

Contemporary Poetry The Grande Finale  
Poet Laureate: Sarah Kay  
10/29/11

Dear President Obama,

There has always existed a need to tell or listen to stories. In fact, storytelling is wired in human neurology, amalgamating the left and right sides of the brain and providing a deep neural connection between humans.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4</sup> A recent Scientific American article titled “The Secrets of Storytelling: Why We Love a Good Yarn,” cited a 2006 study which showed that people who are more exposed to stories and storytelling have better social abilities.<sup>5</sup> As the national storyteller, whether his or her poetry captures a minute, experience, a personal or metempirical narrative, the United States Poet Laureate has the important responsibility of inspiring and raising national consciousness to read, write and treasure the story through poetry. There has been a pantheon of formidable poets on the panel, each one bringing a unique emphasis to the position, yet poetry’s readership is on the decline and at its lowest point in at least sixteen years.<sup>6</sup> The National Endowment for the Arts’ (NEA) report, “Reading on the Rise [not in Poetry],” in 2008, found that just 8.3 percent of American adults had read poetry in the preceding twelve months; in 2002, that number was 12.1 percent and in 1992, 17.1 percent.<sup>7</sup> Some critics and readers, according to the Daily Beast, claim that, “most poetry today is too cloistered

<sup>1</sup> <http://futuremediachange.com/2010/04/storytelling-your-skeleton-key-to-the-brain/>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.prel.org/products/pr\\_/storytelling.htm](http://www.prel.org/products/pr_/storytelling.htm)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-secrets-of-storytelling&page=4>

<sup>4</sup> <http://norahdooley.blogspot.com/2010/07/this-is-your-brain-on-storytelling-deep.html>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-secrets-of-storytelling&page=3>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/03/25/the-end-of-verse.html>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/03/25/the-end-of-verse.html>

and inaccessible, or that it is just plain bad.”<sup>8</sup> The next American Poet Laureate must be a revolutionary in the art of twenty-first century storytelling to re-captivate and re-inspire the American public to engage in poetry. There is one contender in this regard who is truly outstanding in her field. A former TEDTalk invitee, Miss Sarah Kay inspires, has transformed thousands of lives through her Spoken Word Poetry and founding of Project V.O.I.C.E., which promotes and kindles self-expression through poetry, and her poetry has captivated millions of viewers and listeners.<sup>9</sup> The twenty-three year-old knows how to tell a story that will capture the attention of the modern American public and with the title and appendages of United States Poet Laureate, will reverse the diminution of poetry ‘readers’ and revise the generic, fragmented definition of poetry itself.

Sarah Kay’s performance of “Hands” on HBO’s Def Poetry Jam marked her television debut, at age eighteen. Four years prior, Kay’s poetry career began (under the bar) at the famous Bowery Poetry Club in East Village, the haunt where she was the youngest performer by at least a decade.<sup>10</sup> Her talent for weaving words into poignant, amusing, and powerful performances paid off and in 2006 she became a part of the NYC Urbana Slam Team and was the youngest competitor in the National Poetry Slam in Austin, Texas that year.<sup>11</sup> Thus, in 2007 she was invited by Russell Simons to perform on Def Jam Poetry.

Sarah Kay redefined spoken word poetry. In an interview with BreakThru Radio, she acknowledged that the majority of the antecedent works under the classification concerned politics and were expressions of rebellion, anger, and indignation. Mark

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.thedailybeast.com/newsweek/2009/03/25/the-end-of-verse.html>

<sup>9</sup> Youtube.com, TED.com

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.project-voice.net/about-us/>

<sup>11</sup> Project V.O.I.C.E.

Eleveld, the author of *The Spoken Word Revolution* published in 2003, classified traditional spoken word as the expression of social commentary and themed in current events. “Hands” manifested that spoken word poetry was not limited to politics, indignation, nor rebellion. Sarah expanded spoken word with the lines: “no, hands are not about politics / this is a poem about love / and fingers/ fingers interlock like a beautiful zipper of prayer” (Sarah Kay, “Hands”). Kay’s verse merges contemporary academic poetry with the performance facet of spoken word and theater, capturing a story (about hands and love) that currently over one million people have viewed.<sup>12</sup>

Kay’s performance of “B” during her TEDTalk received a thirty-second standing-ovation and the talk itself nearly 1.5 million views between youtube.com and the TED website, placing it in the top five percent in terms of most watched TEDTalks in just eight months.<sup>13</sup> The talk’s appellation originates from the first line of B: “If I should have a daughter...” (Sarah Kay, “Hands”). The poem includes lines such as,

“There is hurt here / that cannot be fixed / by band-aids or poetry... cause no matter how wide you stretch your fingers / your hands will always be too small to catch / all the pain you want to heal...”

and,

“[when] you step out of the phone booth and try to fly / and the very people you want to save are the ones standing on your cape... Cause there is nothing more beautiful / than the way the ocean refuses to stop kissing the shoreline / no matter how many times it is sent away.”

