THE SEVENTH ANNUAL
Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards
August 2023
“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.”

— Gwendolyn Brooks
2023 Awardees and Honorable Mentions
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The Seventh 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 2023 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 the Poetry Foundation, revived the youth poetry awards that Gwendolyn Brooks began in 1969 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’d also like to thank all of the teachers, librarians, parents, caregivers, mentors, and others who supported and nurtured young writers throughout Illinois: you’re building the next generation of Illinois poets!

We invite you to read, reread, and enjoy the poems of the 2023 Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awardees.
Gwendolyn Brooks  
by Nora Brooks Blakely

Born in Topeka, Kansas on 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 two children, Henry L. Blakely III and Nora Brooks Blakely.

The first Black person ever to 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 ongoing 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 the 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 30 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 13-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 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, to “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 Ms. 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’s 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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**Something Happens**

For the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poets Awardees, 2023

You are a poet and something happy happens
In your hands.
Even when you are sad, something happy happens
In your hands.
When you close your eyes there is a poem inside
Waiting in the darkness.
When you look around you a poem is anywhere ---
In the trees echoing the wind, and the birds whispering,
In the cars talking and factories and animals
And people saying the earth in all its colors.
Anywhere you are the poem is.
And we find the poem inside each other when we open
Our eyes and hearts.
And the poem can be a poem of justice of love and goodness
Because you are these things.
Write everything in the poem of who you are
And it will be wide and wise and strong and kind
And it will be the earth and the earth will be better
A little bit because of just you
And your holy imagination
Will guide you.
A something happy happens
In your hands.

— Angela Jackson, Poet Laureate of Illinois
**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 South Side, 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 in 2021.
Writing tip:

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

— Gwendolyn Brooks
“My family rains snow...”

My family rains snow.
My brother has snow on his hair.
It sticks to him when he’s asleep.
But when he wakes
there’s snow everywhere,
even on his face.

— Faith Shelby, Kindergarten, Oak Park
Giganto Cat

A house eating a hotel.
And a cat eating the hotel
because the cat was super-sized
and the hotel was the size of a fly.
And all the other cats were cheering
for Giganto Cat.
Then an apartment came
and the cat ate the apartment,
which was the size of a ant
to the cat.
It barely filled up his belly.

— Glenn Cambalik, Kindergarten, Oak Park
The Love

Let the love go through your heart.
When you feel the love get to your heart
You will feel like all the animals in the world.

— Freyja Sieg, Kindergarten, Oak Park
The Wind

I lay in my bed
Horses galloping in my head
As the sound of the wind gallops in my body
As it gallops to my chest
Runs to my heart
Runs to my stomach
Runs to my hip
Runs to my legs
And runs to my feet
Hair flying in the air
Hooves thundering across the ground
Lightning striking in the sky.
When I think of you I feel brave
When I give you hay you chomp it out of my hand
And down your big throat
And in your big stomach
Oh, Captain, you are so kind

— Aria Hampton, 1st grade, Chicago
The Seaside

Down by the seaside
the sand is bright
and the ocean is wide.

Down by the seaside
the sun is light
and the sky turns dark.

It will start all over again.

The seaside.

— Maeve Rogers, 1st grade, Savoy
Candy

Red or yellow
Hard or soft
So many flavors
So many textures,
Crunchy and hard
Stretchy and sticky

So many to choose I can’t say them all,
Mom gives me a frown when I eat it
Dad gives me a secret smile

Oh candy your clothes are hidden behind the curtains and In the secret box
Oh candy when I see you it makes my mouth drip
Oh candy when I smell you I want to find you

I love you
I wish I can eat you every single day
I would not call you yuck oh I would call you delicious

I wouldn’t survive without you

— Binna Schwartz, 1st grade, Chicago
My First Day of School

It was my first day of school
My heart was trembling with fear
I thought I was going to die
My face was red-cheeked
My arms were tight as metal
But my feelings slowly changed
My body felt calmer
My heartbeat was slowing down
My cheeks were peachy
My arms were as wet as the ocean
I felt like I could stay here forever
I was ready for this day

— Ethan Grinstein, 1st grade, Chicago
The Spelling Bee

My turn was only a few moments away My heart was pounding My eyes were bulging My face was red The judges asked me a word and sweat ran down my forehead My mind was racing My fists were clenched I spelled the word and then every sound in the world was toned out The judges spoke That word rung in my head over and over like an echo until it became a reality Ding! And suddenly I was out

— Krishna Rajan, 2nd grade, Chicago
Corey

His toes so small
His hands so tiny
As his eyes grow wide
In the light of the world

With blood all over
Coming into existence
As we all watched
Him start to cry
Looking at us
With a glint in his eye

His eyes started to close
As his mouth opened up
The cutest baby in the world

— Ethan Margulies, 2nd grade, Chicago
Earth, Our Home

Oh Earth my home
The trees you grow
The big green leaves
Make my heart glow

When it is winter it is as white as a polar bear
When it is autumn the crunchy leaves fall
When it is spring the flowers grow as big as a city
When it is summer it is burning bright

Your flowers are so lovely
They look like a colorful cloud

Your food is so delicious
Peaches are so juicy
Mangos are so soft
Smoothies are so flavorful

And You are so perfect

I love our earth and you should too

— Clara Alfaia, 2nd grade, Chicago
[found poem]

Red like a sun
Dark in a cave.
Great star chuckled,
Mourning a grave.

