



POETRY AND PLACE · JANUARY 2011

Dear Friends of Poetry,

Like the Jurassic shrew, poetry may seem an unlikely candidate to survive the next comet, let alone inherit the earth. Yet like that first of all mammals, poetry has proven itself agile among the feet of dinosaurs. Indeed it has been the animal that always escapes. Able to live on next to nothing — a scrap of paper or, before there was paper, in the ear alone — it survived as remembered words, a remembered rhythm. Once lodged in the mind of its host it traveled easily through time: our oldest literature, earliest history came down to us as poems. And as easily through space: outliving its host, it jumped from language to language, culture to culture. Unfazed by the latest technologies of transfer, it adapts readily to the sound bites of texting, the Twitter-sized attention spans of the new media. Virtual, viral, poetry bestows its blessings on our express world much as it did on the plains of Troy. Like DNA, a single poem carries down time and into the world its record of emotion and perception, a discrete packet of significance.

Small wonder, then, the survival and success of poetry become a matter of place. In this country the Dodge Festival brings poets to an audience of thousands in New Jersey. From Portland to Miami, Los Angeles to Boston, MFA programs convene masters to teach and students to learn the craft of writing poetry. Resident poets, in campuses across the country, attach a host of zip codes to the art. In the archives and collections of every major university, the papers and published works of poets reside, safe and secure from all but perhaps the next comet. More recently these end destinations for poetry have grown to include dedicated buildings, especially designed for those seeking a full and physical engagement with the art form. Last year Poets House opened the doors on its permanent home and now welcomes neighbors, school children, commuters — the streaming foot traffic of Whitman's Mannahatta — to its massive library of contemporary poetry. In Tucson, the University of Arizona Poetry Center houses its own major collection in a building designed for the purpose. What to make of all this, if not that a robust polycentrism has taken hold?

Six years ago the trustees of the Poetry Foundation took up the question of where we should make our own permanent home. Ruth Lilly's historic gift made it possible to think of a dedicated building that would be a place for poetry in Chicago, and an addition to the national landscape for poetry. A plot of land was purchased in the lively and cultural River North neighborhood. After a far-reaching search that attracted architects of international renown, the Board selected Chicago architect John Ronan for the project. Our vision, which Ronan understood perfectly, was for a building that would express one art form, poetry, in terms of another, architecture. Like a lyric poem the building should reveal itself not all at once, but line by line, with the subtlety Frost described as "the figure a poem makes." A walk through the building should begin in delight and end in enlightenment. In the words of the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, a metaphor joins two disparate worlds "by an equestrian leap of the imagination." Between the worlds of poetry and architecture, we asked Ronan to make that leap. He delivered a design that was all of that, and last April there was a groundbreaking. This coming summer a ribbon will be cut, and the word will be made flesh.

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The visitor will enter through a garden, designed by Boston landscape architects Reed Hilderbrand, that is intended to be a sanctuary, a place of quiet contemplation. In Ronan's conception, the garden, separated from the street by a high screen wall, is itself the first room of the building and the beginning of "a spatial narrative that slowly unfolds." A pathway leads the visitor to the building's entrance and inside to a performance space, a library, and offices for the Foundation and magazine. Our goal for the performance space, which seats 125, was to make it acoustically perfect for the spoken word, the human voice reciting without amplification. The library and reading room will house the Foundation's thirty-five thousand volumes. Long held in storage at the Newberry Library, this collection will now be an important resource to our editors as well as to the general public.

This building will be a home for poetry in many forms. Over two hundred letters have been sent to poetry organizations and groups in Chicago and around the country, inviting them to think of this space as their space. We hope that readings, book launches, classroom visits—the happenings of the greater poetry community—will be a common feature of life in the building. In the city where Carl Sandburg heard the stockyards bellow with the voice of industry, in the state where Vachel Lindsay saw Abraham Lincoln walk at midnight, we offer poetry its newest home. Its spaces will give to Chicago a place of airy lightness by day and a jewel box, lit from within, by night.

The building will also be a coming home for *Poetry*. Our Board chairman Don Marshall counts eleven addresses, all of them in Chicago and all of them rented or donated space, where the magazine has made its offices since its founding by Harriet Monroe in 1912. *Poetry* will settle into the first ever home of its own just in time to celebrate its centenary. Don captures the weight of feeling that this carries for us all by quoting a poem, by Adrienne Rich:

Stone by stone I pile  
this cairn of my intention  
with the noon's weight on my back,  
exposed and vulnerable  
across the slanting fields  
which I love but cannot save  
from floods that are to come;  
can only fasten down  
with this work of my hands,  
these painfully assembled  
stones, in the shape of nothing  
that has ever existed before.  
A pile of stones: an assertion  
that this piece of country matters  
for large and simple reasons.  
A mark of resistance, a sign.

— "A Mark of Resistance," from *Poetry*, August 1957

Sincerely,



John Barr  
*President*

ps Please visit [poetryfoundation.org/building](http://poetryfoundation.org/building) for a slide show of our new building.