

UC Creative Writing Program

Letter To Professor Garrett Hongo From Keetje Kuipers About Her Time As A Stanford Stegner Fellow

2009—2011

Garrett,

Your email made me laugh out loud! I hate the start to the school year--it always becomes so quickly bogged down in trivialities. I have a hard time making the adjustment that it requires, forking over my time to all the various little tasks that come knocking. In any event, here's my brief take on the Stegner Fellowship:

I received a call from Eavan Boland in the spring of 2009 notifying me that I'd been selected for the Stegner Fellowship at Stanford University. The Stegner Fellowship is the equivalent of winning the literary lottery: Stanford gives their fellows (ten poets and ten fiction writers) a generous stipend for 24 months. In exchange, we are only asked to live in the Bay Area and attend workshops once a week with our peers and poetry mentors: Eavan Boland, Ken Fields, and W.S. di Piero. When I got the call from Eavan that spring, it came on the tail of twelve very difficult months. I'd been out of my graduate program for three years at that point, and the first two had been characterized by a series of fellowships and grants that had given me ample time to write, as well as that much needed sensation of forward momentum with my work. However, my life had begun to stagnate: I'd applied to the Stegner fellowship (and many others, like the Madison and the Fine Arts Work Center at Provincetown) for years without any promising news. I'd also been sending out my manuscript for more than a year, and I'd begun to lose hope on that front as well. I was living in Montana, working as an adjunct laborer at the university there, and my life had become a routine that didn't seem to have an end in sight. Most writers would probably agree that outside support--the simple vote of confidence that publications and awards provide--can be the thing that tips the scales when it comes to having the courage to continue pursuing the writing life. I would never consider not writing--that's simply not possible for me. But there have been times when I was unsure whether or not I could continue to make it the center of my life. When Eavan called me with the news about the Stegner Fellowship, it was like watching a film negative become a printed picture--the darks became lights, the lights became darks, and my entire vision of my world, and how my writing fit into it, shifted. My life has been completely different ever since. Two days after getting that good



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news, I also received a call from BOA Editions telling me that my manuscript had been selected for the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize. A week after that, the Fine Arts Work Center called to tell me that I had been awarded a residency there (I had to decline because the book and Stegner Fellowship made me no longer eligible as an "emerging writer"). Now, a year and a half later, I'm almost done with my second book of poems and have begun a non-fiction project, as well. The freedom to be daring, to take risks in my work and be playful in my writing, to have the time and space to explore all the avenues of language, has been the most rewarding part of my time at Stanford. My peers and mentors here provide an environment of mutual respect and support that I never could have imagined, and that is truly what tips the scales for me now. It makes me immensely glad to know that I hung on to my writing and my hopes for it through that dark Montana winter, believing in my work when there was no one there to believe in it for me. Thanks to the Stegner Fellowship, I know I'll never need to feel that doubt again.

It's beautiful here in San Francisco, and though I'm bogged down with all the demands of the fall academic schedule, I'm enjoying the sunshine and ocean air--so unlike Montana, but so lovely in its own way. And did you feel well enough to take Annalena on her trip to the woods this month? Was that to be camping or a hike? I hope your family was able to do it!

Much love always,
Keetje