

September 2025



THE NINTH 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

2025 Awardees and Honorable Mentions Table of Contents



KINDERGARTEN - 4TH GRADE

<u>Happy Days</u>	Alantis Martin	11
<u>Loves Me</u>	Essence Dean***	12
<u>Ballgown, Please!</u>	Jennifer Eklund	13
<u>Field Trip Day</u>	Major Garvan*	14
<u>Wind and Grass</u>	Germany Ashford	15
<u>That Terrible Thing</u>	Oliver Spanner	16
<u>Rain</u>	Maryam Zeeshan*	17
<u>The Hibiscus Flower</u>	Delilah Long	18
<u>Stapler</u>	Rani Patel	19
<u>Untitled</u>	Carmen Foley Strasburg*	20
<u>The Nature Walk</u>	Mya Watkins	21
<u>Our World is Crumbling</u>	Bella Xia	22
<u>Rain and Desert</u>	Roy Conley*	23



5TH GRADE – 8TH GRADE

<u>light</u>	Isabelle Lakier	25
<u>The frog on the lilypad</u>	Ray Weitzman	26
<u>Being Me</u>	Anna Vermilyen*	27
<u>Vinegar & Sage</u>	Vivian Steel	28
<u>The Harvest of Silence</u>	Matthew Tesiano Cagadas	29

<u>Blitz</u>	Vera Volckens*	30
<u>A Last Effort</u>	Eli Teper	31
<u>I am from</u>	Sophia Javier	33
<u>Eternal</u>	Caroline Field*	35
<u>Storm's Coming</u>	Khloie Waterhouse	36
<u>intertidal</u>	Beatriz Whitford-Rodríguez	37
<u>Sculpted Lies</u>	Maddy Willard*	39



9TH GRADE – 12TH GRADE

<u>I Dream of Tomorrow's America</u>	Ellie Hersher-Dale***	41
<u>Dementia</u>	Angel'la Murray	43
<u>The Quiet Gaze</u>	Haritha Jagadeesan Suganya*	46
<u>requested funeral rites</u>	Leonidas Leigh	47
<u>Shock and Awe, Attrition, Punishment, Boxing</u>	Serafina Zethmayr	49
<u>what the comb said to the black girl</u>	Zoe Cobb*	51
<u>Outrunning Grief</u>	Ruby Kemp	52
<u>Nature of Destruction</u>	Antaya Malnati	54
<u>The Name I Made My Own</u>	Melynda Patton*	56
<u>If They Take Her</u>	Dalila Martinez	58
<u>Toto, I don't think we're in Chi-town anymore</u>	Morgan Montoya	60
<u>RAMBLINGS OF A SINNER AS AN ABECEDARIAN</u>	Finch Shaw* ***	62
Acknowledgements		68

* Honorable Mention *** Previous winner or honorable mention

The Ninth Annual Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards **by Margy LaFreniere**

We are so pleased to present this year's collection of youth poetry. They celebrate the incredible talent present in our state.

We are profoundly grateful to outgoing Poet Laureate Angela Jackson for her five years of service to Illinois. Each year, she has written a poem to celebrate our awardees and shared it with them in person at the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards. This year, we thank her with the *Passing the Torch Award*. The *Passing the Torch Award* is given to a pair of winners — an adult champion of youth poetry, as well as an outstanding youth poet. She has helped us select a youth poet whose poem reflects the moment, is uniquely thought-provoking, and lights the path forward for others, including their peers. The youth winner will be announced at the ceremony. Ms. Jackson, thank you for your service. Your wisdom and light will continue to guide us.

Our incoming Illinois Poet Laureate, Mark Turcotte, carries on Ms. Jackson's tradition of service to young people through poetry. His warmth and thoughtfulness shine, and we are looking forward to his tenure. He will deliver his first poem for the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awardees this year.

The poems this year reflect the turbulent times we live in. They share laughter, grief, anxiety, and hope. We hope these pages will encourage you to listen more closely to one another.



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.

Mark Turcotte

Just named as 6th Illinois Poet Laureate, writer and teacher Mark Turcotte (Turtle Mountain Band Anishinaabe) first arrived in Chicago in early 1993, where he quickly rediscovered his love of writing poetry and soon became an active member of the city's thriving literary performance scene. That summer he won the First Gwendolyn Brooks Open-Mic Poetry Award and later was named by Ms. Brooks as a Significant Illinois Poet. Throughout the 90s Turcotte was privileged to get to know Ms. Brooks and to read his work on stage with the esteemed Angela Jackson. He is honored to serve the legacy of those two Laureates. He lives in the Rogers Park neighborhood and is Distinguished-Writer-In Residence in the English Dept at DePaul University.