— Dash Carr, 3rd grade, Oak Park
The Faun in the Forest

Drizzle of snow taps the trees. 
The faun’s little hooves crackle 
on the forest floor like someone 
tapping their pen on their desk. 
His parcels tremble in his fingers. 
His rose red scarf hugs his little faun neck. 
The guilt in his blue eyes pleaded for forgiveness.

— Miriam Palmer, 3rd grade, Skokie
**Love before Peace**

Love before peace, piece by piece.  
Graceful when it happens.  
But when you turn the world around,  
You might see your grandpa nappin'.  
Love: kind, caring, and also very daring.  
Peace: hope for all, all for one.  
Love before peace, piece by piece.

— Emily Watkins, 3rd grade, Chicago
**A Girl Named Mia**

“Take off your hat Mia” said teacher
“Dang it” said Mia
I know what you’re thinking
This is a poem
about a girl named Mia right?

Yes but this girl
is not like the others
She is different
She likes to play football and basketball
Her name is Mia

She is a tomboy
If you think because
she is different she doesn’t
have a lot of friends
You are wrong she has 28 friends
She plays four sports
Plot twist she is my sister

And yes out of all the things
I could write about
I chose her
Because I think
Tomboys will change the world

— Gracelin Cassidy, 4th grade, Monmouth
The Sadness of Pollution

A yellow flower swaying in brown dirt,
So free, unaware of the pollution of fast cars with rough calls,
Sick red birds with murky chirping,
Their slow hearts pumping,
Sick trees with branches hard like stone,
Flying planes,
Dirty water,
And red blood flowing through me.

— Charlotte Chung, 4th grade, Chicago
Fading, fading away

Tsk tsk, the pencil shavings falling to the floor, crumbling all the while. It seems they disappear into thin air, as they fall down, down, down. shh, shh, an eraser being used to make words. Pictures disappear like the falling pencil shavings, an eraser like magic. It can erase your thoughts, written down, memories on paper. It can erase your whole life, if you let it. But after a while, the eraser crumbles, shirking into bits, getting dirtier and dirtier every word erased. Going, fading, gone. Gone, gone, gone.

— Vera Volckens, 4th grade, Oak Park
Second Generation Daughter

“Asalamalakum”, (What my mama says is “proper”).
Hey guys - What’s up?
Second generation daughter speaking
Palestinian? or American?

McDonald’s or Shawarma from down the street?
Saturday nights heading to the mall with my friends, or
   prayers at the mosque?
Debka or TikToks?
Hummus on a pita or PB and J?
These are my choices on a daily.

America is home. Palestine is blood.
Red, white, and blue or red, white, green, and black?
“I pledge allegiance...” or “Bismillah”?
Writing left to right, or right to left?
Recite the preamble, or memorize the Quran?
These are my choices on a daily.

Fourth of July; food, family, fireworks.
Eid and Ramadan; fasting, family, feasts.
More American than Palestinian, “Go Cubs Go!”
But on the softball field before every at bat, it’s still “Bismillah!”

The blessings of both - Palestinian AND American

“MahaSalaama” (What my baba says is “proper”).
“Ok, yallah, bye!”
Second generation daughter signing off.

— Seham Matariyeh, 5th grade, Orland Park
Wild Freedom

My ankles bouncing up and down on the piano pedal,
The sound of Chopin swirling about
volant in the air
My fingers flying across the black and white keys
I am nervous on stage, but liberated
Like those free, nimble eagles spinning in the alpine air
That I gaze up at, that I can’t get enough of
Like forceful waves of music.

Watching the smoke billow up from the factory
Trees defeated, falling to the ground with a creak
As a machine punches it with a blade.
Cars belching toxins
Gets me frustrated, furious.
That people don’t appreciate Earth
That people don’t listen.

The music of nature, so free and mystic
    Whirling in the wind
    Booming in thunder
Rustling in the leaves
I admire,
    and I respect.

— Luke Hong, 5th grade, Hinsdale
The Moon and the Sea

When the moon meets the moon
in the barrier of the sea
two glowing eyes
one above one below
Where whales and dolphins
and birds roam about
The sea is silent
except for a shhhhhh

— Noah Shiber, 5th grade, Chicago
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 cliches, 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.

