

August 2021



THE FIFTH ANNUAL GWENDOLYN BROOKS YOUTH POETRY AWARDS



2021 Awardees and Honorable Mentions

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The Fifth Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards

Illinois Humanities, in collaboration with the Poetry Foundation, Brooks Permissions, and the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, is proud to present the 2021 Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards. In 2017, Illinois Humanities, in partnership with Our Miss Brooks 100, the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts, and Poetry Foundation, revived the youth poetry awards that Gwendolyn Brooks began in 1970 and continued until her passing in 2000.

Gwendolyn Brooks summed up the contest best in a note in 1977: ***“All the children who entered the contest are winners ... They worked hard. They created. And that is what is important.”***

With this spirit in mind, we’d like to thank and honor everyone who submitted a poem. We also thank all of the teachers, librarians, parents, caregivers, mentors, and others who supported and nurtured young writers throughout Illinois: you’re supporting the next generation of Illinois poets.

We invite you to read, reread, and enjoy the poems of the 2021 Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awardees and Honorable Mentions.



Gwendolyn Brooks,
by Nora Brooks Blakely

Born in Topeka, Kansas, June 7, 1917, she was brought home to Chicago after her first few weeks of life. She married Henry L. Blakely II in 1939. They had 2 children, Henry L. Blakely III and Nora Brooks Blakely.

The first Black person to ever win the Pulitzer Prize (1950), she received countless honorary degrees as well as many other honors and awards, including Poet Laureate of Illinois (30+ years), inductee of the National Women's Hall of Fame, an Academy of American Poets Fellowship, the National Medal of Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities' Jefferson Award and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. However, Ms. Brooks did not just receive awards. She sponsored numerous one-time and on-going awards at elementary schools and high schools. She also developed awards for adult writers (young and established) and was well-known for her generosity and support of individual artists. Her published works include several books of poetry for adults and children, one novel, writing manuals, and two volumes of her autobiography.

Ms. Brooks taught at several colleges and universities. To date, at least five schools have been named after her, as well as the Illinois State Library Building and several other libraries, award programs and cultural centers.

The History of the Awards by Mark Hallett

The Youth Poetry Awards were first announced in an October 8, 1969 press release. For the next 30 years, Gwendolyn Brooks, poet laureate of Illinois and first Black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, personally stewarded the awards. She wrote guidelines, sent out flyers to schools across the state, supervised the selection process, notified winners, spoke at the awards ceremony and, most importantly, corresponded with hundreds of student poets, parents, teachers, and administrators impacted by this experience. The New York Times reported Gwendolyn Brooks spent \$2,000 or more of her own income annually on the Awards.

Why host a youth poetry contest in the first place? For Ms. Brooks it was firstly rooted in a desire to imbue “a continuing interest in the health of poetry” and, secondly, her belief that “a ‘poet laureate’ should do more than wear a crown – should be of service to the young.”

Gwendolyn Brooks reviewed and selected winning poems for more than thirty years. She searched for poems with “vitality, language surprises, bright contemporaneity, technical excellence, evidence of suitability for the ‘long haul,’” but winning poems did not require “all such virtues in combination.”

In 1979 the guidelines for the contest changed slightly to encourage poems that both “rhyme or rhyme less.” This change may have come in response to a letter from a thirteen-year-old poet, who was deaf. He wrote to Ms. Brooks that his entry was rejected by his teachers because its lines didn’t rhyme even though he’d noticed that the lines of poems by Carl Sandburg, Ms. Brooks’s predecessor as Illinois Poet Laureate, didn’t rhyme either. In the

margin to of the student's letter, she wrote, "These teachers are 'criminals,'" reflecting her sustained belief in taking youth seriously as both writers and individuals.

Her belief in the capacity for young people to write powerfully about their experiences was captured in remarks she made at the final awards ceremony she attended before her death in 2000. She proclaimed to the audience: "When you have experienced these upcoming poems you'll identify new reasons for admiring your children and teens ... Much of the time you know them ... Not always do you know them." She urged parents and teachers, then and now, "Listen to these phrases, these deliciously strange constructions. WOW. WOW."

Over the years, the Awards expanded to honor works by students from kindergarten through college before finally settling upon celebrating poets in kindergarten through 12th grade. From 1976 onward, the University of Chicago hosted an annual awards ceremony in which these students were publicly acknowledged.

In 1987 the Significant Illinois Poets Award ceremony honored both students and Miss Brooks on her 70th birthday with readings by 32 notable poets, including Paul Carroll, David Hernandez, Angela Jackson, Sandra Jackson, Haki Madhubuti, and Henry Blakely, Ms. Brooks's husband. Among the poets reading that afternoon was Sandra Cisneros, who had cultivated many young writers through her years at the Latino Youth Alternative High School in Chicago. Ms. Cisneros later remembered the day as "a rare Sunday. A sincere Sunday. From someone both sincere and rare." That same year, Elsie Adams, whose daughter had been mentored by Ms. Brooks, thanked the poet

for personifying “the artist who is unselfish with her talent; one who ‘gives’ bountifully, and therefore ‘reaps’ bountifully. You believe that we owe our sisters and brothers; you fulfill that debt constantly.”

Illinois Humanities is inspired by Ms. Brooks’ commitment to youth and to the power of poetry. Through the annual statewide Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards we look forward to doing what we can to continue to fulfill the debt of all she has given to Illinois and to the world.

All the writing tips are excerpts from *SEASONS: A Gwendolyn Brooks Experience*; Edited by Nora Brooks Blakely, Cynthia A. Walls with illustrations by Jan Spivey Gilchrist © 2017.