Dear Youth Poets, Dear Angela Too

Dear poets of youth, poets of silky ardor,
of laughter and vigor, dear poets with songs
in your glances and stars in your smiles, I can
see and hear that you've been seeing and hearing,
watching and listening, learning from dear dear
Angela, our dear Laureate Jackson, following
her poet footsteps, her Laureate legacy, her
firm and happy advice to make poems from
your world, your people, places and things, from
your streets and dreams, your fields of vision,
from the sound of clouds in your sky and the taste
of sunlight on your teeth, poems from scabs and tears,
poems from bravado and fear, make poems like dear
Angela showed and shows us all to do do do, dear dear
Youth Poets keep making poems from your Everything.

— Mark Turcotte, summer 2025

KINDERGARTEN – 4TH GRADE

Happy Days

A happy day is my birthday!

A happy day is Easter!

A happy day is getting a Teddy Bear! Love

A happy day is at the park!

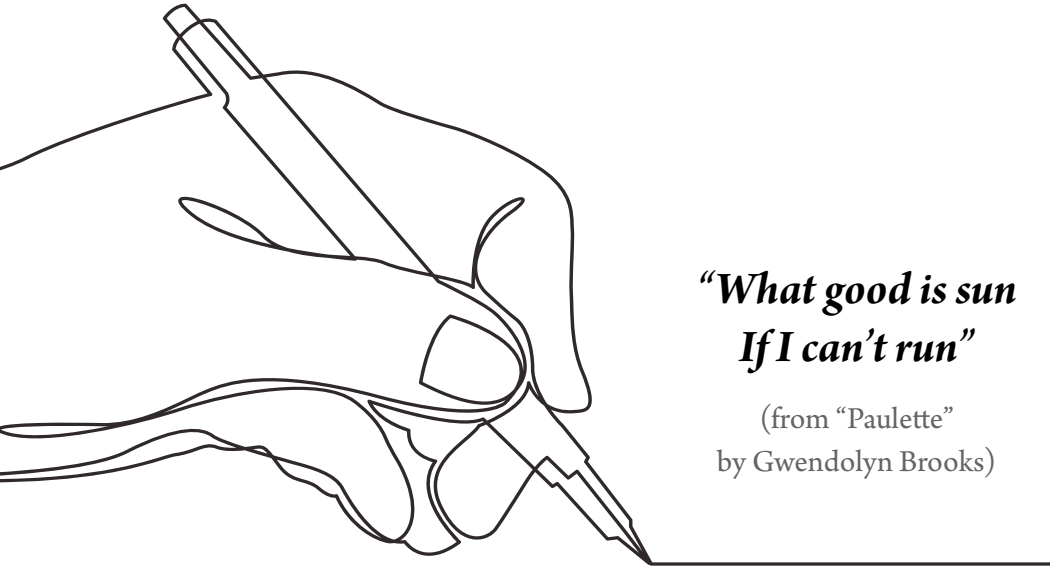
A happy day is going to school!

A happy day is eating an orange

So we can get healthy

And strong.

— Alantis Martin, Kindergarten, Peoria



***“What good is sun
If I can’t run”***

(from “Paulette”
by Gwendolyn Brooks)

Loves Me

Oh what a love to be surrounded by love
When I open my eyes I know God loves me
When I eat my breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I know my mommy
loves me
When I need help putting on my clothes or getting something I can't
reach, I know my daddy loves me
When I just need a hug or to hear "great job" or "it's ok" I know my
big brother CJ loves me
When I need help understanding anything my brother Daniel is
there and he loves me
When I am ready for an adventure far away from home I know my
Gigi loves me
When I want to a special time to be free I know my godmommy
loves me
When I am sad and need to be comforted my uncles are always there
to love me
When I need support in anything I am doing I know Nanny loves me
I am surrounded by so much love and that makes life so good.
They love me, I am loved.

— Essence Dean, 1st Grade, Chicago

Ballgown, Please!

I'm wearing a pretend ballgown
We can't see it
It is pretend.
I found it in my closet
Kid, hold on!
I need to get dressed!
I will get you some food
After I get dressed
In my pretend ballgown
What do you want to eat?
Fruit Loops for breakfast, please!

— Jennifer Eklund, 1st Grade, Peoria

Field Trip Day

I went on a field trip.
I visited Nature Center.
I saw Venus flytraps.
I saw cattails.
They looked like hotdogs.
I also saw milkweed,
Monarch caterpillars' favorite food.
I want to go back to Nature Center.

— Major Garvan, 1st Grade, Chicago

Wind and Grass

The wind and grass
Are like best friends.
When it's windy
The grass moves
It's like the wind's tickling the grass
And it runs in the sky so fast.

Sometimes I sing to the wind.
I can imagine the wind pushing me up
In the sky
And twirling me around.

The wind's like a big hand
If you're hot
And need some air
Ask the wind
You can imagine.

— Germany Ashford, 2nd Grade, Peoria

That Terrible Thing!

