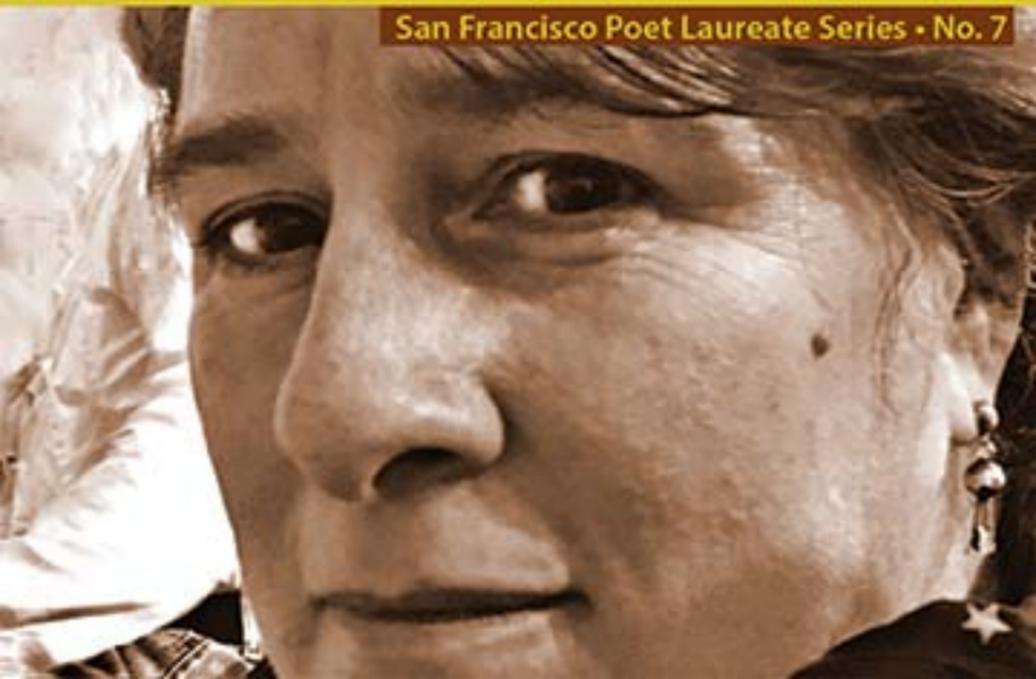




DEER TRAILS **Kim Shuck**

San Francisco Poet Laureate Series • No. 7



CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

DEER TRAILS

Kim Shuck

San Francisco Poet Laureate Series No. 7



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KIM SHUCK
POET LAUREATE OF SAN FRANCISCO
INAUGURAL SPEECH

[the poet begins, wearing a band of flowers around her head]

It is always an honor to read in Ohlone territory. Always.

Now, we are very close to an old village site, and although I could not throw a rock to there, I feel fairly certain that there are at least two men in the room who could if these buildings weren't here. So that's where we are. It's important to understand that we are rooted in that.

I'm going to start by reading the work of two Ohlone poets. The first poem is by Stephen Meadows:

"Cosmology"

Generations of spiders
weave their interminable worlds
among the rough cut boards
the hay colored chronicle
of bodies in the soft light
pendants of spirit
rivaling in abandon
the acrylics and oils on canvas
that speak to me of friends

In this room
with its colors spasmodic
over fifty some years

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neither the sound of traffic
nor the rotting of the walls
nor the murmuring of poems
will halt this cosmology of gems
each delicate passed over body
a bright crypt in air

This morning I was making origami jumping frogs at the Mission Education Center in Spanish, a language I don't speak very well, and now I'm giving this speech. And people asked me before I walked in here, "Are you worried?" No, I am not. Second graders who are waiting for you to make a linguistic mistake are so much scarier than a poetry audience.

So this next poem is by Deborah Miranda, who is also Ohlone. If you don't know these writers, you should. And, with great gratitude, I note both this and the previous poem are from books published by Heyday. I love Heyday Books, by the way. This is an excerpt from a poem called "Petroglyphs":

All my life I knew that I would disappear. I knew my presence here on earth was so tentative that I was in constant danger of being devoured, absorbed, vanished.

