

September 2026



THE 10th 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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Ten Years of the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards by Margy LaFreniere

Young people in Illinois submitted 1,063 poems to this year's Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards — a record-breaking number in our 10th anniversary year. We are proud of every one of the young poets who submitted.

The winners and honorable mentions whose poems are printed in this chapbook formed meaning from experiences that are uniquely their own: personal awakenings, wonder in nature, self-love, the beauty of connecting with others. The poems before you also reflect Ms. Brooks' bold legacy; she didn't shy away from the difficult or the complex or the personal. She refused to say something easy when real life was rapping on her door. If Ms. Brooks could turn the pages of this chapbook, I think she'd be proud of every single young person who looked out at the world and created something meaningful.

I am also proud that Illinois Humanities — with the help of educators, parents, and our partners throughout the state — has invested in youth poetry for a decade. Because of this work, Illinois Humanities now holds a 10-year archive of youth poetry in Illinois, comprising over 5,500 poems.

Congratulations to this year's winners and honorable mentions who join this esteemed poetry community!



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.

Illinois Poet Laureate Mark Turcotte

The 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 Department at DePaul University.

"In my role as 6th Illinois Poet Laureate I am always keenly aware of the deep and special legacy created by previous Laureates—especially as I remember the work and dedication of Gwendolyn Brooks. It has been a primary goal of mine to recognize, honor and hope to live up to that legacy. So as we approached the 10th anniversary of the rekindling of the Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Awards I realized that it would be a perfect moment to shine a light on that esteemed history. There is no better way to honor the past than to offer respect for the present and the future, which is why I have invited the devoted young Chicago poet, Nile Lansana, to write this year's poem in celebration of these youthful Illinois poets."

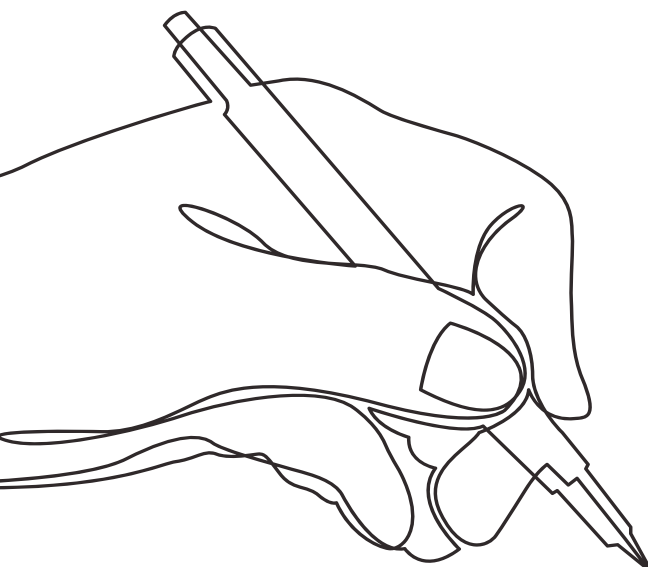
— Mark Turcotte, summer 2026

Salute to the Star Kids

Launched by Poet Laureates' lore
You lift off beyond limitation
Soaring towards dreams imagined
Cut from Gwendolyn's kingdom
Where giants roam & grow
from potholes, arroz con pollo
Mild sauce, blacktop ball
Green Line, Divvy bikes
Ravyn Lenae, picnic in lake's glow
Peril & panic will not perish
your steel will
Long as your sword sharp
& you strike straight!
Terror? You bend into triumph
Your homies will hold you thru heartache
May you rise up, glorious rebels!
Sway forth with your lightning soul
Love will lead your flow to fortune

— Nile Lansana, summer 2026

KINDERGARTEN – 4TH GRADE



***“I say, proudly,
MY PEOPLE!”***

***I say, proudly,
OUR PEOPLE!”***

(from “I Am a Black” by
Gwendolyn Brooks)

Happy Birthday, Mom!

Mixer loud as seventeen drums
Cherry blossom pink batter
Swirls and circles in the bowl
Like a ferris wheel
Into the oven
Hot as a campfire
Oven warns me
It's almost done

— Evelyn Lee, Kindergarten, Chicago

In the City



IN the city PEOPLE RUN

they might BE RUNNING
FOR SOME FUN

they might BE CHASING
A BLACK CAT

they might BE late. that's that!