Oooo that thing that terrible thing
With eyes of goo, slimy sharp teeth, and a long terrible tail
Ooooo that thing that terrible thing
It has big claws
As sharp as a spear
It shoots a beam
As bright as the sun
Oooo that thing that terrible thing
Is HERE!

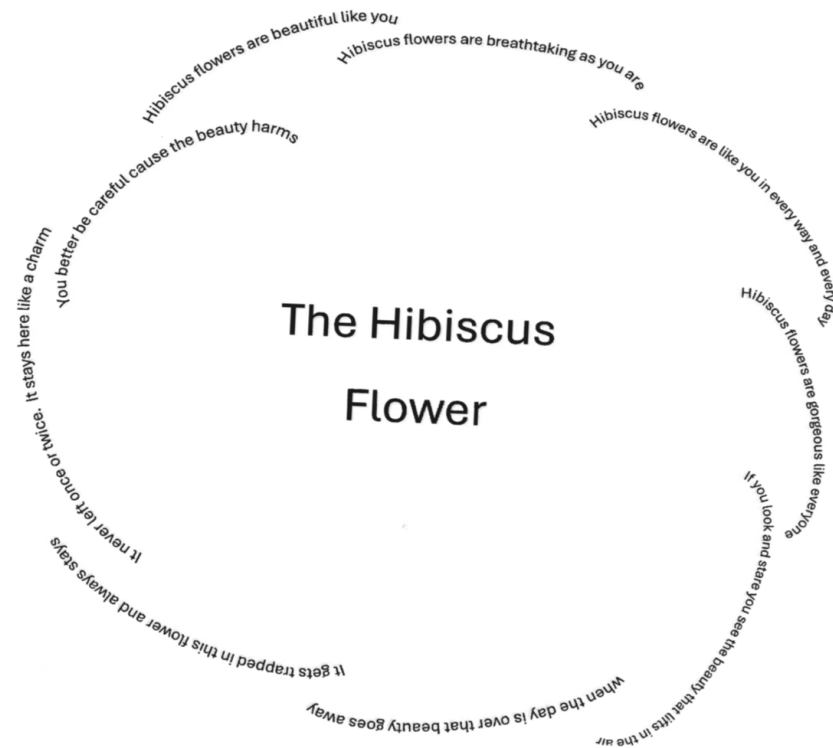
— Oliver Spanner, 2nd Grade, Oak Park

Rain

It's raining.
Trees are wet.
A kid is cold.
Squirrels are hiding in a hole.
Rain's drumming on green grasses,
Making tip-tap sounds.
Worms' wiggling up to the ground,
Dancing to the sound of rain.

— Maryam Zeeshan, 2nd Grade, Chicago

The Hibiscus Flower



— Delilah Long, 3rd Grade, Peoria

Stapler

Creeping, crawling all around
Do you hear that loud sound?
Fears and frights in your ear
Ahhh – it's an alligator over here!
Chomping in my big, dark shed
Even when I'm tucked in bed
Don't worry, it's just a dream
The alligator is on your team!

— Rani Patel, 3rd Grade, Chicago

Untitled

mondays
picking up the
same old pencil

— Carmen Foley Strasburg, 3rd Grade, Winnetka

The Nature Walk

The path beneath my feet.
A tapestry of earth and beat
Whispers of the wind come to me
In melodies both soft and fine.

Leaves dance in gentle breeze
Their rustling song
Puts me at ease.
The sun dips low, a golden sunset
Painting skies in shades of blue.

With every step, a world expands.
A journey shaped by nature's hands.
Through fields and forests, wild and free
The adventures call me.

— Mya Watkins, 4th Grade, Peoria

Our World is Crumbling

We made forgotten promises of a perfect world.
Still we breathe in toxic fumes,
Still we make poor creatures go extinct,
Still we call it progress.

We have a world of confusion,
Seasons blending and calendars flipping,
But the weather does not listen.
The sky does not even know what season it is.
Winter slowly disappearing,
Fall shriveling up,
Spring without its cheeriness,
And Summer like a hot blaze.

Bees hover over blossoms to find them dry and brown,
Pandas suffer from their bamboo vanishing,
Polar bears standing on melting homes,
Sea turtles are trapped in plastic that we threw away foolishly,
Frogs and salamanders gasping in poisonous air.

Still we waste paper and don't care,
We say it will be recycled,
But it still releases smog that stains the sky.

Still we never turn off our lights,
And leave our electronics on all day.

Still we call that progress.

— Bella Xia, 4th Grade, Des Plaines

Rain and Desert

Earthrise is happening.
It looks magnificent
as the rainbow-looking earth rises.
You see a desert and rain clouds
as you look
into the dark abyss on the moon.
You see the earth rise above you.
It feels like you are hypnotized
as the mesmerising sight happens.
The earth goes down and down and down
until you can see it no more.
You wait as the earthrise happens again.

