We live in an abbreviated time. Speak in 140 characters or less. Shoot a memo off from 35,000 feet. Every minute, 12 million text messages zip between cell phones around the world. Consider then, what is the value of a poem? Poet Star Coulbrooke tells us, in the article in the spring 2016 Liberalis.

You can’t buy groceries with haiku. You can’t pay rent in sonnets. Words are free. Star Coulbrooke, the City of Logan’s first poet laureate, will be the first to admit that poems are a useless form of currency, but they aren’t without worth.

“It’s a heart thing,” Coulbrooke says from her office at Utah State University. “If you are reading and writing poetry it is not something that pays. It’s not something you are obligated to do. It’s something people do because something just strikes them in the heart … and it’s something that is really deep. And apparently, it’s really deep for other people.”

Since 2012, as small towns and big cities across the United States climbed out of the economic recession, dozens have carved out space in their municipal buildings — and funding — for poets. Earlier this year, the City of Logan, St. Louis, Missouri, and Vallejo, California, inducted their first poet laureates. As of this printing, there is no known city appointed mathematician. Paul Crumbley, a USU English professor and poetry scholar, suspects the renewed reverence for poetry may represent who we want to become as a society.

“From the beginning of recorded history poets were the ones who told stories and they used rhyme and meter to assist memory and to add elegance and power,” he says. “But the stories were important because they gave direction to people and showed them how to imagine futures for themselves. Poets can be like physicians who help cultures by diagnosing their illnesses and prescribing artistic and spiritual cures … We as humans use the language of poetry to save ourselves and at this moment we may be using poetry to save ourselves from ourselves. Maybe it has always been that way.”

Not as fragile as she looks

Coulbrooke wrote her first poem when she was 9. Fifty years later, it came back to her in a letter, folded properly per her instructions, by her oldest brother now in his 70s. Coulbrooke was bewildered. The small slip of paper survived her brother’s LDS mission and several moves over the decades after. She reread words she didn’t remember putting to the page all those years ago, but which proved prescient of the person she would become. It just took awhile to get there.

Coulbrooke grew up on a farm in Riverdale, Idaho, the penultimate child of nine. When she was 11 her father died and an older sister took her to Montpelier to quell a rising teen rebellion. One afternoon Coulbrooke’s teacher read aloud a poem she submitted for an assignment constructed in rhyming quatrains. It was about her father. The bell rang, but the teacher instructed everyone to stay seated — they must hear this poem.

“How could you not be a writer of poems after that?,” Coulbrooke asks.

Despite excellent grades, she dropped out of school the day she turned 16. There were too many cliques and Coulbrooke did not want to be put in a box where she had to conform. She got married a year later. Then the words stopped coming. Her husband “eviscerated” her poetry and a 23-year drought followed where Coulbrooke wrote just 12 poems. Her words seemed trapped in a reservoir too deep to tap.
“What a timid soul I was,” the professor says.

But Coulbrooke is no fragile thing. Don’t let her soft voice fool you. She is more like a rare and wild bird. Her spiky red hair and icy blue eyes command attention, but any severity in her appearance is lost the moment she smiles, which is often. She has a way of sitting, straight-backed, head tilted forward as though she is grounded to the floor, yet ready to take flight at any moment. For Coulbrooke, it seems there is no power in standing still. On the weekends she hikes in the mountains with her sister. When she gets home she writes and pretends she is somewhere else.

“I walked myself right out of my marriage,” she says. “I would take my notebook and write and write and walk and walk and walk. And that was the way I survived.”

In 1986, she earned her GED the same year her oldest son graduated high school. In 1992 she left her husband, an event she refers to as her emancipation day. A year later, she enrolled at Utah State and worked four jobs while trying to earn her bachelor’s degree in literary studies. An acquaintance suggested she take a poetry class. Initially she balked at the idea. It seemed like it was too early to take an advanced level course.

“I had not been in a classroom since high school,” Coulbrooke says. “It changed my life.”

For the first time she was part of a community of writers. She was exposed to poets she had never heard of and whose words made her feel she eventually would have a say in the world. Her thesis was titled “Afraid of the Wrong Things.” Nevertheless, she shied away from taking classes with Ken Brewer, a poetry professor who would eventually become the state’s Poet Laureate. She finally worked up the nerve to walk into his classroom as a graduate student. The experience was electrifying.