— Louise McDonald, Kindergarten, Frankfurt

Special Time

Girls' time in Japan!
Tea with Mom
Tea with Grandma
Pastries fancy as a queen's crown
Strawberry-sweet muffins
Chocolate chip bread
Rainbow drops
Sprinkle down like twirling ribbons
Barley tea still warm,
The sweet-sour flavor
Tickles all the way
Down

— Emi Lee-Saotome, Kindergarten, Chicago

Octopus

Tentacles like a broken umbrella
Sneaky-smart
Bird-beaked
Soft-bodied eight limbed mollusc
Jaws like black scissors
Lightbulb-eyes
Skin that can change smooth or bumpy
Skidding through the water
Eggs like small white balls
Cuddling in a patch of coral
Star-spot suckers
That can actually feel and smell
Rows of suckers like mushrooms turned inside out
Talented
Intelligent
A rocket in the sea

— Yimi Li, 1st Grade, Chicago

Violin

Resting like Sleeping Beauty
Under my feet
Waiting for me to play
I pick it up, sleek as a stone,
And bring it to my shoulder
Radiant like gold, it sings, “hello”
Allegro, chipper and upbeat
Minuet, merry and jovial
Hunters’ Chorus, galloping to war
I take my bow
My great-small brilliant violin
Is now awake

— Manshu Wang, 1st Grade, Chicago

I Wish

I wish I was a snake,
With wings and with gold scales.
I wish for a crystal,
That I could cast spells with.

— Gus Crews-Cunningham, 1st Grade, Chicago

The Earth

Earth is a shy, whirling dancer
Third place from the sun
Its medal is the Milky Way hiding in darkness
Just waiting to be found
Mars and the moon don't have life
As far as we know
So it's up to Artemis II
To find something new
Asteroids ambush Earth,
Massive waves crashing to the ground
Green-blue planet pulling the clouds like a soft, thick blanket
Drifting, spinning, peeking through a hole
The earth hides
In a big black bubble
Just hoping for it
To not pop

— Everly Kipp, 2nd Grade, Chicago

Brighter Than the Sky

Imagine you were a star
Shining bright
Just like the sun.
Everyone would greet you like a diamond
Worth getting.
Not even five minutes and everyone respects you.
Once you get hurt, they would care.
Think about it.
But things turn when a new one comes.
Days pass.
Attention closing in the other star.
You become lonely and cold
The new star is whispering
You decide to eavesdrop
And you hear rude things
And you can't handle it anymore and comes out and you say,
"stop talking about me like that!"
And thanks to yourself
She quiets down.
Now you are dark
Like the moon.

— Sanaa Shipley Bey, 2nd Grade, Peoria

Beautiful Planet

Grassy-green
Sapphire-blue
Swirled together
Jagged
Level
Moist
Parched
Iguana-green
Whale-blue
Ocean-washed
As glorious as a marble
High with mountains
Flat with prairies
Winding
Dancing
A life-full planet

— Caleb Cohen, 2nd Grade, Chicago

Black Girl Magic

Wake up in the morning, look in the mirror, and ask
“Whose that pretty girl?” Me!
My puffy, dark brown hair always shines
My soft, smooth face is always clean
My black skin always glows
I am beautiful and black
Black Girl Magic

— Yamila Walker-Martin, 3rd Grade, Chicago

The Mystery of Life

The golden ball
The silver tooth
The mystery of life
The king's pet toad
The palace walls
The mystery of life
The sour lemon
The sweet apple
The mysteries of life
There are much more
Mysteries to be solved
And I am one of them

— Judah Walters, 3rd Grade, Chicago

NOPE NOT TODAY

Nope not today
I am not saying hooray
My day is gloomy
My legs are oozy
Nope not today.
Nope not today
I am not feeling good
Today I would feel good
But here I stand
Not holding your hand
Nope not today.
Nope not today
Rite now I am very gray
Wait what is that you say
You want to play
O.K. I will play with you.
Now it is today
Today I hold your hand
Full of joy
Today is the day.

— Mariam Fitzgerald, 3rd Grade, Chicago

The Copper Secret

I am a copper disk, on a bed of white tile
I've been sleeping here for a very long while
I arrived with a splash and a wish from the air
Thrown by a hand that had plenty to spare
Now I'm with the silver, and the dusty gold
Stuck in the boat, I have to be bold
The world above is a blurry roar
Once in a pocket, dropped to the floor
The sun is a ghost that wobbles and glows
As the water above me constantly flows
People lean over, faces in view
Watching their desires sink into the blue
The orb casts a glow on the marble stone
As hope radiates from the throne
The moonlight traces a shimmering line
But deep in the basin, the copper coins shine
As the sun rises, I remember a day
A day when a yearning was underway
I imagined a smile on a bright face
With a peaceful heart in life's long race

— Nihira Vuppala, 4th Grade, Naperville

My Beautiful Mexico

Mexico is bright and bold
with stories and Tales of old
Desert High to Mountains low.
Cactus plants touch the sky.
The beach is shining with golden sand.
Blue Wave Splash upon the land
mariachi music feels the air
with happy sounds from here to there.
On De Los Muertos we remember loved ones.
In November we light soft and slow
to remember to honor those we used to know.
tacos tamales rice and beans
the tastiest food you've ever seen
oh Mexico so full of cheer
with culture Beach and hearts
sincerely a special place
both proud and free and lovely land
for you and me

