Michael Palmer of San Francisco, California
Co-Winner of the Shelley Memorial Award

STONE

What of that wolfhound at full stride?
What of the woman in technical dress
and the amber eye that serves as feral guide

and witness
to the snowy hive?
What of the singer robed in red

and frozen at mid-song
and the stone, its brokenness,
or the voice off-scene that says,

Note the dragonfly by the iris
but ask no questions of flight,
no questions of iridescence?

All of this
and the faint promise of a sleeve,
the shuttle’s course, the weave.

What of these?
What of that century, did you see it pass?
What of that wolfhound at your back?

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Coalition morality; I mean the morality of fairness and love. I have seen this attribute in the most serious of African-American women writers—a creative earnestness, an absence of frivolity, a sternness whose origin may lie elsewhere but to me suggests the awesome, two-fold mandate of the Igbo earth goddess, Ani, who cradles creativity as a child on her left knee and holds up the sword of morality in her right hand. If I have figured it out correctly, it will explain the dual mandate that enables Sonia Sanchez to sing comforting lullabies to us one moment and stretch us with her wild words, as she herself calls them, the next.

I suspect she is so comfortable in her own skin she is not even aware how uncomfortable the stretching can make us. When she told me that the authorities in a certain prison where she had read had told her they were canceling further appearances, she seemed genuinely surprised. And this is a woman who makes a song out of the word resist!

Frost was a different kind of poet. For one thing he had not had to fight for his people’s civil rights. But in the house of poetry there are many mansions and many common-rooms. I suspect there may be more between Frost and Sanchez than the mere fact that they both taught at Amherst College, more encounters in poetry’s common room.

I first encountered Frost fifty years ago as an undergraduate at University College, Ibadan. Following closely on an immersion in English Romantic poetry, Frost, at first, sounded decidedly odd to me and my class-mates. We made particular fun of a little three-line poem called “Sycamore”:

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Zacchaeus he
Did climb a tree
Our Lord to see
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I added a fourth line:

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And this is poetree?
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But of course it was profound poetry, densely packed with allusions and revelations in the same way that Sanchez’s exploration of the haiku is. I hope Frost is nodding with recognition and approval this evening on this marvelous poet, Sonia Sanchez, winner of his medal.

**Toni Morrison**

*For Sonia Sanchez, Frost Medalist 2001*

The Poetry Society’s decision to award the Robert Frost Medal to Sonia Sanchez does her honor and honors the prize as well. It is splendid and appropriate recognition of an extraordinary woman who, as poet, teacher, activist, represents a full artistic life. The honor we do her here is really payback, for she has always honored her talent and us, her readers. No one can read your work, Sonia, and not realize that you have always had us on your mind, in your heart, and in those small tensile fingers of your writing hand; in your voice crafted and designed for more than the ear: for the aorta, the spine, and the soles of our feet. You have spoken for us, saying “I need to have my say/among the unsaid lives I deal with.” Written for us of “the water whistling in squads/of blue comings.” Sung to us when “All summerlong it has rained/and the water rises in our throats/and all that we sing is rumored/forgotten.” Told us about things “the bars, the glitter, the light.” Of “autumn a bonfire/of leaves…,” of “soup cooled by… laughter.” Or “vincent van gogh perched on those pennsylvania cornfields….”

Forgive me if I use your words to say how much in your debt we are and how fitting is this tribute to your work, your intelligence, your life, and your love.

Thank you.
**the 2001**

**Frost Medal Lecture**

**SONIA SANCHEZ**

What an honor it is to receive The Robert Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America. What an honor to have Sister Toni Morrison and Brother Chinua Achebe share their exquisite words. Thank you two for your genius and love. What an honor to walk in the footsteps of Denise Levertov, Adrienne Rich, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Robert Frost. What an honor to be in the presence of all you Brothers and Sisters who love this “subconscious conversation” called poetry.