So from the time I could hold a crayon, I scribbled. I scrawled. My hand grew cramped and tired, calluses formed on my fingers from holding a pen, a pencil. I gripped my writing utensil with four fingers instead of three, used my pinky to support the others. Gripped so hard my fingers hurt but couldn't stop. Couldn't stop, because if I did, I would disappear. Everyone I loved had disappeared. I knew I was next.

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[the poet removes the band of flowers and dons a Polish hat]

I've been asked a lot of questions in the last couple of weeks since I was named poet laureate, and a lot of people have spoken of me as a Native American writer, which I am. But I can't help but remember the time my mother came to one of my art shows and looked at my bio, which had been edited by the people at the gallery, and they had taken out the fact that I am half Polish. Those of you who know what they're looking at will recognize a Goral mountain hat from Poland, the Alpine Carpathians where my grandfather is from. Think the other side of the mountain: I'm from the land of the vampires. My grandfather was a union organizer for the painters union here in San Francisco. When we really, really, really remembered how to do that. When you didn't have to say you were "pro union" in this town because we all knew it.

This next poem I think you should know about is a piece by Ire'ne Lara Silva called "Blood Sugar Canto." When I was trying to write my inaugural address I found that Ire'ne's piece came closer to what I meant than anything I wrote.

I read something about American artists and their mindsets. Something which did not include me as an American—not me in this brown, Mexican, Indigenous, queer, disabled body. Something which did not speak to my art.

I forget sometimes that for some people art is a luxury, a pastime. Even for those who make art, they see it as something to chase, stealing the stories of others, seeking out experiences in order to have something to write about, pushing themselves to extremes to make themselves feel.

I forget because that's not the art I make. Not the art the people in my world make. Writing is the closest art to me, so I will say "writing," but I mean "art-making" in all its forms. In my world, we write because we must, because "no nos queda de otra," because it is how we survive, how we crawl out of self-destruction and hopelessness, how we dream, how we create ourselves, how we speak, how we believe, how we reach out to one another, how we build, how we heal—ourselves, our communities, our ancestors, and our future—how we say, over and over again, we are human... we are here... we are free.

I didn't, of course, nominate myself for this position. I was at a party actually at Heyday Books, and another poet, Kurt Schweigman, walked up to me and said, "I think you're going to be the next poet laureate of San Francisco." And I laughed at him. Then I went off to the corner to finish my aram sandwich and drink some juice quietly by myself. Somebody else came up to me that day and said the same thing. Then later, at a different event, another poet, César Love, asked if he could nominate me. I said, "Sure, and I'll even do it, if they choose me." So here I am.

What I've decided to do, during my time as poet laureate, is to make a poetry map of San Francisco. It's a project I've wanted to do for a long time. In the coming months, many of the poets present here will be tapped for poems, poems about heroes who have left us and places that mean something really important to them. Specific places, not vague places, because this city is amazing. It's an incredible place. How many of you know that we used to have a Native Elder center in Hayes Valley? This is an incredibly high-rent Native room

here right now; you have no idea. There are Native people from across the continent here right now and I am incredibly grateful. When Luis Herrera said that it felt like family in this room, I almost said, “You know what? This is my family.”

[the poet removes the Polish hat, puts on a rabbit hat, and tosses the ears dramatically off her face]

Those of you cheering are probably the ones who know what Rabbit stands for. I am going to end up writing about Mary TallMountain, if nobody else ends up doing so, but only because Bill Vartnaw will be writing the piece about Carol Lee Sanchez, though he doesn't know it yet. This poem is by Mary TallMountain:

“The Last Wolf”

The last wolf hurried towards me
through the ruined city
and I heard his baying echoes
down the steep smashed warrens
of Montgomery Street and past
the ruby-crowned highrises
left standing
their lighted elevators useless

Passing the flicking red and green
of traffic signals baying his way eastward
in the mystery of his wild loping gait
closer the sounds in the deadly night
through clutter and rubble of quiet blocks

I hear his voice ascending the hill
and at last his low whine as he came
floor by empty floor to the room
where I sat
in my narrow bed looking west, waiting
I heard him snuffle at the door and
I watched

He trotted across the floor
he laid his long gray muzzle on the spare white spread
and his eyes burned yellow
his small dotted eyebrows quivered

Yes, I said.
I know what they have done.

