

LOIS SHELTON AND THE ROUND TUIT

*Richard Shelton*

LOIS SHELTON BECAME DIRECTOR of the University of Arizona's Poetry Center in 1970. She had no administrative experience, no training as a librarian, and her knowledge of poetry was limited to the fact that she once sat in on a modern poetry course when she was teaching at Abilene Christian College (now University) and that her husband wrote poetry, although he didn't show it to anybody, including her. Her field was music, her expertise was performance, and she was destined to become the best-known mezzo soprano in Arizona. Looking back, it seems an odd choice for the job as director of a University Poetry Center. But at the time it seemed inevitable, and Lois remained in that position for 20 years until her retirement in 1990. When the directorship became vacant in 1970, I was placed on the search committee to find a new director. Lois was teaching music in the public schools. One night at dinner she announced to me that she was going to apply for the job. I was skeptical. I knew she could do it, but her qualifications wouldn't look too good on paper. As it turned out, there was no paper until after the fact. I met with the search committee the next morning, told them Lois was applying for the job, and resigned from the committee. Then I went to my office down the hall and began the chore of grading freshman themes, something that occupied much of my time. In about 15 minutes Dr. Larry Muir, head of the English Department and chair of the search committee, was at my door. "Lois has just been chosen as the new director of the Poetry

Center," he told me. "The decision was unanimous. We are trying to reach her by phone now."

I was shocked at the speed with which this important decision had been made. Academic appointments in those days did not have the cumbersome formality they do today, but they were usually somewhat formal, involving interviews and a scrutiny of an applicant's vita, letters of recommendation and past performance evaluations.

"But you haven't even seen her application yet," I said.

"That's all right," he replied. "We've seen her, and we've seen her in action." The action he was referring to was Lois' ability to entertain and charm visiting writers. Since the Poetry Center's beginning in 1960 she had had plenty of opportunity to do both. I had been on the Board of the Poetry Center since its beginning and had filled in as acting director one year while LaVerne Clark took a leave of absence to do research for a book.

That ability to charm visiting writers, many of them internationally famous, is captured in Al Young's book of essays on music and musicians, *Kinds of Blue*. Lois had taken Al to the Desert Museum and then they returned to our house. While Lois made coffee, Al sat down at the grand piano and began somewhat absentmindedly to play the music he found there. It was Jerome



Poet and essayist **Richard Shelton** first read for the Poetry Center on January 7, 1970. This undated photo by his wife, Lois, is from the early 1970s. The flyer is for a 1978 reading.



Photos: 1, Lois Shelton; 2, 3, LaVerne Harrell Clark



A masterful teacher, yet extremely shy, **Donald Justice** was also very photogenic when he visited the Poetry Center in 1970 to read on April 9.

**Diane Wakoski** read for the Poetry Center three times during the 1970s (seen here on November 20, 1970). Her archives are held by the University of Arizona Main Library's Special Collections Department.



**Ruth Stephan** returned for the Poetry Center's 10th Anniversary celebration in spring 1971.

Kern's "All the Things You Are." Al is a well-established professional musician as well as a writer.

I'll let Al tell the rest of it:

When Lois meandered into the room with a gleam in her eyes and her arms outstretched singing Oscar Hammerstein the 2nd's actual lyrics in bell-like operatic tones, I almost fell off the bench ...When we reached the end of it, I sighed, looked up at Lois and said, "Where did you ever learn to sing like that? What a shock! Why didn't you tell me?"

Once she got through quivering with laughter, she flashed me her earthy "Hey, Sailor!" smile and said, "My training was in opera."

I promptly apologized for my lumpish accompaniment but Lois, gracious soul that she is, said, "You were fine, just fine. I couldn't resist coming in on you like that. I love that song."

"I love it too," I told her.