— Mia Barajas, 4th Grade, Chicago

Grassy Melodic Chant

It is a crew of tiles
Hanging out on the snow white countertop
Some are squiggly
Some are swirly
They invite my eyes into a trance
An inanimate object
Rearranging my understanding of art
They move like cars on a highway
A shattered piece of green glass
They tell a story
Everything does

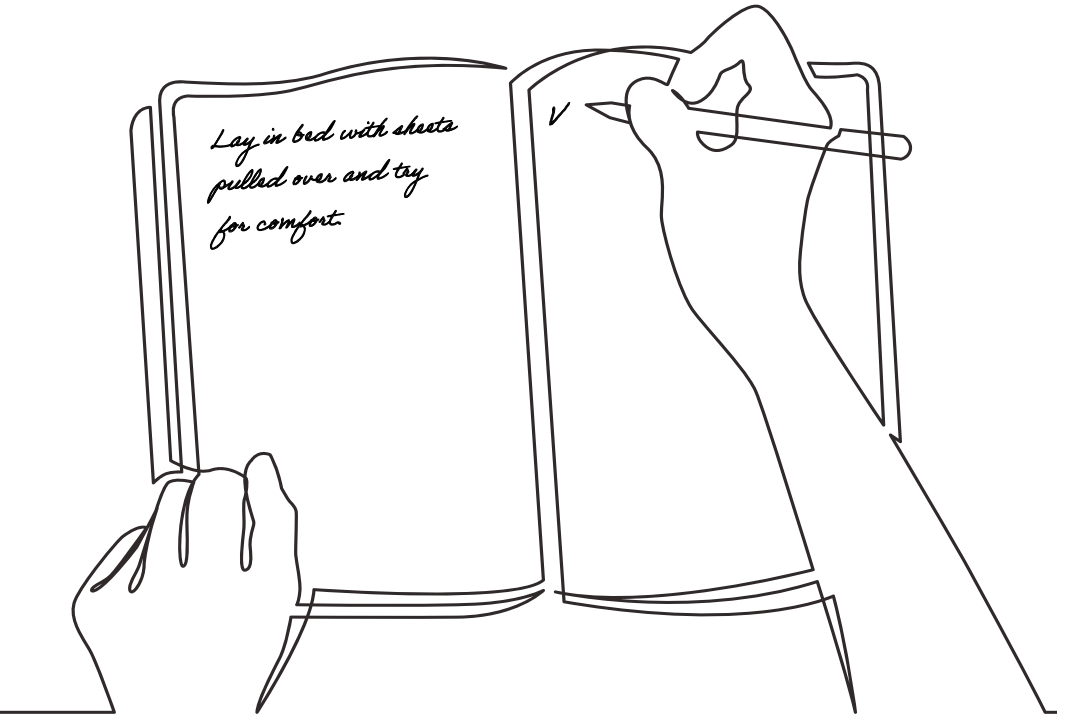
*Inspired by the painting *Grassy Melodic Chant* by Alma Thomas *

— Henry Darchowsky, 4th Grade, Skokie

5TH GRADE – 8TH GRADE

***“Your voice is the listened-for music
Your act is the consolidation.
I like to see you living in the world.”***

(from “Young Heroes — II” by Gwendolyn Brooks)



Pa

Lay in bed with sheets pulled over and try for comfort.

Voice

strain to hear the words from his mouth.

So precious

hang on to each story

Gives me a bookmark. Says, *You know World War II. Winston Churchill was a politician, then. And...*

So the bookmark says, *Never Never Never Quit*. And is golden and pretty with

the words carved in all nice

My brother find a tetris game and doesn't care

that this is the last time

for everything.

Hospital bed comes and I help with the door

Pa is quiet upstairs

the guy mumbles to himself, breathes heavily when it's time for the harder pieces

look at grandma's jewelry. Try to be a little more

helpful then expected. offer

but to make a good impression when it's about to be gone...

too late...

language unknown; maybe spanish, tattoos, say *I don't need help* and *It'll be a second, ma'am*; a

stranger in the house

but when he's gone the hospital bed is there

and I want it to be gone

and the world

to be normal

again.

— Jane Cavanaugh, 5th Grade, Chicago

My Trip to Pakistan

I went to Pakistan after so long,
It felt kind of new, but also like I belonged.
The last time I came, I was only two,
So everything felt like a first time view.
The streets were busy, loud, and bright,
Shops all glowing in colorful light.
People were talking, laughing out loud,
It felt like happiness lived in the crowd.
After a long flight, I saw my mom's family waiting for me,
Smiling bigger than I thought I'd see.
They hugged me tight like they never forgot,
Even though I couldn't remember a lot.
There was food everywhere, smells so good,
Better than anything I thought it would.
Everyone talking, joking all day,
In a fast, happy, noisy way.
At night we sat and shared stories and tea,
Learning about who they used to be.
I felt something warm I can't really explain,
Like finding a piece of myself again.
When it was time to finally go,
I didn't want to leave, that's for sure.
Because now I know what I didn't before—
Family can feel like home, even from far

