

# MARK ANDERSON

Spokane's New Poet Laureate

BY KAREN MOBLEY



**M**ark Anderson was appointed Spokane Poet Laureate in October 2017 and will serve for two years. Anderson is the city's third poet laureate, following Thom Caraway and Laura Read. In 2016, he won "Best Slam Poet" at the Bartlett Awards and was awarded the 2016 Spokane Arts Award in Leadership.

**WHAT ARE YOU MOST EXCITED ABOUT AS YOU BEGIN YOUR TERM?** It's a huge honor to be selected as poet laureate. I hope I can live up to it. I want to reach out to people who haven't been approached and invite them in. We are starting to be known as an up-and-coming city for arts, but many in Spokane don't realize it. I go to other cities and hear Spokane is on the radar as a place to be, then I come home and people say, "Well, if Spokane's so great why didn't I get the memo"? I want to give everyone the memo.

**WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO ACCOMPLISH?** I'd like to widen the audience and inspire people to try out writing. It would be great if reading something you wrote at an open mic became a bucket list item, like The Bloomsday Run. Everyone knows you have to run Bloomsday at least once if you live here—you've got to at least give it a go. Getting up to a microphone and sharing something you've written can be a terrifying experience, but it's incredibly empowering. It's a pivotal experience, having the tangible sensation of being listened to and expressing deeply something important. Not everyone can get a degree in the arts (though I definitely don't discourage that) but everyone can learn to write a poem that connects them to what it means to live their life.

**HOW WILL YOU BE ENGAGING SPOKANE?** I want to teach people who are just getting into writing and people who want to deepen their poetry skill sets. I plan to teach workshops on performance for those who want to bring their poems to life on stage. I plan to create events that let people try out poetry in a safe, stress-free environment, and events that push more experienced writers to grow in their careers.

**WHAT BROUGHT YOU TO POETRY?** I've been interested in poetry since I was very little. Even before I knew how to write I'd dictate stories to family members, then they would write them down. I'd illustrate them and bind them with yarn into books. The stories revolved around giant monsters, inspired by *Godzilla*. When I had a hamster, I made up a super hero called Super Hamster. Then I got a gerbil. I'll let you guess what the next hero was. I believe there was a horror story about a monster with horns that chased me across the world. That one was inspired by *Goosebumps* and a scary dream I had. Then in second grade, once I'd learned to write by myself, I wrote poems inspired by Shel Silverstein. I remember trying to decide what made something a "poem," and deciding it had to do with patterns. I knew it didn't have to rhyme but I thought there had to be some underlying pattern to the lines that tied them together. And now, when I'm stuck on a poem, I still look for the pattern. If there's not something tying it together into a unified whole, I'll abandon it. It won't feel right to me. I was interested in poetry, and every two or three years I'd revisit it, but then when I was about eighteen I came to a poetry open mic at a cafe called Empyrean.



## THE ELVES AND THE SHOEMAKER AT MICA CEMETERY

It is difficult to make a living  
as a shoemaker in the Mica Cemetery.

No one has been buried here  
for forty years. But everyone knows  
elves make the best cobblers

and there are plenty of those. Plenty  
to service these little, red bricks

almost covered by wild grasses:  
no letters on them. A mother  
walking with her son frowns

before the markers as the boy  
asks what they are. The elves

below are single celled organisms  
called paramecium or "tiny slippers,"  
hammering away at first pairs

of shoes for lost children.  
*Times were hard*, the mother explains.

*Children died so often. Parents  
couldn't afford headstones.* The spring sun  
will be setting soon, burying

the yellow sky behind wiry branches,  
a fairy circle almost ready

to blossom. She looks homeward,  
*but it's better now.* They walk off home as elves  
continue the tired shoemaker's job.

He will arrive in the morning, amazed.  
His job is nearly done. Soon, even the nameless

will walk out from this place in peace.

**O**n good nights there were maybe ten readers. I started going every week. Soon, poetry became the axle my week revolved around. I started competing in the slams. A poetry slam is a competitive poetry reading in which performers are judged by the audience. Competing gave me a jump-start to putting in more work on poems.

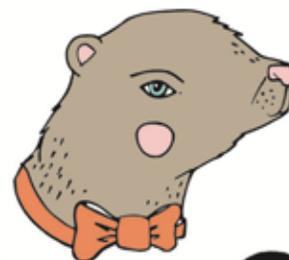
It took me awhile to become one of the top poetry slammers in the scene. I wasn't a natural performer. I had no idea what to do with my hands and my enunciation was terrible. After my first season I'd managed to place third in the finals, trailing behind the top duo who'd been battling it out all year, Zack Graham and Kurt Olson. That summer, as the slam took a three month hiatus, I spent a whole month and a half working on only one poem, while I stayed with a friend's parents in Portland. I'd walk from their house downtown and say lines to myself, thinking of what I liked and what I didn't like, and letting the poem come to me. I practiced that poem more than I'd ever practiced before, repeating it again and again as clearly as I could. Coming home, I won the first slam of that season.

**WHAT ARE THE BEST WAYS TO ENGAGE WITH POETRY?** It can mean reading a book, or going to a book club or a reading, or showing up to an open mic and reading something you wrote. Poetry shouldn't be introduced to people as something they have to understand and analyze before they've had the chance to start liking it. Critical reading is important, but we need to encounter poetry for the sake of enjoying it before we learn to take it apart. Otherwise we miss the point. Imagine the poem as directions to get to some emotional/cognitive/empathetic/spiritual landscape. No matter how well you understand the directions, it's important to trudge through the mud to get there.