During the first decade of its existence, the Poetry Center struggled to survive as an odd, non-academic entity in an academic environment. It had the loyal support of Dr. Larry Muir, English department head, and the Poetry Center Advisory Board, made up mostly of English department faculty and students

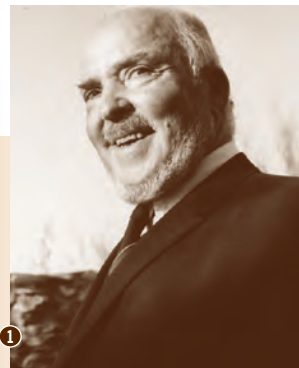
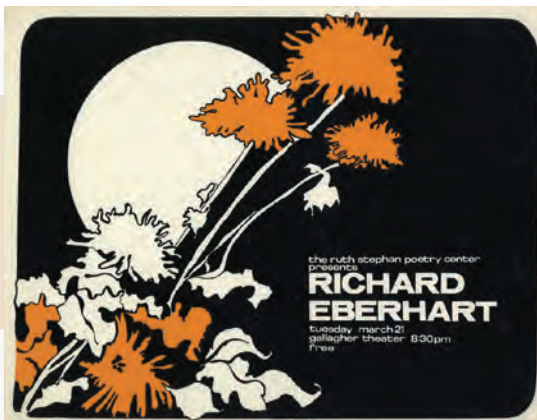
whose primary interest was poetry. There was no creative writing program during the Center's early years, although the English department offered one undergraduate class in poetry writing.

I was a member of the Board from its beginning, and we faced many problems. Of the two small buildings Ruth Stephan gave to the Center, both were termite ridden and had serious plumbing problems.

As LaVerne and the other directors of the 1960s did before us, we had to continue to the difficult task of building audiences for Poetry Center readings. We did this through a three-pronged approach including postering and newspaper announcements. The other thrust was entertainment. Our feeling was that if we could get the faculty members sufficiently involved to encourage their students to come to the readings, we would have an audience. This was particularly true of the English department, not only because poetry was an important part of its curriculum, but because, including freshman English, it dealt with more students than any other department on campus. We instituted a series of dinners before the readings and large parties after the readings, and not surprisingly, the majority of those we entertained were members of the English department faculty.

Members of the Board had no budget for entertaining, but we passed those duties around, and since Lois and I had a good house for entertaining, a fair

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**Richard Eberhart** read for the Poetry Center on March 21, 1972. A dear friend of the Sheltons, he often visited them in Tucson with his wife, Betty.



Photos: 1, 2, LaVerne Harrell Clark

**Ai**, who earned a Bachelor of Arts in Japanese from the University of Arizona, read for the Poetry Center in 1972, shortly after receiving her MFA from the University of California at Irvine.



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share of those dinners and parties fell to us. One of the best parties at our house found Lois singing Allen Ginsberg's setting of Blake's *Songs of Innocence* while Allen accompanied her on a little portable harmonium. When the grand opera voice met the music of a Beat poet and the poems of an 18th-century mystic, the result was magnificent. It was in this capacity, as hostess, that the members of the search committee had seen Lois "in action." Fortunately, she proved to be equally skillful in other areas as well.

When Lois became director of the Poetry Center, I think there was some concern by members of the Board that she and I might be in collusion to ram through a program and a series of visiting writers that they didn't want. Far from that, Lois expanded the program so that it represented many schools and styles of poetry and even nonfiction. At one of our Board meetings, in fact, after a long discussion of which writers to invite for the following year, one of the other Board members turned to me and, referring to Lois and me, said, "Don't you two agree about anything?"

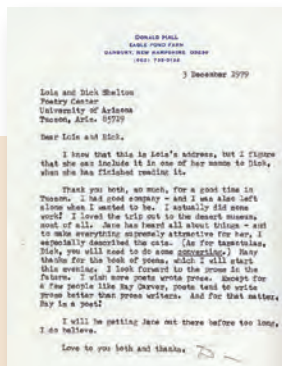
As the program expanded, bringing in more and more writers each year and sending more writers into the public schools and university classrooms, problems with the physical plant continued to plague Lois. At about 2 a.m. one night in March of 1972, we were awakened by a phone call from Richard Eberhart, who, with his wife Betty, was staying in the Poetry Center's guest cottage.

"I'm so sorry to bother you," Richard said, "but the bathroom is washing away."

That got us wide awake. The bathroom of the guest cottage was a tiny lean-to affair that had obviously been added after the building was built. It didn't really have much of a foundation, and when the ancient pipes under it burst, the whole thing was in danger of floating off into the parking lot.

It was Betty Eberhart, during the Eberhart's extended visit, who established what was to become a long-standing tradition at the Center's original quarters. Ruth Stephan had purchased the small ramshackle house on the lot next door to the guest cottage and had it removed, leaving us with an expansive yard shaded by huge cottonwoods, with ornamental orange trees, some bamboo and many flowers. We sometimes held open-air classes or readings there when weather permitted, and the weather usually did except during the late summer monsoons. Betty took one look at this great expanse of lawn and said, "What you need is a croquet set." Then she went out and bought one, and the official Poetry Center Croquet Tournament was created that afternoon. It lasted for years until the Poetry Center was moved to its second home, another set of houses on Cherry Avenue, when Speedway was widened and the Highland underpass put in.