— Fatima Syeda, 5th Grade, Libertyville

Hurricane

Winds fast and swirling,
Running in circles around
The ocean, a
Big,
Blank,
Blue,
Sheet of paper, waiting for for someone
To draw over it.
The hurricane splotches dust
Onto the ocean.
Brushing its paintbrush over coral.
Blowing its winds to dry the paint.
The ocean thunders angrily,
The waves leap onto shores.
Splash,
Splash.
Rain,
Dust,
Dirt.
Visit people's homes.
Breaking off roofs,
Whisking people up like eggs.
Frothing the tops of the oceans.
Until it spills over to the land.
Flooding even the tallest buildings.

— Youning Wu, 5th Grade, Chicago

The City

The city is a cold, concrete cage that never sleeps,
I hear the roar of engines like hungry, metal beasts. The
scent of damp cardboard clings to my shivering skin, I
watch the neon lights blur into a hazy, violet smear. Hope
is a flickering candle in a storm that won't end,
I taste the sour metallic tang of old pennies in my mouth.

The city is a cold, concrete cage that never sleeps,
My fingers feel the rough grit of the frozen sidewalk. The
screech of a distant siren stabs at my aching ears, I see
people pass by like ghosts who have no faces. Anger
burns in my chest like a slow, smoldering coal,
I smell the thick grease from a kitchen I cannot enter.

The city is a cold, concrete cage that never sleeps,
I feel the heavy weight of silence in a crowded square.
The wind whistles a sharp, lonely tune through my coat, I
stare at the towering glass walls that reflect nothing. The
world is a jagged puzzle with pieces that don't fit, The
shadow of a police officer stops right beside me...

— Jack Shoemaker, 6th Grade, Chicago

Numbers in Place of Names

They took names, left numbers behind
Mothers whispering “stay close” to air that won’t bind.
A child’s hand slips - no warning, no grace,
Echoes of crying in a fluorescent place.
You call it law, I call it theft
Of every goodbye never left.
Hearts don’t belong in cages of steel,
No paper can measure what families feel.
And it breaks something deep that I can’t repair
How cruelty can breathe so easily there.

— Mackenzie Wakeland, 6th Grade, Mt. Zion

Unpocketed Questions

Hammurabi states

“An eye for an eye,
A tooth for a tooth”

But Martin Luther King states

“An eye for an eye,
leaves everybody blind.”

So, what is justice?

What is equality?

Things that happen in this wretched world
Surely aren't fair

So, why is it when someone like me,

A young girl

Tries to stand up,

It is frowned upon

Mocked upon?

Am I cursed to be a silenced girl

Forced to put my questions in my pocket?

I think not,

For there are not enough bad dreams in this “perfect” world

To silence my words

— Lizzy Nicolae, 6th Grade, Burr Ridge

Bugs in a net

Do you remember we played in the yard
barefoot clutching clear mason jars
and chasing fireflies
we flew through the grass
as tiny lightbulbs glowed
behind invisible barriers
I hope we stay this way forever
new job new house
I still see you sometimes
on the streets or your lawn
our kids catch fireflies
just like us
we send them to school
the same one you graduated top of class
destined for greatness
me destined for the sky
I wish I could have taken off like a firefly
the lid to our town shut tight
we banged on the glass
but it didn't even splinter
now you serve in the same diner where I scrub floors
and each day we look at our kids
trying to take off just like we did
their bodies glowing
as we stare at the mason jars

and feel familiar
one day they will be old
and try to spread their wings
flying towards the crystal clear barriers
of this small town but for now
they just fly through the grass
wind in their hair
moonlight glowing up their perfect features
catching fireflies in jars
and not thinking about letting them out.

— Daniel Kutcher, 7th Grade, Chicago

Desi Girl in an American World

A desi girl walks into school,
Backpack heavy acting cool.
Teachers call her name wrong,
She just smiles along.

She learned to read the room to fast,
To measure words before they'd passed.
To hear the joke beneath the joke,
To feel the line before it's spoken.

Lunch smells different, kids all stare,
But she pretends she doesn't care.
Rice and spices, taste like home,
Even when she's alone.

She learns their slang, she shapes her tone,
Yet keeps a rhythm of her own.
A language layered, rich and wide.
Some parts of her she casts aside.

At home she speaks another way,
Words that don't come out at school each day,
Two worlds living in her head,
Things she thinks but never said.

She studies by a quite light,
Chasing worth into the night,
Each page a hope they'll finally see,
She's more than who she tries to be.

Music loud in her room at night,
Dancing at the beat, no need to hide.
In the mirror she can see,
Every way she was meant to be.

She's more than labels people slap.
To all who had experience with racism

— Aisha Hashmi, 7th Grade, Oswego

Ode to Garbage

I'm sorry garbage
On behalf of others and myself
For ignoring your masked beauty
And ruining your purpose.

