



2023

Each year the Academy of American Poets presents Dear Poet, a multimedia education project that invites young people in grades five through twelve to write letters in response to poems written and read by award-winning poets.

Through video recordings and correspondence, Dear Poet brings living poets into classrooms and puts them in direct contact with students. Since launching the project in 2012, the Academy has received thousands of letters from students in hundreds of schools and congressional districts, and nearly all fifty states.

The Academy is grateful to all the educators who use the program and for each and every student letter we receive. The letters are carefully read by Academy staff and volunteers before a selection is passed along to poets for their responses.

This PDF booklet contains poems by and letters from the poets that participated in Dear Poet 2023—Richard Blanco, KB Brookins, Mahogany L. Browne, Marilyn Chin, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Danez Smith—followed by selected student letters and the poets’ responses.

Happy reading!

**academy of
american poets**

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**poems &
letters**

Looking for The Gulf Motel

Marco Island, Florida

There should be nothing here I don't remember ...

The Gulf Motel with mermaid lampposts
and ship's wheel in the lobby should still be
rising out of the sand like a cake decoration.
My brother and I should still be pretending
we don't know our parents, embarrassing us
as they roll the luggage cart past the front desk
loaded with our scruffy suitcases, two-dozen
loaves of Cuban bread, brown bags bulging
with enough mangos to last the entire week,
our espresso pot, the pressure cooker—and
a pork roast reeking garlic through the lobby.
All because we can't afford to eat out, not even
on vacation, only two hours from our home
in Miami, but far enough away to be thrilled
by whiter sands on the west coast of Florida,
where I should still be for the first time watching
the sun set instead of rise over the ocean.

There should be nothing here I don't remember ...

My mother should still be in the kitchenette
of The Gulf Motel, her daisy sandals from Kmart
squeaking across the linoleum, still gorgeous
in her teal swimsuit and amber earrings
stirring a pot of arroz-con-pollo, adding sprinkles
of onion powder and dollops of tomato sauce.
My father should still be in a terrycloth jacket

smoking, clinking a glass of amber whiskey
 in the sunset at the Gulf Motel, watching us
 dive into the pool, two boys he'll never see
 grow into men who will be proud of him.

There should be nothing here I don't remember ...

My brother and I should still be playing *Parcheesi*,
 my father should still be alive, slow dancing
 with my mother on the sliding-glass balcony
 of The Gulf Motel. No music, only the waves
 keeping time, a song only their minds hear
 ten-thousand nights back to their life in Cuba.
 My mother's face should still be resting against
 his bare chest like the moon resting on the sea,
 the stars should still be turning around them.

There should be nothing here I don't remember ...

My brother should still be thirteen, sneaking
 rum in the bathroom, sculpting naked women
 from sand. I should still be eight years old
 dazzled by seashells and how many seconds
 I hold my breath underwater—but I'm not.
 I am thirty-eight, driving up Collier Boulevard,
 looking for The Gulf Motel, for everything
 that should still be, but isn't. I want to blame
 the condos, their shadows for ruining the beach
 and my past, I want to chase the snowbirds away
 with their tacky mansions and yachts, I want
 to turn the golf courses back into mangroves,
 I want to find The Gulf Motel exactly as it was
 and pretend for a moment, nothing lost is lost.

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Dearest Readers,

Thank you all so much for taking such a deep-dive into my poem. I am touched by your emotional connections to the poem, as well as by your keen observations about its crafting. In my view, a poem has several phases of creation. Initially, there are the often frustrating initial scribbles that eventually make it into a decent draft; as I continue working on it, I inevitably stumble into a transcendent moment when I realize why I *had* to write the poem, the poem's emotional core and reason for being. I *had* to write "Looking for The Gulf Motel" because I needed to go back in time to revive and relive special memories that I hadn't realized were indeed very special because I had taken them for granted. It's been humbling and powerful to read how you have all connected with the very reason I wrote this poem. Which brings me to the last phase of a poem, which is not when I finish it, but when it comes alive in other lives like yours. Writing can be a very solitary endeavor, but through your letters I feel very connected and embraced. Thank you all for that gift. Poetry is like a campfire around which we can share our stories across time and distances. I urge you all to keep reading and writing poetry because of its inherent power to foster compassion, understanding, and empathy for one another. During these confusing, uncertain, and divisive times, we all need poetry more than ever. May poetry continue to be a guiding light as your lives continue to unfold with all its challenges as well as its many joys.

Best wishes,

Richard Blanco

Dear Richard Blanco,

To start, I would like to say thank you for giving me the opportunity to be able to talk to you about your poem, “Looking for The Gulf Motel” that I find so creative and interesting.

My name is Sara, and I am a senior in Wisconsin. We got the chance to read poems from multiple poets in my Advanced composition class and yours definitely stuck out to me the most.

The thing that really made me enjoy your poem the most was the way that it was written. It has great flow. The way that it was written allowed me to be able to read it like a story and have the flow of a story. The rich details in this also allowed me to create an image in my head of the events happening in the poem. For example, when you describe the mermaid lampposts and make the metaphor, “rising out of the sand like a cake decoration.” Since your stanzas don’t read like a normal poem it also gave the piece a unique feel. For instance, you have full sentences that are broken into stanzas, to look like a normal poem format. The story-like flow just gives this poem a whole new feel and meaning.

One thing that really stuck out to me was the phrase you said over and over, “There should be nothing here I don’t remember...” I liked it so much because of how much I can relate. My family and I had this small little condo we rented in Florida every year. It was an old time place and had all the 70s furniture still in it, in Fort Myers. It may not have been much, but the memories and the beach is what I remember, not what we stayed in. I remember this one time my parents, grandma and I all were looking out the sliding glass door onto the grassy area and it was full of cranes—I mean probably 80 cranes. Seeing how funny it was to my parents and grandma was something I’ll cherish forever. I went there for years while I was young and created so many memories and photographs on the gorgeous beach and even by the awkward shaped pool.

I have one question for you, do you still visit that place? That sacred place of yours where you hold all these core memories. I know I don’t visit my condo in Fort Myers anymore. Especially since the hurricane hit and completely destroyed the strip of little condos. They were all completely demolished. I know that when I saw the pictures

of the immense damage, the little Sara inside me was crushed. The 6-year-old Sara who had all those amazing memories was heartbroken over the little hole-in-the-wall condo. It was my beach condo.

As I sit here today, and reminisce about those days, as I'm sure you do about your beach memories, I thank you. Thank you for sharing your story with the world. You reminded me of what going on vacation truly means. And why it is something you should cherish. I wish you all the best.

Sincerely,
Sara
Wisconsin

Dear Sara,

Thanks for writing and sharing your keen thoughts on my poem. I'm glad that you connected with the poem. You are right, it is a very accessible poem. I strive to write poems that people can easily connect with. But at the same time, poems which are also emotionally complex, because emotions are at the very heart of poetry. The great poet Gwendolyn Brooks noted, "Poetry is life distilled." And that's exactly what I try to do in my poems: distill my life experiences in a way that people can easily connect with them.

I've never found the Gulf Motel. I imagine it must have been demolished to make way for one of the many high-rise condos in Marco Island today. Thanks for sharing your story about your condo in Ft. Myers—your special place—which feels a lot like mine. I find it interesting that I hadn't realized just how special the Gulf Motel was and how many memories were made there. It was only after I knew it was gone that I learned to appreciate it, which I suspect is the way you felt when you learned that your beach condo was gone. In that regard, my poem is sort of a way of bringing those memories back to life to relive and appreciate them. And so that others like you can do the same with their own special place. But remember, even if your condo is demolished, you still have your memories which will last forever.

Cheers and abrazos,
Richard Blanco

Dear Richard Blanco,

It was Monday morning, but rather than looking at the week ahead, I was looking back at the weekend not ready for a week of tests, projects, and certainly stress. I disappointedly walked into my English class, fell into my seat, knowing this letter was coming and prepared myself for the hardship ahead. My teacher began the class and started to read your poem, suddenly a somber but serene wave took over my body. As she read the other poems I just could not stop thinking about your poem. When it was time to write, I immediately shed all of that apprehension and began to think about this feeling that your poem left with me. I read it once, then twice, color-marked, and read it two more times, like a detective trying to find clues to solve a mystery. I then realized it was because you represented an idea familiar to many, but a transition I have yet to go through. The loss of your childhood memories and the people that made them so special. There are many traditions that seem so casual to me now, but your poem made me realize I should not take the people and experiences I have now for granted. It also led me to appreciate my loved ones, and not be embarrassed by them because there will eventually be a time when I can no longer pretend like I do not know them.

Reading your poem, “Looking for The Gulf Motel” I noticed the images described at the beginning and end of the poem contrast two different types of escape. The last image depicts a very wealthy escape, with huge houses and golf courses. For some that may be their idea of an escape but not you. You think of vacationing at The Gulf Motel with your family, not far from your home. A place where your parents bring Cuban ingredients so you are able to eat, a place where you get embarrassed and pretend like you don’t know your parents, and a place where your brother is sneaking rum in the bathroom. This shows how even though the other escapes may be viewed as nicer or more lavish to some, they aren’t valuable to you because your family is not there and those big houses do not hold any memories. I believe you were trying to show that happiness comes from the people you surround yourself with, rather than the things you surround yourself with. Also, we are all unique and value unique things so some people value an escape like yours at The Gulf Motel, while others value an escape to their mansions like the snowbirds.

As I mentioned before, when I read your poem it really stuck with me and after reading it multiple times I was fighting to hold back the tears in my eyes. Your various transitions throughout the poem from fun memories to references to loss invoked a feeling of sadness. This is because when sharing the memories you phrased them in a hopeful way where it seems that things are still like that. An example of a hopeful memory is “My mother’s face should still be resting against his bare chest like the moon resting on the sea.” The “should still” here implies that this event is still possible and occurring. But then you mentioned the loss of your father and The Gulf Motel so then as a reader I lost hope and realized the memories are all you have left to remember the vacations with your family. This happens when you say “my father should still be alive.” In this use “should still” shows the loss of your father, which makes memories from The Gulf Motel such as your mother lying on your father’s chest no longer possible. The disappointment I felt for you when I understood that those memories cannot be re-lived is what invoked the feeling of sadness. I think your poem creates feelings of despair but also, provides a way for these memories to live on without your loved ones or The Gulf Motel. This gave me a sense of hope that when I am older I can not literally relive memories from now but I can share them with others so that the stories can live on.

Your poem led me to think about growing up and my surroundings changing in a different and more positive way. Instead of feeling sad because I cannot relive those happy moments I can share them with others as you did with this poem. But, is there a time when we should no longer reminisce about the past? How did you know when it was time to move on from the losses in your life and focus on what you have gained? I am very interested in hearing your thoughts surrounding these questions because your poem really changed my outlook on life.

