, as the father says, "we were taught to rely on dying" and so have no need to inform the living? Absolutely. (It reinforces a lot of Smith's larger history that looking up "Wytheville, VA, lynching" in order to give context to poem 31 yielded not one but two news stories of men lynched in that town, four decades apart.)

Sometimes, the truth Smith finds in a poem is shocking, as in poem 16. The accompanying photo is of a serious looking young woman, bespectacled, hair frizzing out of any shape she might have tried to impose on it. Compared with the women in other photos in the book, she looks a bit haphazard, as though she didn't have time for careful preparation for her sitting. Then comes the poem, and we learn that she's something of an amateur at *being* a woman. I will give away the second stanza, but I know you'll go back and read the whole poem.

Tell me that I have earned at least this much woman. Tell me
that this day is worth all the nights I wished the muscle
of myself away. It will take my mother less than a second to know
her only child, her boisterous boy, steady, pounding at his
shadow to make it new. Here I am, Mama, vexing your savior,
barely alive beneath face powder and wild prayer. Here I am,
both your daughter and your son, stinking of violet water.

After the poem, you look back at the picture and see a serious young man struggling with who he is and who he's been taught to be, the wild-minded hair, the searching expression, the lack of feminine wiles. The formerly living, breathing young woman in the picture is ninety-nine percent likely to have been born female, but Smith's description, her ability to get beneath the skin of the photo, makes us believe in her possibility just as strongly.

“Take something beautiful and add some sort of cacophony to it.”

Smith’s early poems tie the techniques of spoken word to the page—the oral paradiddle of alliteration and assonance, the stretch of slang and West Side vernacular adding length to words, the fermata and drop in the line break, “Hallelujah for grizzled lip, snuff chew, bended slow walk, / and shit talkin.” But the understanding of form and meter she added to her toolbox with *Blood Dazzler* really shows her virtuosity. The spoken word artist and the formalist living in one poetic sensibility do spectacular things on the page. Richard Wilbur said of poetic form that “Limitation makes for power: the strength of the genie comes of his being confined in a bottle,” and Smith’s deft touch with a variety of received forms from the centuries-old—such as sonnets, sestinas, villanelles—to the newly invented, like Terrance Hayes’s golden shovel, embodies that power. But Smith’s strength is not that of a legalistic, masculine genie crammed willy-nilly into a container. A better metaphor is that when Smith uses those forms, it’s like a woman’s body with generous curves laced into a corset: the shape hews to convention even more than when it’s naked, but somehow the individual sensuality is heightened, and you sweat. It’s more seductive for being wrapped.

Too often, formal poets are so mesmerized by the ka-THUNK ka-THUNK of the iamb that they give it too much leeway to make itself the star of the show. But when someone like Smith, who started with “anemone” in her mouth, who made Green Mill audiences cry, cackle, come with nothing but a mic in her hand, decides to write a sonnet, that sonnet is packed—a crust just sturdy enough to hold almost more fruit and spice than your mouth can handle. The final sonnet of the “Emmett Till: Choose Your Own Adventure” poems in *Incendiary Art*



“I realized that a lot of what I know about characterization or the arc of a story comes from poetry because, if you look at it, a good poem should include an entire story in a really tight and controlled space, so every single word has to do work. When you’re cutting, you’re cutting all that stuff—‘You’re not in service to me, word! Away with you!’”
from *Fight and Fiddle*, Winter 2018,
interview with Lauren K. Alleyne

demonstrates what I mean. On first reading, you almost miss the sonnet-ness of it because the sounds seduce you, and the story of the boy whose picture was splashed on every newspaper draws you in; the rattlesnake temptation of the last two lines gets into your blood. Later, you notice the flawless Shakespearean rhyme scheme. The iambic pentameter ebbs and flows but doesn't crack; the enjambments keep it from becoming stodgy and slowing the poem. She has the confidence to move the turn a line later than usual, which is where this poem needs it to be. Then that gut-shot of a final couplet does what would make centuries of sonneteers shout. Here it is:

So our Chicago kid runs by the store
instead of being wooed by chewing gum
And peppermints. Th steamy shop's a bore
'cause they've got better suckers where he's from.
He's sworn to be remembered in this town,
and so his raucous cousins egg him on
to escapades much sweeter than those found
in candy—live and buzzing skins upon
the water, fruit to yank from every tree.
He hurtles past without a second thought,
without acknowledging her silent plea
behind the screen, her gaze so clearly fraught
with crave. *Hey nigger, welcome to the South—
come slip my sugar deep into your mouth.*

Sonnets are love poems, sure, but they are also rhetorically sophisticated arguments, and Smith has, in these alternate realities of Emmett Till's life, made those arguments without desiccating the power of the story. In all her forms (see also "Hip-Hop Ghazal" and "Ethel's Sestina" among many others), the spoken word artist seduces the formalist and produces structure and sensuality in the same lines.

It feels almost premature to grant Patricia Smith a lifetime achievement award such as the Fuller because there is so much more for her to do, so many more stories that need her particular way into them. Go back to the early books for the spoken-word seductress and then move forward into the eye of the meaning-making, the witnessing that she has made her work.

Barbara Egel is a poet and critic whose day job is as co-director of Design Thinking and Communication at Northwestern. She has been a Chicago Literary Hall of Fame board member since 2021.