You don't get credit or care
For simply being there.
You get ripped up, thrown away, and destroyed
by disgusted humans everywhere.

You get abused
For just wanting to be in use.
The protector for our sake,
an atrocious angel,
an unlighted fuse.

You're so unnoticed
A swimming pool in which you drown,
Thank you not only helping
but slowly getting broken down.
I should've noticed the dark life you live,
A secret
where no one bothers to forgive.
Oh garbage,
you may feel so down and low
But don't worry,
you are still my hero.

— Holiday Boldon, 7th Grade, La Grange Park

Empty Shell of a Body

I am tired.
Not sleepy.
Soul tired.
The kind of tired sleep can't fix
and the kind that settles deep
and refuses to leave.
Every day feels copied and pasted,
like I'm stuck replaying
a scene I never chose.
Same lines.
Same weight.
Same heaviness in the air.
Something in me
is wearing thin.
Not loudly.
Not dramatically.
Just quietly fraying at the edges,
pulled too tight
for too long.
There's a pressure that never lifts
it doesn't explode,
it just presses
and presses
until even breathing
feels like effort.
My body shows up.

Smiles when it's supposed to.
Laughs on cue.
It performs so well
you'd never know
it's running on empty.
But my mind has been drifting,
hovering somewhere above me,
watching this version of myself
go through the motions
like a ghost practicing
how to be alive.
It feels like I'm disappearing
in slow motion.
Not gone.
Just fading
like ink left in the sun,
like a voice getting quieter
in a room that was never listening.
And I'm exhausted
from pretending
I'm still fully here.

— Jalia Coleman, 8th Grade, Chicago

Standing While the World Burns

Dry.
That is all that I feel.
I feel the soil getting dry.
My roots become brittle.
Like the tiniest work could break them off.
The soil gives one last effort.
As if it is wringing life out of me.
But nothing lasts forever.
My bark is like a shield.
My only form of protection from the heat of the flames.
I watch as the flames get closer.
As if they are reaching for me.
As if they want to slowly crush me until I am ash.
Suddenly,
The sky's fingers ran through my leaves.
My tender summer leaves are curled and
blackened by a sudden scorching flame.
Darkness drifts inward, painting the world in smoke.
Then, with agonizing pain,
the blazing heat began its slow siege,
burning the armor of my bark.
I only feel pain.
I only see darkness.
And all that I hear
Is the roar of the fire.

— Jackson Best, 8th Grade, Skokie

A Familiar Sight

Pop

Pop

Pop

There goes the cork.

Chug

Chug

Chug

There goes the liquor.

Crack

Crack

Crack

There goes the bottle;
there goes my happiness.

There goes hope.

There is an old porch in the apartment of 4012
fitted with two red chairs.

Where the cold grime burns
against your skin.

And the stench of alcohol fills the air.

Where three words are
left *unspoken*.

— Katherine Johns, 8th Grade, Chicago

9TH GRADE – 12TH GRADE

***“Lending our strength to keep art breathing we
doubly extend, refine, we clarify;”***

(from “Art” by Gwendolyn Brooks)



Sometimes

Sometimes I fear I won't see you again
Your tears crawling down my window
The sorrows and pain you can't express
The pain I wish I could, but instead
I sit and watch you drown in yourself
And find a version of me in you

Sometimes I fear I won't hear you again
Your desperate cries against my roof
Those complaints, but I can't make them out
Your soft roars that somehow manage
To put me to sleep and keep me awake

Sometimes I fear I won't feel you again
Your gentle drizzle against my cold, hard skin,
Therapeutic by nature
Your embraces are a remedy for my stirring soul
Like a warm cup of tea when I have a cold

Sometimes I fear
I fear I won't taste you
Cooling a tongue charred from sin

My own
I fear I won't smell you
That nostalgic aroma of something
Repeatedly put together and
torn apart once more

Sometimes I fear that our memories
Will evaporate the same way you do
When my friend and I tried to run from you
As we ate Oreos and ice cream bars
When you and I waltzed through the sunset
And you concealed my tears with your own

Every passing day, I wish and hope
That your love never dries
Your comfort never hardens
And every passing day, I long and yearn
For your touch once again

You fascinate me
Something so powerful, you drive growth
And yet, too little of you and everything dries
Too much of you and everything drowns.

— Raahil Lakha, 9th Grade, Skokie

The Locksmiths

I brush past thousands of locksmiths every day.
Each one harbors a million carefully carved metal bricks,
a million different patterns, a million different answers.
They press their keys into my palms as they pass,
every key for every lock, all jangling together on a silver ring.
I never know which locksmith gave me what key,
or for which lock it was intended.
But every day I check again,
searching faces for freshly carved locks,
So I can try another trembling key,
and maybe, finally, turn one smooth —
to feel a lock give way for connection.

