

Diane D. McGurren

## ***Creating Out Loud: An Interview with 2010 Texas Poet Laureate Karla K. Morton***

It's not every day you meet someone who's always wanted to be a poet laureate, and by always I mean at least since the 8th grade, when a teacher explained to her the title and she ran home and yelled "Mom, I want to be Texas Poet Laureate!" And so it goes. Karla K. Morton has been writing for as long as she can remember, listening to the songs and silences of the pastures, certain that if she listened long enough, sat still enough, the wind would tell her something incredible. Admittedly, she still believes that. Admittedly, she's living the dream.

Morton's childhood wishes were realized this past year as she humbly wore the laureate mantel along with her cowgirl boots and silver belt buckles, traveling from small Texas town to small Texas town to share the good news of poetry with all who would listen. Her book in the Texas Poet Laureate Series published by TCU press, *Karla K. Morton: New and Selected Poems*, is available in local



bookstores and online. Her work, and her boots, are also featured in the *2012 Texas Poetry Calendar* now available from Dos Gatos Press. Karla K. Morton is a wife, mother, poet, ambassador, cowgirl, firecracker, and laureate for life. She lives in Denton, Texas, with her family and full-size Ford pickup, and, from what I can tell, is just getting started.



**Diane D. McGurren:** Not to begin on an overly sentimental note, but being named Texas Poet Laureate is quite an honor and places you amongst an elite group of Texas writers. What has this year meant to you?

**Karla K. Morton:** It has been the most incredible year of my life—seriously! I learned about the Texas Poet Laureate position in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, and I have longed to become a Laureate ever since. The best part about it is that even though they name a Laureate every year, the title is one you keep for life. How cool is that? And I feel like I am just getting warmed up.

**DDM:** Oh, I bet. Now, you wear cowboy boots. You drive a pickup

truck. You are a Texan through-and-through. How has Texas surprised or inspired you—or how have you surprised Texas—during your Little Town, Texas Tour?

**KKM:** Wow, what a great question!

**DDM:** (laughing) Well, thank you.

**KKM:** You know, this sounds corny, but each place I go—the thickets, the plains, the coast, the prairie, the desert, the big cities, the panhandle—what I experience of Texas just brings me to my knees. The people are amazing and tough and tender. I just fall in love with Texas over and over again.

**DDM:** And you've surprised Texas?

**KKM:** I received one of the best compliments while performing at the Ft. Worth Stock Show this year. Several cowboys were sitting around saying they were talking about me last night. "Oh yea?" I said.

"We were just trying to figure out what you are. I mean, you aren't *southern*, you aren't *western*, you aren't *cowboy*.... We just decided you are Texan."

That was the best compliment ever!

**DDM:** (laughing) I didn't know that there was such a reductive formula for Texan. That could really come in handy.

**KKM:** But seriously, the people that I have encountered, and the kids—oh the kids! They amaze me with their talent and their love of words in this digital age. I am so proud of them.

**DDM:** What programs have you done for the kids or where have you encountered some of their work?

**KKM:** Well, in reference to my Little Town, Texas Tour, many times, the schools had already held their poetry and art contest prior to my arrival. This was great, because I called the top three finalists up to read their own work before the rest of the student body. They were just terrific—all of them! I've also done several workshops with kids through the schools, libraries, and colleges where they bring in their own work or create there. I'm just always amazed at the level of insight and imagination the next generation has!

**DDM:** Oh, I'm sure. Maybe even some future Laureates out there...

Okay, let's switch gears a little bit. In 2010, you published five collections: *Redefining Beauty*, *Stirring Goldfish*, *Names We've Never Known*, *Karla K. Morton: New and Selected Poems*, and *Becoming Superman*. For all of us writers out there—who are, let's just say, hypothetically, producing about a poem a month—what's your secret to such a generous output?

**KKM:** Well, a couple of those were published in 2009, but thank you. It's just that writing makes me so happy, and whenever I get free time, I absolutely love to write. I find that driving is a perfect time. Texas Poet Laureate Alan Birkelbach has a great line about his thoughts going out to play, coming back with twigs in his hair. That's what I feel like my mind does when I drive. I'm on some kind of autopilot, and my mind takes off.

**DDM:** So you write and drive? Is there a certain technique you want to share with us? Or maybe warn us about?

**KKM:** Oh, I really can't help it! Crazy, I know! Used to, I would try to write as I drive, and sometimes I still do, but the best thing to come along is the iPhone. I've got to say, I've never been in love with a piece of technology like I'm in love with my iPhone. It's got this recorder built right in—also a notepad! It's taken me a while to get used to creating out loud, but it works!

Oh, and I have a great picture of the state trooper who pulled me over and wrote me a speeding ticket outside of Granbury. I hope his picture gets in the *Little Town, Texas* book as well.

**DDM:** And so, other than writing while you drive—er, speed...

**KKM:** Well, I make time to write, and that's so important. I try to set aside three to four hours every day devoted just to my craft. I've got three works upcoming, and I have two manuscripts that I'm looking for a publisher for...and nothing thrills me more!

**DDM:** So you're saying I need to be more disciplined? Hypothetically? I get it. In our current situation though, as a reader, I have to say that I was immediately struck by your poem "Pictographs," especially the line you repeat at the beginning of each stanza: "Were there no words." You are obviously making a connection and allusion here, not just to early writing, but to the visuality of language itself—not to mention the power inherent in images and imagery. How would you explain the role of imagery and images in your work? How does your visual work (being

a photographer, being someone who *sees*) inform your writing? And vice versa?