Since I've been named poet laureate, reporters have been asking me things, like "Why do you write?" I think I've covered that. I always want to ask people, when they ask me that, "Why don't you?" Because I don't know how to do it any other way. Similarly, I've been asked things, almost surreptitiously, like "What's it like to be Native American?"

Now, for clarity, this isn't something I learned how to do later in life. To me, that question always sounds like, "What's binocular vision like?" Or "What's how bipedal locomotion like?" I don't have an answer. "What's it like to be you?" I don't know that either. I will say this: being Tsalagi, for me, is knowing that I am loved because whenever I need them, my family shows up. Do you see them all here? Look around you.

Five years ago, my daughter died. People asked me how

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I kept going, and I would answer it with these people, who carry part of my sadness for me. That's how. And that's what it's like.

Carol Lee Sanchez did a lot of things for me. Among them, she introduced me to devorah major, in a roundabout way; it didn't happen directly, but it happened in that poetry way. And without devorah, I wouldn't have been able to pay my bills the last couple of years. She's had me substituting for her and got me some teaching work. She's always been supportive. Thank you, dev. It's an honor to be in your footsteps up here.

This poem is Carol Lee's, it's from a section called "Notes from San Francisco" from an incredible book called *From Spirit to Matter*:

"the song: the dance: the poem"

1.

i toil in the field
syllable into line
through the breath.
the breathing is difficult
the birthing.

i dreamed of you mama,
far away, talking hours
into the night.
the breathing was difficult
and you changed again
trying to tell me something

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I couldn't remember—except
the field was there and
stretched on and on.

the stubble would not
be replaced with new corn
and spring is soon.

the breathing is
difficult at times
from syllable into line.

So why am I wearing a rabbit hat? Rabbit is the trickster god for the Cherokee People. Or the Trickster Spirit, depending on who you talk to. Rabbit haunts me, so I figured I'd bring him directly, so I wouldn't get swamped by him.

The first thing that happened after it was announced that I had been named poet laureate was that somebody contacted me and asked me if I identified as LGBT. I am in my 50s. People have found that an amusing puzzle since I was 14. I don't answer that question anymore, because there have been a lot of different answers to that question and I am not currently interviewing for the position of "lover," which means that there are three whole people on the planet who need to know who I personally feel like snuggling up with at any given time; they would be, when important, my doctor, my partner, and I. I already know the answer. My partner is taking another picture of me right now. And I don't think my doctor is here.

So I answered that question the way I have for a while. I have a number of flippant answers, because really, it's no-

body's business. The way adults usually deal with this, rather than asking, is to look, make a guess, and keep it to yourself. But, I said, "No, not really," because "No, not really." Then somebody printed that I was evasive and did not want to go on record. So I'm going to go on record about a few things.

[the poet removes the rabbit hat and puts on a San Francisco Giants baseball cap]

I'm in my 50s, Cherokee, Goral Polish, and a baseball fan. I don't really want to say what team because I don't want to play favorites or anything. And I'd go to more games if I could figure out how to trade a poem to get in.

[the poet doffs the Giants cap and replaces it with a San Francisco Seals cap]

Generally monogamous. Omnivore. Still have my own teeth.

[the poet replaces the Seals cap with a purple giant squid hat]

I am the kind of person who believed in the giant squid before they found one. And because I actually think Lee Francis would have found this funny, I'm going to read a poem of his with the giant squid hat on. This is from Lee Francis' book *On the Good Red Interstate*:

Nyah Carol

I try to keep you in present time
message bringer woman

disconnect you from a common past
guitar playing poet
build boxes for all my memories

San Francisco nights
skipping down telegraph hill
Santa Fe evenings
drinking with movie stars
Cubero mornings
climbing sandstone rocks
Washington daylights
looking at monuments

I still wear the shirt you made last year
artist drawing mentor
greet each day with a smile
mother and grandmother
place memories in little boxes

Santa Monica
swimming in the ocean
Albuquerque
walking city streets
Sausalito
listening to John Handy
San Fidel
playing kick-the-can

I pass the fifty to you again
horse rider Capricorn

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spend quiet moments alone
entertainer teacher
add memories to little boxes

Corrales
where Lewie always played

Fairfax
talking all night long

Las Vegas
hoping to change reality

Seal Beach
sharing our grief and pain

I visit a thousand planets
counselor companion
consider well your message
Oak clan cousin sister
stack boxes logically in order

Red
for sun and passion

Blue
for water and rest

Green
for earth and action

Yellow
for corn and change.

