

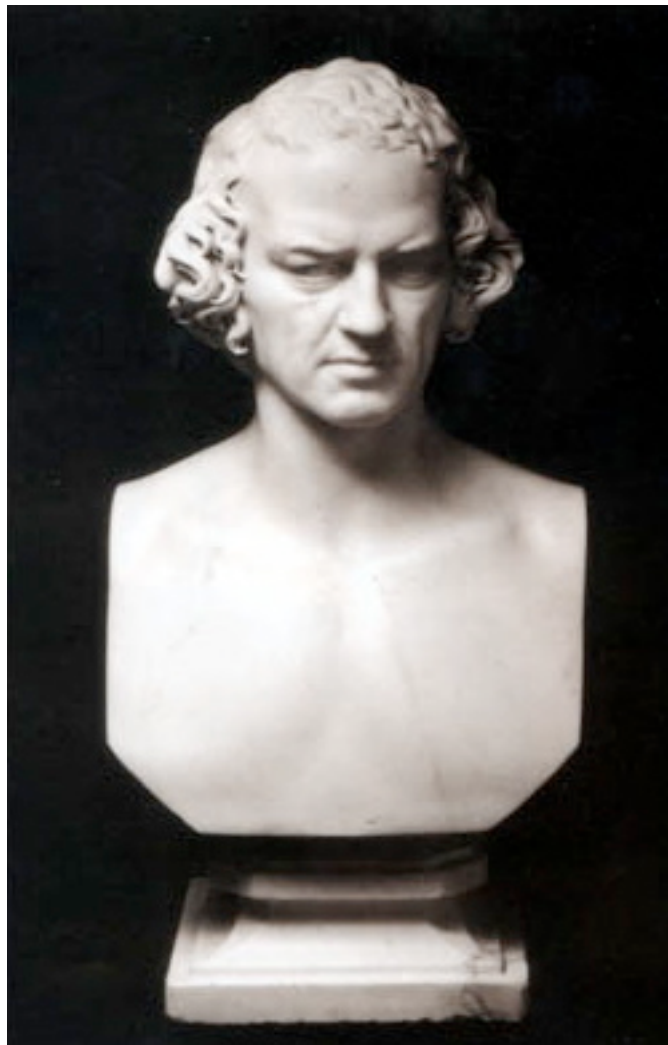
# National Laureate: A Neo-Impressionist Poem

**Robert Fitterman**

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*"National Laureate" seeks to displace the official verse of each state's laureate poetry into another frame or readership. The theme of "nature" appears often in these laureate poems, as if the natural world were an organic outgrowth of the poet's official task or "calling." My aim is to demystify this calling by transcribing these official excerpts into this new context.*

Robert Fitterman, unofficial poet



### National Laureate: A Neo-Impressionist Poem

When you come back to me it will be crow time  
and flycatcher time, with rising spirals of gnats  
between the apple trees.<sup>1</sup> When the last cloud leaves  
nothing behind—no history, no trace of error, no  
basilica to shelter a man—<sup>2</sup> we learn from our animals,  
if we're smart. They know how to wait. They know how to run  
to catch up. Much of their life is spent at windows.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe I should stay in bed all day long  
and read a book or listen to the news on the radio  
but truthfully, I am not meant for that.<sup>4</sup>  
On her dresser is one of those old glass bottles  
of Jergen's Lotion with the black label, a little round bottle  
of Mum deodorant, a white plastic tray with Avon necklaces  
and earrings, pennies, paper clips, and a large black coat button.  
I appear to be very interested in these objects.<sup>5</sup>

Then, as we talked, my personage subdued,  
and I became, as Petit Jean, a ghost,<sup>6</sup> I imagined him  
wading the shallows of a mountain stream--the breeze still  
cold off the higher snow fields, the fish smell of fresh water,  
the pitched hum of insects waking to the sun.<sup>7</sup> Eagle and egret,  
woodcock and teal, all birds gathering to affirm the last gasp  
of sunset,<sup>8</sup> dark grays and fainter grays of near fields and far hills

motionless, his mind playing silently over and over  
with his worry beads of words.<sup>9</sup> For eighty some odd years  
he rose with the rising sun and many mornings got up at dark,  
for so much work was to be done.<sup>10</sup> Then, that recognition would  
reward me for all I'd undergone, my bravery of thought, my refusal  
of dishonest love, and my goodwill.<sup>11</sup> Gray cloud like a sweater  
pulled over the heart of the moon.<sup>12</sup> Hill thoughts, midnight flight.<sup>13</sup>