Sincerely,
Supriya
New Jersey

Dear Supriya,

I'm so touched by how powerfully you connected with my poem. And happy that it turned your drab Monday morning into a special day. As we poets often say, once we finish a poem it's no longer ours. Which means that our poems are sort of like gifts to our readers meant for them to internalize and interpret them in the context of their own lives and memories. I often think of a poem as a mirror into which the reader sees a reflection of themselves.

The famous writer, Anaïs Nin, noted that "Writers taste life twice." In that regard, part of why I write poetry is to go back and sort through my memories, to "taste" them again, to recreate and relive them. But it's not merely to reminisce or to be nostalgic. It's in order to explore those memories and understand what they meant then and what they mean to me now so that I can better understand who I am today. So, to answer your question, I think it's generally good to reminisce about your past, if your intention is to learn something new about your present.

Cheers and abrazos,

Richard Blanco

Dear Richard Blanco,

I remember the time when I was a little child holding a soccer ball, happily playing with my grandmother on the smooth grass of the school next to mine. I should have been more thankful about that singular moment. My grandmother is in heaven now, and I never have the time to go play on that field again. I know I'm only eleven years old, but I already miss the halcyon past. My name is Wilson, and your poem, Looking for The Gulf Motel, really touched my heart.

The reason your poem stood out to me is because of your topic. Instead of writing about things kids would never concentrate on, you wrote about your childhood. Because it was something I already experienced, I can easily relate to the poem. All your descriptive words created a very vivid image in my mind. You wrote about your

thoughts and feelings about your childhood in a spectacular way. My favorite lines are, *My brother should still be thirteen / sneaking rum in the bathroom / sculpting naked women from sand*. It gives a sense of innocence and danger at the same time.

I know I should appreciate being eleven, but I just can't. The world seems like it gets worse each day. *More homework, more activities, less time*. How should I appreciate life? There is no meaning of life if it just keeps getting more stressful. If I ever become a poet when I grow up, I will probably write something like this, *I remember the time when I was writing a letter to a poet/ I was sitting at the computer typing word after word/ I explained about how I should have felt grateful for the past/ Little did I know that the time I was writing the letter, it is like paradise to me now*.

The last phrase, *I want to find The Gulf Motel exactly as it was and pretend for a moment, nothing lost is lost*, is really emotional to me. I have this memory that I kept with me for more than half my life. It was when I was sitting on the couch underneath the singing clock. The aroma of my dad's fried rice lingered in the air. The sunshine was shining directly on me, making me look like an angel. I like to imagine myself in that memory when I feel stressed out. The ugly truth is that you can't go back to the past, but you can still remember it. You can lock it up in your mind, and never let it go. I want you to know that your poem really motivated me into thinking deeper about this subject.

Thank you,
Wilson
Oregon

Dear Wilson,

Thank you for sharing your heartfelt thoughts and the anecdotes about your grandmother and your father. It seems we all have some very special places with very special memories that have really imprinted us. For me, it was the Gulf Motel; for you, that lovely memory of you and your grandmother on the playing field, and the day with your father and the bright sun. One of the magical things about poetry is the way in which my life connects with the life of readers like you. How my memories trigger special memories of your own, your happy place. "Looking for The Gulf Motel" speaks to that old saying: you can't go back home, which is true and not true at the

same time. We can't literally go back in time, of course, but we can certainly revive and relive our memories over and over again. In part, that's why I write poetry: to go back in time in my mind and appreciate the special places and experiences in my life. Just as you think of that day when you felt like an angel whenever you feel stressed, I think of my Gulf Motel days. Writing poems about the beautiful moments in my life makes me feel more grounded and at ease.

Cheers and abrazos,
Richard Blanco

Dear Richard Blanco,

My name is Alex. I'm fifteen and from southern Virginia, and sometimes writing is all there is to do down here. I've recently started writing poetry, and you write it, too. My condolences.

Your writing reminded me of missing seats at the dinner table. Of reminiscing with my sister about our mom, about talking with my classmates about pre-destroyed-world times, of huddling in a blanket while my face is still getting blasted with ice from the air conditioner. I think of the nights when I'm sitting on my bathroom floor and wondering why the world allowed the inevitable to happen. And it reminded me of the ending of all of those moments and conversations, where we're forced to accept that the world is sad, and that there's nothing that anyone could possibly ever do about that. How did you do that?

This poem is reflecting on strictly you-things, but I feel like I really connect with it. As my life is going on, every day seems to suck just a little bit more than the last, and it's too easy to think about how life was before the world started caving in on itself. I imagine we're pretty different people, so how do you do that? How did you write something that was so easy to relate to?

Was it a conscious decision to have magical writing powers? If it was, please tell me how you managed that.

"Looking for The Gulf Motel" was my first time reading your work, but I can't think of another piece of writing that so accurately displays expectations and reality, and the actual dynamic between the two. You build up a comfortable world that would

be the preferred perfect for yourself, and then break it down with a quick “but I’m not.” And I don’t think I’ve ever read a poem with a tone like yours in this one—some third-person-esque feel to a first-person story, objectively comparing the world-that-could’ve-been to the world-that-actually-*is*. Did the tone of this poem come naturally to you? I find that, when writing poetry, every tone I land on sounds artificial. Like I’m creating it for everybody but myself.

At some point in my life, I hope that I can write something on this level. Right now, writing, to me, is a petulant grandmother who keeps correcting my posture. Everything I write feels so strict and rectangular, whereas “Looking for The Gulf Hotel” blooms. And when there’s no motivation, I can only write about how stuck I am. How do you get motivated to write? How do you work around getting stuck? Is there any way to avoid it? Please tell me there’s a way to avoid it.

I’m sure you already know this, but “Looking for The Gulf Hotel” is a good poem. My friend Hannah said she’d get a tattoo of it. Please never stop writing.

You have cool hair, by the way.

Sincerely,

Alex

Virginia

Dear Alex,

Thanks for your candid (and often funny) letter. I hear you: life can be difficult and the state of the world can be overwhelming. But that’s all the more reason to keep on writing. I find that writing poetry makes me feel better because it makes us look at matters differently, lets us discover the nuances about life, and often leads us to discover a silver lining. To answer your many questions about writing, I think it might help if I tell you the story of how my poem came to be.

After living away from Miami for several years, in 2004 I moved back to the city because I missed it and Florida very much. I went to March Island to take the proverbial trip down memory lane. But of course, as you read in the poem, everything had changed, and the Gulf Motel was nowhere to be found. I went back home and wrote a terrible

poem that was full of anger. I worked on several other drafts, but I knew there was something missing, something not quite right. So I put the poem away for several weeks and when I returned to it I realized I wasn't mad, I was actually sad—this was the core emotion—and the poem came together. I was sad that the Gulf Motel was gone and that Marco Island had changed so much, but writing the poem made me realize just how special those memories were, memories that I had taken for granted, that I had thought weren't as special as they were—that made me happy, that was the silver lining I found. And I also realized that nothing and no one can destroy my memories. So you see, poems don't fall out of the sky. Writing is a process, an emotional process. That's what happens when you get stuck (I get stuck all the time, too). Not writing anything worthwhile is simply part of the process. Accept it. It means your mind is sorting through your emotions and working toward a better poem, as happened for me with "Looking for The Gulf Motel."

Cheers and abrazos,
Richard Blanco

Dear Richard Blanco,

Man, your poem is sad, and I really like that. Your imagery of The Gulf Motel really made me feel like I was in the shoes of someone remembering a fond childhood memory. However, the memories also contain a melancholy shadow. It must be hard to be an adult and realize that you'll never be filled with all that childhood wonder you once had in abundance. Things change and we want to go back to the way things were, but we can't.

I am a highschool student nearing the end of my adolescence, and I feel pressured to grow up. We are asked as freshmen to start planning for college and begin building our resume but it's all so much. I still want to be a kid, I want to cling on to that childhood wonder. I don't want all of this responsibility. Do you have any advice for me to grow into what I need to be? I'm scared of getting older and taking care of myself all on my own. I don't think I can handle it. I'm a straight A student and I am involved in a lot of clubs, events, etc, but being an adult is going to be another playing field.

I look around me at the adults in my life and I just don't understand how they do it. How do you juggle a job, financial responsibilities, cooking every night, taxes, etc? It all seems like a lot. I don't think I'm ready for all of this. I already feel like I'm under immense pressure in school and my life in general already. I don't think I can take anymore responsibilities.

That's why I believe I latch onto childish things and memories of when I was younger. When I read the lines: "I want to find The Gulf Motel exactly as it was / and pretend for a moment, nothing lost is lost," I immediately connected this to my personal experiences with escapism. I often watch movies and shows that I used to watch when I was a little, or I'll look at photos of fun times I've had in the past. I feel so stuck in the past but at the same time I'm being yanked forward by the future.

I know that I'll never be able to predict the future, but knowing what's in store for me could be very comforting. I attempt to plan out everything for myself that is in the immediate future, and I start obsessing over due dates and upcoming events. My anxiety goes through the roof anytime I think of important and crucial events in store for me. I wish I wasn't so nervous for the future; but I am. How do you plan for the future, and is there any way you can prevent yourself from obsessing over it?

Not knowing about my future and planning my future both give me a lot to worry about and I'm not happy about that. Have you found a middle ground where you know what's going to happen but at the same time you're not consumed by it? I want to find a way to not be plagued by the future. My life would be a lot less stressful if I was able to. I don't know everything about my future, but at the same time I know too much.

How does anyone even grow up? How does anyone manage to be an adult? How does anyone face their future? I don't know the answers to any of these questions, but hopefully I'll find out in due time.

Appreciatively,

Kody

California

Dear Kody,

Thanks for your honesty and for sharing your apprehensions. I hear you! Philosophically speaking, I think it's human nature to want stability and permanence in one's life, but I think we also crave change and adventure. That's part of the joy of living. Imagine how boring and dull things would be if nothing ever changed and we'd stay the same all our lives. Change makes us grow and see things differently. As you noted, "Looking for The Gulf Motel," does have a certain sad and melancholic tone because I lost a place that was very dear and near to my heart. But if you read more deeply into the poem, you'll also notice something joyful. You see, if it wasn't for the fact that the Gulf Motel was gone, I would've never relived those memories and realized just how very special and meaningful they were. Because things changed, I was able to understand my life, my memories differently. The poem speaks to the old adage: you don't know what you got until you lose it. The changes you are going through right now will allow you to better appreciate the past. Embrace this moment in your life. And keep reading poetry to help you navigate through the many other changes you will experience in your lifetime.

Cheers and abrazos,

Richard Blanco

Good Grief

after the 2021 Texas Winter Storm

I'll admit that I've never thought about frostbite.

Trauma of the blood, a thing to be avoided when heat goes out for an entire state.

I don't know where to place this grief, this sweltering state freezing, politicians breezing over to a country that doesn't have tissue choked out by its winter yet.