*[the poet removes the giant purple squid hat and dons the band
of flowers again]*

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Let me tell you about this city.

I'm wearing this band of flowers because it's part of the story. This was made for me by my nursery school teacher, who's here tonight and who's known me since I was three years old. I had her until I went to elementary school, where I was one of the early people in Ruth Asawa's Alvarado Arts Project. After elementary school, I went to junior high, where my best friend's mother was Kate Wolf, the singer/ songwriter. I dated Carol Lee Sanchez's son. Carol Lee introduced me to California Poets in the Schools, where the next person I am going to read was a big mover and shaker.

This poem from *No Easy Light* by Susan Sibbet is called "What It Will Be Like":

A mistranslation from César Vallejo

I will live in a city with walls made of light, of water,
where the tender fuchsias are never thirsty.

I will live in a city made of intricate wires and sand,
a city without flying paper or Kleenex,
a city of bread.

In my city the crusts will be chewy, sour—
golden stucco and brown shingle—
the heel of the loaf will be the curve of Land's End.

And in this glass of air
and clouds, my city will be dazzling, especially
when the light slips under the fog,
just before the glittering night.

The hills will be made with the bones of houses
And the gulls will fly up silently at night
The only one awake will be my small black cat,
And his song will be so beautiful,
No one will ever be sad again.

I have had the best education in art, and in having a good heart, that anyone could have. I'm not pretending that it's over. I am going to read one piece from Tongo Eisen-Martin. This is from his first book, *Someone's Dead Already*:

Waiting for Prints

Like weapon is to jacket and precinct hold Friday hostage.
Fossil Jaw then Judge

Tunnel at the end of the light
See an overtime hurricane smacking more houses
sleep
until
woke by
dry
cereal
and
surrend
—er

This holding cell only needs a giant pan handler's palms
To shake these coin men around

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The man is a genius. I fully expect to be sitting in the audience when he's standing up here doing this one of these days.

It must be made clear am a Californian and a Native. I am not a Native Californian Native. My people are from the other side of the continent. In Europe this is how I explain it: it is as though you went to someone in Prague and asked about the Troubles in Ireland. I have studied them but I have no special insight.

This River

Runs west and
Counter to every story I drank
Deep in those small doll days
Strange, heavy with collective
Unconscious with all of those
West running, improbable relations spending
Lavish hands worth of emotion on this imagined
West in this city which also
Runs west into an ocean that I
Own no stories for, borrowed ocean full of
Marvels fed by these long men who collect different
Water who polish stones that won't tell me the
Future in any language I know

I want to say, even though they've been acknowledged already, that I personally as a writer, as an artist, as a human being, have received some gift in the words of every one of the people who has been a poet in this city, a poet laureate before me in this city. I am a product of my time in this place.

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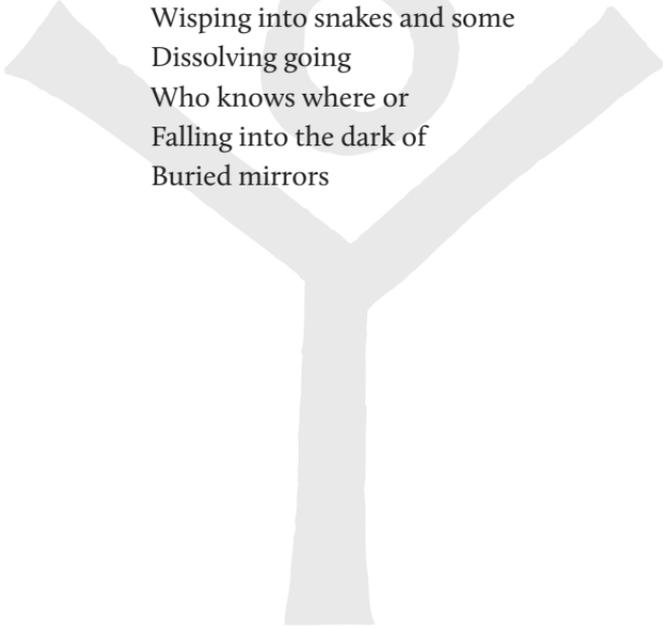