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For Young Poets

This poem says hello to the poet you are.

This poem is young and wise.

You are a poem laughing
like the open, deep sky
at night or morning.

You are a poem weeping
like the rain, mooning like the moods
of the moon.

You are a poem flying free
like dark birds of the air.

You are a poem rising
like a mountain,
to touch yourself laughing
like the sky.

You write this poem
of who you are.

This poem is Love, is you
reaching out to everyone.

And you
will never be erased.

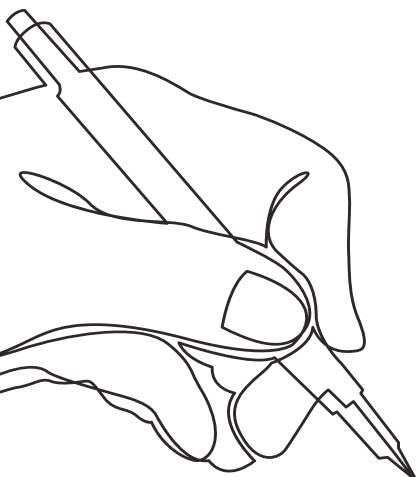
And you
will last and last.

— Angela Jackson, Poet Laureate of Illinois, 2021

Angela Jackson

Angela Jackson, the fifth Illinois Poet Laureate, is an award-winning poet, novelist, and playwright who has published three chapbooks, four volumes of poetry, two novels, and three plays. She is also the author of the significant biography *A Surprised Queenhood in the New Black Sun: The Life and Legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Born in Greenville, Mississippi and raised on Chicago's Southside, she was educated at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. Ms. Jackson wrote "For Young Poets" for the occasion of the 5th Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards Ceremony on August 21, 2021.

KINDERGARTEN – 5TH GRADE



Writing tip:

Use fresh language.

Feel free to talk on your paper
about anything, not just flowers and
trees and springtime...

I like to play with my brother

I like to play with my brother
We like to jump off the top bunk
Onto pillows and blankets
You get to make funny sounds
and funny movements
When I do a ninja jump from the top bunk
I hit my head on the ceiling
but it doesn't hurt

— Michael Wiley, Kindergarten, Chicago

My Favorite Tree

It has white flowers.
The leaves are green
and maybe they're big.
I like to climb it,
it's just down the block.
I walk by it sometimes.
The bark is smooth
and I'm really good at climbing.
I can see my house from up there.

— Lucy Orr, kindergarten, Berwyn

A Talking Clock

A clock always says Tick Tock
and never says Mock.
It always likes to say Walk.
The clock does not talk
but it used to talk.
But now it's a building.
And then it's a light
and then it turned into a walnut
because it lived in a wall.

— Grant Hodges, Kindergarten, Oak Park

“Yesterday I saw a neighbor”

Yesterday I saw a neighbor with a big scar on his face.

He was in front of his house. I said hi.

He didn't say anything, he just waved.

He just waved.

I didn't say anything to him,

I didn't think he wanted to talk about it.

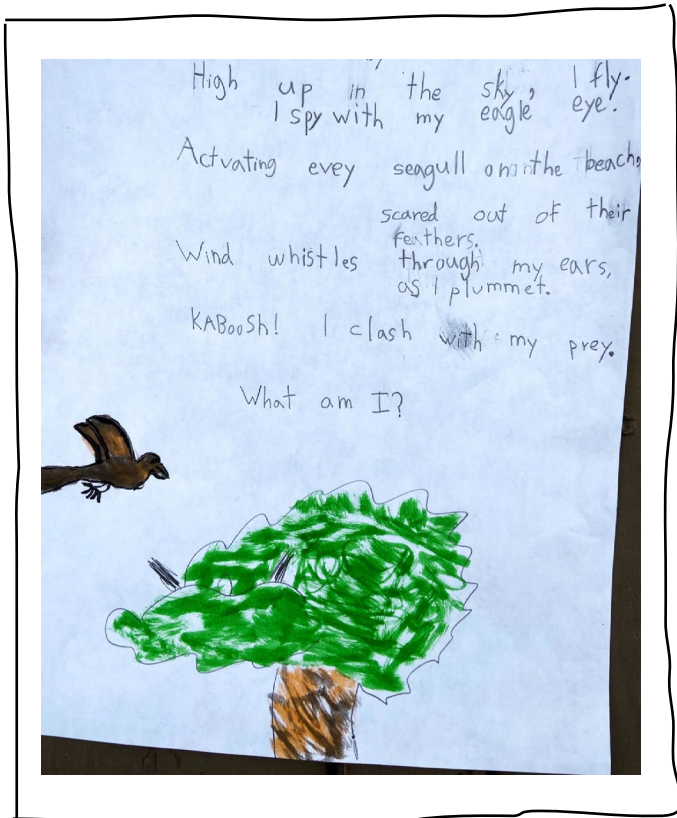
I can tell it's an old scar.

My mom said that he probably got burned.

I feel wonder when I wonder how he got that scar.

— Finn McGuire, 1st grade, Berwyn

The Creature



— Madeline Hyde, 1st grade, Northfield

“Dragons have different powers”

Dragons have different powers, that's for sure.
An ice dragon is good,
He's made out of pure living ice.
And they live in places that are cold.
They live in crystal caves made of icicles
And they are born of an egg made out of ice.
You can see through them sometimes
Because their crystals are ice.
In the middle of a snowstorm
They blend in with the snow.
And they hunt in snowstorms and at night
Especially snowstorms at night.
They catch their prey like owls and bats do.