The sky can only do what it does.

The American government can only do what systems driven by green paper, violence & ache can do.

The trees bloom over dead bodies, missing.

The sound of hands rubbing, engines purring, hopes that gas lights or chafing or the rapture won't come first may quiver in my blood forever.

I am Black but maybe I am doomed.

Memory flashes like a computer screen; I see the zoom link expand. Colleagues process whatever failure number of a thousand this was this year and I can only remember white.

Six inches deep, sunken into my boots all over.

The timeline of friends stranded, impending doom of electricity shutting off, water pressure slipping into nothing every hour, pipes bursting on top of all that white.

I haven't recovered from seeing things that too-closely resemble holes in a graveyard.

I haven't forgotten the project is due in 2 weeks.

My therapist says *take it easy* as if capitalism is listening. As if the body will ever forget what it is given.

I am Black which is history, personified.

I used to listen to *Pilot Jones* fondly. With all this frostbite on my fingers, I'm not sure if I can type.

I cannot finish another sentence on unity.

What is unified about ERCOT letting us freeze? Knowing how to fix the problem & not doing it; how does that form a Kumbaya circle?

If I made art about every pain I've felt unjustly, I would be swimming in accolades for great American books.

I would take back every word I've written if it ended this.

America is the worst group project.

I'm writing a great American poem about suffering.

How much is going without food that isn't canned for a week worth?

The absence of snow feels like betrayal. My memory mixes with American delusion.

I can't believe half the things that I've been through.

Ice cold, baby, I told you; I'm ice cold.

Who said it first, Frank Ocean or Christopher Columbus?

I've never been taught how to adequately mourn the nights spent bitching about a brisk wind; the night we almost got stranded trying to get to J before the cold swallowed them whole.

I want to give everything I've been handed a good cry. Red skin & chapped lips deserve it.

Good grief, what has Texas done to me.

An article features a person walking past tents near I-35.

I can't cry about the body but I feel it.

A highway splits a nation from its promise to be one.

Everything feels blurry and the palm trees have died.

Everything transported here withers away eventually.

6 months later and I haven't been able to shovel out my sadness.

A news report said that it's safe to go back to work. & I listen, because what else can you do in 6 inches of white.

The snow melted and I still feel frostbitten.

There are no heroes in a freeze-frame changing nothing.

I pose begrudgingly. Say cheese & then write this.

I'm not a survivor; just still breathing.

I remember grief, love's grand finale.

What else do we have if not the memory of life before this?

I cannot tell you how many lives I've lost to mourning, but I can tell you that the sky does what it does.

Let's go for a walk & touch the trees that survived like us.

Let's write a future more joyful & less inevitable in segments of leaves.

Anything we dream will be better than this.

Dear Students,

I am touched by all of your brilliant letters in response to my poem, “Good Grief.” Due to your generosity, attention, and insight, I am invigorated to continue writing and promoting the good work of poetry. It is because of readers like you that our genre continues to be practiced and consumed.

What especially feels important to me is the amount of you that survived Winter Storm Uri, and those of you that had no connection to the storm, but brought personal reads to the poem. No matter who you are or where you’re from, you will at some point experience themes that I bring up in “Good Grief”—disappointment, anger, fear, and (of course) grief—and I liked being reminded of the evergreen nature of “niche” poems like this one.

I turn to this medium, this malleable and moving thing we call poetry—when I’m ready to think and move. The way you all moved through worlds with your words is not only spectacular, it is necessary for the times we are living in. The last couple of years have been hard on me politically and culturally, and I can only imagine what it’s been like for school-aged humans (climate catastrophe or not). Please know that each of your letters were read and cherished; your words are doing the work of keeping poetry alive!

I hope that each of you continue to read, write, and amplify poetry. I am changed by your insight, and know that people will continue to be changed by your participation in our craft for days and decades to come.

Best,

KB Brookins

Dear Mx. Brookins,

Hello, my name is Charlie, and I am currently a sophomore at Texas. I also lived through the Texas winter freeze, and your poem “Good Grief” resonates with my personal experiences of living through the storm. I still remember crowding around a fireplace with my family, eating dried and canned foods, and living without any connection to the outside world. I remember putting on my thickest winter coats yet still experiencing the bitter cold, sleeping next to the fireplace yet feeling nothing but the stone-cold floor. I realized how much I took for granted: electricity, warmth, and a sense of security. However, I recognize that my experience was more fortunate than the experiences of many others, and reading your poem shed light on the devastating impacts of the freeze and made me think about the bigger picture—how our society responds to crises.

As someone who has lived in Texas for almost my entire life, I had “never thought about frostbite” before the storm (line 1). To me, the experience displayed the vulnerability of our society and how calamities can impact us when we least expect them. Nobody anticipated a snowstorm hitting one of the hottest states in the US, and nobody expected the fragility of our infrastructure systems. The question you pose—“What is unified about ERCOT letting us freeze?”—also reflects on the bigger picture: the disunity of our political system and the desperate need for change (line 31). The fact that politicians and citizens alike can’t find a way to work together is problematic for the well-being of all of society, and I like how your poem utilizes rhetorical questions to emphasize this fact. Furthermore, your line about our government being “driven by green paper” stands out to me, as it highlights the problem of our capitalistic society driven by profits (line 9). In chasing money, the government has neglected the people it claims to protect, taking shortcuts and neglecting citizens to maximize governmental revenue. I also like how this line refers to money as “green paper” to display the insignificance of the money we care so much about (line 9). Until we learn how to forget about selfish interests and prioritize alleviating the suffering of our people, America will remain “the worst group project,” a group driven by the interests of a tiny, white minority (line 37).

Overall, “Good Grief” might’ve been inspired by the freeze, but I think it’s interesting how the poem’s themes apply to so much more: healthcare, climate change, structural inequalities, and ultimately our capitalistic system. The personification of capitalism in line 18 conveys a vital message. The portrayal of our capitalistic system as a living but ignorant being emphasizes how capitalism has gotten so powerful, it seems like the system can hear what we’re saying but decides to ignore it.

I think it’s interesting how the themes you discuss in the poem reflect many topics I have researched. As a debater, I have researched and read various arguments criticizing capitalism, colonialism, climate denialism, and more. I have read various pieces of literature on these topics, but I sometimes forget what the literature really means. Because I get so used to seeing statistics and argumentation, I forget what those numbers truly represent. Your poem reminded me that these topics are not just arguments to be read in debate, but also real-world issues that affect real-world people. I like how your poem takes possibly abstract and complex topics like capitalism and displays their real-world impacts.

The last line of your poem where you advocate for a “future more joyful and less inevitable” stands out to me (line 64). Climate change, wars, environmental exploitation—these could all be existential. However, accepting these events as inevitable will only lock in a grim future. The last line made me think about how, if humanity had the motivation and will, society as a whole could work together to ensure a sustainable and joyful future. I’m wondering, moving forward, how do you envision our society as a whole responding to crises, and do you believe there is a way to create a better future?

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter!

Sincerely,
Charlie
Texas

Charlie,

I so appreciate you sharing that “Good Grief” resonated with you as a survivor of one of the worst climate catastrophes Texas has ever seen. My goal as a poet is always to reach those who can relate, and galvanize those who would benefit from being

exposed to what I discuss into thinking/doing. It sounds like this poem both reminded you of the terrible experience of Winter Storm Uri and got you thinking about our society's response to crises; this is so special to me!

I think you hit the nail on the head with Winter Storm Uri displaying “the vulnerability of our society and how calamities can impact us when we least expect them.” I would even go further to say that the U.S. is a nation that thrives when its citizens have cognitive dissonance. It's always “couldn't be me” or “this couldn't happen to me” until it is/does, and it happened to Texas this time. It will continue to be Texas, and other cities/states across our un-united country, unless we do something about the large issues that stunt our growth as a nation, one of them being climate change.

With this being said, another goal of mine as a writer is to un-normalize the everyday atrocities that we as Americans have been conditioned to normalize. I'm so glad that wasn't lost on you with my usage of “green paper.” It's quite silly that some of us ignore and aggress others over something made from trees, how this country overtly and covertly decides who has access to a good life for themselves and their families based on something as little as skin color or gender, how we have solutions to many issues (including climate change!) but won't take them due to green paper—something someone made, something that can be devalued at any time, something insignificant in comparison to lives.

You bring up a good question close to the end of your letter, and I must admit that I don't have all the answers. There's a level of “undone-ness” that poetry allows, which drew me to this form as I was trying to file through my feelings about Winter Storm Uri in “Good Grief”; with that being said, I do have some ideas.

I'd love for us to respond to crises first by preparing for them in advance. What individuals in power have done to the earth—in the name of capitalism—is unspeakable, and it will continue to change the way weather looks in Texas and beyond. The truth is, Charlie, Winter Storm Uri was both avoidable and a display of exactly how underprepared Texas is for inclement weather. I think that people in power could create readiness plans that account for unprecedented weather patterns, be ready to carry those plans out when we find ourselves in another climate catastrophe, and create those plans with community members and the environment (NOT property or profit) as the central things that need to be preserved.

Despite all the doom and gloom in this poem, I do intentionally end it with hopefulness, so I do believe there is a world in which things like Winter Storm Uri don't happen. We as people must actually birth that world into being, though. The way we create that future is by seeing the environment and each other as worth more than the paper in our pockets, and then requiring that our leaders do the same. The way that we might do that is endless—protest, boycott, publicizing art & free/factual/community-led mass media about the issues, and so on.

There's so much more that I could say about your stellar letter, but I'll end with this: it is readers like you that keep me writing. With your attention to detail, and your ability to generously take text and extract the exact meaning that you need from it, I believe we can see a future where poems like "Good Grief" are a reminder of our past, but not a reality of our present. So keep reading, applying what you read to your life, and sharing the good word of poetry.

Best,
KB Brookins

Dear KB Brookins,

My name is Jayden and I am a high school Junior from Missouri. Your poem, "Good Grief," expressed a powerful sensation of dedication to existence and survival, which, unfortunately, is all too relatable for many people, including myself. Your grieving, yet your passionate tone and longing for a futurity other than the inevitable gives me the sense of hope I need in times like this.

One line that stood out was "this sweltering state freezing, politicians breezing over to a country that doesn't have tissue choked out by its winter yet." I understand that "sweltering" often depicts suffering from state-inflicted inequality and injustice, however, I am curious about the "freezing" part. In a literal translation, Texas froze over during Winter Storm Uri, yet Ted Cruz, likely among others, left not only the state, but the country, to relax in Mexico, while the rest of the state was left to fend for themselves. However, I am wondering if the frozen imagery is related to the freeze of the self? I also am unsure if the relationship between this line and the second line, "Trauma of the blood, a thing to be avoided when heat goes out for an entire state,"

is that identity and cultural violence always seem to be moved to the back burner under the guise of an “emergency” that the state doesn’t help with, anyways, or if I missed the main interpretation?