— Gwendolyn Brooks

*As I walk on the pathway, the stone creating sore spots on my feet,*
Cannon

As I walk on the pathway, the stone creating sore spots on my feet, The summer breeze cools down this grassy park. I see a scintillating sun high above the flocculent clouds, which look as velvety as silk. oak trees, moderate in size, but not moderate in beauty. the large mahogany trunk creating a whopping shadow, saving small insects from the merciless sun. I can almost feel the ridges in the tree; a miniature canyon with the multitude of slants in its brown breaking bark. monarch butterflies, flapping their wings in all of their glory, their shimmering ornate wings looking as soft as a feather. My feet touching the crisp grass The wind blows past my face, creating a whooshing echo. I hear the fragments of other people talking, being scattered like pieces of glass. Then I see it, a large copper cannon, with its greenish aura. I see the paint chipping off, like butterflies flying off the side of a building. I think of a cannon just like this in the Civil War,
creating sounds of thunder as it recoils back.  
I see men in blue and gray uniforms falling left and right,  
carrying brown muskets with silver highlights.  
Two men with vermilion red crosses on their arms  
carrying a man on a white woven fabric stretcher,  
the once clean woven stretcher turning red with blood.  
Then, my mother calls me,  
causing the battle to dissolve away like smoke.  
The once alive and fighting men now puffs  
This makes me think of how important this hill is,  
and how  
we must remember history,  
so we never repeat the atrocities again  

— Simon Gudell, 6th grade, Chicago
**The Mountains of Rushing Waters**

I will arise and go now, and go to the mountains of the rushing waters, where the rivers and streams trickle down the steep slopes and flow down into the valley below. The trees, brushing the sky, know each sunset brings an array of new hopes.

And I shall have peace there, for peace comes, like a swooping dove. A place where I watch day and night blend together and they seem to create a painting high up above. I’ll be here when cold winds blow through the mountain heather.

I will arise and go now, for the winds cease. White snow blankets the mountains, skydiving over a red dawn. This is a place of memories... of peace. It’s been years since the first time I was here. As I sit here, I know my childhood is gone.

— Anna Palmer, 6th grade, Skokie
Years And Years

Years and years of being outcasts
Years and years of being viewed as a threat
Years and years of being looked down on
Years and years of being the white man’s pet
Years and years of getting zero respect
“We’re all equal”
Who is “we”?
I’m not you, no, I don’t have blue eyes and blonde hair
Everytime I walk into a room, people stop and stare
Is my melanated skin a crime?
Or does it make me worth a dime?
My hair might not be straight and blond, but it’s valid
Who are you to determine what I can and can’t do?
“We’re equal” you say
Then why are my people being beaten until they draw their last breath?
Why does it not matter when a black family has a death?
Why are we getting zero respect?
Harriet Tubman, Martin Luther King Jr., Ruby Bridges, more and more
All their efforts, yet we’re still treated poor

- continued on next page -
When?
When will it stop?
When will you take your blue eyes and blonde hair and realize that you don’t have to stop and stare?
When will you realize that I’m a person too, that I’m not a threat to you?
I shouldn’t be seen as a black girl
I should be seen for what I am, a person
Not an object
Not a maid
Not a criminal
Not a punching bag
But a human
Black History
His story
Our story
We live on, hardly getting glory
We fight just to survive because we don’t have blue eyes and blonde hair
Why?
Why must we fight?
Why must we fear for our life while walking the streets at day or night?

- continued on next page -
Whipped and whipped  
My ancestors have stripes on their back  
Every day they were under attack  
Centuries later and we’re still being beaten,  
Police officers bringing us to our knees  
“No freedom until we’re equal”  
I guess freedom will never come  
Run through the underground railroad,  
Run from the cops  
It seems like the run will never stop  
Melanin is not a crime  
How hard is that to understand?  
Punishing me because of a curly hair strand, because I’m different?  
Why?  
Why can’t you just let my melanated skin shine?  
Why?  
After years and years of beating us until our heart beats one last time  
Years and years of you walking all over us  
Years and years of you seeing us as animals, something you don’t believe deserves respect

- continued on next page -
Years and years of putting my people through misery
Why?
For power?
Glory?
Or because you just don’t like that I’m different from you and
Breathing?

— Trinity Rucker, 6th grade, Rockford
Today

Today was the same
Same people
Same teachers
Same school

But something was different
Something in the air
I felt as if I should beware

Then I heard it
a bang
that put my ears to shame
People were screaming
And the shooter was the one to blame

Say their names loud and clear
They lost their lives and people that hold them so dear
They should be here
Families have cried dozens of tears

- continued on next page -
But if people care so much
Why won’t anyone interfere?
We are still letting people with guns
Shoot up schools and think it’s fun
They act like we can outrun a gun
So I’m begging
do something you should have done

— Mia Suhr, 7th grade, Salem
Hall of Mirrors

Shining chandeliers hanging from the ceiling
Hanging like fruit from a tree
The yellow floor going down the hall
As far as the eye can see
The mirrors reflecting off each other
They look like they never end
The glass and gold shining in my face
It makes my brain hurt and bend

— Henry Downing, 7th grade, Skokie
The Thief behind the Shattered Mirrors

While roaming through this lengthy hall as a cunning fox, 
Daunting thoughts wander across my mind like I wander this palace. 
The guillotine is a supposedly merciful mechanism that slices swiftly, but 
I don’t want to be beheaded and shamed in front of thousands. 
I am a just lowly thief looking to rise into the upper class, 
but all I see are nauseating gleams of gold pillars and crystal chandeliers. 
The glazed marble walls make me sick. How could the wealthy 
sit here with extensive estates, but spare nothing to the peasants of France? 
The Queen told us to eat brioche, but we’re barely surviving on sawdust. 
She has a small peasant village, though she knows nothing about us! 
I say away with the monarchists, and America seems like just a dream. 
Hopefully, the revolutionaries will save us from this dreadful monarchy. 
But, I best leave before I am executed in front of many.