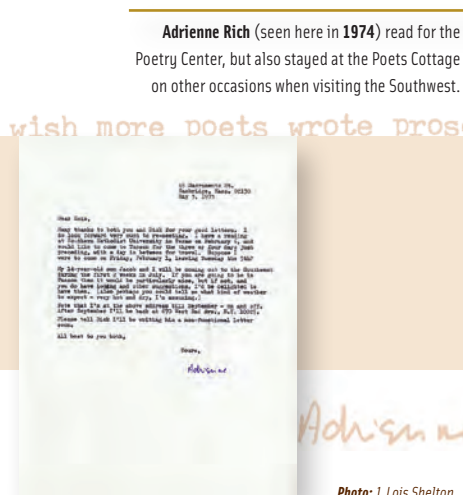
During Lois' twenty years as director, I was privileged to carry the luggage and act as tour guide for many of the most famous writers in America



Donald Hall first read for the Poetry Center in 1972. After his 1979 visit he wrote to Richard and Lois Shelton that he liked his visit to the Desert Museum most.



Pulitzer Prize-winning poet James Wright read to a crowd of nearly 1,000 people in the Modern Languages Auditorium on February 21, 1973.



Adrienne Rich (seen here in 1974) read for the Poetry Center, but also stayed at the Poets Cottage on other occasions when visiting the Southwest.



Photo: 1, Lois Shelton

and abroad, while Lois was their hostess, booking agent, travel agent and publicity manager. She referred to her job as “the care and feeding of poets,” but it was much more than that. That was merely the part she enjoyed most. I introduced the writers to the Sonoran desert, and she introduced them to our ever-growing public audience for poetry. We usually had between ten and twelve readings each year, all open to the public and free. The readers included Stephen Spender, Nicanor Parra, Grace Paley, Robert Penn Warren, Lucille Clifton, Denise Levertov, Diane Ackerman, Frank Waters, Tillie Olson, Carolyn Kizer, Mona Van Duyn, Joseph Brodsky, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, William Stafford, W. S. Merwin, Tomas Tranströmer and on and on.

My duties as tour guide were totally voluntary and enjoyable. Sometimes we took the writers to Nogales, Sonora, to give them a view of a Mexican border town, but usually I took them into the Sonoran desert for a short walkabout during which I identified a few plants, birds and desert creatures. (The encounter between Mark Strand and the tiger rattlesnake was quite remarkable.) For many of them the desert was totally exotic and fascinating. I took Lucille Clifton, who had always lived in cities and never been west of the Mississippi, on a midnight stroll through the desert under a bright moon. She was game but terrified and had a grip on my hand so tight it was painful. At every step she said, “I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid, I’m not afraid,” as if to

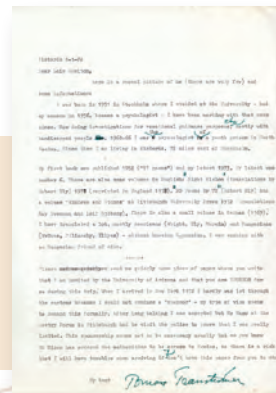
convince herself. After a later trip she wrote a memorable poem about the Sonoran desert and some of its inhabitants.

One such walkabout that I remember best was when I took C. Day Lewis, then the Poet Laureate of Great Britain, into the Tucson Mountains west of Tucson. He was intrigued by the plants. At one point he reached out and touched a cholla, called a Teddy Bear Cactus because it looks so cuddly. The barbed spines which make the cactus look so attractive attached one of the segments to his hand. He winced in pain.

Instinctively I reached out to get the monster off him only to become impaled myself on the same cactus segment. So there we were, both the victims of the same cactus. I finally got us loose from the spiny monster, but always afterward I was able to say that the British Poet Laureate and I were very much attached to one another.