I also couldn’t help but notice the similarities between the poem, “Strange Fruit,” and your line, “The trees bloom over dead bodies, missing.” Generally, trees are assumed symbols of life, however, in both of these poems, the trees symbolize the structure that causes death, and either “bloom over dead bodies,” or “blood on the leaves and blood at the root,” according to Meeropol. I think the way you tied this into the beginning of the poem was beautiful, but the way you tied it back together at the end by bringing the tree and leaves symbolism back with the lines, “Let’s go for a walk & touch the trees that survived like us. / Let’s write a future more joyful & less inevitable in segments of leaves” was my favorite line in the whole poem. I love the way you take the meaning of the leaf and almost reappropriate it, to mean something more than the structure.

One last question I had was referring to your last line, “Anything we dream will be better than this.” While I agree that any dream we can have separates us from the inevitable and impending doom we face, I am unsure what “this” refers to. I believe it is either the system and world we live in now, or specifically the situations with Winter Storm Uri, which I suppose that in-and-of-itself is an issue with the bigger world structure.

Overall, this poem was deeply moving for me, and for many other readers. You have really shown me a new form of determination and resistance that I didn’t think people had the will to execute, and for that, I appreciate it. Thank you for your time, and for helping audiences like me become aware of the possible.

Sincerely,
Jayden
Missouri

Jayden,

You are so right in saying that the times we live in need hope, and I’m happy “Good Grief” was able to give you some of that. In general, I try not to let my perspective cloud too much of what people get from the poem; it’s one thing to write something,

and it's another to share it publicly. Once the poem is out of my hands, I've essentially given up the idea of there only being *one* meaning. With that said, I can tell you my initial ideas behind the lines you hint to.

When I talked about "freezing," I was thinking of the literal freezing of the roads, people's pipes, and of humans themselves that happened during Winter Storm Uri, as well as being "frozen in place" since most Texans weren't able to travel safely by car, and we are a state that basically mandates cars since our transit systems are faulty at best. So in these ways, the state of Texas was frozen—in place and time—for a week. This was what I was getting at, but I'm sure it could be read in more ways than this.

What I think the relationship is between this line and the line you quote here is that they're reflecting on the same instance of event—Winter Storm Uri—and they explore similar thoughts (frostbite, and tissue being "choked out"). However, I do like your invoking of cultural violence—especially as it pertains to some of my other sentiments in the poem re: Blackness. Nice close reading!

I'm loving your thought process re: "Strange Fruit" and this poem; you've got me thinking a lot about Billie Holiday's delivery of this, and how filled with meaning she makes Meerpol's lyrics! And in a way, a chorus in a song reminds me of the repetition used for emphasis, or further exploration in poems. Sometimes, when a chorus comes back around after a verse or bridge in a song, it feels totally different because of what's happened since you first heard it. I aim to do this in my poetic repetition, and I love both mediums for this (and admittedly I am a person who just lives for a loop/return/reminder)!

Re: your sentiments about my usage of "this," I guess my thought process behind using this word was to let "this" be a stand-in for anything. Racism, climate change, homophobia, etc.; there are so many things we can dream that could be better than our current conditions. Though this poem is about a specific event, my hope is that it lends hope to whatever reader encounters it, and to whatever said reader might be wanting to dream up. I'm most curious in poetry when I don't quite know what's being hinted at, and among all the specificity I use, I wanted to at least leave one moment up to reader's interpretation. To that end, I think both of your interpretations (and any future reader interpretations) are right, so thank you!

All in all, I appreciate you reading my work and hope to continue to think—in literature and life—alongside you.

Best,
KB Brookins

Dear KB Brookins,

It's startling to see your own emotions reflected back at you. You spend so long convinced you are the only one. You think: no one has ever, ever felt what I feel. No one could ever understand what I am going through. Yet, it's all right there in "Good Grief": all I have ever felt, written by someone else.

Our two griefs, on paper, are so different. You mourn your city, I mourn my mother. Yet: your poem so perfectly represents the slow molasses avalanche of trauma. "6 months later and I haven't been able to shovel out my sadness." Eight years in and I am the same. I find myself in class, in bed, sweeping, walking, and the sadness reappears without prompting. You say, "The snow melted and I still feel frostbitten." I know you are talking more literally than I am—but I feel like I understand entirely what you mean. Because everything is over and done with now—the snow is melted—but when the sadness reappears, I freeze again. I feel, suddenly, like my hands and feet and voice are frozen solid. Like if I ever want to really, properly use them again I have to completely thaw them out; but here I am, eight years later, still not thawed. I wonder, KB, if you've started to thaw? Has this poem, and people's response to it, helped you do that? Speaking of voice: I talk so much. But when the sadness hits, it's like I can never talk again. That's where the poetry comes in. I can not open my mouth to explain myself so I bring pen to paper. I wonder if it's the same for you? You say: "I pose begrudgingly. Say cheese & then write this." Do you sometimes feel voiceless, too? Like—no matter how hard you try, you can't force out a sound? Is poetry what you turn to as well, or something else?

I don't think I need to ask you why you chose to write the poem the way you did. The feeling you seemed to be trying to get across was instinctual to me. There it is: that slow, molasses avalanche of comprehension. Thoughts and understandings coming one at a time over days, weeks, months, and years.

And one more thing, KB. You mention on your website your involvement with activist groups and projects. I also try to stay as involved. But it feels more useless every day: as I see more killer legislation passed, people killed, and more and more isolation and despondence of the general public—I ask myself, what am I still doing this for, anyway? Yet sometimes it feels like if I were not working for hours on end to try and change things, I would simply combust with the fear. KB, how do you deal with the stress of it all? Is it ever too much—does activism ever feel completely pointless to you? How do you keep going? I know we *have* to keep going, but sometimes I just don't know how to.

Thank you so much for this poem, KB. Genuinely. At first I thought this would just be an annoying assignment—but I am so glad my teacher assigned this. “Good Grief” truly affected my soul. I am so, so grateful you wrote it.

Sincerely,
Lucille
Virginia

Lucille,

I first want to say that I'm so captivated by your writing—its veracity and lyricism especially—so thank you for sharing it with me. Second, I'm so sorry to hear about your mother, and am grateful to hear that you've been able to see that loss in “Good Grief.” In this letter, you have confirmed what I've always thought to be true about literature (and poetry especially): even when a writer writes about specific things—gender, race, climate catastrophe (as I've done here) or otherwise—readers will take from your words exactly what they need to, and it seems that you have done that in your beautiful analysis. You have brought a necessary read to the chorus of experiences of Winter Storm Uri that I aimed to capture in this poem.

Honestly, you bring up quite a good question re: thawing and how this poem has/hasn't helped me do this. Unfortunately, since I've written this poem, my city had another climate catastrophe in the form of an ice storm. I'm not sure if the life that some legislators and business owners have set up for us really promotes the “thawing” you hint at, you know? Everyday we live is a day where we will grieve someone or something we once knew. It doesn't have to be this way, but it is until it isn't.

In general, I think poetry helps me think through some things that otherwise would feel so large, too large, in my head, thus creating a temporary thawing out that I then couple with community care, therapy, and meaningful body movement—all things that keep me going on this place we call earth. So to answer your question, somewhat!

To answer your next question, I think that I turn to poetry when I want to say things that I can't say in regular speech. Like, I don't know if I would've been able to fit Frank Ocean, Christopher Columbus, my worries about climate change in my home state, and other things into something that wasn't a poem, yunno? Poems thrive in complex thoughts and forms, and it sounds like it helps you speak differently. I like that you have poetry for this, and I think it does the same for me.

To be honest, I feel voiceless all the time. I don't know who's truly representing my voice on the city, state, country level. I don't always feel empowered to speak, or grieve (which I try to express in this poem). I think that no matter what I (and others that are fighting for my rights) do, there are many folks invested in things being this way, and I'm sad to hear that you feel this way sometimes, too. We live in such a culture of GOGOGO that there's not much time to pause, you know? There are an array of things that help me put down this voicelessness—one of them being poetry. Another thing is having an outlet—people, mental health support, etc—that will listen to me, and celebrate me even when I have nothing to say.

You bring up so many familiar emotions re: activism and feeling fear. I don't have a great answer for dealing with “the stress of it all” since the amount of things to be stressed about changes as our days do, but what keeps me going most days is knowing that oppressive people/systems WANT us to be apathetic. They thrive on us being inactive, indifferent, defeated by their incessant bullying; I simply don't want to give them that satisfaction. In poems and activism, I aim to constantly be pointing out that the things we've come to accept as normal—climate catastrophe and legislation that takes away people's right to a good life—are far from normal, in hopes that people will be galvanized into not accepting these conditions as “the best we've got.” It's because people throughout history didn't accept their conditions that we have integration, forty-hour work weeks, labor unions, and so on (though most of the things I name here are not enough for the times we live in now). I like that I can see your reflection here, and I can't say enough about the importance of it. I think the “how” of your question is answered by doing what you're already doing: reading, talking about what

you've experienced within friend/family groups and learning communities, and finding like-minded folks to affirm you and teach you things that keep you going.

I'm happy that you read "Good Grief," and I'm even happier to hear that you are a writer. I hope that you keep going, and that I can read your words some day. On days when I'm needing proof of what words can do, I will think of your words, and hold them close to the faces of those that need to see the power of poetry.

Best,

KB Brookins

Dear KB Brookins,

My name is Sal, I am a sophomore. Your poem "Good Grief" spoke to me as someone who once lived in Texas and was there when the snowstorms hit. I can relate to the sense of fear and uncertainty during it and the unattachment afterwards. I lived near an area that had many homeless people and would hope everyday I wouldn't see the body of the man who'd wait at the corner with his dog or the lady who'd walk car to car, asking for money. The cold was unforgiving and uncaring but politicians were more so. I also felt that "impending doom of electricity shutting off, water pressure slipping into nothing every hour," as you wrote, and would worry that when I awoke in the morning, the power and water would still be gone and stuck like that for the rest of the snowstorms. You also wrote the line "The sound of hands rubbing, engines purring" which is great imagery and reminds me of being under my blankets, rubbing my hands to gather some sense of warmth. All of this to say I loved your poem and how you were able to wrap all these complicated feelings and the sense of doom in just a few lines. How did you think of all these metaphors by yourself? I also read a little more about you and saw that you are also queer and trans, like me. With the direction Texas is going, I wonder how you can find motivation to continue writing and working for change? I also wonder if you have any queer poets you see as inspiration or idols? Or any poets overall? I appreciate you taking the time to read this and I hope you can feel the good vibes I'm sending your way along with this letter.