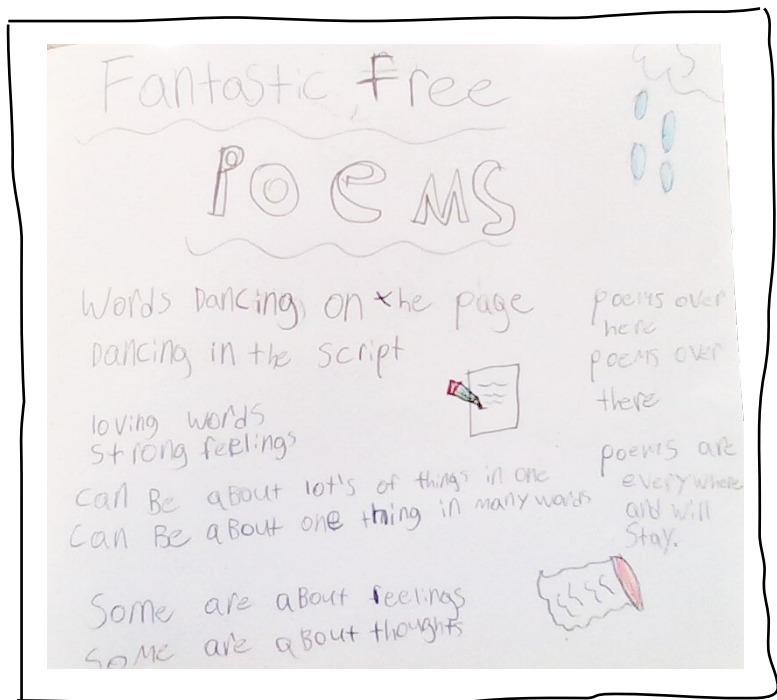
— Harlan Cox, 1st grade, Chicago

My Home

I love my home
Because it is special
Because it has animals
And it has a lot of books
And it has food
And the food I like is bananas
And apples
And pancakes.
My home has four people
Who love me:
Grandma and Grandpa Knight,
My dad and me.
I love them too.

— Mattalyn Sears, 2nd grade, Peoria

Poems



— Emma Balcirak, 2nd grade, Chicago

First Day of School

It's my first day of school!

Let's go to the store!

I need a notebook, a pencil, and an eraser.

And what else do I need?

Oh no, I'm late!

— Laura Hieronymus, 2nd grade, Chicago

Playing Is Fun

Playing is so fun.

I see people getting hurt.

Playing is so fun.

A child trips on hard cement.

Playing is still fun.

Even playing gets you hurt.

But still, it is fun.

— Martynas Vrubliauskas, 2nd grade, Chicago

Shortcut

Reaching for rigid branches that cause your fingers to ache.
Standing on a limb that can support your weight.

Barely.

You stretch yourself to snapping point, throw your legs
up,
up,
up.

Only to feel them crash
down,
down,
down.

Suddenly you see a shortcut.
A branch strong, yet so hard to see.
You slide forward, pulling yourself up and...

Yes!

You reach the top, sun peeking through the clouds,
bliss blossoming through your body.
But then, there's always getting
down.

— Elise Brand, 3rd grade, Chicago

Dear Piece of Paper

Dear Piece of Paper,
Can you stop cutting my finger?
It hurts so bad
Also, can you stop messing up my drawing?

Can you change your clothes because white
is super boring?

Can you get thicker because when I used paint on you
it went right through you and
got on the rug and
I got in trouble

I have a question:
How do you keep duplicating yourself so you have
100 billion of you?

See you soon
I hope you get thicker

— Max Steinhandler, 3rd grade, Evanston

Nature

You hear the rustling of leaves
light and airy, grass green.
Jagged trunks, so strong and bold.
Squirrels with bushy tails, a dark hazel,
hide their nuts for the winter
and scuttle along branches.
You may not know this
but they also like to eat birdseed.
Birds chirp so vigorously:
chip chip chip chip chip chip chip
High pitched but calming to the mind.
It feels so familiar, like the wind.
If we don't take care of this
there will be no such thing as us.

— Amelia Richards, 3rd grade, Berwyn

Cookies

So yummy, doughy and crumby
yet so chocolate-chippy.
Mix the dough with the whisk,
it flows around the steely surface.
Drop in the chocolate chips.
They ping off the metal bowl
as the wind stealthily lurks
across the cinnamon ocean.
It whisks itself away.

— Leo Quest, 4th grade, Berwyn

“Far far away”

Far far away,
there is rich soil.
Mountain peaks and caves.
There's a mountain town.
There's tea leaves galore,
the shadows of skyscrapers,
open meadows with dandelions,
mist on the volcanoes.
There are smoking ash red flags bursting out.
There are tree houses,
waffles and wild mushrooms.
On the snow days there are snow angels
and on the happy days there are yellow-brick roads
and nuts and bolts.

[paint-chip found poetry]

— Zeus Zimm Lyons, 4th grade, Berwyn

When Night Comes By

On a silent, melancholy night as the stars shine,
The light SOARS through the
placid dark blue night, WHOOSH
The dark night is like an abyss in the sky above us.
But the light fills the seams in this dark and gloomy world.
The moon is as shy as a new born baby, and hides from our sight.
In the dark it hums, a sweet song filled with joyfulness.
Soon the dark will disappear into the vivid light of the sun.
The sun will rise up
against the evil in this world,
But the evil will rise again everyday and battle for control over the world.

— Evangeline Hwangbo, 4th grade, Skokie

2020

I didn't expect this past year
To be a pain in my rear.
Along came twenty-twenty,
And brought along plenty.