*Inspired by the painting *Snoopy-Early Sun Display on Earth*
by Alma Thomas*

— Roy Conley, 4th Grade, Skokie

5TH GRADE – 8TH GRADE

***“I’ve stayed in the front yard all my life.
I want a peek at the back”***

(from “a song in the front yard” by Gwendolyn Brooks)



light

When sleeping there is darkness,
until the sun comes up and through the window it wakes me.
Sunlight shines through all of the day when everyone can remark at its
beauty,
it gives us warmth.
After so long of being in the day, we want to rest our heads.
Look up at the soft light coming from the night,
Moonlight can help us go to sleep and only some can see its beauty, so
it's special for
you to see.

In the dark of night when there is no moon, there is still some light
shining on you.

The faintest of light but all can see,
starlight, tiny suns, or stars a million years away,
shine so brightly we still can see them. Tiny droplets of light far far away.

— Isabelle Lakier, 5th Grade, Chicago

The frog on the lilypad

Blending in
Hiding out
A pink string flings
in the blink of an eye
a hunger put at rest.
Suddenly,
A flash of movement,
Leaping forward
Towards other chances
To strike.
A sticky landing
Ominous thunder resounds
Rain pours down
Flooding hopes
Drip
Drip
Heavy droplets smash
Explosions
Ripples echo in puddles
Black clouds float off
White ones drift in
Still patiently
He waits.

— Ray Weitzman, 5th Grade, Chicago

Being Me

If I were I
I'd paint a beautiful picture in the sky.
Everything I see,
Everything a part of me.
I would feel the clouds so far away,
I'd dance with the moon and shine with the sun all day.
I'd be free with the birds and sky,
I would watch the sun rise and set.
I'd ride the waves and be me
The only thing I want to be.

— Anna Vermynen, 5th Grade, Chicago

Vinegar & Sage

No one is watching the shapes of the steam
but the kings, queens, and jacks on the table
The shriveled tomato cries on its plate,
and my little cousin decides to ask
pepper or salt,
pepperoni or sausage,
vinegar or sage
Singing in the kitchen
the sparrows whistling along
as the wind chimes mourn in the summer breeze
In the drawers,
coupons
with dates from forever back
Wrinkles in the corners
of my grandma's eyes
as I reach for the last cucumber slice
and eat away the feelings I used to think mattered

— Vivian Steel, 6th Grade, Skokie

The Harvest of Silence

A farm on the grass, with trees that are green
But darkness lies inside, no soul to be seen
The farmhouse stands with weathered grace
The war has been carved upon its face
The storming clouds hold the darkness that shall show
No flowers to bloom. No plants to grow
The barn's red paint, once bright and proud
Has become a color, all dirty and brown.
Yet in the shade of a crumbling stone,
A child's toy lies alone.
A wind up wooden horse, a memory shared.
Of innocence, of lives once spared.
This farm, no longer just a place
It bears the scars of war's embrace.

*Inspired by the artwork *The Farm* by Kenjiro Nomura*

— Matthew Tesiano Cagadas, 6th Grade, Skokie

Blitz

Tight Anger
Tight air
Air disappearing
Air gone
Gone forever
Gone for eternity
Eternity like ages
Eternity until anger stops
Stops like getting hit by lightning
Stops like heaven and hell combined
Combined like strength and weakness
Combined like lightness and darkness
Darkness like pure black
Darkness like seeing red
Red shoots through everything
Red disappears
Disappears and weakness arrives
Disappears from reality
Reality oh so cold and bright
Reality is you crumpled on the floor, screaming, yelling
Yelling like everything is gone
Yelling like nothing and everything is the same
Same like this
Same as everything
Everything done
Everything gone
Tantrum.

— Vera Volckens, 6th Grade, Oak Park

A Last Effort

I lie with you
On the cold floor of the veterinary office.
Stroking you with my dry, tearstained hands.
Your body is small, and fragile.

This isn't like you.
The you I remember would run and play.
The you I remember would jump and chase.
The you I remember would eat.
You aren't the you I remember.

You haven't made a sound in months.

You lie here with me now.
Every breath a battle.
Every blink a fight.
The veterinarian stands up.
He is done with the second dose.
I know you fought the first.

I run my fingers down your back.
I can feel your little bones beneath.
Thick layers of beautiful fur,
now only soft patches of hair.

You try to turn over.
But you have become too weak.
I can feel it.
Your frustration.

Your exhaustion.
Your want for normalcy.
I carefully crawl over you,
Lying down facing you.
You lift your head for a moment.
Before letting it back down.

You look up at me
Through droopy eyelids.
I can see you fighting the drugs.
I can see you trying to stay here.

Finally, you close your eyes.
I do the same.
Pushing myself closer to you,
our foreheads touch.

My jaw trembles as I embrace you.
But in your final fleeting moments,
Still grounded to your body,
You begin to purr.