**WHAT OTHER INTERESTS DO YOU HAVE AND DOES THIS INFORM YOUR WORK?** Oh, this is a question that could go for days. I'm interested in everything. I take inspiration from anything. For example, I really enjoy playing chess. There are many ways to take inspiration from it. You could start off simply by thinking about how to make a poem about chess, about the relationship between two people playing chess. Maybe one of them is learning how to play, but they're learning something about themselves in the process. There are tons of great metaphors in chess—pawns advancing to become queens—pawns being sacrificed. You could write a persona poem from the perspective of what's called a "poisoned pawn."

But we might go deeper. I might think of chess strategy, and see how that can inform my generative process. I ask, "How can I think this game of poetry is like a game of chess"? Well, there are structural parallels. Every line in a poem is like a move in chess; it has to advance toward your goal and play toward your advantages. After a few lines or a few moves, once the opening is done, you need a plan for this thing that's taking shape. Then you could take that idea a step further and compare writing exercises to speed chess, in which you have a clock going and only get three to five minutes to play the entire game. You could set up a clock and say, "Can I write a twenty-line poem in five minutes, where every line has purpose"? Part of the work is learning how to play well in the first place, and another part is learning to achieve the mindset to play well fast. You could use that to generate a ton of first drafts. Later, you could return to the best drafts and work more. Of course, given five minutes you wouldn't craft a masterpiece, but you might start one. When my writing has been blocked, this is one of the exercises I use to break out of it.

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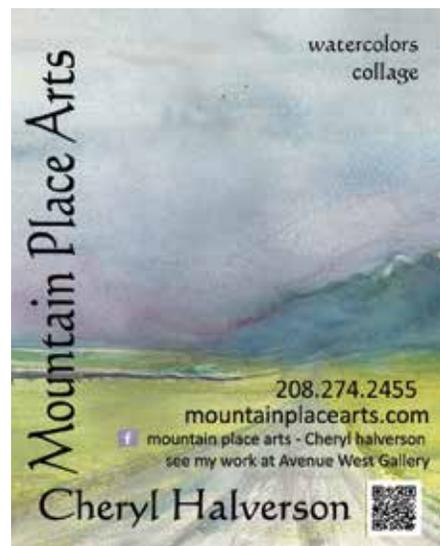
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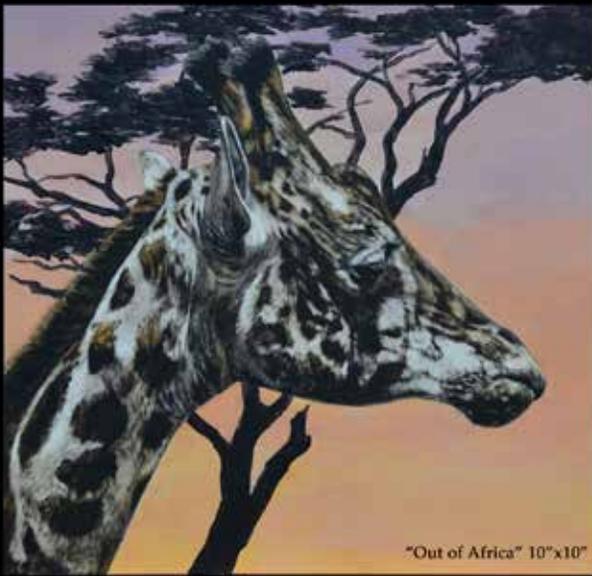
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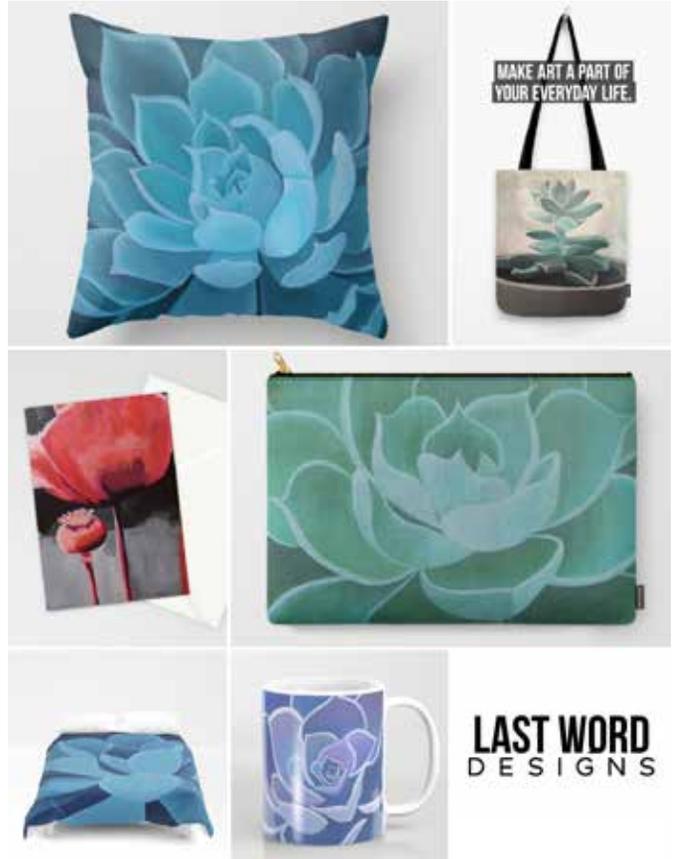
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