— Patrick Chan, 7th grade, Skokie
The Sun’s Sisters

Every night we fill the sky with wondrous pictures and stories
Weaving tales of emotion and heroism
Then the next day we wake up in our own solar systems
Giving light as far as we can reach
Bringing life to all
Everyday over and over
And yet the people began to build skyscrapers and billboards
They shine like horrible fake stars
Covering up mine and my sister’s beautiful pictures
We all know that one day we will no longer be seen
Our navy backdrop will turn a sickly yellow
And our stories will be forgotten
Only our own solar systems will know we exist

— Eleanor Bertelsen, 8th grade, Geneseo
Neptune and the Salamander

Prometheus’ secret gift
Encrypted in fennel
Spread to the Masses
Cavorting from tree to tree

Poseidon’s blessing
Waves of cabalistic Tears
Wash upon our shores
Pure and Chaotic

Yin and Yang
Maintain the Golden Mean
Adam’s Ale drench our fiery faults
Us protected, by the Malta Cross

Ferric and Bush
Ravaged by Vulcan
Sleep, tainted Dove
Revert to slumber

— Henry Bohanon, 8th grade, Skokie
Where the Wind Blows

*Inspired by: Untitled (landscape, man on horse) by Edward Mitchell Bannister*

She was gone with the wind, so fast, so subtly
Not even the hungriest frog could catch her with its tongue
And Oh, so beautiful a bug she would be
She ran like the wind, glowed like the sun, and her voice reminisced of a morning bird
when she sung
So beautiful a bug is not possible, but alas, she stood there with me on that field, so happily, running in the mist
Throwing sticks, racing, climbing trees, whatever we wished
She shared with me her ups, her downs, her highs and her lows
In return I did the same for her with my own
Our oblivious lives were never going to change, and together, we would never be alone
She whispered in my ear and played games of tag, hide and seek in the tall grass, or sailing the ocean blue
Soon enough, looking at each other would turn our faces to a reddish hue-
I loved her

- continued on next page -
She was gone with the wind, yet it felt so slow, the air without her so palpable
Like if the day had no sun, this feeling couldn’t be put into words, it was indescribable
Never have I laughed so little, or cried so hard
She was everything, the queen, the soldier, the jester, the guard
But like all of us, our reigns, at some point, must come to an end
And yet, nobody chased her out, she stepped on nobody’s foot, nobody came for her head
The empty field, the lonely mist, the morning birds lay dormant in their nests, never to wake again
I run out to that field, and I searched the sky for my sun, I ran out to meet the wind, I hid under my lilypad to surprise the beautiful bug
Yet I was met with nothing, and when I cry out for her, the mist turns to rain, with which my salty tears mix
And with which my cries are silenced with the thunderous bangs, the rain wrapping around me for a hug
I loved her

- continued on next page -
She is gone with the wind, and that wind will never sway another jade blade of grass  
The quiet echo of her voice still rings somberly in my left ear drum to soothe the unrest in my heart  
But nevertheless, the sailor still puts up his mast  
I will never speak to her again -  
Maybe I should join her too  
On that voyage to other world -  
I loved her  

Please, Oh God, tell me where that wind had last blown  
O please, please tell me the where, give me the direction, show me the way  
I will pay whatever price, I will do any task for this small favor, this loan  
Just to wave goodbye to the beautiful bug, I will happily give my life away  
O wind, tell me where you come from, the direction in which you blow  
Why must you blow away with my beautiful bug in your arms?  
I will sail to the ends of the sea, beyond the horizon, through the raging storm,  
everyday 24/7
Please, beautiful bug, your old frog friend means no harm
Allow me to have a line in your eulogy, before the wind carries you in his arms all the way up to heaven
My loneliness eats my soul, my heart wrings out every bit of its blood for you
I will search, no matter where this twisted road goes
I will find it- where the wind blows-
I love you

— Jonathan Ry Thach, 8th grade, Skokie
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.

— Gwendolyn Brooks
Love and Shame

I am this name.

My name is bilingual. It’s chasing fireflies on my front porch during a warm summer night. A sandcastle. It’s a library filled with books, your footsteps echoing off the walls, the smell of history. It’s pride, it’s loss, and it is an embrace. It is shame. The shame one feels when you know you don’t fit in. When you are different.

My great-grandmother had my name. I don’t know much about her, but I heard she was compassionate. Caring. A clever cook. My grandmother would say that you could taste the special ingredient she always put in.

Love.

When her hands showered love onto her mole, it was a tight embrace, and so reassuring, that the food would even whisper “Vas estar bien.” The hot steam would float to your face and you could smell the chocolate, peanuts, poblano peppers, chile ancho, sesame seeds, and cinnamon, the spicy-sweet fragrance filling your mouth with saliva. She would serve plate after plate after plate, and no one could complain. To her, seeing others enjoy her food was the greatest gift of all. There is no shame in loving others.