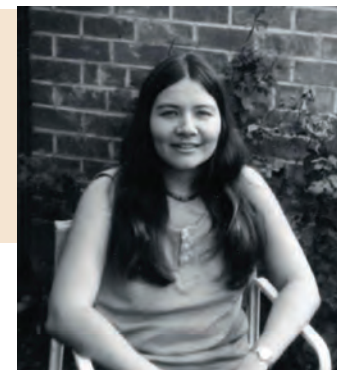
During the twenty years Lois was director, many parties stand out in my mind. One was a party honoring Richard Howard at the home of Harry and Mary Louise Robins. (Mary Louise was a former director of the Poetry Center.) Richard Howard had just done a remarkable reading for a large crowd in the Modern Languages Auditorium, but he decided to do another one, something more intimate, at the party afterward. He read his extensive dramatic monologue, complete with a long, elegant cigarette holder as a prop,

Swedish poet **Tomas Tranströmer** was one of the first international writers to visit the Poetry Center and was a frequent visitor in the **1970s and 1980s**.



*Tomas Tranströmer*

Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton



Leslie Marmon Silko read for the Poetry Center on November 19, 1974, three years before the publication of her critically acclaimed novel, *Ceremony*.

ely some piece of paper where you

in the voice of Edith Wharton. We were mesmerized. Richard is also a master cook. He had studied cooking at the Cordon Bleu in Paris. He cooked an elaborate dinner for the Sheltons one night. It was a great treat, but it seemed that every dish began with a cube of butter. A few weeks later he called to tell us his remaining parent had died.

“I believe,” he said, “that when both your parents are dead, you have the right to choose a new set. I’m choosing you and Lois as my parents.”

“Wait a minute, Richard,” I told him. “We’re younger than you are.”

“Details,” he said. And I’d like to believe we are still his parents.

When Tomas Transtromer, then the most famous living Swedish poet, first came from Sweden to Tucson, he came alone. Lois brought him to our house for lunch, and after he had looked around, he asked in his shy way with a heavy Swedish accent, “Can I ask you a question?” The answer was yes, of course. The question was, “Can I play your piano?” The answer to that question was yes as well. Only then did we discover that he was a concert pianist. After that, he spent much of his time during his several visits to Tucson playing our piano. Between visits he sent us the sheet music of many art songs by Swedish composers for Lois to sing, and he translated one of my books of poetry into Swedish. Later, Lois visited the Transtromers in their

summer home on an island in the Baltic Sea. It was a great and relaxing time for her.

Then there was the business of visiting poets writing on the enameled kitchen wall of the guest house, a strange kind of “thank you for the hospitality” note. Yevgeny Yevtushenko started it. At a little party in the guest house after his public reading he wrote in ink on the kitchen wall:

*I bless everybody unblessed by God  
Those in shoes and those unshod.*

Then Denise Levertov added some lines and then every visiting writer had to get into it. Some merely signed their names or quoted one line of poetry. Others wrote extensive comments or quotations.

Most people who saw the wall were awed by it. Lois and I, however, were not too thrilled. It seemed somehow rude to go into someone’s kitchen and write on the wall. However, we were outvoted and the amount of writing grew each year. When it became clear that the building was going to be demolished because of the widening of Speedway and the construction of the Highland Avenue underpass, there was much concern for the kitchen wall, which had become a kind of writer’s Mt. Rushmore to the literary community. Lois and I were both touched by the amount of passion the destruction of that wall evoked.

Future Nobel Laureate **Joseph Brodsky** read for the Poetry Center on February 20, **1976**. He read his poems in Russian, and Steve Orlen read the English translations.

1



**THE OTTER**

When you played,  
The light of Tucson hovered  
And swung through the pool  
From top to bottom.

I loved your wet head and smashing crawl,  
Your flat swimmer's back and shoulders  
Sloshing and splashing again  
This year and every year since.

I sat dry-throated in the warm stones,  
You were beyond me:  
The mellowed chorale, the grape-deep air  
Thinned and disappointed.

Thank God for the slow toasting,  
When I hold you now  
We are close and firm,  
As the atmosphere on water.

My two hands are plumped water  
You are my pulsatic fibre  
Clear of memory  
In the pool of the moment.

Turning to water on your back,  
Each time, high-riding back,  
Re-riding the light,  
Blowing the rest of your work  
And wondrously you're not.  
Back again, never to ever,  
Heavy and fishy in your restrained poise,  
Planting the stones.

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**THE LIFE OF THE OTTER**  
(Dedicated to Mrs. Thelma)

From mud he pours himself into deep water,  
His whole liberty in which he swims  
Fishes like something that lives on legs,  
It wins parasites, lice on its skin.