“I just drank it in. Ken’s comments were so spare and so encouraging and he promoted my work so much, that it just exploded. I started to get published when I started his class. I started to earnestly feel like I was a poet. I wasn’t timid anymore. I had left behind everything that I was afraid of and I just became strong. I had Ken. I had advisers. I had professors who really valued my work. It was astonishing. They make you brave.”

Ambassador of the arts

Coulbrooke now teaches in the department where she found her voice after decades of silence. She tries to do the same for her students. As director of the university’s writing center, she has worked to make it a safe place for people to share their work. The doors are always open. As people’s minds are expected to be.

“What you write is coming from a deep source and you don’t want to smash that because that would be smashing a person,” Coulbrooke says. “Your job as someone who teaches writing is to draw that person out to that person’s self.”

On top of coordinating Helicon West, a bimonthly poetry series she started with poet and USU creative writing professor Michael Sowder in 2005, she took on the yearlong poet laureate post in May — a position she almost didn’t apply for in the first place. She was too busy. But minutes after the announcement came out from the Logan Library three people emailed asking how they could nominate her for the role.

“It’s astounding. I never thought that would happen,” she says. “When I went to the city council meeting [for] my induction ceremony, the room was just packed. I walked in and people just stood up and clapped. I could hardly go on. It was the most amazing thing.”

Coulbrooke read her poem “City of Poetry” which she composed for the occasion. She recalls a bygone era when the words of people’s favorite lines were stitched across their chest. Coulbrooke imagines a future in Cache Valley where conflict is settled with metaphors.

“Let’s keep going there, keep going back to poetry, forward to more poetry,” she says. “Let’s plaster it on the walls of the City, compose our lines and stamp them in cement at every new roundabout, every sidewalk. Let’s write poems to each other about our lives in the City of Poetry … Let’s let poetry matter.”

Logan’s poet laureate serves as an ambassador of the arts who encourages others to pick up a pen and just write. The idea is to bring poetry to the people through a series of public events and to produce at least one commemorative poem about Logan over the course of the term. Coulbrooke was selected for her “track record of reaching out to those who otherwise wouldn’t be included and to get them writing,” says councilmember Holly Daines, who served on the selection committee.

She is the next link in a legacy of poetry at Utah State that begins with alumna May Swenson, ’34, who casts a long shadow across Old Main. The MacArthur genius has her own poetry trail in Logan — the work of a USU undergraduate. Brewer — Coulbrooke’s beloved mentor — was the next to carry the torch. He is among the
Let Poetry Matter: Star Coulbrooke named Logan City Poet Laureate

university's most famous faculty members and taught in the English department from 1968 to 2000. Brewer served as Utah's poet laureate until his death in 2006.

A picture of him reading from a lectern sits atop a shelf in her office. A basket of apples sits outside her door with a sign attached that reads: Have an apple and a poem from your poet laureate. The fruit is from her apple tree. The poem is “After Apple-picking” by Robert Frost.

Coulbrooke takes the job of bringing poetry to people seriously.

“It matters so much to students to be able to have someone who can guide them in writing their deepest thoughts and making them come out in such a way that other people want to read them,” she says. “It matters so much to them and it matters so much to me. If I don’t have it, I don’t feel like my life matters.”

Bringing poetry to the public

Poetry is the most heartfelt writing a person can do, Coulbrooke says. Every word counts. There is no time for artificial voices.

“One of the things that I’ve tried as poet laureate is let people write from the heart and write in such a way that they are communicating something and not just trying to be smart,” Coulbrooke says. “I tried that myself and it didn’t work.”

While writing her application for the poet laureate position Coulbrooke considered writing a community collaborative, commemorative poem. It would be created using lines from Logan’s residents that she would collect on poetry walkabouts around town.

“I thought, well, the community matters; everybody’s voice matters. I will create a poem that is all their voices,” says Coulbrooke.

Poetry walkabouts are one way Coulbrooke brings poetry to the public. She leads walking tours around some of her favorite sites in Logan. People share poems they wrote or love. Just four months after being inducted she had already held 16 public events.