Patricia & the Fiery Furnaces on America's Bandstand

by avery r. young

A Golden Shovel poem extracted from Incendiary Art: Chicago, 1968

Draw her next to Meshach n'em. Or draw nobody
but her, hurling a doll-like molotov expected
to **BOOM** & red-burst a whole Goldblatt's
gone. Draw her gripping a bible. & next to
some M.B.C. asking, *Did choir rehearsal burn-
down too? Why them flames across the street so
tore-up over Rev. Dr. King? Flames dancing fast*

*like they behind Mr. Dynamite, but heard
the 1 at the 4. Don't they know he fine if it
ain't right, or just like he showed them, or said
to?* Draw them flames with faces that
come with butcher-knife teeth & the
blood of the Lamb upon the doors of store-
fronts owned by the Ebōnesque. This day was
made for tears until everything got smoked flat
out of the sight of Yahweh. Draw her before
a bloody balcony or an angel washing Martin's

face bullet-free. Draw her before blood
became an unusual currency. Draw her as she was
when snow & lake-front-hawk kept April nice-cold.
Draw her 12 & standing next to Jim. Draw a
West-Side Supreme. All about slapping
Mr. Crow into understanding his shit does stink
up the Mississippi that Meshach n'em turned
down due to those flambéed crosses. Draw the
smoke coloring Pulaski & Wilcox out of the air.

Draw her singing this riot-score not as toxic.

Patricia Smith, The Architect

by Andrea Change

Two Black female poets walk into a bar. It is not the start of a joke, but the start of a story. I remember the first time I saw Patricia Smith. She walked into the back of the School Street Bar, on the corner of School and Sheffield, with Michael Warr, from the Guild Complex. I kind of knew Michael from the open mic sets at the Chopin Theater on Division. I was cool, but surprised because School Street Bar was my regular spot. In my mind, we circled each other like predators sizing each other up. I thought I was hot shit back in the day.

The truth of the matter was, we had a lot in common. Obviously both Black, both female, both single moms, and both raised on the West Side of Chicago. You see, being from the West Side gives you a certain level of bravado that other parts of the city just cannot claim. Patricia was born and raised in Lawndale, known by some as K-town. That West Side bravado is just part of the package that is Patricia Smith. I imagine her as a teenager being an adept fiend at playing the “dozens” in the neighborhood, talking smack about “dem AND dey mama.” Taking down all those foolish and misguided enough to challenge her, I imagine that kind of storytelling was already part of her West Side DNA.

Was poetry her first choice as a student at Southern Illinois University? How did poetry find Patricia Smith? Once found, did it know its treasure? Did she see herself finding deference and applause from welcoming audiences?

Patricia Smith is the very definition of self-made. She went from one open mic to the next around the city, honing her poetic voice and sowing her craft at places like the Get Me High, the Guild Complex, the Why Not? Café, and the Green Mill. She experimented with form and story. Patricia slangs poems, like a bartender slangs drinks. Her poems are distinct, smart, and direct like arrows. In those early days, open mics weren’t just places to work your craft, it was your social set as well. We all knew each other, and we were all friends. We came in packs, wandering from bar to coffee house to whatever club basement had a microphone and speaker. You would see many of the same people all the time. We became this community of street poets. No one had an MFA. There was even a certain disdain for those academic ivory tower poets. If anything, they wanted to be one of us. How times have changed.

In 1990, Chicago established Osaka, Japan as a sister city and held a poetry contest in celebration of the occasion. The winner would be invited to recite the winning piece in Osaka. Poetry could take you across the globe? We all

wanted in. And then the news came. The Department of Cultural Affairs had designated the Poem for Osaka theme would be trees. Yes, trees. The fix was in. What did we know about trees? There was no Henry David Thoreau hiding amongst our enclave of street poets. We thought only an academic could win. But then there was Patricia Smith, who did win with her poem, *The Awakening*. She read the poem at the 3rd Annual Neutral Turf Poetry Festival held at Navy Pier that year.

At the open mics, Patricia never really needed to work a room. She made all the usual greetings, gave hugs, and then would sit quietly, waiting her turn. She was ALWAYS last up. She was ALWAYS the one to shut down the mic. She was THE CLOSER. We all waited to hear her magic; she always delivered. And then there was The Slam. The Green Mill and the Poetry Slam on Sunday nights was not for the meek. It was Marc Smith, former construction worker, now legendary emcee, who led the charge. You had to arrive early if you wanted a good seat. Sometimes you could get lucky and find some friends to squeeze into one of those great green velvet half-circle booths. If you got there when the show started at 7 p.m., first of all, you were late. But then you were hit with the warm air from the rowdy, bodacious, overcapacity crowd. It was the Saturday night feeling you wanted--only you had to be at work the next morning. Between the snaps and hisses, there were virgins, veterans, and six slots for The Slam. Three rounds, whittled down to one, and then a winner emerged with a \$10 prize. Enough to buy macaroni and cheese for the week, Marc would say.

That same year, Patricia was the first-ever winner of the National Poetry Slam Individual Championship. In 1991, Tia Chucha Press, the publishing arm of the Guild Literary Complex, published her first book, *Life According to Motown*. The cover pictured a young Patricia Smith with a white dress and

"It was the slam that taught me both the advantages and downfalls of persona, how powerful it could be when used at the right time. I think the early days of performance and poetry competitions, particularly in the hotbed of Chicago, just nixed any pesky boundaries when it came to creation. We were experimenting with music, with video, with movement, way before most folks on the performance poetry scene. The goal was to disappear ourselves so that there was no wall between the poet and the audience." from Chicago Review of Books interview with Mandanna Chaffa, March 13, 2023



bows in her hair. It was a reminder to all of us that this firebrand was once a little girl.

Kind of like poetry's Michael Jordan, Smith took a year off from the National Slam and came back in 1995, to compete one last time. She won with a legendary performance of the persona poem about musician Little Richard, called "The Architect." The poem was based off the statement Little Richard had made proclaiming himself as the architect of rock n roll. Patricia didn't just perform it; she was a bonafide rock star for the three and half minutes she was on stage. She was a Muddy Waters-influenced Mick Jagger mixed with Tina Turner. The energy of The Slam crowd plus Smith's delivery became the story you told your children. That night, Patricia Smith became Slam lore and legend. A four-time winner of the Individual National Slam. Never ever been done before and never ever repeated.