Coronavirus showed up at the door,
The pandemic took it up to the next floor.
Super spreaders hit the nerve,
Handwashing, isolation, and distancing flattened the curve.

My school quickly got closed,
So that I wouldn't be exposed.
We all got stuck at home,
So then all day I played with my nifty phone.

Teachers all ran to Google Classrooms,
So students all needed to set up their study rooms.
Emails became an everyday thing,
Checking it constantly after the ping.

- continued on next page -

Science on my school iPad
Math with my one-of-a-kind Dad.
ELA kept me on my toes,
Social Studies explained with inspiring videos.

One day Covid-19 showed up here,
Next thing you know the vaccines appear.
And just as you're starting to have "fun"
Along comes unpredictable twenty twenty-one.

— Leo Rivera, 4th grade, Clarendon Hills

Breathe

Raspy voice, in need of air. Screaming for life. Knee in his neck. He sees the flashing lights of an officer's car, but they are not protecting. The lights are fading. The man on the ground screams:

I can't breathe!

Phones, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, exploding. Crowds gather, screaming too. They try and try horrified at the sight before their eyes. They record for evidence and scream to try to save his life:

He can't breathe!

On their phones, people miles and miles away, stunned at what they see. They stare and stare. Wait, what? Play that again, could this really be? They comment and repost and say:

Let him breathe!

News screens, TVs, booming with the news. You can't turn away if you want to. The sight will be in your memory 'til your last days. You will never forget when you said:

Why won't they let him breath!?

This man had a name: George Floyd. This man had a family. He had a life. But, those police didn't care. They didn't care about what his mom would think, his daughter, his friends. They took his life for no reason. Careless. Evil. Cruel. Un-American.

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So, we march. We sit. We make the signs. For freedom. For equality. We feel the rock in our souls like the knee in his neck. Chanting, changing, taking charge. Be angry, but stay peaceful. Be sad, but stay hopeful. We will overcome this... one day, someday, still far far away. But we will fight for what is right.

We hold our breath for justice.

— Sadie Haupt, 5th grade, Winnetka

The Moonlight's Shadow

The Moonlight's Shadow

Its vitality is immaculate
and idyllic. It looks like the
serene lamp on my bedside
table. I float on the ocean
waves, moving and down
with the soft current. The
wind wraps around my body
like a blanket. Splish splash!
My feet run through the water
like a cheetah with felicity leaving
behind wet traces that have imprinted
into the soaked sand. Goodnight, oh
Goodnight, dear one. If you are ever
looking for me, I'll be beneath the
moonlight's thinking about all
the things I could do once I
wake up again.

— Megan Pham, 5th grade, Skokie

Masks of Joy

We used to have lunch
around a small table with our teacher.

We gathered like grapes in a bright bunch.

We used to have recess and run around all day like lions on a hot day.

We would open our lockers as if we were breaking into a vault until the
police came and we would be at fault.

When the bell rang we would dart out of our classes like lightning in the sky
and try not to bang into others

We used to wear masks of joy to keep us comfortable.

We would have fun, laugh, and play like hyenas.

Today we have E-learning.

We have to make hand signals as if we were deaf.

We gaze at screens as our eyes bleed.

We wear masks like a doctor and
we don't wear masks of joy like we used to.

— Lorenzo Cavour, 5th grade, Skokie

Feelings Are Blue in a Pandemic

Does happiness linger? Are

Feelings a tool? My shoulders are laden

With joy and boredom. What should I do? Put down

My world, and pick up mindfulness with

Calm emotions and hold fruit

In my hands, for joy? Among

Us are the deep, dark, feelings, like pain, grief, sadness. I feel
sadness. I feel blue.

I don't know what to do with my life; it's a war between happy and
sad feelings, in which the pandemic leaves

Grief, isolation, sadness? The world is one big apple

With Covid-19 taking out thousands of people, with one giant bite
of the green

Apple. The water is the happiness, avoiding the pandemic and
making the world happier. That water is the vaccine, and

it takes people into that bite, but gets them out of it forever. This
world has been severed for a year. The death is red.

— Jack Murphy, 5th grade, Downers Grove

6TH GRADE – 8TH GRADE

Writing tip: *Hear* talk in the street. There is much real poetry coming out of the mouths of people in the street. Many clichés, yes, but also vitality and colorful strengths.

Your poem does not need to tell your reader everything. A *little* mystery is fascinating. *Too much* is irritating.



Why Am I the Enemy?

I used to be a normal kid,
but now for some reason I am forbidden
from my accustomed life of an immigrant family

Why was I sent away?
Why don't I have a permanent home or anything that I once owned?

I used to play,
but now my world is grey
like the wire keeping me inside this prison

Why am I surrounded by guards and fences?
Where did I go wrong to be sent to this dreary, dark, place
and why are only people like me here?

It feels like forever ago
when I could play freely without someone
taking me to do chores and work

Why did my normal life need to change?
Why do I feel strange, like I'm sitting on pins and needles
while alone and isolated?

- continued on next page -

Now seeing people suffer is my normality.

POW!!

A loud boom takes away my friends, and now
all I have left is my broken family and the little yellow ball

I once smiled and laughed now I feel like a wolf pup separated from
the pack, scared to take another step into the world

This poem was inspired by the artwork *Why am I the enemy?*
by artist Roger Shimomura

— Maya Cionca, 6th grade, Skokie

Nature's Windchime

Clouds swarm the sky,
Choking the sun,
Squeeze, squeeze, squeezing it into a small blob until it vanishes.

Lightning cracks the sky in two,
Glowing a sharp white,
Splitting the air like a kitchen knife.