While scouting the route for a fall walkabout, a resident told her about a shop owner who loves poetry and asked if she’d call him. She did. A week later she was posting a sign outside Caffe Ibis that listed the stops on the evening’s sunset walkabout.

She starts the tour by asking for volunteers to share a poem they brought. One participant opens a book of May Swenson poems and reads. Another recites an original poem he wrote about viewing the urban wildlife of Logan. Chuckles arise when he describes his bike light sweeping across couples caught kissing on Old Main hill. Afterward the group — a mismatched crowd of high heels and sneakers, skinny jeans and hiking boots — reaches its first stop at Edwards Furniture to hear a guest speaker. The writers lounge on lazyboys and leather couches.

“I’ve never done this before,” owner Kurt Smith says, face flushed announcing that he will be reading a quote from his dear friend Ken Brewer. “He was a true Renaissance man.”

Coulbrooke’s hand flies up to her chest.

“Deciding to become a writer is dangerous,” Smith reads. “It guarantees nothing but the realization of how little one truly knows and how much patience, commitment and acceptance of cosmic irony one needs.”

As the crowd filters out to its next stop Smith considers tagging along. He has never written a poem in his life. But he consumes them.

“Poetry cuts to the core of life,” he says.

The final stop of the tour is a gazebo in Garff Gardens where summer seems to hand over its reins to fall. The writers seem to pluck poems from the rising wind. After seven minutes of writing Coulbrooke coaxes people to share their words. She listens with eyes closed to savor the odes to weeds and descriptions of the architecture of a thorn. When Coulbrooke opens her eyes, ringed with black liner, she looks as though she has traveled a great distance. As the tour commences Coulbrooke calls out “You are all wonderful” to the dispersing crowd.

Some folks linger at the gazebo as she collects the sign up sheet. Shy onlookers wait off to the side to have a word with the poet.

Americans, in general, are not a touchy people. Scientists have found we need about four feet between us when talking to feel comfortable. One way we can touch one another is through words. And they can be hurtful or they can be beautiful. We can choose. Increasingly it seems the language we use is divisive. Coulbrooke believes we can do better.

“There is so much anger and hatred and misery. The world is afraid right now,” Coulbrooke says. “What if you can escape into poetry and write from the heart instead of screaming in a diatribe of anger at each other and write to
one another as a person with beautiful language? Poetry is needed now as much as it ever was.”

Star Coulbrooke, director of the Writing Center, speaks with students.

Let Poetry Matter

Poem by Star Coulbrooke, written to commemorate her appointment as Logan City Poet Laureate

In Downtown Logan, where artists inhabit bicycle shops and cafes, tattoo parlors and churches, where paintings and sculptures and photographs adorn the sporting goods stores and the old hotels, line the walls along stairways and narrow aisles among the coat hangers, above the tables, along the counters near the checkout stand, there’s a bookstore mentality held-over from the days when poetry was valued as artwork, as an escape from the mundane workaday life, when people would read it everywhere they went, memorize their favorite verses, recite them over dinner. Let’s keep going there, keep going back to poetry, forward to more poetry. Let’s plaster it on the walls of the City, compose our lines and stamp them in cement at every new roundabout, every sidewalk. Let’s write poems to each other about our lives in the City of Poetry where everyone, no matter who they are, no matter what age or persuasion, what family, what job, what form of transportation or what inclination, will have a say, will know they matter. Let’s let poetry matter, let metaphor replace all diatribes, all misunderstandings. Let’s say it in poetry, straight from the soul, not from media-feeds, not from Google or TV or mass email, but out of the heart where our stories reside, where our memories and hopes don’t fight with each other, where art for art’s sake becomes our priority. Here in the City of Poetry, let’s look to the backyards, where families come out on a Sunday evening to watch urban owls rise from blue spruce and juniper, on silent wings, to go beyond the town and return before Monday’s first white dawning, swept with canyon air from the forest’s scent of summer to the paved wide streets where our cars and buses take us to work and to school, where we can think all day of the stories we’ll tell when poetry rolls off our tongues like water over a spillway, fresh and clear and powerful. ~ Star Coulbrooke

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