I want to spread love like she did. Have the effect she had on people.
But how can you love and forgive when you hurt so much? When your name gets thrown in the mud and then you are ashamed. When they say my name it is slaughtered. It loses its music. Its song. Its essence. My heart breaks and it cries every time they say it slowly. Like when you swallow castor oil. Something gross. But my name isn’t gross. It is a *cempazuchitl* flower in the fall, the aroma of my great-grandmother’s *mole*, passed down from generation to generation, the burn you feel on your tongue after you eat a pepper, demanding your attention. Only not to them. No, they don’t know it fully. They don’t know who I am.

All they see is my name.

They think it’s a clap.
They think it’s a color.
They think it is a place.

But I’m so much more than those things.

I am the intricately embroidered blossoms on my favorite shirt, a kaleidoscope of colors, with curves and lines and it is a delightful mess, the bumps of thread creating a hilly landscape. Neverending. I am the uplifting melodies you hear from the birds in the morning, their song unrepressed by the rain and the cold when the world wants to silence them and keep its control. I am the small drizzle that comes at night, the poignant smell of earth and grass and air that reminds you of your happy days. I am this name.

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There was a time when I would’ve changed it. Given in to them. Stripped away my heritage and my name and become a copy. Become them. I would’ve forgotten who I was and where I came From.

But not now. Now I know
I am my name.

— Camila Bravo, 9th grade, Chicago
Ophelia

Silver stars scatter the pitch black sky
As she sat in the midnight blue ocean
In complete silence
The waters cold and calm
Her tears salty like the ocean stung her skin
She laid back letting the water rise up to her neck
Her breath hitched
The moon high above seemed to mock her
She hated the way it seemed to laugh at her
The way it seemed to say
Look how pathetic you are so far below
She took one last breath and let go
Submerging beneath the dark waters
Her vision began to swim as the waves rolled over
And the ever laughing moon began to grow smaller
Into nothing but a small pearl in the dark

— MiKaylah Brown, 9th grade, Caseyville
Mushroom Cloud

Blow, Blow, Blow Up—Towards The Sky
Into The Air And Into Space. The Ground Shaking
With A Hole Sunken Into The Roads Of Western Japan Where
The Rubble Crashes Through The Now Infected Town. Where Childs
Hands Are Thrown Past Their Mothers Burnt And Blasted Face. Then, Roughly
186 Miles Away Was The Same Mushroom Cloud Raining Down On
Families And Farms And Buildings And Not Caring That These
Are People Too. With Lives To Live And So Are We.
Where You Scared? To See Who Fires
First? To
See Who
Snaps In
This Isn’t
Some Game In Who Caves
First, Who
Presses A
Bright Red
Button That’s
Strong Enough To Kill Humanity As A Whole
And Now Children That Are Still Being Born Today Have No Eyes Or Their Skull Is Indented
And What’s Your Excuse To That Baby. To That Family. Now What If They Did It To Us. How Would
Believes In The American Dream? Is That Then A Shame That Some Pointless War Caused A
Child To Be Born With Pain. Yet They Aren’t Different. We’re All Just Trying To Live.

— Justina Muszynski, 9th grade, Chicago
**American Sun**

*Chinese Exclusion Act, 1882*

*American Sun uses text from the Declaration of Independence (Preamble)*

all night we stir, a rifle through my hair— our ivory eyes mistaken for the moon’s scars. come late august & we watch dreams scatter into thorns. below the american sun, rice paper melts into gunpowder, jaded idols wither inside shrines, abandoned altars burn with incense that drowns our tongues in red, a worthy sacrifice. we hold these truths to be in the heart of this country, wake to the aroma of bloodied clothes splayed across cobblestone roads— a lifetime ago, my father etched the new year into sweat-soaked puddles, scorched his flag until only blackened ash remained. follow the north star & we see the america men suited in navy overcoats with rifles drawn, them: saw-toothed | unhinged patriots | self-evident, that all men are created equal, us: dirty-tongued | palms raised | straw hats splintering the sun, the rugged stars. maybe we can be dreamers— carve our diaspora to last another lifetime, so our sons can burn their own patriotism in between cries of allegiance to this country. at night, we make out the shadows of bayonets, uniform cuffs lifted for the blood god, ready to

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burn away a continent. tell me, can my broken bones sew the stitches of the american flag? these men forced the weight of the world onto us

and their country followed. how our muscles soaked up the redness of the american sun, each rigid curvature molded into the texture of peach skin—how

our yellowing teeth rotted into a mirage of the human heart. how we pledged

our allegiance with faith. how we loved this country. fingers kneaded raw. blackened grit beneath each callus. bloodlines strangled sweet, an ocean away. long ago,

my father scorched his patriotism until only blackened ash remained & now

his flag is my own to bear. look up now—a shooting star streaking through the sky,
rushing to scrawl a chapter of our history before it fades into the thorned lyrics of an american anthem. because in this country, we are the color of wild daffodils, a skin too good for beating. their rifles glow red, white, and blue if daylight strikes at the right angle. a lexicon drowned beneath the ink of executive orders,

diverged from the land of the free, a mis-stitched american dream. we are split below the american sun—where my father’s heritage scorched into fractals of a timeworn promise.