Rain drip, drip, drops down my car window,
Freckling the glass for mere seconds,
before jetting across the shield,
And then pushed off with guardian wipers.

Tall buildings, black and gloomy,
Fading into the rain,
Fog lassoing the structures,
Mist purring at their feet.

Roots latch on to the soil,
As a gust of wind tugs at the trunk,
Failing to pry the tree from its underground scalp.

Puddles create mirrors for the storm to double,
Trampled upon by wheels,

And shined on by headlights.

Thunder boom, boom, booming,
Bouncing off the slanting water droplets,
Careening through the air.

Hair wet like a mop just submerged in a cleaning product,
Shivering bodies huddled underneath plastic umbrellas.

Water tinkles at my shingles and trickles through the gutters,
Running in a race like a waterslide.

The heavy racket outside,
Slick streets,

Damp grass,
Soaked jackets,
Whistling wind,
Tapping droplets,
Flapping leaves,
And flashing lightning,
Give a peaceful harmony to the earth.
It is nature's windchime.

— Kira Dolph, 6th grade, Libertyville

Motherhood and Lipstick

My mother wasn't fond of the way I wore lipstick. She said it was clumpy and went over my lips, and she was correct. My mother wore red lipstick on dates with my father, these were the days I wished she came home sooner. Stuffed animal in hand I stayed up, just as I stayed up to write this.

I always wondered what this lipstick was made out of. Lucky for me it was made out of the same thing all mothers wear on their lips, the reasons mothers did anything, or yell at their child the way they do, love.

We put pressure on love to be a lot of things, and we confide in love for reasons for pain, no matter how much it hurts. we refuse to stop loving, that's when the love turns passive. we refuse to say the words I don't love you anymore.

Every lipstick that is worn is bold and passive in fear of not loving.

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Sadly for my mother, her mom's lipstick was rough on her. So my mom learned to put lipstick on herself and promised to teach her daughters.

Her daughter didn't like the way their mother did her lipstick as no one taught her, and just as their mother so did they, they learned to put on lipstick by herself. Instead I'll let my daughter figure out how she want to wear her lipstick.

I never did end up perfecting my lipstick but I perfected my lip liner. Over lined my lips with power to come, that I was robbed from because generations of mothers, with clumpy lipstick.

— Belen Salamanca, 7th grade, Chicago

On the Absence of Wind

The branches lay still
And the once rattling coffee mug shakes to a stop
The biting wind was once ravaging
But now gone
Like the eye of the hurricane
Everything is quiet
Still
At a standstop

The cars miraculously slow to a halt
The birds don't make a peep
The flickering WELCOME sign on the 7-11 stops and becomes an eerie glow
I hold my breath as to not disturb this peace
What a feat
No wind in the Windy City for a breath of time
A simple understanding in the big and bright city

But then;
A car zooms down the street
Another honks their horn
The sign on the 7-11 flickers again
The once red traffic light changes back to green
And the wind picks up

I exhale
So much for the moment of peace
The world keeps spinning once more

— Maddy Lehman, 7th grade, Chicago

I Am From

I am from the large honey locust outside of my house,
From the stone pie shop under the porch.
I am from the gentle breeze
Blowing the dandelion seeds through the air.

I am from sprinting up the wooden steps of my friend's house,
From ringing the doorbell over and over again.
I am from the sap on the pine tree.
We always got sticky.

I am from the dismantled crib in my room,
From the stickers I put on the floor.
I am from the swings at the little park
That will be creaky forever.

I am from my rocket ship from a refrigerator box,
From the garden outside with the juicy strawberries.
I am from the bakery
Where I would get a cupcake sometimes.

I am from the drifting dust under my bed,
From grandma's quilts that grandpa always rolled me up in.
I am from what's wrong pookie.
I almost remember the whole story.

I am from swimming at North Lake,
From tricycle injuries in the driveway.
I am from the lake house.
I even ran away once.

I am from the ribs at Russel's,
From the bush with bright red berries.
I am from the toys in the attic
That would be my room someday.

I am from my cousins,
My grandpa and grandma.
I am from a universe
That was all my own.

— Liana Smith, 7th grade, Oak Park

Humanity

Humanity ruins everything.
From the atmosphere to the bottom of the ocean.
Ruined.
Humanity is ill-mannered and insolent.
We do not think for one second of
the well being for the biosphere we live in.
Humanity stops plant-life from growing.
We rip out trees and grass from the dirt like
how we take out splinters from our hands.
Humanity kills.

The Earth would be much more successful without us.
Vegetation would actually be prosperous,
animals wouldn't be slaughtered,
the air wouldn't be so trashed,
and the sea wouldn't be so mucky.
Humanity demolishes what nature produces.

— August Wittenstein, 7th grade, Skokie

cross stItch

death holds the needle, life is the thread
that pokes stars through the embroidery-hoop of the sky
stitching constellations, and writing words
tendrils of twine curve and braid into each other
fasten, faster, fastened within ourselves

my heart is the needle, my blood the thread
i am twisted together with lines of fiber, my every inch
my skin is the hoop
i am embroidered into my world
twist, taut, twisted
my blood is warm and woven

the river of vessels throughout me run far
my hair to nerves to neurons i am criss-crossed
and cross stitched

Inspired by Snoopy - Early Sun Display on Earth by
Alma Thomas

— Amelia Gottschalk, 8th grade, Skokie

Ode To Summer

I wake up to watch the sun rise
As I sit on the roof
The summer sun keeps my skin warm
The yellows, oranges, and reds dance across the sky