— Eli Teper, 7th Grade, Champaign

I am from

I am from the blood beneath my skin
I am genes that created me
I am from soul that craves
The soul that takes
I am from the calloused hand of my ancestors
I am the food that speaks to the soul
I am
I am from cold nights
Restless days
I am from the answer that created this world
I am from the melanin on my skin
I am from the loud music of parties
I am from the rounds shot outside my window
In the confines of my home, I am from the baked mac and cheese
The hawaiian garlic rolls
My mother says, “Whatchamacallit drowned in lake michigan.”
I am from the sizzling of the hot oil
I am from the saying, “I’m not one of ya little friends.”
I am from the city of Chicago
I am from the ghetto school drills
I am from the being meek when scolded
I am from eating the leftovers in the fridge
I am from the shootouts that surround me
I am the rugged streets
I am from the graffiti littered streets
I am from Turkey, the gravy of Thanksgiving.

I am from the protests
The sit-ins
I am from the derogatory comments made behind my back.
I am from the lives that were lost for this country
The grieving mothers and fathers,
I am from the injustice and the loss
I am from the victories and the wins.
I am from where my ancestors fought for freedom
I am from the hugs from loved ones and hugs from dead ones
I am from the shackles of limitation.
The harassment for our natural hair
I am from the transatlantic slave trade
The beatings of our ancestors
The scars on their backs
I am from the pain of man who has raised his hand to a woman
I am from the sizzling sting of those scars
The stress and the pain
Searching for who you are inside
Shutting out life and the voices telling you stop and give up.
I am from the salty tears slinging your eyes when you just need to cry

— Sophia Javier, 7th Grade, Chicago

Eternal

you
are
the roots
holding the trees
the spines
holding the books
the words
holding the stories
of all
the people
you
helped
but
you
are
Gone
and yet
everything
in the world
you
hold
remains
how can
you
be gone
when
your memory brings
us together

— Caroline Field, 7th Grade, Skokie

Storm's Coming

Snaking through veins,
and emerging,
it's true hue.

The rain that once
was lovely
and brought life,
bears a difference.

It pelts on the skin.
So deep
are the scars it leaves.

It strikes the heart and
pierces the soul,
a sword making its mark.

It lets you flail,
a ragdoll falling with no end.
Standing and watching,
an audience,
while the blood pours.

In all the despair,
a flower extends its hand,
embracing you in its fragrant petals.

— Khloie Waterhouse, 8th Grade, Cerro Gordo

intertidal

saltwater.
i was born in new jersey,
far inland in new jersey,
and we lived in pennsylvania,
but the atlantic ocean worked its way into my blood.
and at eleven, on my birthday,
i met the edge of the continent,
the pacific ocean beneath me from the monterey bay aquarium,
(*not my ocean, it was never my ocean*)
and the wind whirled all around me,
and it wasn't enough,
i couldn't be close enough to the water—

brackish.
back in time.
i was a few years old,
and my family had migrated
(*fact: the longest recorded migration of a whale was over eight
thousand one hundred and six miles long. that's longer than the
diameter of the earth*)
farther and farther inland, an inch on a map at a time, pennsylvania
rippling into north carolina
(*fact: my longest recorded migration was 798 miles. the distance
between whispering pines and chicago*)
i don't know if i was old enough to know that i was leaving saltwater
behind
but i'd like to think i felt the tether stretching,
crossing state lines in the backseat with me.

freshwater.

i live at an intersection

1.1 miles from the lakeshore

i didn't choose this city, this world, this coming of age april

(this highway under a black sky, or those faraway lights on the horizon)

and still, in august when the wind comes through the window

and the light shines all liquid on the surface

i think, in a roundabout sort of way, my head or my heart still chose
here—

because i've never missed anywhere like i've missed this hazy sky,

because i've never loved anything like i've loved this foggy third coast.

the blue-gray of the atlantic belonged to my parents before me, even if

they saw it from different

sides of the world,

but there's more than that to me.

i can be the estuary, i can be the river, i still think there's ocean in my
veins:

i don't have to choose

between saltwater blood

and a freshwater heart.

— Beatriz Whitford-Rodríguez, 8th Grade, Chicago

Sculpted Lies

Hanging down from threads of gold,

The old carved wood, rotting and old.

Always watched and being controlled,

A marionette with tales untold.

He smiles, though empty deep inside.

He can run but never hide.

He never once gets to decide,

With no choice, his arms are tied.

Continuously pulled from behind,

A silent prisoner of the mind.

A quiet tear starting to unwind,

The strength of courage he cannot find.

So forever he will wait, to split the chain

To move as one and feel no strain.

Yet, still he spins at the bottom of the stars,

A puppet confined by phantom scars.

His carved face a painted disguise,

But beneath it all, he sees the lies.

His strings, his cell, his forever home.