The rocket was launched. The sparks were in the sky and the erstwhile people on the ground oohed and ahhed at the spectacle. Four books later, Patricia gave in and finally went for that MFA. Now a rock star with tenure, we are still in awe of the fireworks brand of poetry spectacle she brings, still spittin' fire. To quote Little Richard, "I am the innovator. I am the originator. I am the emancipator. I am the architect of rock n roll." Patricia Smith, poetry rock star royalty. An Icon. An Architect.

Andrea Change is a poet, writer and Executive Director of the Guild Complex. She has been part of the Chicago poetry community for over 20 years. Her work has been published in numerous poetry magazines and journals and included in poetry anthologies from Tia Chucha Press such as *Powerlines* and *Stray Bullets*. Her poetry was also included in the 2001 *Steppenwolf Theatre* production, *Words on Fire*.



Patricia

“It is difficult to get the news from poems, but men die every day for lack of what is found there.”

– William Carlos Williams

by cin salach

Remember when we shared
that hotel room in San Francisco
for the first National Poetry Slam?
We jumped on the beds laughing, then
performed poems until we lost our voices
and won our rounds.

When we landed back in Chicago
there was news waiting that my grandma had died.
OhmygodIlovedhersomuch
I lost my voice sobbing, but
you were waiting at the Mill that night
with all the poems to help me find it.

Patricia, I remember the first time
you opened your mouth there.
So many birds flew out we could barely see you.
But oh we could hear you.
We couldn't stop hearing you,
we begged to keep hearing you,
all of us rocking in our seats being healed.

From then on, out of respect,
the jukebox was unplugged whenever
you stepped on stage to kiss the mic.

Every Sunday night, you brought us ghosts
and headlines, hope and harrow,
shaping our less-than-poetic human condition
into something we could dance to.

When we left, the chorus of you
played over and over in our hearts and heads
as we walked to the parking lot,
the L, the Mexican restaurant,
our real lives. Tomorrow
a little more poetic
than it would ever have been otherwise.



"So the challenge is how to resurrect and resurrect those same stories—stories with endings everyone already knows—and lift them out of the realm of the ordinary." from The Miami Rail interview with Rin Johnson

I Remember (to Patricia Smith)

by Michael Warr

“I don’t know what you are doing, but you sure are doing it good.”

Those are the first words you ever spoke to me. I was standing with a clipboard in my hand at the entrance of BLUES etcetera, on Belmont, helping Julie Parson Nesbitt check in the featured poets for a Guild Books Benefit and “send-off” party for Richard Bray, who was on his way to New York to pursue the opening of a Guild Books sister store in Manhattan. That first “Neutral Turf” happened January 24, 1988. The cast of phenomenal poets included Gwendolyn Brooks, Lisel Mueller, Sterling Plumpp, David Hernandez, Reginald Gibbons, Angela Jackson, Michael Anania, Marc Smith, Haki Madhubuti, and many more.

The next day, you and I held the first of our martini lunch summits at Houston’s on Rush Street. Your job at the *Sun-Times* and mine at a technology magazine were both on Michigan Avenue and within walking distance of the popular eatery. Before returning to work, you handed me a small stack of poems and asked if I would read them. Walking through the hurried crowd of pedestrian traffic on the Avenue, I read your poems for the first time, absorbing the dopamine-like transmission of your words on the page.

I remember those early days.

CHICAGO POETS TOGETHER FOR THE FIRST TIME
“NEUTRAL TURF”

GUEST MC'S: CAROL BECKER, GWENDOLYN BROOKS, LARRY HEINEMANN, TERRI HEMMERT, DAVE HOEKTRA, NICOLE HOLLANDER, ALTON MILLER, AND CLARENCE PAGE.

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The proceeds from this poetry event will help to underwrite the continued expansion of free readings by local and national authors. Enjoy this unprecedented gathering of Chicago's finest poets and help support what has become over the years a local literary institution, the Guild Books Reading Series.

GUILD BOOKS
where the words live

SUNDAY 3-7PM, 24 JAN, 1988

AT **BLUES** etcetera 1124 W. BELMONT (AND CLIFTON)
\$10 DONATION includes FREE SNACKS and ADMISSION later that evening for music by the Johnny B. Moore Blues Band or the Lighthouse Poetry Slam at the Green Hill Lounge, 4832 N. Broadway (and Lawrence). For more information, call 274-1089 or 384-4564.

Other participants included: Inka Alasade, Beatriz Badikian, Karen Bemis, Jeffrey Brown, Maxine Chernoff, Howard Edwards, Tony Fitzpatrick, Phylis Janik, Renny Golden, Matthew Goulish, Lin Hixon, Paul Hoover, Debbie Pintonelli, John Sheehan, and Carl Watson. The Guest MC’s included Carol Becker, Larry Heinemann, Terri Hemmert, Dave Hoektra, Nicole Hollander, Alton Miller, and Clarence Page.

I remember realizing that I had never read poems like that before. Once back at my desk, I called you to say, “People need to see these poems.”

I remember thinking that there is a Pulitzer Prize in your future. I still believe that.

I remember a flurry of your poems arriving via what I think was a Telex or teletype machine as if from a poetry correspondent. I still have a few of those “Telex poems” on the chemically coated paper of that time in my archives.

I remember us turning our professional workplaces into poetry factories. I mobilized my co-workers and an army of artists and audience members to help build the Guild Complex, which would only have paid staff five years later. You were one of those early volunteers and creative cadre that nurtured the Complex.

I remember the Sundays we claimed a booth at the Green Mill and strategized over what battle poem you would launch next. I always ordered a pint of Guinness. You introduced me to Long Island Iced Tea at The Billy Goat Tavern. Did you order the same from Jemilo behind the bar?

I remember – thanks to coverage by LetterX -- our featured reading at Batteries Not Included on Clybourn!

I remember our inside joke about someday building “Poetry Inc.”