I make breakfast for my family
In no rush
I have no worries
We sit at the table outside
By the poolside

I change into my bright blue swimsuit
The pool is 87 degrees
My brothers jump into the pool
Splashing water everywhere

We swim all day
Until the sun goes down
We are red as tomatoes

- continued on next page -

Turning the showers cold
Hoping it helps the sunburn
We are exhausted

But
We go to bed
Knowing
We can do it
Tomorrow

— Avery Kennedy, 8th grade, Colona

Nature

The warm crisp spring air

The bright blue clouds speckled white

The shar chirps of birds

— Kamden Ariano, 8th grade, Geneseo

9TH GRADE – 12TH GRADE

Writing tip:

Poetry HAS a future! You MAY initiate new forms. You MAY create. You do NOT have to consider that “everything has been done.” You do NOT have to write sonnets, villanelles, heroic couplets, haiku, tanka, simply because centuries of poets have written such. Dare to invent something. Understand: that somebody invented the sonnet. Understand: the day before the sonnet was invented there was no sonnet.



Emmett wore his father's ring

Louis bought a little ring. Little ring. Little ring.
Louis bought a little ring while fighting in the war.

Louis wore it everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere.
Louis wore it everywhere. This ring shined so bright.

Louis died across the sea. Across the sea. Across the sea.
Louis died across the sea. The ring came to his wife

Emmett was their only son. Their only son. Their only son.
Emmett was their only son and Louis ring he wore.

In August he went down south. Went down south. Went down south
In August Emmett went south with his father's ring on.

In the store he bought some gum. Bought some gum. Bought some gum.
In the store he bought some gum and whistled at Carolyn

Then he was snatched away at night. Away at night. Away at night.
Then he was snatched away at night and taken on a ride.

His corpse was found in the river. In the river. In the river.
His corpse was found in the river. The river washed the blood.

When Mamie saw her battered boy. Her shattered boy. Her lifeless boy.
When Mamie saw her lifeless boy. Mamie began to wail.

The river didn't take the ring. Take the ring. Take the ring
The river didn't take the ring, Only thing that she could hold!

— Brooks Lansana, 9th grade, Chicago

neverland: memory; clay entering kiln

it sits at the edge of the highway
at 52nd street, just a few miles south of
gerald's donuts, and the decapitated stop sign
some kids tried to steal
before the police caught on
and probation was the consequence
of the misbehavior, of their actions
the effect of the cause

the tree has grown taller,
its roots deeply embedded in the soil
since when last seen
since when last visited

the home grounds are unfamiliar
my hometown ablaze of lost memories,
scattered recollections

feel a smile
pulling, tugging
at my face,
the dark hue and rough patches
of pure skin,
that scar me silently

my dimples
visible,
with firm reassurance the indents by my lips,
have not yet abandoned my laughter,
without the reflection of a mirror
to confirm my gaze

the soil feels dampened
under the wearing soles of my
well worn second hand sneakers,
with loose cloth tearing at edges
of my heels

smushed dirt beneath my shoes
like water pressed clay
before drying out,
before entering the kiln,
before hardening its figure to solid
where mud turns to mug
vase, bowl, dish
and glazed polish
coated once, coated twice,
its clear layer,
turns to glass

— Seunghui Lily Ha, 9th grade, Naperville

Unknown Destination

Along the mossy brick road I walk,
A single destination in mind,
A lonely wanderer seeking something,
From the broken windows and worn wooden signs,

There seems to be no life,
Other than the bugs,
The fireflies light up the empty streets,
As the stars rise from above,

Cars have been parked and never moved,
Their windows broken and cracked,
I reach the end of the mossy brick road,
And stand on the vibrating train tracks.

— Seriphyna Zigler, 9th grade, Chicago

Something you didn't know you still wanted

My mother says you are never really ready.
There is never a good time
for such a change—

The lobs of hair were sitting in the bin all day
and it took me till midnight to realize I still wanted them.
I cut my hair when it was cold;
it's easier for it to feel like a nuisance that way, something to get rid of.

Now I can wash my hair and it will dry much quicker!
Now I can be a modern girl, new!

My mother says
there is so much grief
and it is a relief to hear that I am allowed to grieve so much as I do.

I remember long gone things
I don't mind anymore.
There is less desperation in these places,
fonder and more forgiving, these things that have yet to circle back
until bathtime
or on the road.

But
I remembered hunger today:
blew a dandelion and felt the breath give a headache.

Maybe the other flowers were more ripe
And their seeds clawed less desperately than mine.

— Eleanor Ross, 9th grade, Chicago

New Perspectives

Wavy, brown hair
Carmel, like the crayon color
Had a sudden burst into vivid reality.
Carmel brown eyes
Average, ordinary, typical
Unfortunate, but tolerable
Because if you think about it
Ordinary can have different meanings.
The 5-year-old
Pulls out their brand-new crayons,
Clenching the sky blue
Scraping the paper ferociously.
Their mother's gentle warning
Comes from in the distance.
Back and forth, back and forth
Gently
They grab the sunflower yellow,
Drag it neatly to the corner of the page,
Draw the sun and its elegant rays,
An ordinary summer day.
But art has a mysterious aspect,
Even ordinary things can become extraordinary,
In the snap of a finger.

