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Poetry Foundation Launches Poetry Tour of Washington, DC

Free downloadable audio tour shines a literary light on the nation's capital

CHICAGO—The Poetry Foundation is pleased to announce the launch of the Washington, DC, Poetry Tour. The interactive tour, freely available at www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrytour, reveals our nation's capital through the eyes of its great poets, including Walt Whitman, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Elizabeth Bishop, among many others. From the hallowed halls of the federal buildings to neighborhood side streets, the tour features poems written in and about DC, as well as original photographs by poet Thomas Sayers Ellis.

Narrator and inaugural poet Elizabeth Alexander leads the tour from the stacks of the Library of Congress to Civil War battlefields to the Capitol steps, from the National Zoo to the U Street Corridor to the Busboys & Poets Café. Archival recordings from canonical poets including Langston Hughes, Robert Hayden, Sterling Brown, Randall Jarrell, and Ezra Pound chronicle DC's rich literary history, while contemporary poets such as Linda Pastan, Quique Avilés, Yusef Komunyakaa, Naomi Ayala, A.B. Spellman, and Jane Shore share their experiences, through both poetry and commentary, of national monuments and monumental poets alike.

The DC Poetry Tour presents the development of the capital's poetry scene over the last century and a half, from its interplay with musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Duke Ellington, and Ben Webster, to the creation of the office of poet laureate, to the legendary literary salons hosted by Georgia Douglas Johnson, to the multifaceted work of numerous poet-activist groups. Local poets and scholars—including E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the Afro-American Studies Resource Center at Howard University; David Gewanter of Georgetown University; and Kim Roberts, editor of *Beltway* magazine—provide the framework for understanding the moments and movements that have shaped DC's literary culture.

Listeners to the tour, which includes 34 stops throughout the National Mall and Northwest DC, learn that Washington is not only our government's headquarters but an important American literary capital as well. Historical images and artifacts provide a glimpse into DC's storied past, while photographs by poet Thomas Sayers Ellis, who was born and raised in Washington, give viewers an inside look at DC's neighborhoods and people. Poem text is presented along with original audio recordings and archival images, as listeners step into the national arenas that continue to inspire poets today.

“Tracing the history of American poetry against the culture and geography of our national capital helps readers develop a better sense of our shared literary heritage,” notes Anne Halsey, media director of the Poetry Foundation. “Poetry lovers visiting Washington can download free audio tours and maps to take guided poetry walking tours of the National Mall or Northwest DC—but you don’t have to be in DC to explore the city’s literary history. The full multimedia tour can also be experienced virtually at poetryfoundation.org/poetrytour.”

Beginning at the Library of Congress—the home of the first Poetry Consultant, Archibald MacLeish—the tour discusses the contributions of such heralded poets as Robert Lowell, Robert Frost, and William Carlos Williams. MacLeish declares, “A poem should not mean / But be.” Later, Williams fashions a modernist American poetry: “Never reverse a phrase that is your language as you speak it . . . Then you’ve started to create a culture in your place as you are.”

Contemporary poets from throughout the Beltway also present poems. Poets such as Brian Gilmore, who relates his personal interest in Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Myra Sklarew, who discusses May Miller, recognize the influence of their predecessors, reflecting upon them as President John F. Kennedy did when he spoke of Robert Frost: “Our national strength matters; but the spirit which informs and controls our strength matters just as much. This was the special significance of Robert Frost.”

The Washington, DC, Poetry Tour, an original production of the Poetry Foundation created in collaboration with Tierra Innovation, was written and produced by Curtis Fox. Special collaborators on the project include Grace Cavalieri, Katie Davis, Patricia Gray, E. Ethelbert Miller, and *Beltway* magazine editor Kim Roberts.

For more information, go to <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrytour>

About the Poetry Foundation

The Poetry Foundation, publisher of *Poetry* magazine and one of the largest literary organizations in the world, exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. The Poetry Foundation seeks to be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry by developing new audiences, creating new avenues for delivery, and encouraging new kinds of poetry through innovative literary prizes and programs. For more information, please visit www.poetryfoundation.org.

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