I remember our shock and uncontrollable laughter after I “won” my one and only slam bout. You, Luis, cin salach, and I “competed” in 1990 at the “Hemingway Poetry Slam” in Oak Park. I wisely hung up my gloves after that.

I remember that same year Parisians were gobsmacked by your poems when you, Luis Rodriquez, and I read at the Sorbonne (specifically the *Université Paris Diderot, Paris VII*) and Shakespeare & Company bookstore.



photo credit: Patricia Zamora

I remember reading your first poetry manuscript and feeling something was about to change in the poetry world. And it did.

I remember Tia Chucha Press publishing *Life According to Motown*, David Hernandez's *Rooftop Piper*, and *We Are All The Black Boy* simultaneously. Our triple-feature book release party at Tony Fitzpatrick's Edge of the Lookingglass Gallery was like a family reunion.

I remember the difference your edits made to my first poetry manuscript. Thanks for your poetic eye and word witchery.

I remember asking you early on a Wednesday morning if you would make it to Chicago that evening for your appearance with Adrienne Rich at the Chicago Cultural Center. It turned out to be my favorite Guild program ever. Thanks for being there when you also needed to be elsewhere. Your presence and performance were a gift to Chicago.

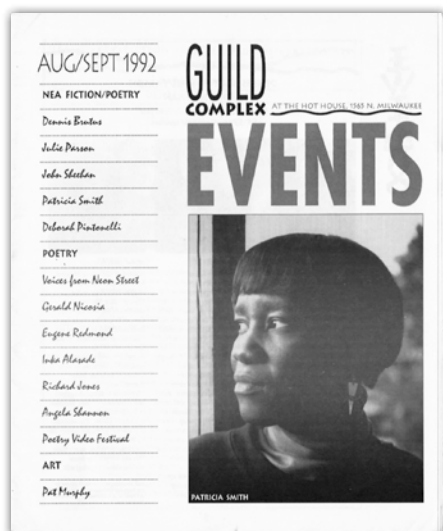
I remember much more than this space can contain.

Thirty-six years ago, I just happened to be standing in the right spot when you walked into Blues Etc. More people than I could have imagined have experienced the rapture of your poetry. You “sure are doing it good.”

– Love from your forever fan and friend, Michael Warr.

Poet **Michael Warr** is a 2023 San Francisco Public Library Laureate and Poetry Editor of the anthology *Of Poetry & Protest: From Emmett Till to Trayvon Martin* (W.W. Norton). His books of poetry include *The Armageddon of Funk*, *Power Lines: A Decade of Poetry From Chicago's Guild Complex* (as a co-editor with Julie Parson Nesbitt and Luis Rodriguez), and *We Are All The Black Boy*, all published by Tia Chucha Press.

All images from the archives of Michael Warr



“Teach As I Have Learned” (For Patricia Smith)

by Billy Tuggle

1.

When you draw your sword
It should with intent
Directly for the heart, samurai
Make opponents and traitors know they will be next
Be loyalist or Ronin, the battle must be won
With little resistance,
The message before the village
Be clear, concise
Be power, strength
Beware of shadow opponents
Like assassins and self-doubt
Your mission, never clearer
Than your reflection in your katana
When you first drew it
Not today,
But in the dojo
As you practiced perfection

2.

Perform the poem
By heart
Full of heart
As if breaking and healing the hearts of the room
In other words
Perform that poem to perfection
And then do it again, and again
Like judges were watching
Like your Mom was a slam judge
Like judge and jury depend on your testimony
And do it again
A total of ten times
If you don't perform perfectly-
In front of camera or couch, mirror or shadow-

The count starts over
Yes, start at “one” and
Perform perfection
Get to know your own inkflow
On a molecular level
And sweat it out in stage

3.

We can all “feel” the Force
Around and through us
But, as you meditate on the crystal
Locking inside the lightsaber
Like a battery in a child’s toy
Can you see it?
The spark emanating from it...
The light. The Force
The alchemy of nature and spirit
The life in between space, in between life
With the gift to navigate the shadow
It’s not how powerful the weapon
But how wise the warrior
How practiced the practitioner
Be a master by remaining the apprentice
And don’t worry about the next one’s glow
Make sure you are grounded
And perfect at your own frequency



Do Something Beautiful

by billy lombardo

In my memory of those first days at the Green Mill's Uptown Poetry Slam Patricia Smith was on stage. I don't remember the first poem I heard her perform there, but I remember pinching my nasal bones together to keep from weeping. Rereading her first collection of poetry today, *Life According to Motown*, I realize now it might have been any one of those poems—any of the ones that she'd already written that didn't make it into *Motown*. And it might have been any one of the ones that she hadn't written yet.

I know for a fact that after seeing her and hearing her perform my lips made the shape of *what in the holy fuck?* and I know I looked around the Mill to see if what was happening was landing on everyone like it was landing on me. I didn't trust myself as a witness to what was happening—that Patricia was blowing open all of our understanding of what poetry was. But it was more than that. She was blowing up our understanding of what words could do if they were the only thing keeping you alive, if they were the only way to give you any kind of inkling of What It's Like To Be a Black Girl if you were anything but. And once she figured out how to do that for herself, she got to figuring out how to get into the bones and the skin of the rest of us. And one of the only certainties of this life is that she won't ever rest from the work of that.