<sup>12</sup> Youtube.com, two videos of “Hands” alone has around 1 million views

<sup>13</sup> TED.com

Her poem ends: “you tell them / that they really ought to meet / your mother.” The transcription of Kay’s piece, however, does not capture the entire essence of the story. The impersonation of superman rocking backwards trying to fly, the inflections, and accelerations and decelerations in pace from “hands” to heal” add a dimension of narrativity that words on a page cannot always express. Kay’s spoken word poetry engages and involves the audience, a sure key to reinvigorating poetry.

Sarah Kay’s TEDTalk concluded with a story: “Hiroshima.” The poem is a relation of the 1945 detonation of the nuclear bomb on the city of Hiroshima, the magic of the impossible, and Kay’s realization of purpose. The story tells not only of the devastation, but also of the possibilities, of a glass half-full. In essence, however, “Hiroshima” is really just an insight into the story of Sarah Kay, her passion for sharing and helping others discover through poetry. The poem, whether intentionally or fortuitously, reflects Kay’s creation of and dedication to Project V.O.I.C.E., a national movement that uses spoken word poetry as a medium to guide people to find their “voice.”

Kay founded Project V.O.I.C.E. (Vocal Outreach Into Creative Expression) in 2004, while in high school, to encourage her friends to perform spoken word with her.<sup>14</sup> With Phil Kaye, she renovated the mission to: using spoken word poetry as a means to entertain, educate and inspire.<sup>15</sup> The program celebrates and excites youth self-expression, encouraging young people to involve themselves in the world and use spoken word poetry as an instrument to discover and better understand their culture, society, and

<sup>14</sup> [http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah\\_kay\\_if\\_i\\_should\\_have\\_a\\_daughter.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_kay_if_i_should_have_a_daughter.html)

<sup>15</sup> Project V.O.I.C.E.

consequentially, themselves.<sup>16</sup> Kay, Kaye and Project V.O.I.C.E. have reached out from New York to California, Indiana, and India, and engaged with nine-year-olds and MFA candidates.<sup>17</sup> By providing a supportive environment and blending performance with writing, Project V.O.I.C.E. inspires youth to recognize that their views are significant, valid, and necessary.<sup>18</sup> Ultimately, Project V.O.I.C.E. equips individuals with the tools necessary, and a voice, to be storytellers as well.

“Hiroshima,” the Huffington Post expressed, “provides us with a fresh and positive perspective that seems crucial in light of recent catastrophic events.” The poem does more than just present an opportunistic attitude towards recent events, it provides a model for approaching the future and parallels Kay’s work on Project V.O.I.C.E.. “After the A-bomb,” Kay expresses,

specialists said it would take 75 years / for the radiation  
damaged soil of Hiroshima City to ever grow anything  
again. But that spring, / there were new buds popping up  
from the earth... I don’t know if I can change the / world,  
yet.... These aren't the last words I'll share. /  
But just in case, I'm trying my hardest to get it right this  
time around. (Kay, “Hiroshima”)

In her TEDTalk, Kay stated, “spoken [word] poetry cracks open locks.” In her time with Project V.O.I.C.E., she noted that she had seen and heard the impossible, just as the plants started to bloom that spring after Hiroshima. She witnessed students like Charlotte, a high school freshman who thought there was nothing interesting about herself, realize that everyone has a voice and that anyone can tell a story. As Kay presented, “I use spoken word to help my students rediscover wonder... and [actively] pursue being

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.project-voice.net/>

<sup>17</sup> TEDTalk

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.project-voice.net/>

engaged with what goes on around them so that they can reinterpret and create something from it.”<sup>19</sup> “Hiroshima” is proof of the expression.

The accessibility and potency of Kay’s poetry, as well as her purposefulness in utilizing spoken word as a way to change the world through the expression of story, designates Miss Kay as the perfect candidate for the United States Poet Laureate. Her poetry speaks to the American public, as evinced by her invitation to present at TED and the popularity of her performances. With Project V.O.I.C.E. already initiated and gaining prevalence, Kay, as Poet Laureate and thirty-five thousand dollar stipend, would have a head start on inspiring the American public to engage in poetry and will allow her to focus on Project V.O.I.C.E., and spend more time telling her stories through poetry. The young poet’s success epitomizes the capitalist structure, demonstrating that when presented with something it likes, the general American public will take the product in and ride the wave, even when the result is poetry. The plaque outside the workplace of Walt Whitman, states: “He Gave America, and Poetry Itself, A New Voice.” Sarah Kay is changing the way The People experience poetry and storytelling and not only providing poetry with a new voice, but Americans as well.

<sup>19</sup> TED