2013 LRAC FELLOWSHIP GRANT
DR. YAHYA FREDERICKSON, POET

This year’s recipient of the LRAC/McKnight Fellowship Literary/Performance Grant is a poet and writer, Dr. Yahya Frederickson, Moorhead, Minnesota. By providing him with the uninterrupted time to write and revise, the LRAC/McKnight Fellowship will allow him to move closer to completion of four poetry manuscripts, a memoir, and possibly coordinate another Arabic poetry translation project.

It is his hope that their completion would lead to his submitting them to presses for possible publication, which would, in turn, strengthen his literary credentials and expose the world to a perspective that is not typically available. His poems can be categorized in a couple of artistic directions.

First, following the old adage “write what you know,” he has developed a body of work that is set in north-central Minnesota, where he has lived most of most life. His second chapbook, Returning to Water (2006, Dacotah Territory Press), typifies this direction. It contains poems set in nature, poems of memory, and poems that explore the stories of ancestors.

His second artistic direction is a body of work set in several other countries—specifically countries in Africa and the Middle East—which he had the privilege of traveling to and/or working in. This international direction is typified by his as-yet-unpublished full-length poetry manuscript “The Gold Shop of Ba‘Ali,” which is set in Yemen. Disparate as these two directions might seem, they are both parts of his identity as an American and as a Muslim.

“Yahya was my student during his undergraduate years at Moorhead State University and proved to be one of the very best writers I’ve worked with in nearly 40 years of teaching.”

Mark Vintz, Associate Poet Laureate of North Dakota

Dr. Frederickson received a B.A. in the Individual and Society (an individualized social sciences- and humanities-based major) from Minnesota State University Moorhead in 1985, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing (Poetry) from the University of Montana in 1989, and his Ph.D. in English from the University of North Dakota in 1999. After earning his doctorate, he has been a Professor of English at MSU Moorhead, Moorhead, MN.

He spent much of the decade between graduate degrees in Sana’a, Yemen, where he taught English as a Foreign Language, composition, and poetry. His areas of specialization include poetry, Middle Eastern literature, cross-cultural contact literature, and Henry David Thoreau. His doctoral dissertation is a collection of poems inspired by his experiences in Yemen. A lover of international travel, he has visited Canada, Ethiopia, Greece, Mexico, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Saudi Arabia, in addition to Yemen. Dr. Frederickson’s poems and book reviews have been published in national literary journals.

While he is a tenured full professor, a two-time Fulbright Scholar, and a former Peace Corps Volunteer, he is not yet the author of a published full-length poetry manuscript. Getting his first full-length collection published would galvanize his reputation as an established poet. In addition to the personal significance of the LRAC/McKnight Fellowship, there is a more global significance. He believes that his internationally-set poetry puts a human face on peoples of other lands. He hopes it leads to a better understanding of the rest of the world. These days, a better understanding of other cultures, particularly those of the Middle East, cannot be overemphasized.
What I learn about poetry in Syria, I learn in a mosque. 
As soon as the congregational prayer finishes, he’s at my elbow,

a student of mine from the university. He wants to introduce me
to the imam who just gave the sermon. I can’t say no.

He leads me through the crowd of lingering men to the prayer niche up front. The imam is my friend,” he says, opening a secret door.

And there, in a long room lined with chairs, sits the imam, surrounded by his retinue waiting for extra inspiration.

I am seated on the highest couch next to the imam, while at my feet my student crouches, ready to translate in case my Arabic fails.

I repeat my oft-repeated sentences of self-introduction:
I am an American professor teaching English at the university,

I am an exchange professor teaching here for only one semester,
I embraced Islam 15 years ago in Yemen, I like Syria generally,

though of course there are good people as well as bad people everywhere, and I write poetry. The imam’s eyes widen: “Ah, you are a poet!”

His retinue sighs with delight. “That’s wonderful!” he smiles.
“Let us hear one of your poems!”

I feel my face getting warm. “I’m sorry,” I say, “but I haven’t memorized any of my poems, and I don’t have any of my poems written down with me.”

Faces around the room squinch in puzzlement. I try to explain, “Poetry in America is different from poetry in the Middle East,” I begin.
“In America, poets depend on written-down poems. The writing is important, the recitation, less so. American poets usually read their poems; they don’t usually memorize them and recite them as you do here.”

Hmm. . . Aahhh. . . the crowd buzzes, still puzzled, but polite.

The gracious imam intervenes, sparing me from the silence. “Well, if not one of your own poems, perhaps you can recite a poem by someone else, perhaps a famous English poet? Then your student can translate it for us.” I count the years that have passed since my last doctoral comprehensive exam. Six. At that time, I memorized a Shakespearean sonnet to illustrate the parts.

Hard as I try, I can’t conjure it. It evaporated long ago. There is nothing, absolutely nothing I can provide to this hungry audience, not a single poem for the imam, my poor student, or even myself. The retinue must think I’m a charlatan. What kind of poet doesn’t remember even one poem of his own? This time, my student speaks, offering a poem by Donne that he has memorized in another professor’s class, followed by an impromptu translation. Hmm. . . Ahhhh. . . the room coos. The imam turns again to me: “Anyway, we are most happy to meet you, our Muslim brother from America.” As he begins his lesson to his followers, I excuse myself to meet my wife and daughter outside. Everyone smiles.