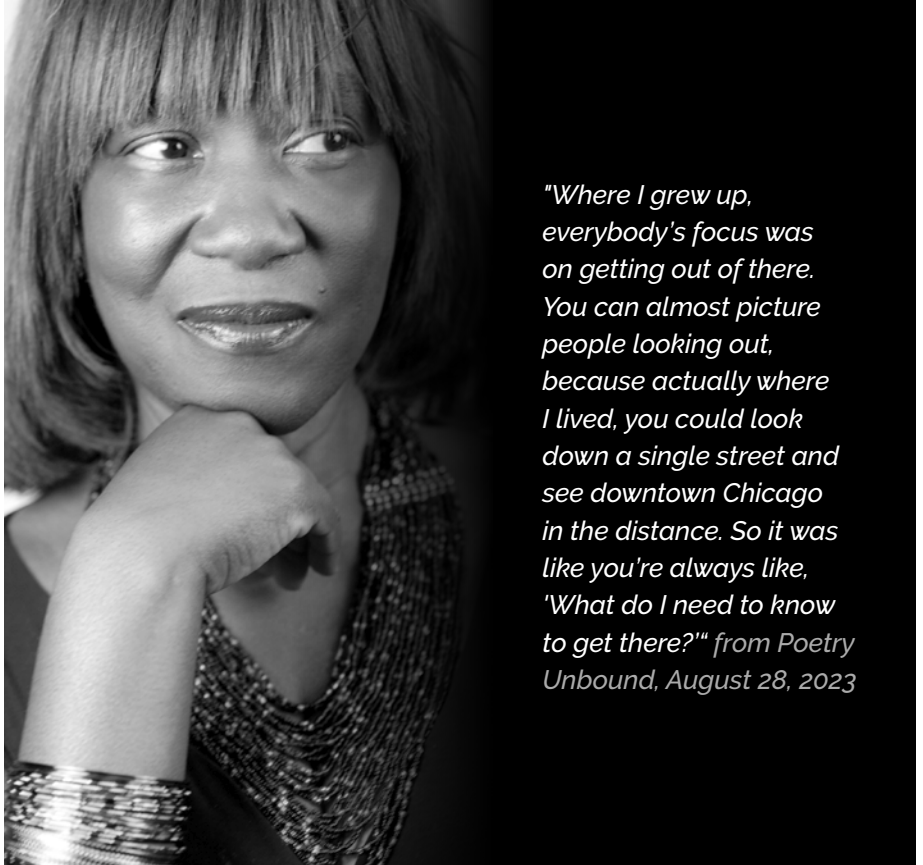
Somewhere in the early 90s I invited Patricia to my old neighborhood—Bridgeport--to do a reading at Puffer's, a bar where I hosted a one-off night of poetry and music. I was right to be worried. It would be seven years before one of the neighborhood's ugliest nights, when Lenard Clark would ride his bicycle from Stateway Gardens into Bridgeport to get free air in his tires. Not much to ask, but the man has paid for that air every day of his life.

Maybe, like a lot of things in my life, I hadn't thought that invitation through all the way. But I don't recall Patricia being worried. It was there, I think, sitting at a high boy table in the corner of that bar in Bridgeport that Patricia said something like, "We need to go somewhere and get a drink one of these days, you and me, so you could tell me what the fuck happened that put us in this place together."

It was a moment I'm proud of in ways I could not explain then, but I think it was this. She is one of a handful of humans I hold responsible for setting me on a flaw-filled but enduring odyssey to do something beautiful.

Mostly I just feel god-awful lucky. Lucky to just have been able to step onto that stage before her or after her. Lucky to have a thing to reach for. Lucky just to know her. Lucky to believe, every once in a while, the lie that Chicago is my city, when I know damn well it belongs to Patricia Smith.

billy lombardo is an award-winning poet, fiction writer, and essayist. His awards include the Illinois Arts Council Literary Award, G.S. Sharat Chandra Prize for short fiction, Guild Literary Complex Prose Award for Fiction, and the Chicago Tribune Nelson Algren Short Story Prize.



"Where I grew up, everybody's focus was on getting out of there. You can almost picture people looking out, because actually where I lived, you could look down a single street and see downtown Chicago in the distance. So it was like you're always like, 'What do I need to know to get there?'" from Poetry Unbound, August 28, 2023

I Be's An Act of Grammar in Black Literature (for Patricia Smith)

by Ed Roberson

Ask for your taste your tongue about to get
a workout long unaroused areas
of your language be hot to salivate
over old tenses anew doctor do-ing the who

upside up and down yo head such that that tense
be's you don't know when it happen in
and where likely all over and you
there crowned its knowledge knots poked all out yo head

bespoke spoke
spoken here and time thrown up its mf-in' hands said
slammed together into universal I heard that

said and how
the truth feel be to come loudly lawdy
hallelujah!like work!dem tropic hip be's it Patricia did it.



*"I was both fed up
with explaining
and desperately
craving an
explanation."*

*"What do we do
with these huge
gifts of the throat
and tongue? How
do we manage?"*

Patricia Smith: Written in the Stars

by Jen Benka

By 1991, Patricia Smith was a legend. If you were a poet anywhere across the U.S. involved in the poetry slam, you knew her name. That degree of notoriety wasn't easy to achieve at the time. There was no social media or even much email, and smartphones hadn't even been invented. Instead, her poems and performances were so powerful, news of



them spread on the poet express, one to another, city to city, state to state, until her name was lit like a bright guiding star. When I learned I was to compete against her that year in the semi-finals of the second-ever National Poetry Slam at the Green Mill in Chicago, it didn't matter that I immediately knew I would lose to the reigning champ. I would gain something better and more life changing—the opportunity to see the poet herself. And she was extraordinary. At that moment, I knew a poet and her work could stir another person's feelings and expand their thinking. She did mine. Poetry is, as Muriel Rukeyser wrote, a great resource. Whether you encounter Patricia's poems at her readings or in the many award-winning books she has penned, you understand how and why. In late 2022, more than 30 years since I'd met Patricia the first time, I was honored, in my capacity then as the President & Executive Director of the Academy of American Poets, to let her know that she had been elected a Chancellor of the organization, a distinguished role at one of the world's largest championing poetry. It's been a joy to see her name and work continue to be lifted up by so many, including now by the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame, confirming what we knew all along: Patricia Smith is, and will always be, one of our country's great poets.

Jen Benka is Past President of the Academy of American Poets, publisher of Poets.org.