**KKM:** Ooh, another great question.

**DDM:** I really do try.

**KKM:** (laughing) They're great. You know, I can't separate them, honestly. My recent book, *Names We've Never Known*, by the Texas Review Press, has my black and white photo on the cover because I thought it spoke best to the feeling of the book.

**DDM:** How is that?

**KKM:** I had the title a long time, and when The Texas Review Press wanted to publish it, I was so excited, but didn't even think about a cover until Paul Ruffin asked if I had anything in mind. Instantly, I remembered my pictures from a trip to San Antonio. There was this incredible Día de Los Muertos remembrance set up outside of Mi Tierras restaurant, and I took some great black and white photographs. Going through them, I found this one. It's a picture of a young, beautiful woman facing a skeleton of a woman. I loved the angles, the mood. Who is this woman? Does she know she's looking at her own skeleton? Do we have different names when we move into the next world? All these thoughts went running through my head, and I knew this needed to be my cover. I think it captures the feeling of the book...

**DDM:** Oh, wow. That is intense.

**KKM:** Carl Jung had this saying carved over his doorway and on his tombstone: "Bidden or not bidden, God is there." This is the feeling I wanted—whether we can name it or not, whether we call upon it or not, beauty is all around us.

**DDM:** What a great story.

**KKM:** I see stories in certain things, the way a branch is shaped, the slight of shadow; physical things, yes, but still, they all have a story to tell. I love especially black and white photographs because, like poetry, I feel like the true story is illuminated when the frou-frou of color is stripped away. Images become classic—timeless.

**DDM:** Oh, I agree. I'm something of a purist myself when it comes to photography.

**KKM:** I see poetry everywhere, and for me, images and words simply feed and play off each other. Actually, I think so many senses do that for me: smell, taste—ooh, taste is a big one—and touch. As a poet, we are open to the world around us, and I love to take something so tangible and mix it internally—with something intangible.

You know, the ancient Greeks believed that poetry and the Arts are so important because they link mankind to God. I truly believe this.

**DDM:** Will you tell us a bit about your collaborative project with former Texas Poet Laureate Alan Birkelbach—please? It contains image and text as well if I recall correctly.

**KKM:** Yes, one of my upcoming works, *No End of Vision: Texas As Seen by Two Laureates*, is my photos and Alan's poems. It came out of an ekphrastic workshop he was doing. He needed some photos and knew I dabbled in it. I sent him those for the class, but they were triggering something in him, and he wanted more and more. Before we knew it, we had an entire manuscript put together.

His work is incredible, and I am so honored that my photos touched him this way. And I am so grateful that Jerry Craven with Ink Brush Press wanted to publish this book. It has been so much fun! It should be coming out any time now.

**DDM:** Now, *Redefining Beauty* also contains photographs by Walter Eagleton. What was this process like for you, being on the subject's end of the camera? And how was it that you came to pair these images with your poems?

**KKM:** Actually, the *Wee Cowrin' Timorous Beastie* book and CD was the first project I did with Walter. He is an amazing photographer and a friend. I don't photo well myself, and when we were shooting that book, I was so uncomfortable in front of the lens. Finally Walter said, "but Karla, I'm not shooting you, I'm shooting Vashti, the woman in your work!"

After that, it was okay. It wasn't me, and I could glam it up!

**DDM:** Okay then, *Redefining Beauty* was your second project with him. Tell us about that process.

**KKM:** The *Redefining Beauty* photos happened because Walter wanted to document my very round bald head, just for fun. I was really lucky because I had a lovely head! I was writing my way through chemo and

radiation, using writing as a tool to get myself through, not realizing that I was putting a manuscript together. And when Dos Gatos Press wanted the manuscript and wanted pictures, I felt it to be an act of synchronicity that we had those photos—I mean, I don't believe in coincidences. I believe God has His hands on us all. It was a gift—all of it. The discovery of that nasty beast was a gift that saved my life. Walter's photos were a gift too. I had a lion's mane of hair—straight, blonde and down to my waist.

It's good for people to know that you can lose all of that, but still be beautiful. That's Walter Eagleton's gift.

**DDM:** Wow. Let's talk a little more about this. You wrote *Redefining Beauty* during and about your fight against breast cancer. These poems make a powerful statement about strength and faith and determination and life. I'm sure you are routinely asked about this collection, and I don't want you to feel like you have to give any kind of canned answer, but how did writing function for you during that time? And even now, what is it like—that urge to write?

**KKM:** I simply have to write. I have to. It was only natural for me to write when I was going through that hell. It kept me somewhat sane, kept me in touch with what really matters. Samuel Beckett said, "All Poetry is Prayer." I truly believe that. It was my healing tool, but it was also open communication with God—the announcement of my fears, the declaration that the only control I had was my faith, but oh, how immense is that! It is taking that big tangled mess of my life, like fishing line, and placing it in God's lap to figure out. Honestly, I don't think there's anything more healing than that.

**DDM:** And the urge to write?

**KKM:** The urge to write is huge. I wake up every day so excited because I know something will happen during the day, some simple or outrageous revelation, some tiny moment of life, that will work its way into a poem.

On this great boat of life, I think the philosophers stand on the front of the boat, watching, predicting the world...but the poets stand at the back, linking humanity to the sunshine, the spray, the swarm of gulls, and the wake we leave behind.