Wishing you well,

Sal

California

Sal,

Hello, Texas fam! I'm happy to hear that parts of "Good Grief" resonated with you, and am sad that the both of us went through such an avoidable event. You are so right when you say "The cold was unforgiving and uncaring but politicians were more so"; it's this type of sentiment that I was trying to relay in "Good Grief," and I hope that it was felt by you.

To answer your question about metaphors, I honestly think that the English and creative writing teachers had a lot to do with it. Poetry, like any skill, requires practice in order to get good at, and I had quite a bit of practice in K-12 schooling when I had to come up with examples of various literary elements, and got even more practice when I took creative writing classes in undergraduate school and community classes. Everything I write is because of the teachers—including dear friends—that decided to nurture my voice, and me continuing to refine my voice on my own. I see "Good Grief" as a testament to the years of learning coupled with practice, and I'm glad you enjoyed a bit of that!

I'm grateful that you feel comfortable sharing your identities with me (and honestly am psyched to hear about other queer and trans people reading me; yay!). Texas is going in *quite an interesting direction* politically, and I sustain my motivation by remembering that there are good things that are happening as it pertains to queer and trans rights. For instance, this year Texas hit a new record for the amount of pro-LGBTQ+ bills that were filed at the state level! Though we also hit a record in the other direction, this is good! It's helpful to have something to support that isn't all doom and gloom. Second thing that I do to stay writing and advocating for change is being reminded of our history and immersing myself in positive depictions of LGBTQ+ people. Have you seen the movie *Anything's Possible*, directed by Billy Porter? 10/10 recommend. Have you read *If I Can Give You That* by Michael Gray Bulla? A very cute book that I read recently. I look at the Lambda Literary awards finalist list and get great recs of LGBTQ+ books in every genre. It also helps to read up on LGBTQ+ history—*Black on Both Sides* by S. Riley Snorton, *The Stonewall Reader* by Edmund White/The New York Public Library, and the Netflix documentary *Disclosure* come to mind.

I have SO many LGBTQ+ poets that have both inspired me and made it so I can write today. A couple that come to mind are: Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Pat Parker, Essex Hemphill, Jericho Brown, torrin a. greathouse, Danez Smith, Cyrus Cassells, Gabrielle Calvocoressi, Cameron Awkward-Rich, jason b crawford, Chen Chen, Constance Merritt, Ocean Vuong, Kay Ulanday Barrett, and TC Tolbert. I also have other LGBTQ+ entertainers that inspire me endlessly: Frank Ocean, Laverne Cox, Janelle Monae, Kid Fury and Crissle of The Read podcast, Laci Mosley, Marsha P. Johnson, Monica Roberts, Emmett Schelling, etc. It's important to me that I draw from many angles.

All in all, I so appreciate being in conversation with you. While I'm revising my poems/life, it is young LGBTQ+ folks that are especially at the forefront of my mind, always the people I'm wanting to honor. Thank you for your letter, and I hope that we can keep wowing each other from here.

Best,

KB Brookins

Dear poet KB Brookins,

My name is Makenna. I come from a small town called [redacted] and I'm currently in 11th grade. I was always interested in poetry as our school had two classes for it. Though I never joined them until this year being too afraid of being bullied, but when I hit a real low in my life, I found poetry helped me out of that dark place.

Your poem "Good Grief" stood out to me, I could relate to it in so many ways that it made me feel not alone in my own emotions. The line "*I haven't recovered from seeing things that too-closely resemble holes in a graveyard.*" Was a line that spoke to me, it's been almost 9 years now that I lost someone important but that sadness still seems to loom over me. Poems like this let me remember that sometimes things will hurt in life and they take a long time to heal. You spoke about how if you'd painted all your emotions out you'd be swimming through them. Do you like to have drawings or paintings with your poems? I try to usually include some form of art since I express more emotion through them.

Now before this gets too long (since I bet you have many letters to read through) I just want to say thank you. Thank you for writing this amazing piece of poetry and also helping me without knowing it. You are truly someone that has the ability to help many others and I hope you do so.

Sincerely,
Makenna
Pennsylvania

Makenna,

Thank you immensely for your letter, and for telling me that “Good Grief” stood out to you. I’m especially glad to hear that poetry helped you out of a dark place; it’s done that for me too! I wrote “Good Grief” with (of course) my grief in mind, but I love that the emotion that is grief can be so universal that it also resonates with you. That isn’t lost on me, and I thank you for confirming that we tend to reach people in ways we’d never know just by talking about our grief. I hope you feel empowered to do this as you mourn your lost loved one.

Regarding your question, visual art is something I desperately wish I was good at, but I’ve never been able to gain the clarity and thought processes needed for that medium. I’m truly a text-based artist (haha) but admire drawings quite a bit. In general, I like to be a consumer of multiple art forms—TV, film, music, theater, you name it—in hopes that it gives me multiple ways of seeing the world. Surprisingly, though, I LOVE to read, write, and teach *ekphrastic poems*. If you are at all interested in the overlap between poetry and visual art, I would check out this poetry form.

Thanks again for your reflections, Makenna! Here’s to hoping our paths continue to cross—on the page and otherwise.

Best,
KB Brookins

Country of Water

I know who I am because I believe it

The breath in my chest

Insistent in its choice

The skin that I'm in

The bones and blood and veins

It carries like a promise

Have you witnessed the ocean

Moving with so much gust and life

Have you witnessed the river

Still waters bubbling the rebirth of school

Have you witnessed your body

Its own country of water

Moving against the tide of a world

So heartbreaking it's forgotten its own voice

Be still friend

Be still

Be kind to yourself in the gift of stillness

I know who I am because I believe it

I know

I know

Who I

Who I

Believe

Believe

Believe

In three's we will come
A drip of water moving against a boulder
Water slow and steady can turn rock
Into a pebble
Like anxiety
Like self-doubt
Smaller
Smaller
Until gone
Let your love for yourself be the water
Be the rise
Be the mist
Let you be

I know who I am because I believe it
I believe I am my mother's daughter
I believe I am my grandmother's prayers
I believe I am my great-grandmother's backbone revealed

I am I am because I believe so
I am because a woman believed in me
What a continent I became
What a country of water I be
I flow and fluid and rise and ebb and I believe in me

I am not wrong

I am wronged

In this skin I've reclaimed
From this trap of this country's tourniquet
Only to find the sweet solace is a river bed
Its mud beckons me closer to its silt
Small fish and forgotten glass unearth themselves
Like baby teeth
Only one can cut into flesh purposely
Only one does not know what it is capable of

I believe in the air as much as I believe in the fire
I believe in the fire as much as the water consumes
I believe in a higher source
Energetic and wise
I believe in my ability to thrive

This body

 This body is a good thing

Turning two miles walked over a bridge into a family's meal
Creating poems that become cashier's checks
Dentist bills and rent
I've three holes in my teeth
And a nation that pretends I didn't almost die for it to survive

I am I am still here still here
I am still here and like the ocean, full of salt and shells
Full of ship remnants and noble ones
I bleed and the sand grieves

I be because someone survived for me to be here
Today

Breathing this almost air
Marching for cleaner belongings
My front seat beneath the deadening stars
Is still a seat
Is still a ground
Is still a home that I can pronounce my given name
To write amongst the forgotten names
The taken and the ignored
But today

 There are no tombstones

Today
There is no true death
Only life

Only life
Only a song of the living
Maybe even a belief system
With water as its minister

I am water

I dive into my own currents
I dress my dreams in the satin breath
Of my ancestors

I know
I know
I know who I am
I know who I am because I believe it

Dear Students,

Thank you for your heart-to-heart inquiries, poetic support, and lyrical receptions that centered my poem “Country of Water.” You move me completely. I am grateful you chose this poem and have been able to locate your beautiful writer, artists, and creative selves in the lines.

I was drawn to write this poem, as a prompt from a young artist and yoga instructor, Sudan Greene. In his prompt, he asked writers to respond to the phrase “I Know Who I Am Because I Believe It” and the revolutionary way in which my own belief became the axis point of the text was revelatory to me as a Black woman, writer, and mother. The repetition served as momentum and the pulse of the piece. Each cycle was a war cry, or a self-naming, or a finger snap.

Do you know what it feels like to speak your work, written from your heart and mind and score it on the page? Then to have that score ignite the audience of listeners (readers included) into a call and response—it’s more than magic; it is healing. It is collective healing. And poems have the power to heal both on the page and on the stage. On the page it serves as a blueprint or a holy text. You return to the text to find understanding of self. On the stage it serves as an assembly of organizers and community members. When the words become sound and sound rides the air, it is a call to action that the body responds to. Some people cry. Some people snap their fingers. And some people sign up to protest, change policy, or assure mental health is a priority for the next generation.

As I edited this poem, I realized how much of the lyrics feel like a testimony. I was transported back to a time of pure amazement and fright. I believe my teen years hosted the most impactful years of my life, as I became a young adult wrapped with layers of insecurities: my weight, my hair texture and length, my skin tone, the size of my feet, my teeth, my parent’s whereabouts, my talent, and my me. All of these were subject to scrutiny that would outlast those seemingly small moments of bullying. And the testimony that is “Country of Water” within 102 lines is a meditation of water, rebirth, and reconsideration. The way a song meditates between the silence, or a line that declares “I Am Here,” are the kind of poems I hope we all continue to have the vulnerability to write.

Thank you for your notes of how to remain brave, to become the tide, to recognize the power of my own naming. I am grateful to be seated in a classroom with bright minds like yours. Your light will lead the way.

Mahogany L. Browne

Dear Mahogany L. Browne,

You control the tide. In the “Country of Water,” you convey a sense of confidence and power; in yourself, along with the rich history you carry. I can see you without truly seeing you. I can hear your voice and its strength in specific words. That very unapologetic vigor is what makes your poem stand out in ways unimaginable. Your poem has a sense of duality to it. When writers bring up struggle it can sound very endlessly somber. You shine light in a first-person sense. The realization of the fact that it’s important to not forget sometimes melancholy history but also not to let that consume you : “I am I am still here still here / I am still here and like the ocean, full of salt and shells / Full of ship remnants and noble ones / I bleed and the sand grieves / I be because someone survived for me to be here / Today.” That feeling of being consumed by the struggle of your ancestors is understandable. It’s as if the waves you mention in your story are their living breathing history. But I believe the tide of the ocean is up to your control. You make it clear that recognizing history doesn’t mean constantly mourning the past but thinking about how it still affects some today: “And a nation that pretends I didn’t almost die for it to survive.” In American society, many act as if our country’s history is one-sided and we are always on the moral and victorious one. The victims of our country’s dark history are constantly disregarded at their expense. I applaud your constant use of the word “I” that one specific craft choice is actively putting that disregard away. The belief in putting yourself first is so fundamental in your poem : “I am not wrong / I am wronged.” You help reflect others’ voices. Their thoughts, whispers, and conversations. I mentioned earlier that the aspect that makes your poetry stand out is your unapologetic-ness. That confidence is something I admire. Hello, my name is Malia. I’m in the 8th grade and I’m from New York. As a black girl, for me especially going to a PWI, it can feel as if speaking your mind is strangely taboo. No matter how agitated I may be, in our society, it’s as if you have to mask your feelings and stay quiet. And when you don’t, names are placed

on you like stickers, no matter your regular personality you instantaneously become moody, 17 short-tempered, or fractious. That mindset of becoming desensitized to your own emotions makes you not want to share them again. But in “The Country of Water” you put that aside you powerfully speak your truth. You understand history but you don’t let it defy you. That’s power. You juxtapose sadness with assuredness. “To write amongst the forgotten names / The taken and the ignored / But today / There are no tombstones / Today/ There is no true death / Only life.” When you use your voice even if it’s demonized by some it’s important to remember that it benefits others as well. You give the forgotten names, people, leaders and kings their voices back through the rhythm and music that flows within you. You control the tide.