*to the black girl who waits on the bench, to the
black boy who spends nights shooting the ball,*

Inspired by Patricia Smith

by Nylah Watkins

If the concrete cracks with the bounce of that ball,
please know it wasn't your fault.

Not a little bit, not at all.

That cement wasn't meant for the weight
you hold, the blood carved in your skin,
or your thick hair rough and tall like the trees
we scraped our knees on.

That concrete, that wasn't meant for you to hold,
maybe just to sell

your hard body to the NBA,

play for your life, or,

pledge your allegiance

to the NFL,

another black body in their field,

or, deal

with the devils Masquerading as men,

friend, I should tell you

to hold on, hold on,

baby, hold on.

If the bench splits under your weight, black girl

it's 'cause your body is heavy

carrying your momma's sins,

her curses,

her beat downs cause she couldn't hold

your daddy down,

'cause some one (woman) told her

her husband bore another son.
That bench splits cause you a momma
when you 'posed to be a girl
A momma to your brother and your sister,
A momma to your momma.
I'm sorry, baby.
I'm sorry no story can save you.
That your soul will fracture
from saving everyone else's,
I'm sorry, baby girl, that someone
made you do it all.
it's never your fault,
Not a little bit, not at all.

***Nylah Watkins** is an award-winning writer and graduate of Douglas Anderson School of the Arts for Creative Writing. She has been recognized by Élan Literary Magazine and Scholastic Art & Writing for her fiction work. She has engaged in community service advocating for safe spaces in classrooms, literary arts, and preserving history.*



Patricia Smith: Muse, Magic, and Mythology

by Luis J. Rodriguez

There's the myth of Patricia Smith. I'm not talking about how "myth" is sometimes used for "lie." But myth as the stories that hold truths, of what is learned, in the fantastic attire of a wonderful story. Myths that typify a people, a place, a time, and engages the imagination so you can carry these stories in your bones. Patricia's story is one that has stirred the poets who didn't know they were poets, who perhaps didn't know what poetry was (I was one of these). She embodies the best of those who painted with words, who made original breathtaking metaphors the brick-and-mortar of a moving line, a moving image, a deeply moving emotion. I know Patricia Smith and will tell you this myth is true in more ways than one.

I was there in the early days of Patricia reading her verses in Chicago, poems apparently stuffed into kitchen cabinets or bedroom drawers. A reporter for the Chicago Sun-Times, writing was her domain, a master of type in lead to make a newspaper page sing with black-and-white sonatas. But as any journalist knows, poetry is the "news" you can't get from the fonts carefully hammered into place or digitally laid out. Poetry is multidimensional, the original multiverse, that opens multiple minds and multiple hearts.

Where words are breathing and sweaty, marrow deep.

I also read aloud around the time poetry slams exploded in the bars, cafes, bookstores, and libraries. I arrived in Chicago in 1985. Slams are said to have started in 1986. I began to perform in the city's public stages in 1988. My sloppy stanzas inside a coffee-stained manila folder. Michael Warr, a former roommate, Patricia, and I ended up working the clubs—with the first Slam impresario Marc Kelly Smith at The Green Mill Lounge as well as Gallery Cabaret, Artful Dodger, Get-Me-High, Lower Links, Hot House, and more. I was there at the founding meeting in 1989 of the Guild Complex, Michael's vision of a literary arts center that helped fuel a movement. Patricia became our lyrical partner, our companion of the caesuras, but also on how to own a poem, to strike a presence with words that caressed or punched, filling voice and body.

In 1990 I also started publishing Chicago poets, many Slammers, through my press, Tia Chucha Press. This included Michael and other wordsmiths

like David Hernandez, Lisa Buscani, Rohan B Preston, Dwight Okita, Tony Fitzpatrick, Jean Howard, Carlos Cumpian, and Marvin Tate (over the years I've extended this to poets across the United States). And, of course, I published Patricia Smith. Her inaugural book, *Life According to Motown*, first appeared in 1991. It remains Tia Chucha Press's bestselling from the over one hundred books we've released in 35 years. Part of the mythology is how Patricia stands out among us, becoming the five-time National Slam Poetry champion, and now with poetry and nonfiction books with other presses. She's won many other accolades and awards—I'm not going to spell them out because they will grace other statements. But I will say this—she helped ignite poetry inside this Indigenous-rooted Chicano writer, baptized as Luis Javier Rodriguez, although I also have a Mexica name, Mixcoatl Itztlacuiloh, obtained in a name-seeding ceremony.

What universe would you find a West Side book-impassioned Black girl and a Watts/East Los Angeles troubled youth in the same post-industrial Chicago venues? In the same publishing houses (besides Tia Chucha Press, my poetry books are also with a Northwestern University Press imprint like one of Patricia's), and the same mythological terrain of slams?

Somehow, we helped wrought a new artform. Patricia and I became part of the first Slam Tour of Europe in 1993 that included Nuyorican Poets Café's Slam Champion Paul Beatty, and luminaries Alan Kaufman, Neely Cherkovsky, and Dominique Lowell. This was in a time when nobody there had an inkling what slams were. It wasn't just spoken word, it wasn't Rap, but in a few years, there would be some 70 cities with poetry slams. Same with the United States. Slams everywhere. In Los Angeles, Get Lit Players holds the county-wide high school Classic Slam championships in downtown L.A. (and



the largest Slam battle in the country), for which Patricia and I have served as judges. My old high school has won this contest three years in a row—talk about completing circles.

I want to end then with a poem I wrote for Patricia Smith that appeared in my second poetry collection, *The Concrete River*, published in 1991 by Curbstone Press. It demonstrates the powerful impact she's had on me in those early days when I needed poetry as a lifeline from the drowning sea of drink, rage, and misery I had been in for years. I can say the poet I am today would not have happened without Chicago and the Slam community, particularly the magnetic muse of the incomparable Patricia Smith.

Don't Read That Poem!