— Addie Mitchell, 9th Grade, Aurora

Say it Again

Dithi:

My first name—soft on the tongue.

It sounds like a gentle drumbeat, quick and light.

5-letters, short and simple.

Like a thesis statement to an essay.

A roadmap to myself.

It is the name for the “mother of demons”

It tastes bitter and heavy, like unsweetened cacao.

So, the next plan of action?

Change it to a name that flows with sweetness—feminine energy

Like golden syrup oozing from a honey comb, warm and slow.

Vaishnavi.

I was even given a nickname, “Vaishu”,
the scent of fresh soil after rain, earthly.

It seemed to fit in,

Sweet, like the creamy center of an Oreo.

Or the vanilla frosting on a birthday cake.

Vaishu—soft as a feather, mellow as a woolen scarf.

Like paint to a canvas, clouds to the sky,

Like my name to me.

And then, I moved.

The land of America, the dominance of whites.

I was in 2nd grade,

afraid of the chalky path before me.

“Vishnuve, vishu? No, Vyshnave”

The scarf tightened around my neck, choking—

I felt breathless, gasping for air as I tried to survive my first day.

My name tastes peculiar now,
One that rolls awkwardly in strangers' mouths.
Hard to bite into, like caramel—
Like leftover corn kernels in popcorn,
Wedged between teeth.
Vowels that could never come out.
The scarf's texture is sour, the acidic trace of lemon
Leaving a visceral grimace across my face.
My name is not complete
So isn't my life.
As long as I'm alive,
My identity keeps blooming and growing
Like beads to a bracelet, until you tie the final knot.

— Vaishnavi Manchala, 9th Grade, Oswego

This Feeling — Again

Where are you from?

they say in a tone
like I haven't answered before

This feeling

Again

thinking I had buried that question
somewhere between
learning their language
and swallowing *their* food

I was born in Chicago
I say

the sentence that's ingrained in every fold
of my cerebrum
my rehearsed truth
the go-to mantra
that strips me
naked

But where are you *really* from?
they lean in closer
like they already know
I don't belong

do they mean
the country that was stitched into my last name?
The one my single mother carried
on an eighteen-hour flight
so I could say “Chicago”
without hesitation?

Uzbekistan
I say
even though I know
it’s a story
they don’t have time to hear

I see them—grinning menacingly

“Uz-Pakistan?”

They know what they’re doing.

No, *Uz-bek-i-stan*
But they nod
like they understand

like a country
can be reduced
to syllables

like *my* story
fits inside
their pronunciation

and now,
somehow
I'm the one who
feels foreign

this feeling

again

— Samir Salomov, 10th Grade, Aurora

Never

Never shall I forget that warm summer night.
The tv on, my dad and I watching, but talking more than anything.
The dinner he had prepared, an amazing penne dish.
The warm, red sauce- the color of love.
Never shall I forget that camper in the driveway.
The camper we had thought about selling;
The camper we barely ever used.
The camper that had found new value.
Never shall I forget the phone call my dad got.
A coworker saying, "We have a problem."
The problem? A homeless veteran, needing a place to stay.
"I have just the solution," replied my dad.
Never shall I forget his name.
A name that still brings me to a place,
Inescapable, unexplainable, and still frightening.
The name of a man who turned into a friend.
Never shall I forget that cool summer morning.
I had been sent to my grandma's the night before without advance.
The morning I saw an entire case of beer spread across my lawn.
The morning my dad said, "Greg is no longer here."
The morning I learned the camper ceiling had been stained that same
Warm, red tone as the penne sauce.
Never.

Inspired by "Never Shall I Forget" by Elie Wiesel

— Sean Conner, 10th Grade, Colfax

Shark Week

my ankles dip beneath the water, pooling around my strawberry legs.
skittishly, my gaze travelled from the soap in her hand to her furrowed
brows,
the darkness of her brown eyes staring into the blue of mine.
absentmindedly, my one front tooth grazes against the chap of my
bitten lips.
“i thought this was supposed to be *fun*.”
hours earlier, i had been perched, chubby cheeks pressed
against the face of the colorful television,
watching a drama about high school girls out on the town, shopping
and partying
their hearts out. the sticky, chunky blood dripping down
my thighs were, clearly,
not a shopping spree.
my mother urged, “it is,” but the proof was in the pudding. voice weak,
she managed
to add, “at least you’re not a boy.”
but my sight flickered to my older brother on the lawn, lanky limbs
shining
under the sun, the only blood to be found on his scraped knees.
critically, my gaze roamed up over the razor knicks from my failed
attempt at shaving my legs,
the pimple patches plastered all over my pubescent face,
my cracking voice, the body hair daring to poke out of my underarms.
“seems better than this.”

— E. Antonow, 10th Grade, Chicago

What We Carry Home

The bus exhales us onto cracked sidewalks.
We step down with backpacks, grocery bags,
the weight of hours pressing into our shoulders.
Someone's baby cries. Someone's mother waits.
Someone pretends not to be tired.

