



DANA GIOIA

A Boom Interview with California's Poet Laureate

With “A California Requiem”

Editor's note: Having served as chair of the National Endowment for the Arts from 2003 to 2009, Dana Gioia has long been known for his provocative essays, for his work in literary criticism, and especially for his poetry and advocacy of the craft. A native Californian born to Sicilian and Mexican immigrant parents in 1950 and raised in the southwest Los Angeles County industrial town of Hawthorne, as a first-generation college student, Gioia earned his BA from Stanford, MA in comparative literature from Harvard, and MBA back at Stanford, leading him into the business world decades before becoming a full-time writer.

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With a seemingly ever-growing emphasis on STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education in contemporary K-12 learning and in universities, a natural tendency has been to dismiss the arts and humanities as less important. This is as true in California as anywhere. And yet, as big questions remain and loom ever larger for California and its people, so does the importance of the arts and humanities for learning, for critical thinking, and for engagement with wider societal concerns. Consistent with California's rich literary tradition, Gioia has contributed in many ways, with *California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present* (Heyday), *The Misread City* (Red Hen), his essay "Fallen Western Star," and in poems from his many collections including *Pity the Beautiful* (Graywolf) and *99 Poems* (Graywolf). Together with his essays, Gioia takes up the task of the poet, for whom California reserves a special place.

While the title of State Poet Laureate has been held by California poets for over a century, the position became official in 2001 and is overseen by the California Arts Council, which conducts an intense nomination process, after which the governor chooses the poet laureate from three top candidates; then the appointee must be confirmed by the California State Senate. On 4 December 2015, Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. appointed Dana Gioia to this role. What follows is Gioia's accounting of his work as California Poet Laureate, originally delivered to the California Senate Rules Committee and here revised with new questions for our *Boom* readers.

Boom: You are California's tenth poet laureate, serving a two-year governor-appointment. California has changed a lot over the years, as has the dynamic makeup of our state. What do you hope to accomplish in this role?

Gioia: My goal as state poet laureate is to bring the power of poetry and literature to as many people and communities as possible across California. I especially want to reach people and places outside the major metropolitan areas. The state poet laureate should serve the whole state. For that reason, I have set the goal of visiting every county in California. Reaching all fifty-eight counties in two years perhaps may be too ambitious, but it seems the right target. With proper planning and the active partnership of county libraries and art councils, that goal should be achievable. I will give it my best effort.

Boom: What are your plans to reach diverse regions and people in the state?

Gioia: I want to reach all California. Our state is so large and varied that one needs to be systematic in covering the vast territory and meeting the diverse populations. That is why I have chosen the approach of trying to visit as many counties as possible. Of course, it will also be necessary to do multiple events in the metropolitan areas to reach different audiences. This second goal is easier since so many invitations come from urban areas. The key is to focus on invitations that reach different communities.

Boom: Why is poetry significant, and why does it matter in today's society?

Gioia: Poetry is our most concise, expressive, and memorable way of using words to describe our existence. Poems awaken the imagination and memory to make us more alert to life. On both an individual and communal level, poems provide the language, ideas, and images to help us understand ourselves, our society, and the world. That is why poems are so often used to great effect at public occasions. They give people the words to articulate what they experience and feel. That is also why poetry has always been used in education. It not only develops a student's mastery of language; it also enhances creativity, empathy, and emotional self-awareness.

Boom: One of the functions of the California Poet Laureate, as with the United States Poet Laureate, is to create a cultural project during the appointment. Could you briefly describe your cultural project? How has it come to and involved artistically underserved communities?

Gioia: My project has been to participate in at least one cultural event in every county in California—with a focus on creating a free event at each county's public library. This approach is necessarily simple and flexible, then, and the events are either primarily literary or combine several arts, including poetry. In both cases, I have and will continue to involve local students, writers, musicians, and artists in each visit. I have already had local Poetry Out Loud high school champions participate in my public presentations and will continue to do so. By trying to visit every county, my public service, by definition, focuses on underserved communities.

Boom: You teach in the university, but how does poetry become accessible rather than a mere academic pursuit for cultural elites?



Photograph by Matt Gush.