Lump lumps drawn with the necessary and warm  
Of a little more water behind his back  
His nose so he should get it  
In the observation of his and where?

The world has long been been rescued from gilly  
Through you.

to give play and as relaxation  
of emotion he receives the all done all  
activities he has: proportion, feeding  
Punctuated but as it grows.

Now

While he rises out of a downward curve  
I witness through glass the miracle of milk  
As a stone above with its own little  
Caves in a French cathedral porch-ward  
Spaced, strongly detailed.

When the very  
Of that fine messenger reads through in his presence,  
Of which the space reveals its own colour,  
Present not in the light as accident.

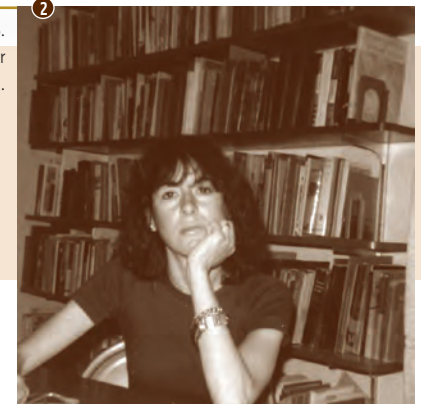
*Dedicated to Lois  
Thank you for your reading  
of my poem "The Otter" at the  
Poetry Center on February 20,  
1976. Richard Shelton*

THOMAS  
GUNN

Irish poet **Seamus Heaney** read for the Poetry Center twice, on March 30, **1976**, and on October 11, **1982**. On his first visit, Lois and Richard Shelton took him to the Desert Museum. He remembered the otters there and wrote a poem to them, included in his 1982 reading flyer. Anglo-American poet **Thom Gunn** penned a response to the Heaney poem, entitled “The Life of the Otter,” which he sent to Lois with a handwritten note.

Photos: 1, LaVerne Harrell Clark; 2, Lois Shelton

Future Pulitzer Prize-winner and U.S. Poet Laureate **Louise Glück** first read for the Poetry Center on March 16, **1978**.



Her assistant, Ila Abernathy, photographed every inch of it so that the writing would not be entirely lost.

...

Lois' struggle with Buildings and Grounds, the entity which controlled all repair work for University buildings on campus and off, was protracted and monumental. The Poetry Center was housed, at different times, in two sets of little houses on the periphery of the campus. Lois engineered the move from one set of houses to the other, which was no small task since the book collection had grown enormously thanks to endowments established by Ruth Stephan and her mother, Mabel Walgreen. At the time of the move, a sizeable portion of the collection had to be put into storage because of a lack of space.

Many other programs were housed in such buildings at the edge of the campus, and the attitude of Buildings and Grounds towards them was obvious: These old houses are hard to maintain and are going to be torn down eventually to make way for large, modern brick structures. Why should we waste our time, energy, and resources repairing them? The fact that one of those old wooden houses contained a priceless collection of poetry, including first editions of famous works, broadsides, unpublished manuscripts and correspondence by poets didn't seem to make much difference to them, as exemplified by the first near-disaster and their response to our plea for help.

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Later, Lois would handle this ongoing situation in various ways depending on the nature of the particular problem, and there were constant particular problems. She seemed to be able to get along with anybody, and she charmed the workmen who came to fix things. One of them, in fact, stopped by nearly every morning for coffee and stayed as long as he dared. This did not alleviate the source of the problems. That source lay in decisions made in the upper echelons of Buildings and Grounds, decisions over which Lois had no control.

To deal with this, Lois sometimes turned on her helpless southern belle voice, at which she was quite adept. (She was raised in Texas.) In telephone conversations with the head of Buildings and Grounds she would use it, appealing always to his sense of chivalry in regard to the helpless and unprotected female in distress. "Ah declare the commode is overflowin' Suh, and Ahm frightened out o' my little ol' wits. Ah don't know the furst thin' about plumbin', Suh. Could you sen' one of them nice workmen ovah here right away before we have ourselves a major flu-ud." Her southern background and her extensive stage training and experience made these telephone conversations as Scarlett O'Hara priceless theater to anyone who happened to be in the same room, but we were not allowed to laugh or applaud until she hung up.

Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. The original guest cottage had a room in front that had been a tiny sitting room but was converted into a

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1

Renowned Russian poet **Yevgeny Yevtushenko** began the tradition of writing on the walls of the Poet's Cottage during his stay in **1979**.

