

# Emeryville's poet laureate recasts a small city in verse

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1of8Sarah Kobrinsky, the Poet Laureate of Emeryville, was pushed out of Emeryville after the landlord raised her rent. She is photographed at store run by her and her husband, Jered's Pottery, in Berkeley, Calif. on Thursday, April 30, 2015. Tim Hussin/Special to The Chronicle [Show More](#) [Show Less](#)

Sarah Kobrinsky slides behind the wheel of her Buick. She calls it her Midwestern-grandma car. "Oh, it's hot!" She rolls down the windows. "I'll give you the tour of Emeryville," she says. All 1.2 square miles of it.

Five years ago, Kobrinsky moved here because it was the closest she could get to San Francisco, right there at the foot of the Bay Bridge, without paying San Francisco prices. About 10,000 people live in Emeryville, a puzzle-piece-shaped place founded by a man who didn't like the rules of the towns that were already there and decided to make his own. Former U.S. Chief Justice Earl Warren once called it "the rottenest city on the Pacific Coast." Kobrinsky calls it "a place on the edge of things."

For the past year and half, she's been serving as the city's poet laureate, the second in its history, teasing the poetry out of a place that is probably best known for its Ikea, in a role nobody knows about. But even if most people hardly stop to consider Emeryville, it's still

caught up in the Bay Area's storm, and earlier this year Kobrinsky had to move to Point Richmond when her rent jumped 38 percent.

The poet laureate of Emeryville can't afford to live in Emeryville anymore.

"So here — on the left — is the famous Oaks Card Club, where people gamble," Kobrinsky says. She wrote a poem about it a while back, about how Santa and the Easter Bunny and all those childhood lies hang out there when they're not working. "I was only there once, and I was very pregnant. We were just having a walk around the neighborhood."

## **Harsh irony**

Kobrinsky doesn't look much like a poet laureate. She's young, for one thing — 37 years old, with long dark hair, smooth pale skin and a hushed voice. She has a big golden belt buckle her husband gave her that says

"POET LAUREATE 2013-2015." Her friends like to tease her; they call her the "PL of E'ville."

There's a shaky, low-res video of Kobrinsky standing in front of the Emeryville City Council last month. She leans on the podium, one of her legs tucked behind the other. "I have to say how amazing it is that this community recognizes the importance of poetry." She was there to celebrate National Poetry Month, but something else was on her mind.

There had been a story about her in the morning paper, she tells the council. "My family was the family that was priced out of Emeryville." It was a harsh irony, celebrating a city's commitment to the arts, but also recognizing that it might be hard for artists to hold on. Kobrinsky got ready to read a poem she'd written about the move. She prefaced it first: "A move is kind of like a loss."

## **History with artists**

Public art is scattered throughout Emeryville. Stick figures play on the side of utility cabinets, and abstract sculptures twist up out of the ground. As it turns out, Emeryville has something of a history with artists. There's the artists co-op on 47th Street, the art festival the city holds each year (its biggest annual event) and the percent-for-art development program.

Of course, Mayor Ruth Atkin knew all that when she proposed the poet laureate program four years ago. "I thought it was important to round out the arts," she says. It isn't a big initiative by any means, just \$3,000 out of a \$30 million operating budget — \$1,500, split over two years to whoever was named laureate and then another \$1,500 for whatever else they might need. "People do it because it's professionally satisfying," Atkin says. "They certainly don't do it because it pays the bills."

Kobrinsky keeps driving. “There’s IHOP.” And CVS. And KFC. A tour of letters. She passes by Pixar, then City Hall, then Rudy’s Can’t Fail Cafe. “Rumor has it one of the guys from Green Day owns that. I don’t know if that’s true. You might have to fact-check that one.” Turns out the rumor’s true; bassist Mike Dirnt co-owns it. “What else can I show you that’s really awesome in Emeryville?”

It’s probably an unfair thing, to request a tour of Emeryville from the city’s poet laureate and expect she’ll be able to show you what’s under all that strip-mall finish. The truth is, there is poetry to be found here, but it’s easier to notice a Target when that’s all you’re expecting.

“It has this industrial past, a rugged past, and you can kind of still feel an element of that,” Kobrinsky says. “That is interesting to me, more than the box stores — the history of a place that made things.”

Like so many others, Joseph Stickney Emery came to the area chasing the Gold Rush in the late 1800s. He found wealth but also the taxes that came with it. So, as Atkin puts it, he just said: “Forget this. I’ll just buy up some land and do my own thing.” Even after the land was incorporated, that outlaw spirit persisted. Emeryville became a place full of vice, full of speakeasies, cardrooms and brothels. “It was totally unregulated.”

### **City remakes itself**

Heavy industry came next, a steel coatings plant, a paint factory, tanneries and canneries, dropping waste into the earth. “So, we’re overcoming and remaking ourselves from that industrial past,” Atkin says. “There’s a lot more to Emeryville than what people realize.”

Even before all that, back before Manifest Destiny, there were stories, like the one about the Emeryville Shellmound, a once-great hill with a sweeping view of the Golden Gate made by the American Indians who lived here first. Out near the base of the city’s peninsula, not far from the Ikea, is a small memorial to that place. Kobrinsky wrote a poem about it once. She read it at her inauguration.

“The refuse of life well-lived/  
piled high at the water’s edge—/  
In a hundred years’ time,/ what  
will we have left behind?”

Maybe, even if it’s not written in the official proclamation, that’s why Emeryville, a small city whose very name is small, like one of those towns from black-and-white television, needs a poet laureate. She gives people a chance to reconsider this place.

As poet laureate, Kobrinsky has recast Emeryville — its “blue and yellow mound” and “white playful lamp” — with poetry. She’s also read at city events, held writing workshops and put poems on the Emery-Go-Round, the city’s free shuttle service. Each month, she prints 10,000 copies of a new poem and sticks them where the maps would usually go. (“That’s a better print run than most small presses,” Kobrinsky says.) One of the first came from Janell

Moon, the city's first poet laureate. She took her job seriously, too, even if others didn't know what to make of it. ("People are just absolutely shocked that such a small city would do something like that," Moon says. "Well, good for Emeryville.")

Back in her Buick, Kobrinsky turns onto a narrow street and slows to a stop. "There it is." A boxy, white house, 1½ bedrooms, framed by a skinny, empty tree. "We had the bottom apartment."

The neighbor girl gave Kobrinsky's son half of a walkie-talkie set for his 4th birthday. A week later, Kobrinsky and her husband found out about the rent increase, and two months later they moved. Local press picked up on the news. "It really struck a nerve," Kobrinsky says. "It's was just such a perfect case study of what is happening." She's hoping, if nothing else, it might lead to some rent control. One thing, though: She never did considered quitting as the city's poet laureate. "I just feel so close to the projects I started."

### **'It does feel a bit strange'**

Kobrinsky doesn't miss the house, exactly, or the strained relationship with her landlords. Even so, memories get caught up in the places we live, no matter how plain, no matter how small. "We became parents there," she says. A lot of firsts. "It feels a long way away now." You get the sense she's not just talking about the 10-mile drive from Point Richmond. "Yeah. It does feel a bit strange."

"What is home?" Her husband asked her that the other night. "It's a big question. It's what I've been thinking about the last couple days."

Whatever the answer, it's no longer Emeryville.

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