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It's in the eye of the beholder.
The same child
Works on the stick thin body
Arms, legs, head
Reaches gently for the caramel brown
Hair, eyes
SNAP!
The tears begin to fall,
Their mother walks over
And what did she do?
She said no one ever told you
That broken crayons couldn't color.
The sniffles slowed, and they reached once more.
Tip of crayon, top of paper, new perspective.
New. Perspective.
Maybe ordinary isn't so bad,
And caramel brown can be more than typical.
Maybe, when we see dreary or broken crayons
In ourselves,
Others see art, beauty, masterpieces.
And our broken, blunt-tip features
Quickly revert to the brightest colors on the page.
Bright is not bad, unfortunate,
And it's much more than tolerable, it's extraordinary.

— Mackenzie Burgess, 10th grade, Joliet

girlhood after the storm

Silent is the storm, cold and sober
solemn and somber; that which clutches the
pearls of our youth in its limber fingers,
plucked fresh from the shells of our once-innocence.

A storm that is a woman with blue lips
and pliers to wrench us open and examine
our comfort— only to tear it from us,
to string us up around her neck and say that the flayed
open cadavers of girlhood can be beautiful.

A storm; a woman who must've seen our downy feathers and soft, fragile bone
birdlike yet still grounded, anchored to our homes and our unfettered faith.
she is the gale force wind that comes to push us out the tree
and the one that stares at our adolescence with dispassionate, empty eyes.
a nest, a once-home, fallen from its resting place.
Silent is the storm which learned to be this way.

She is a cruel teacher, one who has only ever taught the way she learned
quiet that crept into her mouth with the fever of infection;
an inflammatory wound that never healed clean.
never rid her of her quiet no matter how the water scalded,
how long she scrubbed.

Silence which likes to teach itself through generations,
where it was more comfortable to create likeness than
question the roots of our own reticence,
where it was easier to let scars grow over and over;
another veneer of tissue on another body
another part of some young girl's anguish.

Where the only ataraxia for our ancestors was the coffin and the hearse,
Sore is the storm that wreaks havoc on our poor souls
the youth and its water; our pearl and our shell, our home and our wings
Sore must be the storm that bound our sea and our sky together to tether
us to land,
a lightning strike to hammer home her own trauma.

Each of our foremothers' griefs wrapped and tucked into the joints of our
skeleton
heavy and haunting, clawing their own way back out our skin.
manifested as a rippling of new scar tissue; echoes of once-hurts.
Sore is the storm that got comfortable in the cycle
and all the women before her who found air only after their last breath;
Each small grief we commiserate with and each one we grow into.

— Annie Wu, 10th grade, Chicago

It Doesn't End Until You Do

I'll never forget the day
When i walked up to that cold, frozen, still, silent body
I didn't know what to say
My childhood, my interests all laid within him.
Now that he's gone, am I gone too.
Everything I did was to impress him
All he did for me was help me.
A kind soul.
You could be yelling, and cursing him out and he'd say,
"I'm sorry" when it wasn't even his fault
He was a giant , but was gentle.
He taught me how to edit videos.
Something that I still love to do till this day.
So when i found out he was gone I didn't know what to say.
The day was so normal.
Pollen flying everywhere, kids playing,
The sun was warm
The sky was baby blue
And then like a burst of lightning in light rain
My father tells me, "he's gone"
That was the first time I lost someone close
And unfortunately it wasn't the last.

— Liyala Wesonga, 11th grade, Chicago

I'm smiling under my mask

I'm smiling under my mask

Inspired by "Say Thank You Say I'm Sorry" by Jericho Brown

Who is the girl with the orange and pink hair,
who I compliment every time I go through the Starbucks drive-thru.
I only ever see half of her face.

Who is the man who stands at the intersection
between Hollywood and Sheridan.
His suit coat and top hat, fitted with a plume,
always dapper and singing his own tune.

Who are the girls at the track meets,
always oversharing and bonding over nerves.
We exchange compliments and lace up our spikes,
becoming best friends for a fleeting moment before we sprint away.

Who was the father who sacrificed his shoe
for our volleyball, stuck high in the branches at the beach.
We could only thank him briefly— we had to
retreat back to our separate set ups to maintain distancing
in the pandemic.

All the interactions cut short and sweet,
I long for the day when we can openly embrace one another,
sharing smiles instead of elbow bumps.

But for now, we squint over our masks at the world,
like we need sunglasses to see the state of the
globe.

— Liliana Green, 11th grade, Chicago

“A Letter to My Son”

I was 9 when Micheal Brown was murdered

Footage of the riots occupied every corner of my street on iPhone 5s, on newspapers, on the TV

There is no protection for the young when they- when we are the ones being killed

That night I had a dream not about me but for my son

It appeared in a poem and it danced in my mind because what is it to be Black if not to make art from unimaginable pain

So to my son- the son that I have not had yet I give you this

I give you your ancestry in the form of a poem because I cannot build you a wall- may it protect you

When you're a child no one warns you of the hate that awaits you

Different place, different time and it wouldn't have been you- is it- no it IS your fault

Questions asked are hushed quickly by a finger held to your mouth by the man or woman you love most

Get quiet quick- hands up or on the dashboard

Words so tight as if Uma and Baba are trying to lock you in themselves to protect you because they are

My inheritance is fear but it is not what I will be giving to my descendants

I will not give this to you my son I refuse

Can I tell you a story?