Heartily,

Malia

New York

Dear Malia,

Thank you for such a wonderful note. I love that you nod at melancholy and the various ways in which I’ve learned to enter rooms safely. There is a history that speaks to me every time I return to the page. It’s a gnarly feeling—to think your words and thoughts and ideas don’t belong. But it is also because of poetry that I am able to articulate my worry, and sadness, and joy, and confusion. The true power, Malia, is you seeing this poem as a place to continue conversations with the world. The world of you. The country of you. I hope this poem helps you as much as your note as helped me.

Mahogany L. Browne

Dear Mahogany L. Browne,

I have chosen to write to you because of your poem “country of water.” The poem instantly caught my eyes. I have always had a hard time with just my existence and just my whole being. I have always struggled with my self image. This poem inspired me and made me feel less alone.

When I was around two and a half years old I was a little girl in an orphanage in a rural part of Thailand. I was getting ready to travel all the way to the USA in a small town in Wisconsin (you might be wondering why Wisconsin. Trust me I wonder why too) the only thing I would take with me were the clothes on my back. Growing up as an Asian in a mostly white rich town was a struggle. I was constantly bullied for my lack of English, for my skin color, for my eyes, the list can go on for miles. As a young child knowing you weren't supposed to even be here was a really hard concept to understand. I hated people that looked like they had their life together. I resented the kids who got to see their faces in their parents' eyes, I never got that privilege. All I got was my imagination. I hated how I looked. I would avoid the sun so my skin could whiten up. I would never let my coffee colored skin show. I would use tape to try to open my eyes. I would learn to walk and talk like a normal white girl but while doing that I had lost myself.

“Water slow and steady can turn rock
Into a pebble Like anxiety Like self-doubt
Smaller Smaller Until gone
Let your love for yourself be the water
Be the rise Be the mist Let you be”
I was young when I came down to America. I don't even remember anything but yet I yearn for the life I could have. I yearn for the warmth of seeing people who look like me, where it's normal to have coffee colored skin and hooded eyes. A part of me wants to stay for the people I have made connections with throughout the year. But there the other part wants the experience of what I could have had and what it would be like to live in my home country. I feel very selfish and guilty for wanting to leave the people who so kindly took me in and raised me like I was one of their own. But reading your poem you have inspired me to forgive myself, to embrace my color for it's a beautiful and powerful thing. I need to let the guilt flow off me for I am the only one that will live my life and I plan to live it to the fullest.

Sincerely,

Piya

Wisconsin

Dear Piya,

Thank you for this note. And yes, I know very well how anxiety can build until it becomes its own street block of compartmentalized living. I know how anxiety can make a person feel smaller than small, lesser than less, but I have found through poems, I can study my growth and I can rewrite my ownness. I don't have to be scared anymore. I don't have to be worried. I don't have to wait for others to recognize my worth—I write me into existence. I write me into being. I write. I write. And just like that—the meditation of doing, becomes a meditation for being more secure and more whole in this body, in this city, in this country, on this planet. I want to believe “Country of Water” is a reminder of the shoulders we stand on, and the groundwork our elders afforded us. But it is also a call and response to clean out the ghosts. To mine my memories with all they've taught me and to remember what I am fighting for while never forgetting who fought for me.

Mahogany L. Browne

Dear Mahogany L. Browne,

My name is Sarvesh and I'm a high school student in Ohio. As a person of color, this poem was personal to me. The difficulties that people of color faced in the past were terrible. Still today, some people of color are on the wrong side of hate crimes and other shootings. My parents always told me to be myself and strive to be better. I believe I know who I am. We are both connected as Indians and Blacks that went through brutalities as we gained freedom and independence. This poem has inspired me to be proud of who I am.

“In this skin I've reclaimed.” This line hit me hard as the central theme of this poem is to believe in who we are. What difficulties did you personally have in school? In my day and age, everything is about diversity and I believe the country is in a good place for different cultures. My parents had schooling in India so they didn't experience any hardships. I have learned about the hardships faced by people of color in books but I haven't heard from a person in modern times. The quote stated before is a strong point in being proud of who we are as different people. What did your parents teach you about adversity and how to handle it?

I love the line, “I be because someone survived for me to be here.” The poem could be understood with this single line. It provides a strong basis for the struggles faced by our predecessors for our benefit. Racial equality was made possible by the numerous sacrifices made by important historical figures and maybe even our great-grandparents. Thank you for taking the time to read this! Hope all is well!

Sincerely,
Sarvesh
Ohio

Dear Sarvesh,

Thank you for asking such profound questions. I think my high school difficulties centered around me not knowing who I was (something I think all young people do) and blindly following other people’s ideas of me as the blueprint to who I was (or who I wanted to be) is a bad formula. There is no one outside of me that should dictate my happiness, my worth, and my love of self. The poem is a reminder of that fight and also a reminder that our elders did all of that dirge work already. I don’t have to feel guilty for being—I just have to be. And I have to make sure I give the same amount of effort in creating space to redefine, reimagine, and be in awe of our efforts as creators, creatives and humans. Therefore, I write with the next generation in mind. And not just my child by blood but my children by book, bond, poem, and play. Gwendolyn Brooks said it best: “We are each other’s business.”

Mahogany L. Browne

Dear Mahogany L. Browne,

I fell in love with your poem, and it filled me with admiration. It was full of so much symbolism and it was personally very relatable which I loved. The way you used repetition within lines 19–25 was poetically beautiful. It created a meaningful emphasis on self-empowerment. I suffered through an eating disorder, and it has created lifelong struggles of anxiety and self-doubt. It is a terrible thing to live through and your poem shed light on the love that I can have for myself. Specifically, the lines: “Let your love for yourself be the water/ Be the rise / Be the mist / Let you be.” You made the idea

of loving yourself seem effortless and easy. I absolutely loved that because it is so easy to get wrapped up in one's self-imperfections. I come from a long line of strong women who had to work hard for their careers and their life, and I hope to do the same. Therefore, your lines relating to your mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother were so empowering. I also loved your reference of this country being related to a tourniquet. It is absolutely so empowering and holds so much symbolism. As I continued to read your poem, it gradually kept getting better and I was so amazed. I also loved the line that states "And a nation that pretends I didn't almost die for it to survive." You then went on to do more comparisons between the human body and nature. It felt as if the body and nature was one and that is so powerful. It is incredible to think that history has led all of us to be where we are today. You expressed that into your poem perfectly. Overall, thank you so much for this beautiful piece of work. You are an incredible writer and an amazing person.

Sincerely,
Sarah
Michigan

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your close read. Writing about the effects of COVID felt like an easy task at first. But there is so much wrapped up into our survival and that specific moment of history, it is still unraveling itself. I wanted to write with an understanding that the world that once existed was different than what existed now. The care the community required to just find a way back to one another, is still an idea that is swirling in my head and heart. And to be stricken by and the ways in which we returned to each other through intentional isolation as a form of community safety. I love that "Country of Water" oscillates between several universes, time frames, generations, and history. It feels like an opportunity to look back at "Country of Water" as a time capsule and to have a frame of reference of the ways in which we had to dig into the core of our love, belief and trust; to remain. This poem is proof of our breath work. This poem refuses the act of erasure.

Mahogany L. Browne

Dear Mahogany L. Browne,

Your poem was very inspiring to me. It spoke to me because of how you reference water. I love the water and what it stands for. Now I feel like I have a new connection to it that wasn't there before. I read your poem at a low and dark point in my life and it was exactly what I needed to hear to get me back into the light. "A drip of water moving against a boulder / Water slow and steady can turn rock / Into a pebble / Like anxiety / Like self-doubt / Smaller / Smaller / Until gone / Let your love for yourself be the water."

This part of your poem pulled on my heartstrings; it made me stop and think about how I currently view life. I am curious as to what made you use this metaphor. What was your inspiration? What emotions did you have when you wrote this verse?

I am grateful for everything that I have in my life, and I always will be. I am a young teenage girl with what appears to be a perfect life. I get good grades, play sports to stay active, and have a decent social life. All everyone sees are smiles. But recently, times have gotten rough for my family, and it is starting to chip away at that exterior. When the bad times come, I stay strong and help out. But, recently, it has been getting harder and harder to deal with. Years of pushing through the pain and not dealing with it have finally caught up to me. I haven't found the right "water" to help it all get smaller yet, but I will. What was your defining moment when the problems started getting smaller?

Hearing your poem made me remember why I help others in times of need, why I am here today, and why I'm still fighting. "I be because someone survived for me to be here / Today." This line was the deepest saying I have heard in a while. It was as if it had just jumped out of the paper and hit me. It is so true; our ancestors fought for the world we have today and the progress that we have made. It isn't a perfect world, but; it can be if we would've just listened a little more.

Thank you for writing this poem. It spreads hope and inspiration. It also reminds people why they're here and why they deserve to be here. I know your poem has helped so many people, just like it helped me realize and remember some things I had forgotten. I'm glad I got to read this poem; I can't wait to read more of your poems.

Sincerely,

Bailey

California

Dear Bailey,

What a beautiful letter. And thank you so much for holding this poem to the light. In regards to your questions: I didn't realize how much anxiety I was holding, because I've been functioning with it all of my life. So thinking about the drip of water, becoming one with your own BODY (of water) and the ways in which we can erode doubt by being honest with ourselves.

The metaphor came to me when traveling between NYC and Hudson, looking at the rocks that are held up by netting to assure they don't block the road. I thought of the power of water or our bodies; I thought of the power of water as our thoughts and I wanted to lean into that image. It felt honest in its massive nod at nature and therefore, an introspective study of human nature.

My gratitude to you for sitting with such personal work and offering such gentle words in return.

Mahogany L. Browne

ADVICE (for E)

Be the stealth between stones

The abracadabra amongst clones

Be the fighting fish with a fancy tail

The wizard who deifies gnomes

No worry be happy missiles flying

While innocents are dying

You're pretty nimble for your age

One day a wombat next day a sage

On the way to feeding a despot

You summoned your rage

Most virtuous mother don't be fooled

They will bomb our shelter scorch our earth

Unwind regroup turn swine into pearl

Be the change you wanna see in the girl

Dearest Young Readers:

Thank you for your kind responses to “Advice (for E).” Let me answer some of your tantalizing questions.