One of my missions as a poet/writer/educator has been to eradicate the aura of the educated class, while cherishing the creative power of learning…a task for the truly creative writer, teacher, worker, lawyer, preacher, human being. One of my missions has been to celebrate the red/black/purple gums/corn cob smoking/nodding/staring/urban/loving people who were never considered poetic. But we gave them life and form and beauty.

As Robert Frost said, it is my “lover’s quarrel with the world.”

come into black geography
you, seated like manzu’s cardinal,
come up through tongues
multiplying memories
and to avoid dissent
among wounds
cruising like ships
climb into these sockets
golden with brine.

because I was born
musician to two
black braids, I
cut a blue
song for america.
and you cushioned
by middle class springs
saw ghettos
that stretched
voices into dust
turn corners
where people walked
on their faces,
i sang unbending
songs and gathered gods
convenient as christ…

Poetry has always been a part of human life…. What I remember as a little girl in Alabama was the rhythm, the music pouring forth from the speaker’s mouth as she recited Langston Hughes’ poems in a small auditorium. I was transfixed by the sounds circling the room, sounds that permeated my ears with a promise of something that I had yet to articulate. But the beauty, the quiet noise of that afternoon always envelops me whenever I remember my first experience with poetry.

That is not to say that we did not have the usual “ditties” of childhood. For me and my sister, Jack and Jill ran up our childhood hills while assorted furry kittens lost their balls in bouncing rhyme. But the early poetry I heard in our
home in Alabama, were the words I repeated as a child when my grandmother spoke her Black Southern English, and I picked up her words like blue black waves and jumped inside them, swallowed them whole, till my belly and brain almost popped open with her oceanic croon. I still hear her words breathing life into me.

As a teenager in New York City, I would appear at a poetry reading downtown, in some NYC library full of tea and crumpets and crumbling faces. Faces unlike mine. Faces looking at a young girl, holding a notebook of poems in her hands. And I positioned myself in the back of the room, closed my eyes to listen to words I had learned in some distant dialogue. At the conclusion of the reading, I walked up front, extended a tentative hand to my Sunday afternoon poet-in-residence, and all the way home, back uptown to Harlem, in my brown oxfords and white kneesocks, in my too short teddy bear coat with its fancy green handiwork of four leaf clovers, I ruminated on the sounds and words and practiced them in my brain ‘till my tongue, tart with stutters, became a more responsible member of the team...

The poet, Louise Bogan, had an aristocratic voice. Her voice traveled that New York University classroom with clarity and a calm that attempted to calm my unquiet tongue. Sonia, did you read that poem aloud as I suggested? That poem you have just read in front of forty-five students that...

And I, standing in front of a class of would-be poets, froze midway in my lie of: yes, I did read the poem aloud, of course I did! Isn’t that what you said we had to do, must do, if we are to train the ear to identify all that is extraneous, extravagant, and expendable? And I returned home to my Riverside Drive apartment, began the long slow process of reading aloud poetry that I and others wrote. And I learned to love the poem and myself at the same time. Words started to grow inside me, started to beat like a griot’s tongue, and the practiced step of poetry with its inevitable beat gripped my hand and I followed it beyond eyes into the breath of ancestors where words become women and men...

The first time I actually read a poem in front of an audience, I prayed to what only the heart can see. I felt my knees touch the floor but the chance to read with living alive poets, the chance to have my words make their acquaintance, made me stand at attention in that Harlem auditorium. Do you remember the first time you knew you were Home? At peace with yourself? Yes. Something like a first kiss. Or a first communion. Holier even than that. As I stood reading my poems to a small group, I suddenly became talkative. I summoned talk from places I had never known existed. I witnessed my homecoming on that Harlem stage as I swam in a September flush of words...


i am the frozen
face, here my
face marches
toward new myths
while spring runs
green with ghosts.

i am the living
mask, here my
skin worn
with adolescence
peels like
picasso’s planes
and the earth
in one fold of
permanence stares
at the skies.

if i had a big piece of dust
to ride on, i would gather up my pulse
and follow disposable dreams
and all things being equal
they would pass into butterflies
and quiver in sprawling yellow...

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