— Robert Gao, 10th grade, Champaign
Transcriptions of Two Voicemails

August 18

Hey,

it's me.

I know we haven't talked
in quite some time.
I heard what happened; I thought
I should reach out even though
you claim the falsity of being fine.

I bet that you don't go out now
like you used to, just to feel the early air.
I get it, I know that it gets cold and
I know that the sky looks different
when your friends are up there.

Loss is a great and rolling ocean and
treading water gets tiring when it's nonstop.
If you feel like talking to someone
or need a buoy to help you stay afloat,
you know that my number's at the top.

So anyway,
if you get this please write back.
I know that it is all different now.
It's different for me too.
But, solace is a quiet and small
and dim and comforting place and
I want to be there with you.
January 1

Hey!

It's me.

I know we haven't talked in almost a week. I heard about some job offer, so I decided to reach out and I'll tell you all about it when we meet.

I bet that you are loving your new job in the city. It's always so pretty in Chicago. I bet it gets cold in the winter and I would love a picture of the sky there or you and your new friends or the snow.

I'm glad that things are looking up. I hope the new year treats you well. If you feel that current's tug still, I know you've learned to stay afloat. You've made it to the brighter side of hell.

So anyway, thank you for deciding to write back. I'm flying in tomorrow, so I'll meet you by the vans. I'm glad you found your solace and I cannot wait to see you. Call me back when you get a chance.

— Adelia Sandifer, 10th grade, Alton
Cre(m)ation of Memory

I - RECEPTION
The only thing I remember was the tamales in the back room. I picked away at the raspy wrapping, crinkling against my lips as I chewed down by mistake too soon, the choclo wedged between my teeth, its throat husky from whispers, its wax hemmed to my tongue maybe then, I found it hard to swallow.

II - SERVICE
The only thing I don’t remember was the wailing. assails of horror, shattered cornflowers cascading behind the casket, petals trailing—

was it blood?

or maybe the tinkling of ice cubes circling my ear like church bells clinking, clinging tight to the building like prayer beads wasting,

wailing,

- continued on next page -
maybe from mouths,
from nightmares,
or the monsters under my pew.
maybe then, I took another sip.

III - CASKET
I could tell you about the stench they hemmed into her dress,
the steely powder crusting every ounce of skin, raspy satin
scrunched against her shirt like rubber wrapping.

her body laid still,

not covered in affection or salsa dresses or sturdy aprons that whispered
wrinkled fragrance
her plastic bones were sunken,
prayer beads welded to her wrist.

in the casket, she was kerosene,

sculpted from wax like the choclo imbued
in her eyelids coated in cornflower blue.
maybe then, I forgot to remember.

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IV - CREMATION

The only thing I remember was the urn in our back room. I picked away at my nail bed, made it to lie in, just like the casket I forgot to kiss goodbye—

it invariably burned,

the way she remained in our husks, tied and tangled, ashes mangled into paraffin like our throats into whispers, reaching, pressing, praying, wailing, assails of horror chewed down by mistake. maybe then, my memory wasn’t hidden behind corn husks.

Maybe then, I took another bite.

— Morgan Montoya, 10th grade, Chicago
Beautiful Mess

i want to be spilled paint.
the deep green kind—
the kind that stains your converse like glitter and
doesn’t wash away on a dance through the rain on a thursday,
i want to be a hurried signature,
half the letters curled together the way her curls intertwine when her hair flies up in the wind wild and crazy and free,
golden hour springing from dawn to midnight i want to be
the perfume that lingers on your sweater like
flowers or vanilla or something in between
i want to be big t-shirts and black heels
your favorite page in that old book, torn on the edges with corners turned down
i want to be love letters unfinished and coated in tea
i want to be sea glass
so many blues you can’t pinpoint and
shades of time you can’t understand,
the shattered piece from a bottle it’s outlived
i want to be your oldest friend and your biggest surprise,
the minor sixth on replay on your mind
not a force to be reckoned with but a force to be loved...

- continued on next page -
i want to be a rose petal that falls into your hand to save in an album.

to be so unbelievably imperfect that you just can’t help but fall in love with every shard,
every taste of an unprompted season—
i want to be a mess.

a beautiful,
beautiful mess.

— Sophia Memon, 11th grade, Chicago
su liao de ai (plastic love)

sometimes i get so focused
i almost don't remember where i am
and think that everywhere looks like
china

those dainty streets of tatou, with bikes and cars
fighting for existence on the dry pavement
spinning toys and knockoff characters and
green trees, always too
saturated.

i miss it

you know, they say
my eyes look like
almonds
when i speak chinese
it sounds like i'm shouting
and those long legs are paper cranes
better off folded.

i thank them

hao lei, hao lei (good, good)
in school
i study diligently.
i know everything from the
moon landing
to the american revolution
to why my name
is missing from the textbook.

teacher, a question.

if i sit here waiting
white lotus in the mud like some adage
can i return to that country
of fireworks and paper,
buy milk candy?

hao lei, hao lei (so tired, tired)

after all, we must remember
no matter how bright are
those flashing lights,
spinning pinwheels

personhood is mass-produced.
i am but a cheap toy.