A puppet's soul, forever alone

— Maddy Willard, 8th Grade, Cerro Gordo

9TH GRADE – 12TH GRADE

***“Art hurts. Art urges voyages —
and it is easier to stay at home.”***

(from “The Chicago Picasso” by Gwendolyn Brooks)



I Dream of Tomorrow’s America

Yesterday we sank in our own river like stones
And today we count the drowned but,
I dream of tomorrow when we learn to fight the current
And hold my “if” close to my chest
Because over the lip of this wound
Dawn does crest

My teachers used to tell us not to ask what-if questions
During ALICE drills because they could not answer them
Adults are afraid of questions that poke the uncertain;
Breed fear under their dark lids
This is not another Pandora’s box
This demands to be opened
So let our questions be spoken,
What if somewhere
There is an America
Where my dream for tomorrow
Does not get lost in translation?
What if this seed of hope
That lives beneath my eyes
Is salvation
For an America
Where the Mississippi does not run red
Where Georgia peaches don’t blossom with the unsaid
Where girls don’t have to cross state lines just
To get to their futures on time

Where we don't learn how to duck and hide
In case a gun is fired in school?
What if this hope
Is just the light we need?
Because a dream is perhaps the antidote to greed
The medicine
For the hopeless, whose downturned eyes
Hold sorrows as dark as the smoke that covered LA's sky
The water
That washes the wounds of today
Even as we bleed
I dream of tomorrow anyway

Some may dub me foolish
But there is nothing foolish about a dream
The true fools are the ones who
Synthesize submission on their knees
And supplicate to the ghoulish
Who cut up the Constitution
Take their favorite pieces then
Call it reading between the lines
Take a chainsaw to its spine
There is nothing foolish about dreaming of a
President who lives for more than an iron fist and a dollar sign
So let us build tomorrow's America
One dream at a time

— Ellie Hersher-Dale, 9th Grade, Evanston

dementia

Half asleep, I hear my
Grandma's distinct yell,
yelling about things not so distinct?

*What could she possibly want?
Especially at this time of night?*

I gather the strength
To get up from my
Warm and comfy
Position on the couch to check on my grandma.

I peek in.

Great. Not again.

I drag myself to my room,
Where my mom slept
Since there wasn't a bed for her,
and I took her sleeping place
On the couch.

"Granny's on the floor. Again."

I said,
As if it were something I did daily
And was sick of it.
I was.

"Angel! Why aren't you alarmed by that?!"

My mom whisper-yelled,
Loud enough for me to hear.
Quiet enough not to scare my grandma any more.

*I am alarmed. Every time I see her there.
I sympathize for my grandma
When I see her there,
On the floor and unable to help herself.
What bothers me
Is that it happens in the first place.
All of this.*

We rushed into my grandma's room.
I didn't like going in there much,
It was a representation of her disease
For your senses.

Like an exhibit that was made to
make you realize how bad this really was.

We went through the same routine
The method in which we found
Was best to hoist her
Off the ground.

My grandma babbled off about
The endless amount of
Unknown kids she held in her
Atrophied brain.

*How can she remember
Children that don't exist,
But can't remember the names
Of her immediate family,
Who are virtually the only ones who care for her?*

After trial and error, we got her up,
She almost immediately fell back into deep slumber.
So did my mother.

But I,
I prayed a second time to God
To make sure my grandma remembers
Everyone she knew, including Him,
Once she reaches heaven.

— Angel'la Murray, 9th Grade, Oak Park

The Quiet Gaze

The stars glitter like dust across the sky,
Their silver light a trail of silent fire,
Each one a distant dream that burns on high.
The moon afloat in the velvet onyx,
Sheds soft stands of light that grace the earth below

The night is still, like the world holds its breath,
The shadows let loose under the pale light,
The wind is like a secret whispered close,
That rustles through the trees, a gentle song.

The burning diamonds glimmer in their dance,
A thousand eyes that blink and slowly fade,
Wrap earth in peace beneath their quiet gaze.

And time itself is but a fleeting dream,
A thread that weaves through moments yet to come.
The world sleeps beneath a blanket soft and deep,
While starlight threads its fingers through the dark,

And calls to us, to rest and dream and know
That in the quiet, we are not alone.

— Haritha Jagadeesan Suganya, 9th Grade, Aurora

requested funeral rites

carrion birds are lonely, i think
and they are afraid, as i am, of losing love
so they feed off of what has already been lost
they tear at what can never leave them

so that they might keep it forever,
a part of their being tied
to a carcass rotting in a clearing
linked to something that will return to dust soon

but then, so will the carrion bird.

the zoroastrians, many thousands of years ago,
would leave the dead out to be consumed
by the vultures,
by time.

i do not know if vultures
eat every part of the animal,
if they leave behind
all the fragments they don't want.

when death fetches me, eventually,
i would like to be left out to be loved
by the carrion birds,
by the soil.

whatever of me they leave behind,
will surely be the parts of me
that i would leave behind too.
the stars will take all of me back
with the eventual heat death of the universe.

