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Reflections Essie P. Graham

Poetic Grit An Interview with 2010 Texas Poet Laureate Karla Morton
Dallie Clark

Gifted. Fighter. Sensitive. Humorous. Survivor. Kick-butt – all words that describe the 2010 Texas Poet Laureate Karla Morton, a woman of astonishing diversity and strength. This Fort Worth-born poet and Texas A&M graduate wasn't even afraid to veer away from her Texas roots to create an epic, rhyming poem about a Scottish pirate – and then solicit an award-winning Canadian composer she'd never met to write a musical score for the piece. She also wasn't afraid to be photographed vulnerably bald for her recent 2009 book *Redesigning Beauty* that chronicles her struggle and subsequent survival from breast cancer. In the interview below, Karla Morton generously shares her insights, wisdom, and hope for sharing not just poetry with her fellow Texans, but the grit and spirit of life itself.

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Dallie Clark: I've read that you had longed to be the Texas Poet Laureate since your middle school days! When did you first realize you had a love for words and language? Was poetry an initial part of that love - or did that come later?

Karla Morton: For as long as I can remember, I have been in love with words, with phrases, cutting out quotes and pinning them to corkboards, pasting them to my paper book jacket. I used to think I was crazy (and, okay, maybe I still am!), but words would spin in my head like unpolished agates until I wrote them down, arranged and rearranged them until they looked right, until they sounded right. There was a night I distinctly remember, however, going to Casa Mañana when I was in the ninth grade, and seeing *Man of La Mancha*...it brought me to tears. I wanted to be that good, to put a lump in a throat, to bring out those emotions inside of me and pass them on.

DC: In today's rushed, multi-tasking world, do you believe that poetry has therapeutic - perhaps even curative - powers?

KM: I think today, poetry and the written word are even *more* important. I think it settles us, brings us back into the mindset of what really matters in this world. It grounds us and makes us whole, and brings us rest. There's a church in Dallas that just bought pieces of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and paid a fortune for them, I'm sure. Why is that? Because words are our *history*; words are our *future*. They give us the tools to quietly seek that great Voice inside each one of us...and I believe *that* is the greatest of healing powers.

DC: You've discussed the enormous significance of "giving back" a portion of what we've been given in this life. How does that influence your poetry?

KM: That's a good question, but honestly hard to answer, because I don't write poetry with an audience in mind. I write for the sake of the words, for the story, for the emotion that is tied into it.

I wrote a poem, titled *Picking Up the Accent*, which is about how *everything* shapes us, how we "ingest every experience," how everything we've done "...seeps into the bone, curves the hand around the pen..." I think who we are, and what we believe in can't help but come out in our writing.

DC: As Texas Poet Laureate, you've committed yourself to a project called the "Little Town, Texas Tour" across the state, during which you will be visiting many small towns, some described as

possibly "underserved" in the arts. When your position comes to a close, what do you hope to have accomplished through this mission?

KM: I want to lift up poetry to kids and adults – if even for just one hour of their lives. I want them to see how important poetry and the arts are; I want them to see how *fun* it can be, how it can *enrich* their lives. I want them to crave this kind of beauty every day in their hearts.

DC: During your tour thus far, has an experience with a particular place or person encouraged and confirmed that you chose the right project as Texas Poet Laureate?

KM: Oh, there are so many cities, towns and villages that have left an impact on me – and how can that be? Here I am trying to give something of beauty to them, yet I'm the one who ends up being so blessed! One place in particular, however, stands out so far – Hardin, Texas (in Liberty County). It's a tiny place that brought me into their homes and schools; a place that understands what community and neighbor is all about; a place that made me fall in love with Texas all over again.

DC: Tell us how you and photographer Walter Eagleton decided on the photographs for your book *Redesigning Beauty* – the work that chronicles all sides of tackling breast cancer.

KM: Well, that was Walter's magic. I was on the Square in Denton one day – bald head o'shining – and Walter said to come into his studio; we were going to take some pictures. I had lost my hair from the chemo, but not my eyebrows and eyelashes yet. He is an amazing photographer, who sees beauty in a whole

different way, and the way he captured that time in my life was something, we hoped, could be passed on to others.

DC: Our society has an obvious and relentless love affair with beauty. How would you counter or comment on that?

KM: Absolutely! What we see on TV and in the magazines is just crazy, and we can so easily buy into the idea that THAT is what real beauty is. But there is so much more – our lives are so much *more* than what is on the outside. In the title poem of *Redefining Beauty*, I compare true beauty to the love of two eels – those creatures of the deep, where everything and every being is "...blind by Divine design..." It's more than what we see. *Beauty* is who we really are.

DC: Out of all the poems you've written, do you have a favorite one – and why?