— Sophie Lin, 11th grade, Naperville
What We Use as Medicine

My first taste of lingonberry was from in my mother, the second was broken up in the food processor and spooned into my mouth as medicine.
Satan’s secret, Gud vatten.

Nona told me that food heals which is why she always got along with my dad.
Honoring Islamic law was his specialty: no pork, no alcohol, halal meat only.

I found it ironic that my dad owns bars.
He told me drinking is his customers’ version of medicine, that he couldn’t change their ethics.

Last week, dad fired his longtime manager.
He didn’t cut Julian, his daily customer, off after 3 beers.

Dad carried him to the hospital, the electrocardiogram screeching loud as a siren.
Doctor doused his surgical tools in rubbing alcohol.

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He paused
to dip his sharp silver spoon into wine
and shove it down Julian’s throat.
He called this Julian’s antiseptic; dad called it torture.

He is now a survivor of cardiomyopathy -
walked straight out of surgery with a bottle in one hand and red roses
in the other.
Maybe his drink really was his medicine.

— Hanna Bilgin, 11th grade, Chicago
The Monsters that Hide behind her Silence

I am going to let you in on a little secret. Something locked away in the dark to protect the worst of us.

The truth is a heartless woman. She must be, or some people will never learn.

The truth does not care what you had to drink. The truth does not care what your gender or sexuality is.

The truth does not care what you were wearing. The truth does not care how many times you said yes before you said no.

The truth does not care about good intentions. The truth does not care if they were a family member. The truth does not care if they were not a man. The truth does not care how mature you are for your age.

The truth does not take too kindly to being told to shut up, sit down, and look pretty like a good girl. The truth is not ladylike, the truth is not well-mannered. The truth does not care that they “didn’t seem like the type.” The truth does not care about our corrupted justice system. Created by the privileged, for the privileged, and with only the privileged in mind.

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What did you expect? The truth is not a part of humankind. The truth is not a lawmaker who will never understand our experiences.
The truth sees beyond politics. The truth sees beyond his social status. The truth sees beyond his charming personality. The truth sees your tears.
The truth sees your pain.

The truth sees hundreds of years of pain caused by people with charming personalities who did not seem like the type.
The truth sees them falling apart on their bathroom floor. The truth sees her walking home at night.
Keys woven between her fingers, preparing for the worst, praying for the best. The truth does not take sides. She takes numbers, facts, and statistics, have you seen the statistics? I am a part of those statistics. I am not afraid to say that I am a part of those statistics if it means that someone in this room won’t be. It makes you wonder, who are the monsters that hide behind her silence?

We cut to a party where you are letting loose. You are not the only one drinking. It is a party after all.

You stumble into what you thought was an empty room, except the empty room is not empty. There is a girl passed out in the
corner of the room. She seems like she had a little too much to drink. Does that give you the right?

At that moment, you have some choices to make. So, what do you choose?

Do you close the door? Which side of the door are you on when it latches shut? Are you still in the room with her unconscious body?

Do you lock the door behind you? Do you roll her onto her stomach? Is she face up or face down? What do you do to her corpse-like body now?

A corpse of a body. Where have we heard this story before, I wonder? The blond bombshell who was murdered, I mean who passed away in the 60’s perhaps? And if she stops breathing?

Does that stop you or does it motivate you? And if she starts crying, do you keep going?

And if she was your little sister in that room? Would you still lock the door behind you as you crept towards her? Statistically, that has been your girlfriend, sister, mother, aunt, grandmother, cousin, niece, daughter, and granddaughter in that room time after time.

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Would you want the person in the room to keep going if that was your sister instead of a stranger? No.

That unconscious girl is someone’s daughter, she is someone’s niece, she is someone’s aunt, she is someone’s cousin, she is someone’s mother, she is someone’s grandmother, she is someone’s granddaughter, she is someone’s girlfriend, she is someone’s little sister.

This time it is a stranger, but it will not always be. Still don’t believe me? Ask the women in your life. If we are going off statistics, they are almost guaranteed to have a story. To my fellow statistics, some people will only ever see a number. Know that your truth means so much more than just a number. We need to raise each other up now more than ever.

To the statistics, to the kids who grew up too fast, to the kids whose nightmares are haunted by their truth, to the kids who feel more at home in the mental hospital than they do their own house, to that boy I once knew who never got his justice, failed and fucked over by the system, to the kid who finches every time the room gets a little too loud, to the kids who leave their

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hoodies on all year around in order to hide the pain under their sleeves, to the kids who had to learn their boundaries the hard way, to the kids who had to learn everything on their own, to the kids fighting battles they were signed up for long before they knew how to speak, to the kids who do not know what love is supposed to look like because their family never showed them, to the kids who get sent home despite screaming their truth screaming her head off, to the girl I knew who spent over fifty days in the mental hospital because she had no home, to the kids who fluctuate between feeling everything and nothing in the span of a day, to the kids who understand what a PRN is from personal experience, to the kids who feel more comfortable with complete strangers than they do their own family, to the kids who can do nothing but watch as their rights are slowly peeled away one by one, to the kid who had a room full of people pray over them because their family didn’t like who they were, to the kids whose mothers did nothing but watch while it happened, to all the kids who have been backstabbed and betrayed by the adults in their life, I see you.

