

# Paulann Petersen (1942-)

By Tim Gillespie

Paulann Petersen, Oregon's sixth Poet Laureate, is an award-winning poet, influential teacher, and ambassador for poetry. Her poems, which are rooted in Pacific Northwest landscapes, have appeared in national and regional literary journals, magazines, and anthologies and in venues ranging from the popular Poetry Daily website to Portland-area buses and MAX trains as part of the Poetry in Motion project.

Born in Portland in 1942 to a mother who was a registered nurse and a father who was a sheet-metal mechanic, Peterson (born Paulann Whitman) attended Franklin High School, where she won a prize for an early poem. Following graduation, she moved with her parents to southern Oregon before heading off as a scholarship student to Pomona College. After a short stint there, she moved to Klamath Falls to marry and start a family. As a young mother, she earned a teaching degree by taking night classes at Southern Oregon State College in Ashland (now Southern Oregon University) sixty-five miles away, and soon she was teaching English at Mazama High School in Klamath Falls.

While teaching, raising her two children, and tending chickens and rabbits at her farmhouse outside Klamath Falls, Petersen, inspired by her reading of contemporary poets, began seriously writing poems and submitting them for publication. "I guess the desire to be a writer was there, inside me, waiting," she later said. "I'd found what took my breath away, what I most wanted to read, to hear. And I began to write it."

Petersen's first published poem appeared in the *Oregonian* in 1975. In 1984, she earned a master's degree in Humanities, Fine and Performing Arts at Southern Oregon University, where she graduated summa cum laude and was named Outstanding Graduate Student. While there, she studied creative writing with Lawson Inada, who later preceded her as Oregon's Poet Laureate. She was awarded a Stegner Fellowship in poetry at Stanford University in 1986 and moved to Portland in 1991 to teach English at West Linn High School.

*Under the Sign of a Neon Wolf*, Petersen's first poetry chapbook, was published in 1989. A series of four chapbooks followed, and Confluence Press released *The Wild Awake*, her first full-length collection of poems, in 2002. Since then, Petersen has produced five additional books, and her work continues to be published in national and local literary venues ranging from *Poetry* and *The New Republic* to *Wilderness Magazine* and *Oregon English Journal*.

There is a Whitmanesque generosity to Petersen's poetry, which is suffused with gratitude, "meeting life with open hands, believing the world is good to taste." Her poetry is attentive to the natural world and is rich with sensual details of touch, breath, voice, and taste. "I believe in poems that rise from the body," she said. A popular and accessible writer, Petersen has said that she does not want readers to have to use a "secret decoder" to understand her work.

Petersen retired from West Linn High School in 1999 but continues to give workshops and readings at schools, colleges, libraries, and conferences in the United States, India, and Turkey. Honoring one of her early inspirations, she has long served on the National Advisory Board for the Friends of William Stafford and is a driving force behind the annual Stafford birthday readings. She is known for her generous support of poets and has often opened her Portland home to celebrate just-published writers.

In 2010, Petersen was named Oregon's sixth Poet Laureate. "Paulann Petersen is the perfect choice to serve as Oregon's poet laureate," Governor Ted Kulongoski said. "Her wonderful poetry and her commitment to sharing her craft with the people of Oregon through her teaching and service exemplify the kind of person that is ideal to serve in this position." During her two terms as Poet Laureate, from 2010 to 2014, Petersen traveled over twenty-seven thousand miles, visiting all thirty-six Oregon counties to give workshops and presentations to schools and community groups.

Petersen has earned two Carolyn Kizer Poetry Awards, has been repeatedly nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and was a finalist for the Oregon Book Award in Poetry. She received the Stewart H. Holbrook Literary Legacy Award from Oregon Literary Arts in 2006 "in recognition of significant

contributions that have enriched Oregon's literary community." Willamette Writers, the largest writers' organization in the Pacific Northwest, gave her its Distinguished Northwest Writer Award in 2013.

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