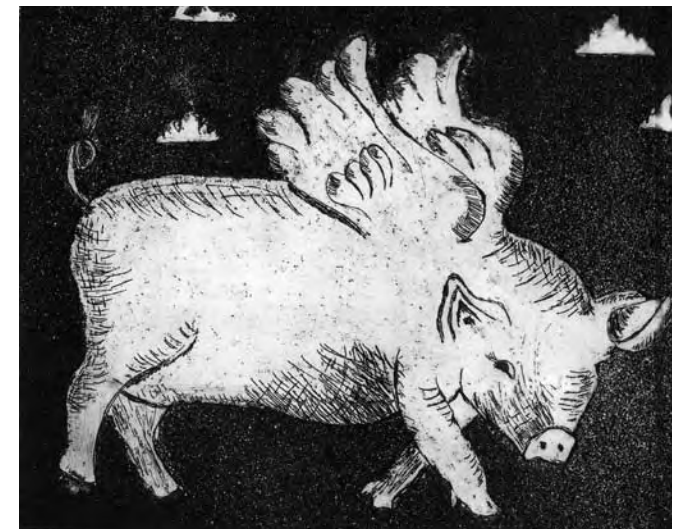
KM: Gosh, you know, sometimes they become like your children, and it's hard to choose between them, but one of my favorites is "*For Love and Michelangelo*" because it combines my love of storytelling with the emotions of love, timelessness...okay, and a little lust!

DC: How has the tone and direction changed in your newest books (*Becoming Superman* and *Names We've Never Known*) changed?

KM: I'm still doing what I do, but...as I write – as we write, as we gain more



When Pigs Fly #1 Ava Everett



When Pigs Fly #2 Ava Everett

practice, as we witness more of life, we can't help but change in certain ways. I'm constantly learning new things, new ways of doing things, meeting new people. And, I'm also guilty of creating new forms, many of those being syllable count forms. I have a book of Sufi poetry titled *Stirring Goldfish*, which is coming out May 7th, by Finishing Line Press.

I stumbled upon an old book by Bahu at Recycled Bookstore in Denton, and it was a treasure. So, I spent months learning the Sufi poetry form. It's deceptively simple looking, but difficult for a modern western thinker like me to wrap her brain around an ancient, middle-eastern poetry form! But I did, and it changed my view of the world yet again. These Sufi poems are tiny love letters between man and woman and man and God – a mix of the earthly and the eternal, the sensual and the spiritual.

DC: You've been charmingly open about your past rejection letters, insisting that you could "wallpaper" your whole house with them. What words of encouragement can you offer to aspiring poets and writers of all ages who have also experienced a great deal of rejection?

KM: This may sound simple, but I tell you – DON'T GIVE UP! You have to have a strong backbone to be a writer, because so much of it is an individual taste. You put three people in a room, and you will have three different ideas about your work. I have a plaque in my bathroom with that famous quote by Winston Churchill: "*Never, never, never give up.*" Good words to live by.

DC: What else inspires, motivates, and drives Karla Morton? What bigger-than-life dreams do you have - and do they include other collaborations similar to the epic poetry and music project you completed in 2007?

KM: I have a fascination with life. My husband often asks me what color the sky is in my world, but I believe you have to have a sense of wonder, a sense of imagination. Why be bound by reality? I am inspired by nature, by other poets, by music, by a need to be all I was put on this earth to be. I want to take "*Wee Cowrin' Timorous Beastie*" to stage. I want to put together an event with other Texas Poets Laureate at performance halls. I want to raise up poetry in the public's eyes – even showcasing the Laureates in such venues as in the permanent library in the future Museum of Texas Arts and Culture (which is in the works in Denton by the Greater Denton Arts Council).

I want to write into my 90's. I want to publish so many books that my friends dread the next Christmas. I want to walk this earth in my new Leddy's custom boots (with the hand-tooled shaft and a laurel wreath around a Texas star) into every section of Texas, every state in the United States, and every other country that calls my name. I want to kick life in the teeth, to dance at my grandchildren's weddings.

I want to wake up each morning with the love of my life at my side, and laugh every single day.

I want, just like the *Man of LaMancha*, to... *dream the impossible dream.*

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For more information about Karla Morton's events and projects, visit her website: www.kkmorton.com



Behind Bars Essie P. Graham

In Camera 102, Hotel de San Francesco

Karla Morton

I think of you,
in that corner room,
where flowered papers
soften 500-year-old walls...

Our love blooms
thick and tangible;
like silent sweat on skin;
lips moving in their own language;

pale sheers, a sanctuary –
holding back the world...

And across the street,
across cobblestones toed
by barefoot saints,
sits a chapel...

ancient doors and ten million prayers
padding the archways...
In there, our hands would clasp
together again,

our tongues, remembering the silence –
the taste of all things holy.