Who is “E?”

I wrote this poem for an acquaintance who has passed away recently. I’ve given her the rap name “E.” I met E, ironically, in a yoga class. She had a feisty and argumentative nature and was often caught bullying other people. But she was also one of the most generous and fascinating people I’ve ever met. Some students think “E” means Mother Earth or “Eve.”

Yes, she is a trickster matriarch, a tragic-comical survivor, a shapeshifting presence that we can’t quite define. She is a benevolent spirit.

The last time I saw E, she was engaged in a shouting match with a man twice her size over a parking space... Her beautiful twin daughters (I remember that they had thick brown curly hair) were often embarrassed by her antics.

Writing poetry is like making magic:

I believe that writing poetry is like performing magic: The poet is “the wizard.” And there is “abracadabra” in her pen. Indeed, mixing some strange and wondrous ingredients together can make transformations in front of our eyes: how a “wombat” can turn into a “sage.” How “swine” “can turn into “pearl.” How “stones,” rhymes with “clones,” rhymes with “gnomes!” How the word “happy” could immediately be followed by “missiles.” The poem is a dynamic thing; it can shapeshift tone and ideas within “poof” a short space.

I also purposefully used fun words that might tickle younger readers’ fancy. “Fighting fish,” “wizard,” “wombat,” “abracadabra.” These fun images quietly grew into important messages and larger issues. Ultimately, “Advice (for E)” is an anti-war poem.

In my first draft of the poem, I was worried about the news of missiles blasting in the Syrian civil war; by the time I finished the final draft, the missiles also implicated Russian missiles blasting toward Ukraine. Unfortunately, war is a never-ending theme; we humans tend to make war everywhere. Mothers and children are caught in the endless nightmare.

My last line: “Be the change you wanna see in the girl”—alludes to a line spoken by the great iconic Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” I am hopeful that E’s girls and the youth of this generation will help us “change” and become better world citizens.

Dearest young readers, I am hopeful that you can lead us toward a peaceful, beautiful future!

Sincerely,
Chancellor Marilyn Chin

Dear 陈美玲(Ms.Chin),

Four years ago my grandma was diagnosed with stage one pancreatic cancer. When I heard this news, the spark I had inside of me suddenly started to dim. Two years later, after months of chemotherapy and surgery, her cancer went into remission. I was filled with joy and once again became the happy girl I used to be. I was free to carry on with my dream of one day becoming a poet. I was also thrilled to continue my studies in Chinese, Spanish, Farsi, and French. Unfortunately, I recently found out that my grandma’s cancer came back, this time stage four. Finding myself back in the same position I was 4 years ago, I began writing poems as a way to cope.

My name is Ariana and I am an author, a 6th grader, and a Persian American. I love to learn languages, my favorite of them being Chinese. My Chinese name is 田家美。I made it when I was a little girl, back when I thought my grandma would be here for my whole lifetime. That lifetime has now been shortened to four or five years. I try to make the most of the time I spend with her, but I just can’t stop thinking about why it’s her that has to leave. You see, my grandma immigrated to the United States from Iran with my mom and grandpa 37 years ago. They had nothing but each other, but then my grandpa died and they didn’t even have that. My grandma was just 41 when this happened.

I never even got to meet him. My grandma had to work two jobs and then came home to raise her two girls as a widow. Despite the major challenges my grandma went through she kept on fighting. Just like she is right now. Her whole life she's been fighting.

My Iranian heritage is a big part of my life and it's all because of her. She taught me Farsi as my first language. She taught me Iranian values and traditions. She helped me develop a love for Persian cuisine. Now that she's leaving I feel like I'm losing my identity along with her.

When I first read your poem I felt as if I could hear my grandma reading it to me. At the end of the poem you exclaimed, "Be the change you wanna see in the girl." I felt like I was the girl at the end of the poem. That my grandma was giving me advice. When you said "be the stealth between stones" you reminded me of my grandma, your voice powerful and meaningful yet gentle and soothing. When you mentioned "You're pretty nimble for your age/ One day a wombat the next day a sage" you reminded me of my grandma's spirit. She always believes in what I have the potential to become. She always wants the best for me and makes so many sacrifices so that her family can live a better life. When you stated "No worry be happy missiles flying/ While innocents are dying" I imagine the strength my grandma uses to always have a positive outlook and put me first even while dealing with great hardship.

Your poems are truly an inspiration and I really hope to hear back from you.

Best,

Ariana

Washington, D.C.

P.S. Who is E?

Dear Ariana:

Thank you for your kind letter regarding "Advice (for E)." I am very moved to hear about your brave, heroic, hardworking grandmother. Our immigrant mothers and grandmothers sacrificed so much to provide for us. My grandmother, too, worked two jobs and helped raised our family. She, like your grandmother, was tireless and resourceful.

I am also happy to hear that your grandma has survived her bout of cancer. Life is filled with uncertainties and struggles...Your grandmother is a survivor on many levels. She sounds incredibly resilient and wise. I hope that she will be around for many years to come!

Now, to answer your question about the last line in “Advice for E.”

“Be the change you wanna see in the girl”—alludes to a quote by the great Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” Yes, you are right. I am speaking directly to you, my Dear Ariana—girl poet, studious scholar of Chinese, Spanish, Farsi and all matter of poetry. I wrote this poem to speak to you and to your generation of readers.

I hope that you will help “change” the world for the better, that you will carry the torch and spread peace, love and wondrous poetry around the world!

Best wishes,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Mrs. Chin,

My name is Hannah and I am from Texas. I love writing poetry.

I’ve loved poetry since I realized that I was not one that could put my thoughts and emotions into words. I often fumble over myself when I speak or attempt to make points, and I tend to get tangled up in the strings of what I want to say, like I can’t reach the words even though I know them and can visualize them crystal clear behind my eyes. With poetry came the ability to convey how I feel without having to necessarily find the “right words.” To be able to use dialects far removed from our time, and to be dramatic and romantic and striking without worrying about “does this make sense?” “is this too much?” was ENTHRALLING. Simply having the ability to write without having to tell the entire story, leaving all but what I need to say up to interpretation for whoever reads, to be able to write without bounds, is what made me fall in love with poetry. The ability to write ME is what makes me love poetry.

I have a point, trust me.

Today, I read your work “ADVICE (for E).” The bizarre structure is what first caught my eye, the fragments making it charmingly different from the rest. Next was the language, “abracadabra” (can you believe only 5 letters are used in that word?) “the Wizard who defies gnomes” “one day a wombat next day a stage” “They will bomb our shelter scorch our earth” the diction switching from light hearted to cold kept me fixated. I was so intrigued by this poem and determined to figure out its meaning. So much so that I had to reread it. And then I had to reread it again.. And again.. And again.. And I found that I didn’t understand.

The other poems didn’t seem like something I could write about y’know? So I just kept trying, but it wouldn’t click. “What is the meaning of this?? Can my grade handle another zero?” I was so unbelievably frustrated. But as I was about to give up, something different hit me- I remembered why I started writing poetry in the first place. To be able to write with no bounds, to be able to express what i feel with no worry about what others think, and to allow them to interpret my work their own way when I struggle to find words- to find my own words

I realized that while I didn’t understand, I still *loved* it.

I LOVE this poem, it was fun and enDearing and tragic and frightful, and I don’t get it! But I felt the emotion, I saw the words, I created my own story with what I was given and I loved it.

I was reminded that I don’t *need* to understand.

I greatly apologize for not being able to properly convey this poem, but thank you for letting me use this to remember why I write in the first place.

Your friend,
Hannah
Texas

Dear Hannah:

Ha ha, thank you for your passionate letter. You DO understand “Advice (for E).” The fact that you “reread it and reread it” shows that the poem intrigued you; and although you might not have the critical words to discuss the poem thoroughly, you have responded to it in your own personal way. There is no right way or wrong way to interpret a poem.

Your assertion, “I realized that while I didn’t understand it, I still loved it!” gave me joy! Often, poetry speaks in a magical language that goes beyond surface understanding. Reading a good poem is a heartfelt intuitive journey.

The fact that you “reread” and “reread” my poem and “loved it”—is the ultimate praise!

Thank you, young poet! Write on!

Sincerely,
Chancellor Marilyn Chin

Dear Marilyn Chin,

My name is Adam. I like animals, and I want to be a mortician when I am older. I write lots of poetry, and I read bunches, too. I read your poem, “Advice for E,” in my poetry class, then looked you up. I commend you on your many accolades and your activism, as well as your craft.

Your poem is interesting to me. I was drawn to its themes of nature and nurturing. It feels very alight with a childish wonder. I presumed the E stood for Earth, but I wanted to know if there was any specific event in the world that inspired the creation of this poem. Was it directly withdrawn from the present culture, or was it a more generalized interpretation of the world around you? E is also a feminine figure in the writing (another contributing factor to my belief that it is referring to the Earth), but the last line, “be the change you wanna see in the girl,” makes me wonder— who is the girl? Is the girl an individual, or is girl being used to speak for all humanity?

The choice to combine very metaphorical, tacit but mysterious lines with very direct ones is intriguing to me. I wrote my own poem inspired by yours, actually. It is called “Wonderer.”

Today, we are going to the aquarium.

I am leaning against the leg of my mother, my cheek squashed against her thigh.
We are dyed blue, and rippling. I can only hear half the world.

My mother says, “look, it’s Dory!” and I tell her it’s a palette surgeonfish.

The world booms throughout my body, dull and steady.

My mother, she presses her left hand to the glass wall of fish,
and she tells me, “you are sweet and curious.” She tells me that,
and I cling to her, with that eyes-closed love. She cups my right ear, says,
“Listen to your heart, because your heart is strong and brave.”

I look at the fish, I hear my heart. I am in love with the world.

It is a poem I would have liked to read as a child, not for subject matter or childish technique, but because it is simple and needful, hopeful and vibrant. I feel the same about your poem. The language is rich, but accessible, and the story it tells is important. I appreciate your poetic storytelling and visuals. Thank you for your poetry, for your art.

From,
Adam
Virginia

Dear Adam:

Thanks for your kind letter and for sharing your fine poem with me. I have never met a future “mortician” before. You sound like a fascinating person, indeed!

I am glad that you think that “Advice (for E)” is “alight” with “childish wonder.” I am a full-grown adult poet, but I love to return to “beginner’s mind.” “Abracadabra,” “wizards,” “gnomes,” “fighting fish” are all magical creatures that speak to the child in all of us.

The poem is hopeful that your generation will make the world better. The last line—“Be the change you wanna see in the girl” shouts out to all children to take charge! Abracadabra, let’s turn “swine into pearl,” let’s make missiles disappear!

