

Welcome to Alexandria!

One of the best things about living in Alexandria is the city's devotion to the arts. Everywhere you look as you walk around town, there are signs that this city understands the importance of art to the life of its citizens. From our art galleries to the studios in the



Torpedo Factory, from the symphony to MetroStage, from the sculpture and photography in public venues to the brightly-painted buses, it is clear that art has a place here.

As Poet Laureate, I've had the privilege of helping to make the literary arts a vibrant part of Alexandria. Writing poems for various occasions in the life of the city, I have been given an amazing opportunity for personal learning and growth.

In this book, we have collected the "occasional" poems I've written for events in the past two year—and added on additional one for luck.

I hope you enjoy them—and our beautiful city.

Mary McElveen  
Poet Laureate  
The City of Alexandria

## City of Songs

History wrote refrains here--  
The rattle of carts, the chime of church bells,  
The muffled drum of famed footsteps  
Reverberating on our cobbled streets;  
Old rhymes writ with images  
Glimpsed through a rippled mirror--  
Songs of remembrance.

Today is an unwritten poem  
Crackling in the nighttime air.  
Rhythms ride the streets on Harleys  
Staccato beat on 'high',  
And couplets crowd the corners  
With their conversations  
In raucous bar-time voices.

Monuments punctuate the traffic  
That flows in measured time,  
Crawling in iambic meter  
(Stop, start. Stop, start.)  
Toward the beltway's perpetual rondo  
That repeats, repeats, repeats  
Each day and night.

But the river remembers a slower song  
Flowing like an eecummings poem  
Unhindered and peaceful  
Past lordly houses stacked  
Like syllables in haiku formation,  
Shouldering for space along its banks.

We are tomorrow's unwritten poems:  
Homeless and builder,  
Tourist and truck driver,  
Lawyer and artist-- all of us  
Speaking our souls to cell phones  
And singing to the empty air.

Who listens for our voices?  
Who speaks the soul of the city?  
Who is history's troubadour, the future's oracle?  
Alexandria is an unwritten poem:  
Pick up your pen.  
It's our turn now.

April 11, 2007

## Wind from the River

The wind from the river breathes a lament  
Over the grass under which they lie,  
And our sighs blend and fill this place:  
This grave of innocence  
Where father, mother, child  
Lie gently wrapped in this free soil.

The wind from the river bade them come  
And claim anew a world they'd been denied--  
A place to dream, and hope, and work:  
A land they believed in  
Where father, mother, child  
At last stood equal to their brothers.

The wind from the river stirs memory's flame  
And flickering shadows rise like ghosts.  
What answer can we give them,  
The people of this place,  
Father, mother, child,  
Who lie unmarked, unnamed?

Death knows no limit, time, nor place,  
Yet hope springs up like a summer breeze  
With promise of healing rain.  
This family, knit of freedom,  
Father, mother, child-  
Shall, in the end, prevail.

May we all abide in peace.

Rededication, Freedmen's Cemetery  
May 2007

## One American High School

We are many; we are one.  
We are brown-black-red-white-yellow  
and none of the above.  
We are lightning, thunder, sun and rain  
stardust and moonshine,  
clouds and fresh breezes.  
wise and foolish, intertwined.

We are music  
that flows, that marches,  
that swings,  
that dances to its own drumbeat.  
We forge a path, and yet we follow.  
We are children; we are men and women.  
We are in between.

We are fearless and afraid,  
Articulate and tongue-tied,  
confident and hesitant.  
We are tomorrow, we are history,  
We are the exquisite intersection of generations.  
This place lets us go and holds us captive  
Even as we fly free.

We are the promise  
Made to our parents,  
Made to sons and daughters:  
The gift of learning, freely given:  
T.C. Williams,  
One American high school.

T.C. Williams High School Dedication  
October 14, 2007

## Half Turn

If the road through our city were a ribbon,  
it would spool out along the river  
in a silken band, twisting and turning  
upon itself in a sumptuous tangle  
of history, culture and accomplishment:  
a spectacular Mobius strip  
of memory and vision.