On my block, paint peels like old promises,
but the stoop still holds laughter
and Mrs. Ruth still waters flowers
that weren't supposed to survive this heat.
She says, "They grow because I expect them to."

A boy practices jump shots on a crooked rim,
talking to himself like a coach and a crowd.
Every bounce is a question: Will I make it?
Every shot is an answer he wants to believe.

Inside, a brother counts coins on the table.
Not for candy. For light. For milk. For tomorrow.
His hands are small, but they carry big math.
We learn early how to fold fear into neat corners,
how to smile so teachers don't ask too much,
how to say I'm fine in a hundred accents.

But hope is stubborn.
It grows in sidewalk cracks.
It hums in kitchens at midnight.
It shows up even when we don't invite it.

We carry home more than tired feet.
We carry names, dreams, borrowed courage,
the echo of someone who once said, “You can.”
And sometimes,
that is enough to make us stand taller
even when the world is short on space.

— Lillian ODonnell, 11th Grade, Collinsville

A Saplings Song

In the midst of winter, my leaves found solace in the wind.
Pointed fingers and readied their saws, they tore my roots to pieces.
Smiled with glee as they watched the tree fall.
They didn't care enough to listen to the story on how the first sapling
sprouted.

Mi papa was 15 when he first crossed the border.
Same twinkle in his eyes you'll find in mine, we plant the seeds.
He came in search for his family
in the land of the free, the home of the brave, the United States of America,
And so he came.
Took the bus all the way to Zacatecas
Un dia lo cruzaron, al paso Texas llegó.
There New Mexico waited for him, nadie lo reconocio.
Three hundred fifty dollars he paid the coyotes, for freedom, for liberty,
His worth tied to the clinking of pesos across the table.
Took a train to Joliet, wrong place right time, reached Chicago.
Lived on 24th street,
Gangbangers controlled the hood,
A scream, a car, a store, a laugh, a gun
He lost some good friends those years.
Knocks on wood as he tells me the story.
Mi mama was 18.
Fists clenched, empty pockets
La mandaron pa ser dinero, porque la pobreza no espera.
Gazed upon her prison one last time, watched them wave goodbye,
she wouldn't miss this place.
Misunderstood, but at least she was free.
Somewhere along the line they had me.

Second girl in a middle class household
Gifts fragments of my sister's infancy,
Used and lived in, nothing was mine, but everything was.
Wrapped and delivered
in a red white and blue flag,
stars painted on my face,
I'm American.
Porque mi color de piel no les satisface.
I never liked my name.
Not enough r's not enough o's
Because if not by my name then how could I show, que yo soy Latina
Tengo cultura, tengo tradicion,
You can't take that away from me, te lo prometo, por Dios.
Escuchame.
My roots pertenecen aqui.
On this land that claims to be free,
On land that will never be mine.
Leaves fall to the ground, meet the fire that burns away our shame,
turn to ash, and reborn again.
I will extend my branches as long as I can,
and hope they reach people like me.
I learned my lesson.
Keep la cultura alive.

— Samantha Alvarez, 11th Grade, Chicago

footnotes

1. when you are very young, your body belongs to your mother.
2. your body was carved from hers.
3. you are okay with being your mother's eve, life torn from rib
4. you are too young to know how genesis ends.
5. your father does not believe in god.
6. your mother is god.
7. your mother's body does not belong to her mother.
8. in fact, she has spent many years staring in the mirror with a blunt knife, trying to tear her mother from her body.
9. you do not like "hallelujah" by leonard cohen.
10. your brother is a prodigy.
11. your body belongs to the night.
12. your body is your mother's.
13. your mother is the night.
14. your father is also the night.
15. your brother is the day.
16. all you have is a half-empty notebook.
17. you do not even have a body.
18. your brother is a prodigal.
19. your god is in the body.
20. the body is your mother's.
21. your mother cannot bear to look at you because your hands are hers and all the things you have are things she does not because she carved them out of herself to give to you.
22. your mother is odysseus.
23. no – your brother is odysseus.
24. your mother is telemachus.
25. a comedy commonly ends in a wedding.

26. does that mean a tragedy starts with one?
27. you love your mother.
28. your mother does not say it back.
29. your father believes in god.
30. god is your mother.
31. you are eve.
32. your brother is adam.
33. you are ishmael.
34. your brother is an isaac who will not come home.
35. your mother is abel.
36. you are not your mother's keeper.
37. god has cast you out for looking kindly on a snake.
38. you are cain.
39. your body will always be your mother's.

— Leonidas Leigh, 11th Grade, Oswego

Blonde

My grandmother washes my hair
in the kitchen sink, blonde and six years
long, humming to the tune of

boys like that sort of thing.

I will grow up to a symphony of pink headbands,
long sleeves, and sirens screaming from the eye
in the back of my head, watching
for unsolicited attention, praying to
God nobody noticed, asking
God why they all noticed
her. She wasn't even
blonde.