**Robert Hass**, former U.S. Poet Laureate, has read for the Poetry Center four times, in **1979, 1984, 2000**, and most recently at the Poetry Center's **2007** Housewarming Festival.



2



3

University of Arizona Creative Writing professor **Peter Wild** read for the Poetry Center in **1970, 1976, 1982, 1985**, and **1993**. This photo was snapped in **1979** by Lois Shelton. Wild, who died in 2009, published more than 82 books and more than 2,000 individual poems in his lifetime.



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**Robert Pinsky** first read for the Poetry Center in **1980**. Later, as U.S. Poet Laureate, he founded the "Favorite Poem" project, which invited Americans to share and read their favorite poems.

tiny additional bedroom when the larger sitting room was added in the rear. That added room in the rear was one of the most charming features of a charming cottage, with a bank of windows on two walls and black and white checkerboard vinyl flooring. Its furniture and decoration had been overseen by Ruth Stephan, whose taste was exquisite. Because that room became the social center of the house, the tiny sitting room in the front, now converted to an extra bedroom, was seldom used. One morning Lois opened the door to that room and was horrified to see the long tunnels termites make hanging from the ceiling. She called Buildings and Grounds, and eventually they sent a man over to inspect.

The man, who arrived in a golf cart, was a stranger to Lois. He said that the ceiling had to come out and that the attic had to be treated for termites.

“When can you do that?” Lois asked. “We have a visiting writer coming in next week.”

The workman reached into his pocket and pulled out a plastic disc slightly larger than a poker chip. On one side it was embossed with the word “TUIT.”

“See this, Lady,” he said. “This here is a Tuit. And notice that it’s round. I’m going to give this to you to remind you that I’ll come fix your ceiling when I *git around to it.*” Then, laughing, he got in his golf cart and drove away.

Lois was not amused. In fact, she who seldom showed any sign of anger was livid. She went next door to her tiny office in the library building and thought about it. Then she got the push broom from the closet and went back to the guest cottage. Placing the business end of the broom against the ceiling in the little front bedroom, she pushed upward as hard as she could. The entire ceiling came down in a great tide of lathes, plaster, dust and termites. Then she went back to her office, replaced the broom in the closet, dialed a number on the phone and turned into Scarlett O’Hara. “Suh, mah ceilin’ just collapsed. It scared me almos’ to de-ath. Somebody could have been kil-led!” She got a new ceiling and the house was treated for termites the next day.

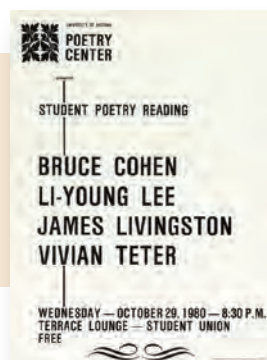
I thought about this incident many years later, in the 1990s, when I was filling in for Alison Deming as acting director. (Alison was doing research in Hawaii.) At some point during the years since Lois had had her adventure with the ceiling and the TUIT, I had made an accidental discovery. It came about when Alison and I were planning to take a group of creative writing graduate students to visit several ghost towns and historic sights on the San Pedro River and spend the night in Bisbee.

We requested two fourteen-passenger vans from the motor pool and were told that we would have to have a special driver’s license to transport students. That license could be obtained only by attending a half-day training session at something called Risk Management, which I had never heard of



1 New York-based poet **John Ashbery** read for the Poetry Center twice, 10 years apart, on November 4, 1980, and September 12, 1990.

Student readings are an ongoing tradition for the Poetry Center.

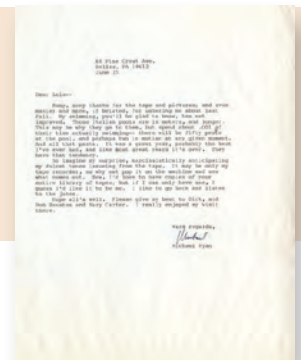


Warm regards,  
*Michael*



Photos: 1, 2, Lois Shelton

2 **Michael Ryan** read for the Poetry Center on September 9, 1981. It is customary to send visiting writers a recording of their reading. In Ryan’s case, the tape he received was of a reading by William Matthews, which had been mislabeled.





before. In fact, Risk Management was so low-key that it was difficult to find, tucked away in a small, nondescript building on the north edge of the campus. What I discovered during the training session, however, was that appearances could be deceptive. This little unit on the edge of campus was actually one of the most powerful organizations of the university since its job was to minimize risks to anybody on or visiting campus, and thus cut down on costly lawsuits. It controlled everything from slippery floors to students in university vehicles. Suddenly I saw what this could mean for the Poetry Center. Risk Management trumped Buildings and Grounds.