— Leonidas Leigh, 10th Grade, Oswego

Shock and Awe, Attrition, Punishment, Boxing

There is a wasp in the beehive.
Taking the larvae unnoticed.
The details come together in an unseen swarm,
The flowers will soon be empty of nectar,
Empty of pollen as they rot in the field,
And yet the bees feast as if it is unending.

The wasp is known
Seen
Trusted
Beloved
Never to be a threat
As it devours them whole and cuts away at the comb

I see the swarm.
I see it go ignored.
I see my dear queen in this multi colonial hive refuse to leave.
Because the wasp could not be doing such things.
For surely, the other bees would not allow it.
Surely, it could never get that bad.

Surely, it will not reach us.

And the fear begins to devour me whole.
The realization that the bees know.
They simply do not care.
Because surely, someone else will do something.
Surely, nobody would allow it.
Surely, it is not their job to change.

None of us will be remembered.
We will be a story.
A statistic.
Taught in ten years,
And denied in twenty.

I find it hard to believe that I will survive.

— Serafina Zethmayr, 10th Grade, Justice

what the comb said to the black girl

We got a tangled history the two of us
My child

It's all in knots

When someone uses me it's to

fix

neaten

Come baby, sit on the floor

Let me clean you up before you go out.

Let me knead through the kinks I

have tried to protect you

Pull your hair back

Into a precise

Powderpuff

That's acceptable

When they look at you

But when the hair tie

breaks

it all unravels

And you come back to me

— Zoe Cobb, 10th Grade, Chicago

Outrunning Grief

I ran after your car
barefoot, heart full of hope,
gravel biting into soft skin
that hadn't yet learned
what leaving really meant.

You waved,
a hand out the window,
smiling through the tint
You always did that
made the end feel gentle,
like time would make an exception

I stood at the end
breathless from the chase,
small hands still raised
long after you were gone.

Then one year
You didn't pull into the driveway.

Yet I still run,
not on gravel,
but through the years

I find you in fragments
The sound of your music
the curve of your laugh,
the way your eyes always said
"See you soon"

And it aches
How silence lives where your laughter grew
How stillness follows your name
How I will always be chasing that car
But I will never run fast enough

Because the child in the rearview mirror,
she still believes you'll come back.
She watches the horizon like it owes her something.

She is forever running
older now, but further than ever.

—Ruby Kemp, 11th Grade, Oswego

Nature of Destruction

My father is an unspoken thunderstorm,
The fury crackles beneath his skin
So bright it blinds me. Some days,
I hear the thunder even while I bask in the sun.

His lightning breaks without warning,
Striking at the calmest second
Setting daisies ablaze,
Forcing flocks of doves from their homes.

After the storm rolls through,
And the fires are put out,
The aftershocks burn below my skin
Rattling through my bones,
Blaring through my eardrums.

But even when he comes home calmer
And promises to change his ways,
Nothing can silence the thunder
That rolls below his surface.

My mother is a used wedding gown,
Hanging in her bag
Untouched since the only day she was used.
She yearns to feel alive;
She hasn't, not since 19,
When I came along.

She claws at her lacy sleeves,
Slowly tearing out each thread

To feel the adrenaline dancing through her veins,
But she embraces the burn
Like a sweet, blue fire.

In the name of feeling something,
She ruins her soul,
Fraying her beautiful lace
With each tug at the strings
Until the threads pool on the floor.

I am a handed-down hurricane,
My emotions are wet and soggy,
They rake through my lungs like waves crashing.
My sadness is violent, destructive,
Ripping branches and tearing down power lines.

But my anger is hot and dry,
Whipping through my city
Slashing at buildings with a loud whistle.
Once I'm done,
Apologies spill from my lips,
A feeble waterfall,
As I cover the evidence
Of the tragedy I inflicted.

I tear down everything I love,
Leaving myself with a ruined paradise
Where I listen to the waves topple ashore,
Picking at the pilling in my silk dress,
Watching the lightning crash in the distance.

— Antaya Malnati, 11th Grade, Oswego

The Name I Made My Own

My parents didn't even name me
Instead, they left it to my sister
Who was only eleven at the time
Who wanted to name me Mango, and my brother Pineapple

My name.
The times when we'd talk about how pretty our names were
The times when my "friends" would say
"Why do you have an old white lady name"
"Why don't you have a black people name?"
"Or a Hispanic name like Aaliah or Lakeisha or Tatiana"

My name.
I didn't know how to feel about my name growing up.
My name didn't fit me
It didn't tell anyone that these long thick curls come from a black and
Hispanic descent
It didn't tell anyone about the light caramel skin color I was born with
It didn't tell anyone about who I am

My name.
It's Greek.
My parents probably did not know that.
Melynda means graceful
Melynda means beautiful
But that's not what I associated myself with

Instead
I associate myself with the given names my friends and family call me
Like how my mama calls me sunshine
Because of how much I smile
Like how my dad used to call me his little duck
Because of how I used to follow him around everywhere
Like how my friends and family call me Mel
Because I was a miracle to them.
Because I know that they know me.

