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'Be a breath when we need a breath': U.S. Poet Laureate performs at WKU

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Ada Limón, the 24th U.S. Poet Laureate and resident of Lexington, performs a selection of her poetry Monday at Western Kentucky University.

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The nation's 24th Poet Laureate Ada Limón visited Western Kentucky University this week, sharing words of hope, pain and natural beauty.

Limón, originally from Sonoma, California, is the first Mexican-American to be awarded the national laureate title. She resides in Lexington.

“I feel like for someone who lives in Kentucky, it’s rare that I get to be here,” Limón said. “...This has been my home for 12 years now, and it has been one of the most beautiful places I know to write, to live and to hopefully flourish.”

Limón said one of the main things she tries to bring to the laureate position is representation for Kentucky “in the best light, in the best way I know possible.”

She has published six poetry collections. Her 2018 release, “The Carrying,” won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry. Her newest collection, 2022’s “The Hurting Kind,” examines links between the natural world and humanity, a theme that was on prominent display during her poetry reading Monday night.

She shared 10 poems from her two most recent collections, touching on topics like loss, patriotism and growing up with divorced parents.

The reading included the standout “What I Didn’t Know Before,” a poem chronicling the beginning of Limón and her husband’s relationship and how their love came into existence fully formed – not needing to be “coddled and cooed over,” but like a horse giving birth to another horse that is “ready to run.”

“I love to read love poems, because I think they’re actually really, really difficult to write,” Limón said.



Other poems performed included “Dead Stars,” capturing the oft forgotten realization that humans are not “unspectacular things,” and “Forsythia,” penned in honor of Limón’s deceased stepmother.

“For me, writing about nature feels like a form of devotion,” she said. “I think that the more I pay attention, the more I watch, the closer I pay attention – the more I love.”

Limón said it’s easy to feel disheartened or hopeless in the face of climate crisis, but by taking time to reflect on how humans have a reciprocal relationship with nature “we can maybe have some chance of being in this world fully, maybe even helping to form some climate mitigation.”

The title of poet laureate is awarded annually by the Library of Congress. Laureates serve one-year terms and are to work on a community-oriented poetry project.

Limón said the title “still flattens me when I say it out loud.”

“I think this position has reminded me more and more about poetry’s potential to just be a breath when we need a breath,” she said.

Limón’s visit was part of the Potter College of Arts and Letters’ Cultural Enhancement Series, which brings influential artists and intellectuals to WKU’s campus.

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