After Alison left for Hawaii I took a little tour of the two old buildings on Cherry Avenue that housed the Center. I discovered that one leg of the bed in the guest cottage had fallen through the floor where there was considerable termite damage. There was also a bad weak spot in the dining room floor where traffic was heaviest. The roof in that building had been leaking badly, partly due to a malfunctioning swamp cooler. Next door, in the library building, there was a weak spot in the floor of the main room, and the wheelchair ramp was in such bad shape as to be unusable. Alison had been trying to get these things repaired for months to no avail.

The next morning I began stomping large holes in the wheelchair ramp in several places. The two staff members who were working inside came out to see what all the noise was about.

“Alison isn’t going to like this,” one of them said.

“Alison will love it when it’s all fixed,” I replied. Then I went into the library building and stomped a large hole in the middle of the floor while shouting, “This is for Lois and the TUIT.” I was on a roll.

One of the staff members was distraught and expected the campus police to arrive any minute and cart me off to the loony bin. The other staff member seemed to be enjoying the show.

Next stop was the guest cottage. Shouting, “This is for Lois and the twenty years,” I stomped a large hole in the floor between the living room and dining room, then enlarged the hole in the bedroom. When I got out the ladder and started to climb up to the roof of the guest cottage, I thought one of the staff members would faint, but she didn’t. By leaping into the air and coming down on both feet, I was able to knock several large holes in the roof. “This is for Lois and the ceiling and the broom,” I shouted. Then I came down from the roof, put the ladder away, and went into my office to make a phone call. I had to wait a few minutes until my heavy breathing calmed down. It was probably the best day’s work I had ever done during my two stints as acting director.

But I didn’t call Buildings and Grounds; I called Risk Management and told them we had some very dangerous situations that they might want to check

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*1*

*The poets' cottage be free? If it is, may I be allowed to see you?*

**Photos:** 1, 2, Lois Shelton; 3, LaVerne Harell Clark

Mark Strand's second reading for the Poetry Center was on November 17, 1981. In between he wrote to Lois Shelton about staying in the Poets Cottage. The Cottage was available, but Strand's plans changed, and he didn't stay after all.

*Dear Lois and Lois -*

*I had been about three years since I visited Phoenix since I'd like to visit it again. I like to sit down on my way to California and my 2nd visit. Will the poets cottage be free? I'd like to see you in the place. I would like to see you again before I come over to see the other poems. I'd be staying for a few days. Please May I be invited to stay? I'd like to have lunch with the cottage and I'd like to have lunch with you too. Let me hear from you at any time.*

*Warm regards,*

*Mark Strand.*

*Warm regards,*

*Mark Strand.*

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*2*

The late **Larry Levin** read for the Poetry Center only once, on January 27, 1982.



*3*

University of Arizona professor **N. Scott Momaday** read for the Poetry Center on many occasions, beginning in 1974. This photo was taken “in between” readings in 1985. Momaday’s groundbreaking novel, *House Made of Dawn*, was published in 1968.

out before somebody was seriously injured. They sent an inspector that afternoon. He looked at everything, shook his head and rolled his eyes. He probably knew exactly what I had done, but he said nothing about it. He made notes on a clipboard and went away.

Next morning a crew from Buildings and Grounds arrived early. They worked for several days. While two of them went to work replacing the wheelchair ramp, another two began preparations for putting a new roof on the guest cottage. The floor repair took longer because large sections of the floor had to be removed. The man replacing the flooring in both buildings did an excellent job. The kitchen and dining room floors in the guest cottage had been covered with vinyl tile, and once he had the floors repaired, he asked me what color tile I wanted to put on them. He had a book with samples. It hadn't occurred to me that I would have any choice, but I knew immediately what I wanted. Black and white checkerboard like we had in the first guest cottage.

While he was laying the tile, I said, "This is for Ruth, whose dream we have tried to keep alive."

...

There was an ironic epilogue to this scene. Later, the head of Buildings and Grounds called me to ask if I was pleased with the work his crew had done. I

told him I was very pleased, and they did an excellent job all the way around. He then asked me if I would write him a letter recommendation stating that his crew had done good work.