She rises from a chair
and slides toward the stage
with satin feet over a worn-wood floor.
She bears down on the microphone
like a blues singer about to reveal
some secrets.

A fever of poems in her hands.
She seizes the mike
and begins her seduction.

I'm in the back of the bar,
my head down.
The things she does to me
with words.

I want to leave. I want her
never to begin.
She starts with a poem
about Daddy-love and I feel
like getting up right there
and yelling, don't read that poem!
That one that causes little bursts
of screams inside my head,
that makes tears come to my eyes,
that I refuse to let fall.

Don't read that poem!

the one about a daughter raped and killed
in the shadow of a second's dark fury.
I want to hide in the neon glare above me,
to swim away in the glass of beer
I hold close to me.

She does another poem
about her many mouths
and I want to howl:
Don't read that poem!
that one that entices me
to crawl under her skin,
to be her heartbeat.

Oh, how she plunks the right notes,
rendering me as clay in bruised hands.
No, don't do the one about
what it is to be
a nine-year-old Black girl,
the truth of it trembling at my feet.

Somebody should make her stop!

I should be home, watching TV,
blank-eyed behind stale headlines,
cold popcorn on the couch,
a dusty turntable
going round and round and round.
I should be fixing a car.
Or shooting eight-ball.

But I can't leave.

I need to taste the salt of her soliloquy,
to be drunk with the sobriety
of her verse
quaking beneath my eyelids.

Luis J. Rodriguez has 17 published books in all genres. His best-selling memoir *Always Running* is one of the most censored books in the U.S. He's founding editor of *Tia Chucha Press* and co-founder with his wife Trini of *Tia Chucha's Centro Cultural & Bookstore* in Los Angeles. He served as L.A.'s Poet Laureate from 2014 to 2016.

Before Orphan Unearthed the Mirror after Patrica Smith, for Cousin Derick

by Zaneta Lockwood

He was told that *god's timing was always right*, wrong—
daddy lost in war, mama ran away,
dog found in the middle of the highway,
family called him death drop.

Nosy folk asked him to cook dinner,
raw chicken foot soup
or government-kraft mac and cheese, in his daddy's old house.
When they came their mouths
never opened for food, but their eyes wide to
the magazines stacked taller than him and
if the ash tray was still full,
if the piercing metal was left
from the last time he had company,
smell the invisible shit in every room.
Everybody had a claw on him, breathing too hard,

and draining all the goodness from his potential.
They used to invite him to church,
for the first lady and the gossip,
and when he didn't come
put him on the prayer list.
They still got him on the prayer list.

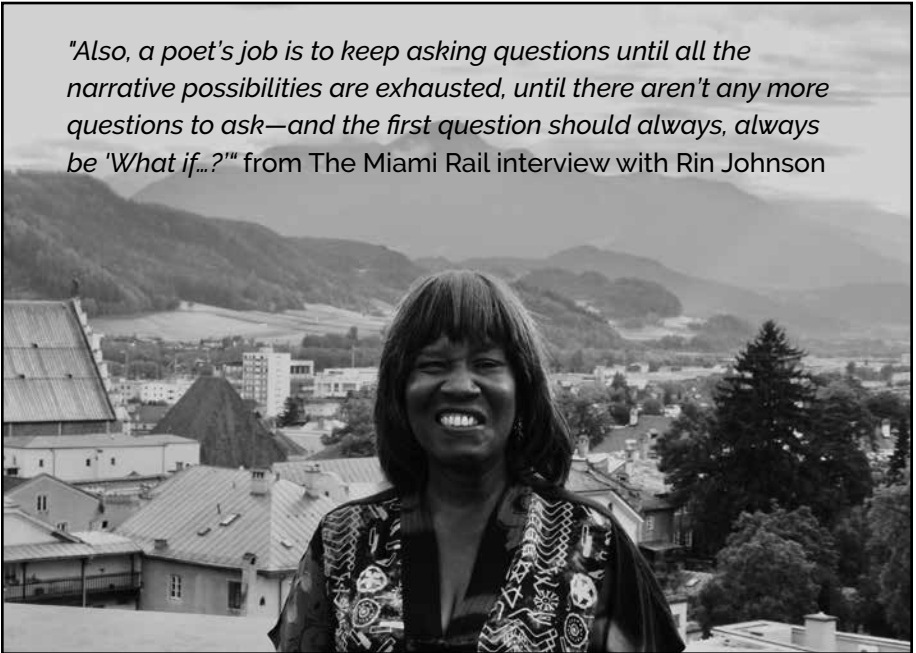
His encouragement was a dollar to the face.
So, every morning he woke,
he tried something new:
Love, Scrabble, Brown Sugar, Kryptonite, Skunk, that purple stuff.
He taught himself poetry in housework,
half-washing dishes
at midnight and sweeping
the porch at dawn hoping for something good.
Every time death drop tip-toed though the living room

hoping to let them rest
he was reminded of the dead.
The urns staring at him,
guilt consuming. He was never right in anything.

When he said he didn't need
money anymore, the family rejoiced:
Ignoring his elephant in the night sweats.
The rash on his neck. The blood they once shared.
All of his being reminded them of the dead.
They were tired of pretending his face,
paler than usual, was beautiful to them.
He didn't try to hide it.
He didn't mean to say goodbye so fast.
He didn't mean for anything, really.

Zaneta Lockwood is a rising College Freshman at Columbia College Chicago and will double major in Programming and Creative Writing. She's recently been featured in the Ebony Tomatoes Collective for her poetry and hopes to find solace in writing for the rest of her soul's existence.

