

A circuit bard for Silicon Valley

Computerese isn't the only language in the capital of high tech. Today, Silicon Valley -- which has long had a robust poetry infrastructure -- introduces its first poet laureate.

By Maria L. La Ganga

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Reporting from San Jose — Joel Katz stands before a clutch of wordsmiths assembled one recent Thursday night on mismatched folding chairs at the back of Willow Glen Books. There is a wall of cookbooks behind him, titles shouting, "Onions," "Salads," "Fruit!"

With his rimless glasses, rumpled khakis and maroon polo shirt adorned with corporate logo, Katz looks more like a software consultant than a published poet. He happens to be both. He clears his throat and begins "Lessons":

Back in 1961 my mother decided to learn
how to smoke -- not to become a smoker,
just the art of smoking: how to hold it
and light up in one unbroken gesture,
an exhaled cloud entwining the conversation --
something useful for weddings and bar mitzvahs.

To Katz, there is a "direct tie-in" between poetry and the well-crafted computer program. In poetry, he says, language is used "to view the world in a clearer, fresher way, just like computer language -- when properly crafted into programs -- allows you to get a clearer picture of what you're doing in your business."

Never mind that it's hard to find a decent poem written about the computer; the last one might have been Richard Brautigan's 1967 work "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace." Forget that computer-generated poetry doesn't have a wide audience, that it is the rare -- and not very good -- poem that's written by machine without human intervention.

And it doesn't matter that the birthplace of the personal computer is better known for corporate culture than the other kind. This morning in San Jose, the first Silicon Valley poet laureate -- official versifier 1.0 -- will be introduced.

San Francisco has Lawrence Ferlinghetti, inaugural poet laureate of The City (*And now our government / a bird with two right wings*). Oakland is best known for Ishmael Reed (*I am a cowboy in the boat of Ra. I bedded / down with Isis, Lady of the Boogaloo*). South Los Angeles owns bragging rights to Wanda Coleman (*usta be young usta be gifted -- still black*).

Now, the capital of high tech wants its own bard.

The reason, says poet Kevin Arnold, is to "validate" what he describes as a robust "poetry community, which exists and has flourished for many years but doesn't have the recognition."

Arnold is a former IBM executive, a member of the laureate selection committee and president of Poetry Center San Jose. He points to the regular Willow Glen reading, which featured Katz this month, as proof of the region's poetry infrastructure

Still, he says, "it's hard to compete with Steve Jobs, but we are -- for mindshare."

Bruce Davis is executive director of Arts Council Silicon Valley, the group that has spent the last two months shepherding the selection process. For 20 years, his organization has awarded grants to assist painters, writers, dancers and other creative souls living in a region expensive enough to put the "starving" in "starving artist."

Davis argues that "it isn't that incongruous" for a place obsessed with computers to desire an official poet-in-residence.

"Creativity," he insists, "translates to all fields of enterprise," from technology to terza rima.

But should the laureate here be digitally literate?

Poet Charles O. Hartman, co-director of creative writing at Connecticut College, has no strong feelings on the matter, even though he is the author of "Virtual Muse," an early exploration of computer poetry, and a creator of verse-writing software.

In Hartman's view, however, "surely every place needs a poet laureate." The ancient Welsh, he noted via e-mail, viewed the bard as a powerful figure "who, in their endless battles, cursed the opposing tribe." One Welsh chieftain, Hartman recalled, was never defeated "because his name did not fit any of the Welsh meters, so that he could not be cursed."

The job is a little safer these days. One major role, the call for applicants says, is to "present appropriate works at the annual State of the County ceremony and at least four selected county-sponsored events, dedications, or memorials per year."

Alan Soldofsky, a poet and director of the creative writing program at San Jose State, hopes that the laureate will draw attention to the region's poetic life and help create a literature of place in this "Hollywood for engineers."

"I always preach to my students," said Soldofsky, who is also on the selection committee, "you have to go out there and write the poems of this place, the agricultural past, the ethnic mosaic and the complex relationship between technology and culture."

Stanford University is well-known for fostering the likes of Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang, Google co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin, Intel co-founder Andy Grove, and William Hewlett and David Packard, founders of the eponymous tech firm.

But Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Wallace Stegner, born 100 years ago last month, founded Stanford's creative writing program, and the university has produced two U.S. poet laureates: Robert Hass and Robert Pinsky.

Pinsky is probably best known for his 1994 work, "The Inferno of Dante: A New Verse Translation," a reworking of the 14th century Italian masterpiece. But he also has written about the intersection of technology and culture.

"What has poetry to do with computer software?" he asked in a New York Times Book Review essay. "They share a great human myth or trope, an image that could be called the secret passage: the discovery of large, manifold channels through a small, ordinary-looking or all but invisible aperture."

Pinsky is not the only poet fascinated by technology, but writers who harness both right and left cerebral hemispheres in pursuit of poesy are not the most common breed.

An avant-garde poetry movement called flarf uses Google searches to generate verse. Poet Christopher Funkhouser uses flash technology to shuffle letters on a computer screen, creating poems in anagrammatic fashion.

"It's a cyborgian activity," said Funkhouser, director of the Communication and Media Program at New Jersey Institute of Technology, "a human and machine collaborating to create something that's transformational like a poem."

Richard Gabriel is a published poet and celebrated computer scientist who lives in Redwood City. He has a doctorate in computer science and a master's in poetry and writes poems both conventionally and un.

"God is the Final Eigenvector" is one of Gabriel's computer-assisted poems, a more challenging piece than his traditional work. It starts in quirky fashion -- *wow Lisa Pea you sure do smell nice bunnies* -- and ends even more so:

the entire Internet can see

what your underarms smell like all day

God is the final eigenvector

& some of the worst

Gabriel believes Silicon Valley is well-populated with poets, but "almost all of them have a tad bit of Luddite in them and are online against their will."

Luckily for the winner among the 23 poets who applied to be Silicon Valley laureate, there will be no calls to dream up a paean to the mother board.

There are, however, duties that go along with the fancy title and "modest honorarium," \$4,000 for the two-year term. One is to create a project to make poetry more "available and accessible" to Silicon Valley's citizenry.

No fan of computer-generated verse would describe such work as "accessible," so it is not surprising that the man chosen to be the first Silicon Valley poet laureate plies his craft in a more traditional mode.

Nils Peterson, who will be introduced this morning, is a 75-year-old retired professor of creative writing and Shakespeare from San Jose State who has been described as "Silicon Valley's Garrison Keillor."

In a foreword to Peterson's collection, "The Comedy of Desire," poet Robert Bly described the new laureate as "that rare thing in contemporary American poetry, a comic poet who does not diminish the world with his humor . . . The poems have great affection for the feminine, and they are wonderfully patient with human confusion."

Here is Peterson's "Bedtime":

If we have quarreled our bodies wait

patient as horses. At last their owners

huffy and proud set off leaving

the sweet beasts to each other.

They turn, nuzzle, and flank to flank speak

the eloquent touching language of the dumb.

Peterson is not "well-connected" to the world of technology, he says, but he does think about it. He calls his Apple iMac a machine that feels "friendly to me as other ones have not."

"The whole Apple business is kind of business poetry in a sort of strange way," he says. "It is shapely, well-crafted, it feels good, it feels coherent. And all of those adjectives would be applied to a good line of poetry."

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