The greenest grass I've ever seen is the grass that makes up the park that I played at as a child

Memories these days appear through stained glass

Not Biblical stained glass, with hints of color and depictions of holy figures

But glass stained with "you don't belong here" and "you are not like the other blacks"

Glass stained with scornful eyes and the fear you wish you did not have

The fear that is in your heart, in your mother's heart, and your fathers

Stained, dirty, immigrant made in Sudan glass so opaque you can barely see the girl at the park anymore

America America America

Glass stained with red, white, and blue- so opaque that you now cannot see anything at all

All the pain is now patriotism and I'd give my life here and now to wipe the glass clean of the pigment for the sake of clarity

We see ourselves in everything

I see myself on a dollar store poster board

9 letters and a dropped apostrophe

As I look around at the normalization of my murder I see myself in everything

I see my son in everything- the son I have not had yet

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Somedays I long for the smell of grass and the feeling of the hot sun
that defined my childhood, others I curse
my skin for looking like but not being wood
Today, however, at this moment that you and I share I am neither. I
am bakhoor, my son lets be Bakhoor.

Noun: wood chips soaked in oils and perfumes, that when burned
creates an aroma that reminds me of home.

A home that i'll do my best to show you, my son
Incense that floats around my house, from room to room
occasionally out a window left open and just like you-
it will take up room and venture into places unknown and that is
how I stay brave

I stay brave for you when I cannot stay brave for myself
It is not easy to exist as an object son, despite legislature telling us
that we are lucky for what we do have- we do not have much, we only
have each other. But if we exist as smoke we are untouchable
We can be everywhere and nowhere at the same time, I can remind a
young girl on the playground of home

I can give her the heat of the sun, my son I will give you the heat of
the son, the smell of grass and bakhoor
mixed together to provide you the cultural experience that I have
never had

The one I long for; The one I am creating for you my son.
For a life of struggle, the strength that I have but did not ask for
would have all been worth it forth at very moment.

— Ala'a Tamam, 11th grade, Springfield

Miss me unconditionally

I love you

under book jackets and over bridges

sitting on a field of dandelions

sweet nothings taking

flight in the air

rummaging through your anthology of premade flattery

you never fooled me but I

enjoyed them still

lullabies drawing me into a dream state

every word quieted so I could read the

flits of your eyelids and the temperament of your smile

ending and beginning with a now easily

predictable drop of your chin

no one had what you had so I held you tight to me

enveloping my

heart with a developing comfort

to stand the test of time and the unintentionally cruel

let yourself

imprint on me the parts of you I miss

secluded in solemnity

your exterior grows opaque under the

crescent moon,

now I wait for those missing parts to come back.

— Jaydra Hamid, 11th grade, Chicago

Stretch

It is quick. Most things
are, or seem to be,
like

Driving to my sister's and I catch
a glimpse of a girl in her Jeep. She looks
too young
to afford a Jeep but she is in a Jeep all the same
and I catch her with her mouth open. Smiling at something? Maybe at
the world

Tumbles back into concrete and winter and the dirt
from the road flings itself onto the windshield and I wonder
where she is going and why I wonder
what she is going to have for dinner and why
I wonder when she is going to die when she is going to bed when

My mother says
"I swear this stretch gets shorter and shorter."
We're at the exit
already

— Charlotte McManus, 12th grade, Homewood

“How to Make Spring Rolls”

Spring rolls, summer rolls
No matter the weather
My family huddles together
Our table overfilling
Our eyes wandering
Our hands busy

There is a process to this art
A step by step to this roll
You must start with rice paper, dipped in
Cold water
It teaches patience
For you may be bitter and brittle
In need of much care
But with some time
You'll be flexible too

Then you choose your meat
A pork belly here
Or a shrimp there
For life is only fulfilling
When you are
Full

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Next place the noodles
Bouncy, springy
Resilient
Just like you

Of course, you need vegetables
A little crunch to your life
A slice of cucumber
A sprig of mint
All to nourish you before you wilt

Tuck in the sides and roll
Dip into your special sauce
Of just peanut butter and hoisin
A little salty to complement your tears
And a little nutty for the crazy

Here you have it,
Your own gỏi cuốn

Enjoy.

*gỏi cuốn = Vietnamese spring roll

— Cindy Ha, 12th grade, Carol Stream

***“Does poetry make anything happen?
Poetry has been known to alter
opinion. From altered opinion
‘happenings’ evolve”***

— Gwendolyn Brooks



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Brooks Permissions was founded in 2001 and manages the literary works of acclaimed poet Gwendolyn Brooks.

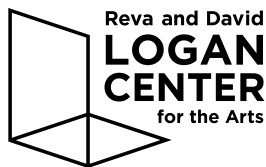
The company processes numerous requests for Ms. Brooks' works annually, working with mainstream, educational, and independent publishers, as well as individual artists for projects ranging from literary anthologies and academic course packs to theatrical performances, multimedia projects and more.

In 2015 Brooks Permissions expanded to include programming and products which help to shine a well-deserved and continuing spotlight on Gwendolyn Brooks's life and work.



The Poetry Foundation, publisher of Poetry magazine, is an independent literary organization committed to a vigorous presence for poetry in American culture.

It exists to discover and celebrate the best poetry and to place it before the largest possible audience. The Poetry Foundation seeks to be a leader in shaping a receptive climate for poetry by developing new audiences, creating new avenues for delivery, and encouraging new kinds of poetry through innovative literary prizes and programs.



The Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts advances arts practice, inquiry, and presentation at the University of Chicago, and fosters meaningful collaboration and cultural engagement at the university, on the South Side, and in the city of Chicago.

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(illustration, cover) is currently an undergraduate student attending UIC. She's an abolitionist artist and feminist. Asha engages in community-organizing, abolitionist campaigns, and mutual aid as a member of a community-based grassroots organization in Chicago. She hopes to help establish community gardens as well as free, sustainable, and Earth-based housing on the South Side of Chicago as part of the struggle for Black self-determination, indigenous sovereignty, and the eradication of global oppression.

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For More Information on the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards please contact Illinois Humanities at:
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