We are artists on that road, each of us,  
making art, making laws, making room, making time  
for this community, our city,  
Enriched by and enriching lives  
of artistic visions made real,  
of daily realities fathered  
by our fantastic dreams.

Our road, this twisted ribbon,  
holds the nexus of life and art:  
the half turn that blends the possible and the certain,  
concrete and ephemeral, imagination and creation  
in the self-renewing, continuous path  
we trace each day  
in Alexandria.

Alex Awards  
November 2007

## Birthday Cake

Take a deep breath.  
Ringed around you, smiling faces,  
The flames and fireworks  
Of passing years.  
Your history  
Shimmering in candle-glow.  
A slice of time, a dish of memory  
To savor here and now:  
Your birthday...  
How sweet the taste.

Alexandria Birthday Celebration  
July 2008

## Makers of Rainbows

The light of living,  
Fractured into a million crystal shards,  
Scattered and buried and dimmed an all but lost  
In a cloudy rainswept world,  
Is captured for an instant.  
Dazzlingly focused, bent by inspiration,  
Reflected, distorted, embellished  
By the human lens,  
It burns a rainbow blaze across the sky.

We are the prisms  
Through which life bleeds  
And dies  
And is resurrected.  
We are the makers of rainbows.  
Through facets of talent and insight  
We build visions.  
From storm and sunlight  
We fashion promises for the future.

We make art.

Special Presentation to Mayor William Euille  
Alex Awards  
October 2008

## Building

New buildings start with tearing down,  
With structures being brought to earth,  
With land swept clean of all that hinders progress:  
Digging deep and building strong,  
Brick by brick and stone by stone,  
We make foundations that endure.

Charles Houston was a builder  
Who wrestled with injustice:  
Who tore down restrictive laws,  
Swept clean the field of opportunity;  
Digging deep and building strong—  
Brick by legal brick, stone by hard-won stone,  
He built foundations for the future.

This building, his namesake,  
Borne of hope and strength,  
Honors him..and this community.  
His values, rooted deep, maintained so strong,  
Brick on remembering brick, stone on history's stone:  
Are the foundation that endures.

Charles Houston Recreation Center Dedication Ceremony  
February, 2009

## Women of Alexandria

Around each corner  
Is a woman making history,  
Redeeming family, friend, and neighbor  
With prayers and elbow grease-  
She teaches and inspires,  
Tackling women's work,  
And men's work, too.  
She does not recognize that boundary.

She walks and dances, runs and marches  
Through these houses, along alleys,  
Across gardens and streets,  
Across time.  
She may lack the luxury of choice,  
But lives with generosity and faith,  
Responsibility and hope.  
She is the life of her community.

She steps out of her own definition,  
Doing more for less, being more than expected.  
She is everywoman, every sentient soul  
Who sees a job and does it  
Without question, prompting or excuse.  
She is our finest hour, our minute of glory,  
Our aspiration, our reality,  
Our hero and our dream.

She is a woman of Alexandria.

## Old Town Bricks

It took me months,  
Stumbling on uneven brick sidewalks  
Before I got the hang of it:  
Unconsciously lifting my feet  
A fraction higher  
Or measuring my stride a bit more carefully  
Against the variable curb.

Maybe it was history I tripped over:  
The thin overlay of events  
Scattered across the centuries,  
Abandoned on our walkways-  
Molecules of revolution,  
Of civil war, of heroes and villains  
Whose commerce filled these streets.

Living with the past,  
We see our present less defined;  
Eras blur, and their murmurs claim  
It's not so different now:  
Trees and brick and sky and river,  
Shops and voices, children, churchbells...  
Close your eyes and see.

I walk the puddle streets  
With shadow-steps and ghostly figures  
Mirrored on the rain-slick stones.  
They hurry through their own dimension,  
Heads bent against the storm,  
Stepping over yesterdays, a fraction at a time,  
As do we all, tomorrow and today.