As my grandmother pulls back my hair,
she ties my intestines into a pretty pink bow that I don't feel
yet. Tangles my self-worth with the thing
of my worst nightmares, combing over the knots until
it's impossible to know where one begins and the other ends,
married.

I will learn to hold myself to the standards of men
without even being attracted to them, convince myself
I'm just a *late bloomer*, like a love for men
will seep out with my first blood,
grow in time with my tiny breasts.
I tell myself, again,

you can like it, too.

My cousin comes home and my grandmother laughs,
asks about her best friend, the sporty girl, the
human garbage can, and we're too covered in blonde to see
the rose that blooms across my cousin's cheeks.

I won't see it for years,
and I won't feel it for longer, the ladybug
dancing across my freckles when
the right girl is mentioned. My cousin will catch it
before I do, perhaps because she's older,
or because her hair is darker, short enough that
she doesn't have to push it out of her eyes.
My grandmother can only shake her head as
my uncle approaches, asks,
*how is she going to find a husband
when she surrounds herself with girls?*
I will tell him
that's the point.

— Hannah O'Keefe, 12th Grade, Palatine

Flip of a Coin

Miracles.

I used to believe in miracles,
Even though I'd never seen one.

That childlike certainty,
that soft glow in the dark,
Blindly believing in hope
thinking if I wished hard enough,
something would answer.

I wish I still saw the magic.
Back then, I thought miracles came from God.

All those nights I stayed awake,
listening for something holy
to move inside the silence,
to release me from
the ache of not knowing why.

I called out,
but only the walls responded.
Maybe miracles aren't earthquakes
but slow rearrangements,
tiny cutting shifts
that go unnoticed until
you look back and realize
the landscape has changed.

Maybe the universe flips a coin,
and sometimes it lands on you.
Maybe that's all luck ever is.
Still, I keep searching for patterns

in the cracks of ordinary days,
trying to believe each choice
is a thread in some quiet design.
Maybe the miracle
isn't what happens to me,
but what I build
from the wreckage of what doesn't.
And yet,
on certain nights,
when the world hums low and breathes slow,
I still wait by the window,
half-expecting the air to shift,
for something unseen
to finally choose me.
...
But I'm still waiting

— Ainsley Laos, 12th Grade, Oswego

Triptych for how I open

(This poem is in the form of a contrapuntal. The columns can be read separately as well as together from left to right.)

I.		
at first just refrigerator doors,	empty stomach the only organ	i think about eating nonstop:
egg cartons and whole milk	pure white for body autonomy.	three times a day. what i've
swallowed like my life depends on	this: revelation that change	misplaced isn't better before
the expiration date. how my dream	lasts only a night. it wasn't even	night, but a time in the sunset that
just kept raining and raining	and drowning me. i dreamed of you	, in sopping glass panels, disguised
from this angle. it almost sounded	like <i>that</i> . like you loved me	as everything else. the mirror unfamiliar,
i stand under it bleeding	with veins that won't close,	loved like i don't want it.
II.		
in my mouth, the next thing I learn: a molar that is perfect is		
	not mine. When I realize skin is just another layer sitting on me	
glistening, suddenly I am too young to know what's		
	not right; to label postmortem tags with my tongue and become	
good for myself. How vitamins gnashed these bones to powder,		
	ice cubes simmered into syrupy wine. Blooming florid, wearing	
all black. I watch my room turn into a room turn into		
	nothing at all. The way I pretend the car's silence is mama's, not	
mine. Like the world's worst thief, I steal from		
	this fleshed out daughter; I make a guidebook on	
all that I know of: for		
	how to love	
sacrifice.		
III.		
up in an antiseptic room watching a lava lamp ooze blue goop,		
the same shade of couch fabric I leave dimples in. Telling a		
stranger that when I realized a pint of my veins worth \$200		
costs nothing inside me, how enticing it was to watch the milk		
jug fill and stare at this impure white leaking out from the cracks.		
Because the mirror always fogged up in steaming bloodstreams.		
Because I am still naked behind this goddamn glass panel. Because		
this is the reason why I let chromium steel cradle me, why I keep		
lying to myself telling this body that it's just <i>one more time</i> .		

— Sophia Pan, 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” by Gwendolyn Brooks)



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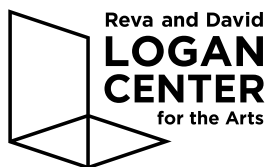


Brooks Permissions was founded in 2001 and manages the literary works of acclaimed poet Gwendolyn Brooks.

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.

Gwendolyn Brooks's poetry at the beginning of each section of the chapbook is reprinted with consent of Brooks Permissions. Full poems can be found in *SEASONS: A Gwendolyn Brooks Experience*, edited by Nora Brooks Blakely and Cynthia A. Walls.



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