Loaded on beer and whiskey, we ride to the dump in carloads  
to turn our headlights across the wasted field.<sup>14</sup> Behind the ridge  
the seeking spirit cry life.<sup>15</sup> The afternoons go by, one by one.  
My old friend, who shone like a tropic sun amid the poets of our day,  
too soon grown wan and thin as the late May moon.<sup>16</sup> Fact is,  
each breath becomes bone, becomes dust.<sup>17</sup> Most poets are rooted  
in the natural world, spokespersons for the inarticulate in nature.<sup>18</sup>

In river country flint nodules rest among limestone sea bottoms,  
unexplained, glassy among the porous tangles of shells.<sup>19</sup>  
When I was a child and angels argued slamming doors,  
I lolled, feet up the couch, head on the floor.<sup>20</sup> I see her  
in a photograph I found, unsmiling in a drop-waist dress.<sup>21</sup>

Before I leave, almost without noticing, before I cross the road  
and head toward what I have intentionally postponed—<sup>22</sup>  
the streets of my ancestors,<sup>23</sup> stretch even the fingertips  
against sand-coated hills. You can get there from here.<sup>24</sup>

Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses goodbye.<sup>25</sup>  
And you pretty much gotta trust Her, even if that means  
twiddling your thumbs while she makes Her way through Her medley.<sup>26</sup>  
The city was brick and stone in the time before glass and steel.  
In those days the city was streets of women.<sup>27</sup> Treat your Mommy nice  
and take her to Las Vegas—she'll think you're swell.<sup>28</sup> The dark barge  
works the length of braziers humped like monks awaiting sacrifice;<sup>29</sup>  
seeds of hope are waiting in the sacred soil

beneath our feet and in the light and in the shadows,  
spinning below the hemlocks.<sup>30</sup> The only clouds forming are crow clouds,  
the only shade, oaks bound together in a tangle of oak.<sup>31</sup>  
Under her cool skin the feet dipped in formaldehyde to prevent sweating  
a river runs.<sup>32</sup> Her skirt clings to her the way fog clings to a flower.  
Her legs are curled up, her sleeping face soft like a saint.  
Driving for hours a man thinks about how things are measured,  
about how coffee always tastes better in small towns.<sup>33</sup>

I can stand here all day and tell you how much  
I honor, admire, how brave you are.<sup>34</sup> Oblivious to the fact  
that anyone might be watching, that he might be teaching us all  
how to live.<sup>35</sup> Neither of us can guess if they'll hurry  
dusk along, those clouds that have loitered all afternoon  
over the rooftops.<sup>36</sup> Although distance does not matter,  
it's a long way into the flat pine forest.<sup>37</sup> The work of hunters  
is another thing: I have come after them and made repair.<sup>38</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> Vermont
  - <sup>2</sup> Virginia
  - <sup>3</sup> Florida
  - <sup>4</sup> Alaska
  - <sup>5</sup> Delaware
  - <sup>6</sup> Arkansas
  - <sup>7</sup> Idaho
  - <sup>8</sup> Alabama
  - <sup>9</sup> Connecticut
  - <sup>10</sup> Tennessee
  - <sup>11</sup> West Virginia
  - <sup>12</sup> Montana
  - <sup>13</sup> Indiana
  - <sup>14</sup> Georgia
  - <sup>15</sup> Mississippi
  - <sup>16</sup> Iowa
  - <sup>17</sup> Illinois
  - <sup>18</sup> North Dakota
  - <sup>19</sup> Kansas
  - <sup>20</sup> Maine
  - <sup>21</sup> Kentucky
  - <sup>22</sup> Maryland
  - <sup>23</sup> Louisiana
  - <sup>24</sup> Nebraska
  - <sup>25</sup> New York
  - <sup>26</sup> Oregon
  - <sup>27</sup> New Hampshire
  - <sup>28</sup> Nevada
  - <sup>29</sup> Rhode Island
  - <sup>30</sup> South Carolina
  - <sup>31</sup> North Carolina
  - <sup>32</sup> Oklahoma
  - <sup>33</sup> Texas
  - <sup>34</sup> California
  - <sup>35</sup> Washington
  - <sup>36</sup> Utah
  - <sup>37</sup> Wisconsin
  - <sup>38</sup> Wyoming

*Note: Not all 50 states have a poet laureate.*