

# Texas Poets Laureate meeting for the first time

*By Christian McPhate*

The first time you hear the term, you might think you've traveled back in time to the marbled halls of ancient Greece, with Heraclitus, Plato and Aristotle awaiting your arrival. "Ekphrasis," Dave Parsons says, rolling the word off his tongue, "are you familiar with the term?" His eyes twinkle and a smile appears. "It's writing based off a piece of artwork," he explains. "And it's a pretty trendy thing right now in the art and poetry world."

Dave, the Texas Poet Laureate in 2011, uses ekphrasis to connect literature and art. He's used portraits painted in the days of Oscar Wilde to inspire his own writing. Whenever he wants to discuss a "classic big poem" with college students, he brings a piece of art along for the lesson these days. Now, he and seven other Texas Poets Laureate are coming together – for the first time in history – to celebrate this "ekphrastic awakening" at Denton's first annual poetry conference in October. "Ek is Greek," Dave explains, "and I think it's defined as 'to reveal all' and the phrasis part is Latin for 'phrase.'" So to reveal all, in a phrase, the conference is called "Ekphrasis: A Collaboration Among the Arts."

The historic gathering of Texas poetry masters springs, in part, from the work of Denton's own resident Poet Laureate Karla Morton. Karla wrote *Redefining Beauty*, a collection of poetry about her diagnosis, treatment and recovery from breast cancer. In 2010, she was named the first female Texas Poet Laureate in 15 years. Lifting a pen "to reveal all" might seem unusual while undergoing chemotherapy, but it was a way for Karla to paint a picture with "unfiltered honesty" of her struggles, intimate hopes and good-natured defiance.

Sitting in the old power company that houses the Greater Denton Arts Council today, Karla listens to the sounds of a jazz trumpet echoing in the background. "It's only fitting that this building is still that source of light and power and energy for the arts in Denton," Karla says. She is just home from her Little Town, Texas Tour, part of her mission as poet laureate to inspire students to reach their poetic dreams. To celebrate her homecoming, Karla composed 25 poems to celebrate the life and culture of her chosen home, Denton. Local artists interpreted her work, and the next thing she knew, she and friend Margaret Chalfant, Arts Council executive director, were talking about bringing together poets laureate from Texas to celebrate the new trend in poetry.

Karla smiles as she thinks about the upcoming gathering. It is a historic moment in the making. She is going to read from her upcoming collection, *Passion, Art, Community: Denton, Texas, in Word and Image* and share her poetry with her fellow Texas Poets Laureate, ranging from James Hoggard, the cowboy Poet Laureate of 2000, to the current Poet Laureate Jan Seale, known for celebrating the Rio Grande Valley in verse. "It's simply amazing," says Karla, gazing out the window, a flock of crows momentarily catching her poetic interest. "I don't think this many poets laureate have gathered ... ever." Paul Ruffin, Poet Laureate of Texas in 2009, knows all about ekphrasis: He writes poetry about paintings and photographs, developing stories of what's not in the frame. "Almost anything can inspire me," Paul says and smiles. He finds humors in just about every aspect of life, from the fine arts to Walmart, where he studies shoppers for inspiration. "I haven't really thought much about the conference," he says. "I thought about reading a couple of poems. Isn't that what it is – reading your poetry?"

Larry Thomas, the 2008 Texas Poet Laureate, has been writing and publishing ekphrastic poetry for nearly 25 years, finding his artistic influence not only in paintings but also in the sounds of Beethoven. He will be sharing his art-inspired poem collection, *The Skin of Light*, at the conference. “Ekphrasis, at least for me, is an effective means of exploring these connections,” Larry says, his tired eyes looking thoughtful. “Poetry is like ballet in its rhythmic aspects, music in its sound patterns, and visual art in its descriptive and imagistic capacities.”

Jim Hoggard couldn't agree more. He sees poetry not only as a ballet but also the very artistic essence of the Lone Star State: storytelling. Jim was the first poet laureate named in 2000 after a 17-year hiatus. No one is sure why it took Texas so long to recognize a poet, but Jim suspects the mystery isn't so mysterious. “Probably,” he says, with a mischievous sparkle in his eyes, “some people just forgot about it.”

Jim plans to read from *Triangles of Light: The Edward Hopper Poems*, a collection of poetry inspired by Hopper's iconic American paintings. Like other great Texas storytellers, Jim has a story behind his poetry: “One night about 20 years ago, I finished a poem and called it ‘Motel’ and then gave it a subtitle: ‘Based on a painting Hopper never did.’” A few years later, he came across an existing Hopper painting that reminded him of his old poem. “Then I wrote 50 poems based off 50 paintings and figured I'd stop.” He didn't, luckily. *Triangles of Light* continues that tradition of poetry interpreting the visual arts.

The poets don't know quite what to expect, but as Dave Parsons says, “The idea of bringing eight poets laureate to Denton is very exciting.” It will be ekphrastic and that's hot right now.

### **[ just the facts ]**

**What:** “Ekphrasis: A Collaboration Among the Arts,” a conference to explore the intertwining of visual art, dance, music and the written word.

**For the first time ever:** Readings by eight Poets Laureate of Texas – James Hoggard (2000), Cleatus Rattan (2004), Alan Birkelbach, (2005), Larry Thomas (2008), Paul Ruffin (2009), Karla Morton (2010), Dave Parsons (2011) and the current state Poet Laureate Jan Seale.

**When:** Oct. 11-13, 2012. Registration 4-6 p.m. on Friday, followed by a reception and book signing by poets at 6 p.m. Events through the weekend.

**Where:** Greater Denton Arts Council, 400 E. Hickory St.