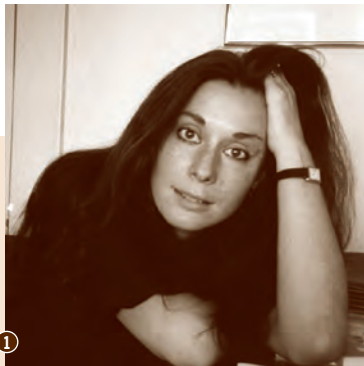
"Yes, I'll write you a letter," I said, "but I'm terribly busy right now. It will have to wait until I get a round tuit."

He didn't mind that. Evidently the workman with the tuit, years earlier, had not let him in on the joke. He never sent me a round tuit, so I never wrote the letter.

Looking back over what I have written, I see that nearly every event and situation is "behind the scenes," so to speak, something the public would not have been aware of. It does not take into account that during her twenty years as director, Lois Shelton put the University of Arizona's Poetry Center squarely on the literary map of America, where it has been ever since.

It does not take into account the hundreds of public readings of poetry and prose she managed with dexterity, nor the affection with which she was viewed by hundreds of writers in this country and abroad.

It does not take into account the students in many classrooms, both at the university and in the public schools, who developed a real interest in reading and literature when a live writer was in their midst. Lois sent those writers to



**Jorie Graham** read for the Poetry Center three times, in **1982, 1990, and 1999**. Winner of numerous literary prizes, she has been called one of the most celebrated writers of our time.

**Al Young** first read for the Poetry Center on September 14, **1983**. He returned in **1997** as a reader and weeklong guest in the Poet's Cottage, which he used as home base for a statewide residency sponsored by the Academy of American Poets.



*Photos: 1, 2, 3, Lois Shelton*

**Lucille Clifton** was one of the most popular poets to read for the Poetry Center over the course of four decades. Her indomitable spirit and great sense of humor endeared her to audiences. Clifton passed away on February 13, 2010, the same year she was selected to receive the Poetry Society of America's Robert Frost Medal for distinguished lifetime achievement in American poetry. This photo from her **1983** visit shows her enjoying the Sonoran desert landscape.

the classrooms, often chauffeuring them herself. She also founded the Friends of the Poetry Center, a support group that has been instrumental in helping to provide funds for the Poetry Center's many programs.

Today, the Poetry Center, in its new building, the first building ever built specifically to house it, and under the inspired leadership of its current director, Gail Browne, is undoubtedly the most important and effective entity of its kind in America.

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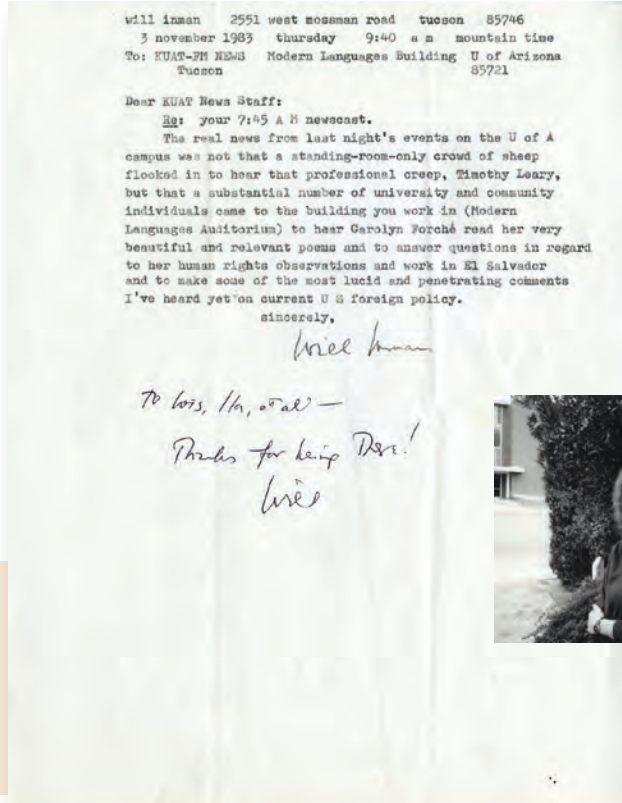


Photo: 1, Lois Shelton

*Will Inman*

Carolyn Forché first read for the Poetry Center in 1983. Her poems of that time period drew from her observations as a human rights worker in El Salvador. Will Inman, one of the founders of the Tucson Poetry Festival, wrote KUAT News a note following Forché's reading.

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