

# Elizabeth Woody

*Oregon's new poet laureate talks about family, living with poverty and her Native American culture that shapes her view of life*

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To meet Elizabeth Woody is to feel the full breadth of nature embodied in a woman. She truly understands the human condition.

And she is an endless well of experience, knowledge and fascinating stories. This made her a natural choice to become Poet Laureate of Oregon, an honor she received in March from Gov. Kate Brown. She is the first Native American to hold that position.

Woody is a member of the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs in Oregon. She was born Tódich'íinii (Bitter Water clan) in Ganado, Ariz. Her family has connections to the Milee-thlama (People of the Hot Springs) and Wyampum peoples (People of the Echo of Water Upon Rocks), and the middle Columbia River Chinook peoples, Wishram, Wasco, Watlala.

Woody and her ancestry is woven into many communities across Portland, the state of Oregon and throughout the Pacific Rim. Woody has collected a lifetime of appreciation for the natural world, artistic creation and service across her communities.

I asked her to comment on a poem she wrote in the 1980s titled "Home and the Homeless."

**Elizabeth Woody:** I wrote that during a very down economic time. When people reflect back now, Reaganomics didn't bring back the prosperity that was promised. When I returned from the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, I was looking for a job, for work and there just were no jobs.

People ask me, "What kind of support did you receive when you were writing your first book of poetry that received the American Book Award?" I say I basically wrote that book when I was impoverished and I was in a single room occupancy and eating out of the soup kitchen. I had food stamps and a meager income that came to me from my tribe, and I used that to buy my necessities. I was applying for school, bridging my way to better times.

I became very conscious of the way a set of circumstances can take you from what I considered my height as I was part of this elite school, The Institute of American Indian Arts.

When I wrote that poem, I was living in a Victorian four-plex in central Southeast Portland at the base of Ladd's Addition.

There was a warehouse district from there to the river and a lot of people lived there at



PHOTO BY JOYCE BREKKE FOR THE BOOK, "PIECES OF PORTLAND: AN INSIDE LOOK AT AMERICA'S WEIRDEST CITY" BY MARIE DEATHERAGE AND JOYCE BREKKE. PIECESOFPORTLAND.COM.

that time. I think there still are some camps there.

There were a lot of people traveling through and I saw a lot of people (without) means. There was a gentleman who rode his bike. He had a long grey beard and he called me sister.

I felt like when I closed the gate to my apartment, I left that environment where people were interacting with me who didn't have a place to live. But I did. I could go in and shut the door and nobody would bother me. But they were constantly in this environment where they were continually touched and hollered at by people.

There was no way that I could describe the difference between us except that I had a home that had these beautiful roses in the garden and had the trees and had things that I valued that they couldn't enjoy.

**Suzanne Zalokar:** *The role of poet laureate, in Oregon, was first bestowed in 1923 and then the position was left vacant for decades. In 2006, you were a part of the process of revamping the position with the governor at the time, Gov. Ted Kulongoski, who in 2006 named Lawson Fusao Inada as the state's poet laureate. A decade later you were nominated. What is your vision for the time that you are*

*servicing in this role?*

**E.W.:** The lady who nominated me was so kind and when she explained to me why she wanted to nominate me, I figured it would be disrespectful to tell her no.

I've applied for a lot of things, fellowships. I've never received any of it. Even the Oregon Book Awards, when I was a finalist, I didn't expect to win. (The award of poet laureate) comes at a time when I had no idea that I had this kind of regard as a poet.

**S.Z.:** *What a beautiful gift, to be valued.*

**E.W.:** Yes. I'm at a different time in my life now. I'm in my 50s and I feel like I am getting back to what I genuinely am: an artist and a writer.

There was so much work to do and when I was younger, I was really focused on getting my second and third books out. Then I was just working because I wanted to build up these programs that I was involved in.

I was a program officer at Meyer Memorial Trust, so I spent some time in communities that I didn't know that I would be in. I was able to see some amazing people doing remarkable things at a really hard time. We have some very important communities

in our state and our world.

I'm thinking of Ontario, Ore. They are closer to Idaho (geographically and culturally) than they are to the rest of Oregon.

I'm thinking of Coos Bay and Medford and these places that are more geographically tied to Northern California.

We're in this state, but our communities go beyond the state. They go to the ocean, a very important part of our existence here in Oregon.

**S.Z.:** *Pablo Neruda's remains were returned to his family recently, and earlier Prince passed away. Both artists leave behind a remarkable legacy of their life's work and service. What legacy do you want to leave one day?*

**E.W.:** Just a minute. (Becoming emotional). I'm sure you know this, but Pablo Neruda lived in Portland because of his politics.

It just occurred to me: Pablo Neruda stood up for his beliefs. They say his demise was by being poisoned by the Junta. Poets have lived and died because of their belief system.

I'm intuitively strong, meaning that any time that I have been asked to contribute or be part of something, I give it my all.

Right now, I have the wind basically knocked out of my sails because my mother passed away (in October). My mother was an exceptional person.

**S.Z.:** *Tell me about her.*

**E.W.:** One of the things that came up to me was her childhood with my grandmother who was also an exceptional person.

My mom told me the story about how she used to go out on the land and spend her day out there. She would come back and my grandmother would shake her down and empty her pockets – pull out a snake, pull out a frog and a lizard or something.

(My grandmother) would say, "I want you to go and take those back because they have a family. And what would happen if somebody picked you up and took you away from us? We would be really sad." And my mother started taking the critters back. Eventually she got to the point where she would just

## Home and the Homeless

by Elizabeth Woody

The buildings are worn.  
The trees are strong and ancient.  
They bend against the grid of electric lines.  
The windows are broken  
by the homeless and the cold past.  
I am home on the yard  
that spreads mint, pales the Victorian roses,  
takes into it the ravaged lilac tree.  
The black bulk of plastic lies about  
stopping unwanted weeds for the Landlord.  
Tattered, the cedar tree is chipped to dry heaps of recklessness.  
The unwanted spreads by the power of neglect.  
The wear of traffic says that we are out of time,  
must hurry.  
Age, the creak in the handmade screen door fades behind itself.

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