

August 2023



# THE SEVENTH ANNUAL GWENDOLYN BROOKS YOUTH POETRY AWARDS





***“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

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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.

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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.

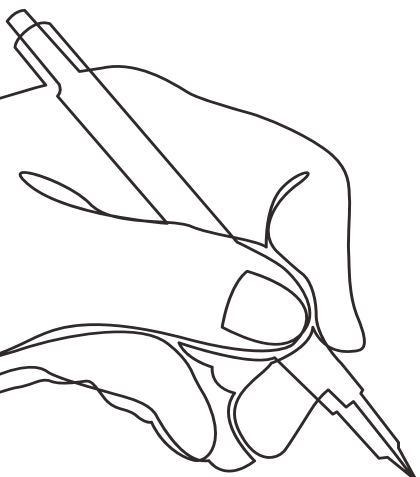
— Angela Jackson, Poet Laureate of Illinois

## **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.

# KINDERGARTEN – 5TH GRADE

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## ***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.

- continued on next page -

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

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**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.

— Gwendolyn Brooks



## **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,

- continued on next page -

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 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

- continued on next page -

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

# 9TH GRADE – 12TH GRADE

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## ***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.

- continued on next page -

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

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## *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  
That Change? Would You Feel More Empathy Towards A White Family? Towards Someone Who  
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

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## **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,  
assaults 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...

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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)*

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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

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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

- continued on next page -

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,

- continued on next page -

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.

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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



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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.

## **Acknowledgements**

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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**.



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