Gioia: I have spent most of my working life outside the university—in business, government, and journalism. I believe the pleasures and enlightenment of poetry are open to most people, not simply to an academic elite. Although I take myself seriously as an artist, I don't see much point writing in ways that exclude the average intelligent person. Art without an audience is a diminished thing. This is one reason why I have been and plan to continue working with local civic institutions, especially libraries and art centers—local venues that are open to everyone. They are the best avenues to reach a broad and diverse audience. Mixing poetry with music and the other arts also makes events more accessible to the average person.

Boom: How do you see poetry connecting to the minds of individuals in leadership and innovation throughout California, in both public and private sectors?

Gioia: I have been and will continue to be open to invitations to meet and speak with leaders in both the public and private sectors. I have both held and have scheduled several talks at statewide or regional gatherings for librarians and high school teachers, with one for county officials. I also believe that our state finals for Poetry Out Loud in the Capitol building allows our elected representatives a chance to

see the transformative power of poetry programs in the lives of students in their districts.

Boom: Do you plan to collaborate with your predecessor, Juan Felipe Herrera, now the US Poet Laureate, or the State Librarian of California Greg Lucas, or any other government group?

Gioia: It is impossible for me to be an effective state poet laureate unless I collaborate with arts councils, libraries, schools, parks, museums, and city book festivals. As chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, I learned how much could be accomplished through partnerships. I consider myself a member of the State Arts Council team, and I involve them in everything I do. I am currently working with Greg Lucas to find an effective way of partnering with county libraries to help reach my goals. His support is essential to my success. As for the US Poet Laureate, I have also already done two public events—in Sacramento and Los Angeles—with Juan Felipe Herrera and have an invitation out to him for a third event in partnership with State Parks.

Boom: Who among our California poets do you believe have had the greatest influence in California?

Gioia: California has an extraordinary poetic tradition. When I led an editorial team to create the anthology

California Poetry: From the Gold Rush to the Present, I found it challenging to limit our selections to *only* 100 poets. If I had to pick a central poet for the state, I would choose Robinson Jeffers. His vision of California's landscape and wilderness has inspired three generations of writers, artists, and environmentalists. There has also been a great bohemian tradition with writers such as Kenneth Rexroth, William Everson, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Charles Bukowski.

I also admire the great Theodor Geisel of San Diego, better known as Dr. Seuss. Among my favorite living California poets are Al Young, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Ron Koertge, Juan Felipe Herrera, and Kay Ryan. Pulitzer Prize and MacArthur Award winner Ryan, who also served as US Poet Laureate, is probably my favorite living American poet. A master of ingenious, short poems that mix wisdom and surprise, she is California's answer to Emily Dickinson.

A California Requiem¹

—Dana Gioia

I walked among the equidistant graves
New planted in the irrigated lawn.
The square, trim headstones quietly declared
The impotence of grief against the sun.

There were no outward signs of human loss.
No granite angel wept beside the lane.
No bending willow broke the once rough ground
Now graded to a geometric plane.

My blessed California, you are so wise.
You render death abstract, efficient, clean.
Your afterlife is only real estate,
And in his kingdom Death must stay unseen.

I would have left then. I had made my one
Obligatory visit to the dead.
But as I turned to go, I heard the voices,
Faint but insistent. This is what they said.

"Stay a moment longer, quiet stranger.
Your footsteps woke us from our lidded cells.
Now hear us whisper in the scorching wind,
Our single voice drawn from a thousand hells.

"We lived in places that we never knew.
We could not name the birds perched on our sill,
Or see the trees we cut down for our view.
What we possessed we always chose to kill.

"We claimed the earth but did not hear her claim,
And when we died, they laid us on her breast,
But she refuses us—until we earn
Forgiveness from the lives we dispossessed.

"We are so tiny now—light as the spores
That rotting clover sheds into the air,
Dry as old pods burnt open by the sun,
Barren as seeds unrooted anywhere

"Forget your stylish verses, little poet—
So sadly beautiful, precise, and tame.
We are your people, though you would deny it.
Admit the justice of our primal claim

"Become the voice of our forgotten places.
Teach us the names of what we have destroyed.
We are like shadows the bright noon erases,
Weightlessly shrinking, bleached into the void.

"We offer you the landscape of your birth—
Exquisite and despoiled. We all share blame.
We cannot ask forgiveness of the earth
For killing what we cannot even name." **B**

¹ Dana Gioia, "A California Requiem," 99 *Poems: New & Selected* (Graywolf Press, 2016).