To the adults who were supposed to protect and love these children, you are no better than the adults from your own childhood nightmares. What happened to doing better? Do better.

— Mateo Murphy, 11th grade, Monmouth
Endurance Test

my anger is a worn,
ill-fitted leather jacket.
it was passed down to me from my father,
and his father before him,
and his father before him.
the sleeves are too long,
the shoulders too broad.
the jacket is much too large for me to carry,
but carry it i must,
because it’s the only one
that will ever be suited for me.

when your father’s hands are tattooed in the blood
of all his fathers before him,
it is only natural for you to be born
with all that rage stuck between the gap
in your baby teeth,
such is the nature of these things.
i was six years old when my father
passed down that leather coat to me.
not my older brother,
sunlit and golden and perfect in the way that all elder sons are, 
but me, rotten to the core, 
who sharpened my teeth on the bite of my tongue.

when i received that coat, 
it had already been frayed 
and worn. 
that coat was so large 
i could hardly walk. 
for it was too heavy, 
and i was too weak. 
others seemed to notice it as well, 
telling me what an ugly look it was, 
unbefitting for a little girl. 
but little do they know that before i am my father’s daughter, 
i am his son. 
the sons of angry fathers 
always seem to wear the coat so well, 
and we bear the unescapable heirloom 
like soldiers bear their swords 
and teeth.
and though it may be true that on me
it is a garish,
ugly
wretched thing,
i have learned to wear it well.
(i fear the sleeves may always be a touch too long,
but they hide the blood on my knuckles with ease.)

— Anonymous, 12th grade, Naperville
beans (rebrewed)

I’ll wake up and clutch poppy red
The autumn leaves that lit themselves anew
Just outside my windowsill
Remind me that change does not happen overnight
And a basket of powder
It helps me realize that passion
And keeps my heart beating
No matter how much my skin detests the sensation
Of fire ants crawling down my throat and into the hills past my lungs
Begrudgingly, I start to work

I’ll scrape with broken twigs and mud
Scratch at the one thing I’ve let consume me
Yet I find it ironic that it has not been my passion
But rather necessity
That has carved its way into my mind
And dictated what sculpture I’ve made next
I’ll forever envy Michelangelo, as he figured it out before I
That while it may be set, stone can be broken
And so I crave it, whatever it may be
But I can always try and figure it out over the next cup of coffee

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The evening comes swiftly as do thoughts
I’ll always regret what I haven’t done, yet mourn over what I can and should
And the coffee comes back for vengeance
On me, for allowing nothing to come to out
On you, dear family, for telling me what I should do to live
On life, for not asking if I was ready to live it
And what was given will be taken away
As the slowing of my heartbeat is more sobering than a drink alone
While I am limitless, my body is not
My mind may run while time cheers it on
And I wish for one to choose for me
So for the sake of my passion
Let me down easy, my dear candle flame
Let me down easy, as you harshly burn
Let me down easy, as your reluctance to die is what keeps you alive
So I beg of you, and out of want for me
Let me down harshly, and let me drop
With a drunken thud onto my hardwood floor

I know must stop my wallowing
Before swallows come to pluck what’s left
And birds drink blood
But that’s out of necessity

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And I’d quite like my morning coffee
Just so I can taste my own blood
Cough and sputter over self realization
And pray I don’t die from the lingering hope
That my own flame will finally clutch its wick

— Ashtynn Geans, 12th grade Chicago
“Does poetry make anything happen? Poetry has been known to alter opinion. From altered opinion ‘happenings’ evolve”

— Gwendolyn Brooks
Illinois Humanities, the Illinois affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, is a statewide nonprofit organization that activates the humanities through free public programs, grants, and educational opportunities that foster reflection, spark conversation, build community, and strengthen civic engagement. We provide free, high-quality humanities experiences throughout Illinois, particularly for communities of color, individuals living on low incomes, counties and towns in rural areas, small arts and cultural organizations, and communities highly impacted by mass incarceration. Founded in 1974, Illinois Humanities is supported by state, federal, and private funds. Learn more at ILhumanities.org and @ILHumanities.
Brooks Permissions was founded in 2001 and manages the literary works of acclaimed poet Gwendolyn Brooks.

The company processes numerous requests for Ms. Brooks’s 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.
Asha A Edwards

(illustration, cover) is currently an undergraduate student attending UIC who is pursuing public health. Asha sometimes engages in community organizing, abolitionist rooted campaigns, and mutual aid as a member of community-based grassroots organizations in Chicago. She’s a virtual artist who also assists in work by creating liberatory visions of the future. She engages in direct action campaigns through Assata’s Daughters and WeAreDissenters, an anti-war, anti-militarism, and anti-imperialism organization.
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For More Information on the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards please contact Illinois Humanities at: poetry@ILhumanities.org or 312.422.5580.

Please visit us at: ILhumanities.org/poetry.