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Navigation

Hard to tell if this is
Fog or
Prayer smoke and the
Singing of flowers and
Horns already in
Some places these poems
Wisping into snakes and some
Dissolving going
Who knows where or
Falling into the dark of
Buried mirrors



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Change

Try to dream the things that
Yerba Buena plants dream when the
New printed storm runs
Fingers through the
Cypress and reaches
Along hidden
Roots and quiet water songs in the
Cracks in the serpentine they
Find salamander prayers in layered
Stone
Coins lost in the fret of
Post earthquake with
Slumped brick and the
Full panic of
Witness and dynamite these
Hills hold down hold
Down and breathe
Storm and
Smile up into the
Rain eyes and
Change again

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Cusp

Morning star the
Redwood has caught her for the
Moment this
Ancestor net this
Old game on the cusp of a day that I
Know will be hot will
Bake the tiny tomatoes on the
Vine and
Set the lavender and
Rosemary scent
Free
Ripples of early
Autumn that
Break out in
Orange butterflies

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Saved

Feast of all souls prepared with the
Bones of the dead the
Packed memories of a family who
Presses flowers and saves
Recipes and skies and the
Tips off of shoelaces this is a
Sky I might save fold into a
Fortune teller with its bands of hot pink with its
Echo of a phone call from the
Disappeared mythical
Cousin because anything at all is
Possible at any moment I will
Carry dice from now on, develop a
System of predictions based on soup and
Crackers and replace latches on the
Doors of a house in a
Storm that selectively pries at the
Deepest secrets to reveal that they are not
Where we left them

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Immeasurable

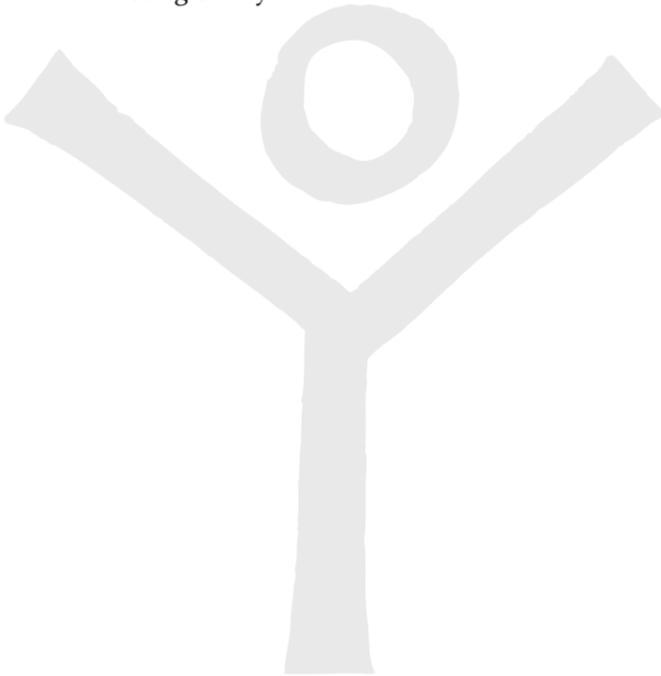
Fog in earnest and
Here near the
Mint and
Candle flowers the
Songs of
Seep and absorb call
Quicker feet could
Become that smell
Lemon thyme and
Rosemary before they
Cut the redwoods down these
Fogs would be combed out
Less than a mile down the road
West there maybe there is a
Stump to navigate by an
Abbreviated tooth of
Wood and ghosts they
Knew something those
Tall cousins a thing about
Ancestral blood and
Ravens and
Sea fog
Immeasurable by
Victorian or
Pythagorean tools a thing that is
Also not the sipping of
Wild pink roses

Contraband

No need to
Forbid the songs on a
Monday morning with the
Cold
Shivering the lights near the
Mint and the
Braced grey buildings with their
Red blinking
Signals to airplanes
Beware
I think of a
Fortress as an
Old-fashioned thing and in a way it is but we are
Not singing and the
Barricades are up in some
Pretense of offense the
Boats have entered the Bay and the
Songs are not being sung although we are
Allowed and
Revolution is a tea or a
Jacket and does not lend
Support and still the
Streetlights are
Trembling as the
Woman under them
Does not and we will measure her
Worthiness for help her

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Parents and her
Choices and the
Mess the
Bold fact of her there and she isn't
Singing either not soup or
Poem no
Song of any kind



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