My name is Melynda.
The forbidden puzzle piece I made my own
Melynda is the laughter when driving with friends
Windows down while singing terribly
Sticking our heads out like dogs
Melynda is the cold rain dripping down her face
As she dances and sings

— Melynda Patton, 11th Grade, Oswego

If They Take Her

My mom does not drive me to school
anymore.

Instead, she lingers behind curtains,
watching the world move
without her.

Her feet, once steady on grocery store tiles,
now refuse to step past the front door.
She hands me the list—
milk, tortillas, diapers—
and I go in her place.

My grandma's hands
should smell of masa,
her voice should yell out,
“Tamales! Champurrado!”

But her corner by the grocery store—
where hands once reached for warm plates,
is empty.
Her stove, cold.
The streets are too dangerous for a woman with no papers,
only recipes.

Inside, I move through the aisles,
list in hand
Milk, tortillas, diapers.
I go in her place.

At night, my mom whispers
of a paper she must sign.
Papers that would name me guardian,
words that prepare for a future
where she is missing.

My sister is eight. My mom wonders
if her legs are strong enough to walk alone.
If I am strong enough
to become her mother.

I wonder how a country can call her a
criminal
when she has built so much of it with
her hands.

I wonder,
if they take her, who will I become?

— Dalila Martinez, 12th Grade, Chicago

Toto, I don't think we're in Chi-town anymore

Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!

Will you canvas me in sonograph as the sun goes down?

What of Decatur and Calo's and the halo round our neck?

The wind streaks cross our faces as the star hides down, behind a
cloud,

and all we see is plain plain planes, no planes in sight,

and What of phonics and tectonics and monsoon?

Lightnings are few, but hail comes down sooner,

bloomin in the radio. So will you panhandle my legacy as the sun
goes down?

Flat streaked earth, below and above unspeakables,

we curse the dull blue sky coated in clouds,

and the power lines slur in the street.

So tell me, will we part ways as the sun goes down?

The street lamps are on now, not a NOAA in sight,

and the trees aren't down till we say they're down. Not a noia in
view.

They bloom funeral songs on the radio, spersed with upbeats and
sound made manifest, gusts we

can see and swerve into,

and *torneo parece como tornado*, after all, So we compete with the
rest of those hankering steel

machines, the loose canvassed stoles round the halos,

We squeeze sedan tween two trucks

as the sun goes down

— Morgan Montoya, 12th Grade, Chicago

RAMBLINGS OF A SINNER AS AN **ABECEDARIAN**

Angels cannot sing. Their eyes do not open wide into chorus, filling
the streets with
Biblical symphonies streaming through gaps in window screens,
through
Closed curtains. Instead, they only stare into the keyhole, trying to
Dramatize your sobs, declare your pain a sin. Whenever you wake,
it's only as an
Evil being, with a deep rooted ache in your chest, with red hot lava
Filling your heart, wrapping around a carcass, trying to warm it
back to life.
Google an angel and you will see men, hands outstretched,
How, if they are all-knowing, do they still hold faith within their
wings?
Is trust not a human fault? Do we not press our bodies together, fill
gaps,
Just to seek assurance of welcome company? And, if after closeness,
Kerosene settled within the cracks, would we still worship warmth?
What about light? Imagine a blind man, and now, imagine him
touching
Moonlight. Does he know that the stars have kissed him on his
fingers, that
New gentleness is born at the expense of a rib? On the train home,
two
Open chests are trading hearts to fix mismatched brains, sinning to
Pass time, to live a realer life than Heaven can give them. It's easy
enough to hold

Quartz between your fingers, find meaning in fractures—
Revelations come in the pink light of sunrise, in the air between
snowflakes, in
Stray murmurations of faith stored in soaring black bodies, starlings
on powerlines,
Twisters in Oklahoma where your grandparents used to live.
Upright, you no longer spent your time driving looking for
Variations in road signs, repeating numbers, nor do you feel the
Weight of your knees on the hardwood floor, nor do you trust
anything more than the
X-rays of your jaw. When you are home for the summer, there is
only holy birdsong,
Yearning in the coos of doves. Lawn mowers growl at leaf blowers
outside.
Ziplock bag of music notes clutched in your baby hands.

— Finch Shaw, 12th Grade, Lincolnshire



***“This is the urgency: Live!
and have your blooming in the
noise of the whirlwind.”***

(from “The Second Sermon On The Warpland” Gwendolyn Brooks)



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

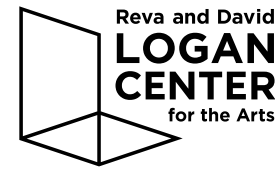
The company processes numerous requests for Ms. Brooks's works annually, working with mainstream, educational, and independent publishers, as well as individual artists for projects ranging from literary anthologies and academic course packs to theatrical performances, multimedia projects, and more.

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.



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

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