"Also, a poet's job is to keep asking questions until all the narrative possibilities are exhausted, until there aren't any more questions to ask—and the first question should always, always be 'What if...?'" from The Miami Rail interview with Rin Johnson



Uncanny Powers

by Tyehimba Jess

Patricia Smith is a once in an era gift to American Letters who commands respect in every room she walks in and every page and book in which she appears. I am proud to be one of the many poets who learned from her example of craft so finely wrought on the page that translates and vivifies on the stage with uncanny powers of empathy, insight and vision. Her body of work is a panoply of varied voices that plumb the mysteries of the universe starting from the West Side of Chicago and spiraling back in history to our great-great grandmother's grandest and humblest wishes. It's impossible to imagine American poetry without Patricia Smith, and with Patricia Smith, generations of vibrant poets have seen themselves write possible. Here's to the daring inevitability with which we understand her work in the present, and the courage and fortitude with which she has taken her pen and forged new possibilities on the page for all of us to learn from.

Tyehimba Jess is the author of seven poetry collections, including *Olio*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize in 2017.



Documenting Marginalized Voices

by Ruben Quesada

As a student of poetry I found Patricia Smith's poetry electrifying. I first learned about her through her masterful presentation on Def Poetry Jam. The urgency in her work teaches me how to confront brutal truths. Her work is a conduit for those who seek to bear witness, spark dialogue, and effect transformative change. She influenced my understanding of the vital role that poetry plays in documenting and illuminating the experiences of marginalized voices. Patricia Smith's enduring legacy stands and serves as a guiding force in my role as an editor, thinker, and advocate.

Ruben Quesada, is a poet and critic and author of the award-winning anthology, *Latinx Poetics: Essays on the Art of Poetry*.



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The Chicago Literary Hall of Fame (CLHOF) honors, celebrates, preserves, and promotes the development of Chicago's great literary heritage—past, present, and future. CLHOF seeks to realize

this purpose by annual inductions of selected great writers from the past; ceremonies honoring living writers whose lifetime contributions to the literary arts warrant the highest recognition; literary awards to young people; classes, panels, and other literary endeavors designed to encourage the development of writers at all ages. CLHOF also creates written materials that record the lives and works of Chicago's most important literary figures and presents these and other materials on its website, in exhibits, author events, public art installations, literary tours, and programming relevant to the organization's goal of promoting Chicago's vibrant literary tradition and culture. CLHOF formed as a project of the Chicago Writers Association in 2010, and splintered into its own nonprofit 501(c)(3) entity in 2014.

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Our Host: The Poetry Foundation



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



A Most Wonderful Beginning

by Michelle T. Boone

Patricia Smith gave me my first joyous experience at the Poetry Foundation. Within the first few days of starting, I had the wonderful honor of calling her to tell her that she was the 2021 recipient of the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize! I couldn't believe I had the honor of making the call - since I had just started - but was reassured that the president notified honorees. Cool! Welcome to the Poetry Foundation!

Patricia's joy and excitement about the news was the warmest welcome I could ever hope for into the world of poetry. It was the perfect manifestation of how the Foundation could (and has!) impacted the lives of poets. She is a model of grace and excellence that I reflect on often and strive to emulate. Congratulations, Patricia!

Michelle T. Boone is the president of the Poetry Foundation and previously served as Commissioner of Cultural Affairs for the City of Chicago.



Special Thanks

Many people assisted in making this evening's ceremony, as well as this commemorative program, a success. Our wonderful partners, talented speakers, world-class program contributors, dedicated Board and Associate Board members, passionate selection committee, our booklet and cover designers, our razor-sharp assistant editor—they're all named elsewhere in the program. Several deserving people were left out, including our website designer Hannah Jennings, slideshow creator Rich Kono, photographer Don Seeley, Advisory Council member Salli Berg Seeley, and videographer Rana Segal. The Guild Literary Complex's Andrea Change deserves double mention for her sage consultation. Also, the entire Poetry Foundation staff, especially Public Programs Curator Noa Micaela Fields, Director of Grants and Awards Chris Guzaitis, former Guest Experience Manager Christine Jordan, and Vice President of Programs and Engagement Ydalmi Noriega. Breaker Press printed this program and the lobby poster. The Special Event provided bartending service at the pre-ceremony reception. The food we enjoyed before the program was provided by Catering by Michaels and Mariano's. We belong to a special artist community; again, tonight, we came together to stage a celebration worthy of a literary legend.



Partner Tributes

The **American Writers Museum** congratulates Patricia Smith on this much-deserved award. Through her work as a teacher, poet and performer, she has contributed immensely to the cultural life and landscape of Chicago.



The **Chicago Poetry Center** congratulates world-shaker, word-spinner, breath-taker and life-giver Patricia Smith. You make our beloved city prouder than proud.



Congratulations to Patricia Smith on the 2024 Fuller Award. Thanks for being a part of the **Guild Literary Complex** legacy, from the beginning, as we celebrate 35 years within Chicago's literary community.



Heartfelt congratulations to the brilliant Patricia Smith on the Chicago Literary Hall of Fame's Fuller Award for



her lifetime achievement. We are honored to have her as part of our **Lee & Low** family of storytellers. We are so proud to be the publisher of her first and only book for children. Inspired by Patricia's childhood memories of spending time with her father in a barbershop on the west side of Chicago, *Janna and the Kings* continues to resonate deeply with young people today. Thank you, Patricia, for all you do to bring the richness of language to life for readers everywhere. You deserve all the flowers.

The Shipman Agency congratulates our dear friend and client Patricia Smith on a lifetime of accomplishment in American letters. She is one of the great poetic voices of our time, and we were honored to be a part of her journey.



Third World Press salutes Patricia Smith whose words have always left an indelible mark on her readers, whether they are being launched into the universe from the page or the stage.

She reigns untouchable, unapologetic, unforgettable, and unarguably one of the most prolific wordsmiths of her generation. Patricia Smith, Chicago's own literary skyscraper, stands tall before us—her roots planted in the ever-fertile soil and cultural landscape of a Midwest pool of poets whose incendiary art and indelible essence continue to be amplified across borders of space, wind and poetic ripple.



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