Now, as for your poem—I am so delighted to read this gorgeous poem about your joyous day at the aquarium with your mother. “I cling to her, with that eyes-closed love” is such an amazing line. I shall savor it forever.

Write on, young poet!

Sincerely,
Chancellor Marilyn Chin

Dear Marilyn Chin,

Hello, normally while reading I can always hear the author’s voice and yours was unlike any other voice I’ve heard while reading. It was gentle but filled with passion at the same time. Your poem changed my whole perspective and instantly grabbed my attention with not only the format but also the comparisons. The more I explored your work in “Advice (for E)” the more intrigued I was. Why did you use this format? What did you mean by the sudden switch in the tone of the poem? Everything was lighthearted then suddenly switched to fear and danger. Why? There is so much hidden meaning in this piece, and I am curious as to what pushed you to write this piece? Who is this advice meant for?

The comparisons throughout your piece give it a lot more meaning; it leaves room for the reader to do some of their own interpretations. You put your own meaning into these words, and not only did they speak to you but they also spoke to me. But they spoke to me in a different font than you intended, which is the beauty of poetry. Your words that meant something completely different and meaningful to you, spoke to me and made me feel a bunch of different emotions. It changed the way I viewed my own writing. Now I’m not as critical and am more eager to add those dramatic effects like yours.

In the beginning I explained how I can always hear the author’s voice while reading and I wanted to expand on it more because it was such an amazing experience for me. The passion and gentleness of your voice astonished me. For example, “No worry

be happy missiles flying / while innocents are dying” (lines 5-6) your voice eases into the danger, almost lets it lightheartedly but towards the end it gives the realization that this is the turning point. Life is not always rainbows and sunshine. When I was a kid and my parents just told my siblings and I that they were getting a divorce, I was so taken aback. Thoughts of what? How can this be happening? They were so happy. Infiltrated my head to the point where I burst and took it out on them instead of expressing my emotions. To me your voice was like the calm before the storm, putting on a brave face and smile when you don’t feel like it can change everything. Everyone is fighting a battle that no one knows about, just because they look happy and okay doesn’t mean they are! Sometimes I forget about this message and it flies right over my head, but when I read your poem it helped me remember it again and the significance it has in my life.

The relatability that your poem contains is another reason that I was drawn to it. The pauses and gaps throughout your poem give it suspense and meaning. One line that spoke to me personally was “Be the fighting fish with a fancy tail” (line 3) because it shows that you can still be confident, fancy, and elegant while you are fighting battles no one knows about. Overcoming obstacles is not easy especially because some are a lot more difficult than others but your words showed me that those obstacles don’t determine who I am. I can still be my confident, fancy, and elegant self no matter what I am going through or what I look like. What made you pick a fish for the comparison? Why did you choose the fish to have a fancy tail and not fancy scales?

The last line in your poem has been resonating with me for a while now and I still don’t think that I am grasping the true meaning of it. When you say “Be the change you wanna see in the girl” (line 14) what does that mean? The use of the word girl is very interesting, this is such a common phrase that I’ve heard before but with the simple change of one word complicates it so much more for me. My understanding of this phrase was change starts with you and if you don’t like how something is in this world; take action. Although with the simple switch of using the word girl instead of world, that definitely changes the meaning of this “common” phrase for me. My interpretation of this new phrase is that the world is your oyster. Everyone has dreams for themselves and not everyone lives up to the dreams that they made for themselves, but this phrase spoke to me in that aspect. If we want the “girl” to succeed, we have to be the change that we want to see in our lives. It starts with us.

Your piece made me feel excited, eager, and unstoppable throughout it, which still leaves me with a few questions. What inspired you to write this piece? What motivations do you have in your life that inspire such amazing work? Do people reach out to you often explaining how your poetry has made them feel? Because if not; they should. Your poetry helped my overall aspect of poetry and showed me how helpful it can be and that interpreting things on your own is just as meaningful as the true meaning of the poem.

Sincerely,

Ella

Wisconsin

Dear Ella:

Thank you for your kind words and for your thorough and passionate unwrapping of “Advice (for E).” Your “interpretations” are spot on! There’s no right way or wrong way to interpret a poem. But I was pleased by your thoughtful interrogation.

I shall answer some of your questions:

I began the poem with the intention to give advice to a very argumentative friend (whom I named E for privacy). I wanted her to stop fighting and be kind to her two daughters.

The “fighting fish with a fancy tail” alludes to a beautiful Siamese fighting fish that a friend gave me for my birthday. (Unfortunately she died within a week, which is a sad story that I won’t go into here!) You ask an interesting question about word choice: why did the fish have a fancy tail and not “scales?” My Siamese fighting fish had a beautiful red tail. My friend E was a red head and wore her long hair in a flowing ponytail. These associative images are very personal choices and may not translate to the reader. But as a poet, I felt happy to be able to connect the two fighting “girls” via their beautiful “tails.”

Hopefully the constellation of images in the poem offers shapeshifting fun for both the writer and the reader.

Thanks for sharing your feelings about your parents' divorce. Life is dynamic; our situations are not static. There are surprises in every corner. We must be resilient and learn to embrace change.

So many things can disrupt our lives: divorce, family feuds, hurt feelings...and in other parts of the world, war, violence are rampant.

You are absolutely right: a "lighthearted" poem can change within a second and turn into "fear and anger." This is how a poem offers magic. A "swine" can turn into "pearl." The word "happy" can immediately be followed by "missiles." I love to surprise the reader by shapeshifting, by offering a constellation of surprises for the senses.

But ultimately, the fun images add up to a larger concern... "Advice (for E)" is an anti-war poem. And yes, I am speaking directly to you, Ella.

"Be the change you wanna see in the girl"—

I am calling on all girls to rise up, "take action!" The world is in disorder; it's time for women leaders and girl poets to change the world.

Ella, I believe that you are ready to lead us toward a better future!

Sincerely,
Poet Marilyn Chin

Dear Ms. Chin,

My name is Katie. Currently, we are working on our poetry unit in English class. We read and listened to many pieces of work on the Dear Poet website, but your poem—"ADVICE (for E)"—was my favorite. It jumped out at me because of its relation to nature and how it applies to my own ways of thinking.

When I was a kid in elementary and junior high school, I was very enthusiastic about two things: world wars and nature. I would consider these to be two completely contrasting concepts. I would spend hours on end playing in the park, building with snow, engineering with sand, and just appreciating the world around me. The following hours would be spent watching war documentaries and reading books about all different types of battles. As a little kid, I never quite fully understood how humans

could fight and kill each other over boundaries or a leader. I began to compare this to how animals in our environment live. Of course, they fight and kill and eat each other, but that is a means of natural instinct and survival, not on the basis of wanting power or trying to conquer the world. The animals go along with the natural flow of the earth, moving day in and day out in which no drastic changes are made. I feel that this line, “No worry / be happy / missiles flying / While innocents / are dying,” resonated with me because in the past, I could barely wrap my head around how ecosystems in nature deal with conflict so differently compared to humans (line 5–6). The use of fewer words in each line makes me interpret the words with my own meanings, which I enjoy. For example, at first I thought this poem was about the relationship between a young girl and her growth and struggles, but after rereading, I discovered that it is actually about Mother Nature’s struggles. I also feel that it strengthens the poem’s emotion relating to the calmness of nature and the roughness of man relating to the ecosystems and human society. Humans have developed mass weapons of destruction, and even though we consider ourselves to be smarter, most of nature’s disruptions come as a result of our behavior rather than the animals’. I also feel that this poem ultimately put my questions and thoughts from past-me into words.

I believe that my two favorite lines in this poem are “Be the stealth between stones / The abracadabra amongst clones” and “You’re pretty nimble for your age / one day a wombat next day a sage” and (line 1–2, 7–8). For the line about the “clones,” I saw that this referenced the beauty of nature and the visual differences it can have if you travel even just one mile. I live in a very urban city that is full of skyscrapers and light pollution. Most other cities with bustling crowds and loud traffic look the exact same, like “clones.” However, if I drive far enough, I can see the stars that luminate at night and hear animals that are mute in everyday city life. I also enjoyed the lines about how “nimble” Mother Nature is for her age. Nature comes in many vibrant, colorful, and diverse forms, whether it be a shell 8,000 feet underwater or the bird chirping next to your window. Another line I felt strongly was “Most virtuous mother don’t be fooled / They will bomb our shelter scorch our earth” (line 11–12). This line stuck with me more than the others. The earth has so much to offer us, but humans take it for granted. We overfish, overhunt, and over-exploit natural resources, which leaves the earth hurting.

I do have a few questions about your poetry. With each line, the words are spaced out and lack punctuation. How does this more strongly relay your message than using typical sentence structure? The final line also sparked a question. How does nature “be the change [it wants to] see in the girl” (line 14)? Using my understanding, I considered this line to be a warning to humans, rather than an actual statement to nature. If humans continue to deplete the earth, they will have to learn how to help Mother Nature rejuvenate and strengthen her to how she once was. I believe that my own personal experiences shaped my interpretation of this poem because I feel strongly about preserving the beauty of nature and constantly question how man changes said beauty. Did your own experiences shape the writing of this poem?

I have one question about my own writing in particular. I constantly struggle with putting meaning into my words without creating run-on sentences or a jumble of words that do not make sense. I also often try to write too formally which creates a tone of superiority in my writing or a tone that differs too much from my own. Do you have any advice on how to find my own voice in my writing without changing my wording?

Overall, I want to thank you for creating a poem that voices my, along with many others’, opinion on the impact of Mother Nature and how humans need to be the change they want to see in the world.

Sincerely,

Katie

Texas

Dear Katie:

Thank you for your inspiring discussion of “Advice (for E).” I am very gratified that you can extrapolate so many ideas from my short poem. “Weapons of mass destruction,” “ecosystems destruction,” “world wars” and “Mother Nature” are huge, enduring themes. I am pleased that you are courageous enough to tackle them.

You say that you are worried about finding your voice and about “run-on sentences” and “jumbled words”—or that sometimes you write “too formally” in a “tone of superiority...”

Hey, our imaginations love to roam. You are too young to write in a uniformed, monolithic manner. Your brain is free-associating, trying out different ideas and voices. This shows that you are writing with passion and curiosity.

Soon enough, you will learn how to organize your thoughts and make linear arguments... Your fine teachers will help you. But right now, please have fun reading and thinking and pontificating and scribbling and “poem-ing.”

Be the change you wanna see in the girl!

Sincerely,

Poet Marilyn Chin

(Channeling the voice of Mother Nature)

One Boy Told Me

Music lives inside my legs.
It's coming out when I talk.

I'm going to send my valentines
to people you don't even know.

Oatmeal cookies make my throat gallop.

Grown-ups keep their feet on the ground
when they swing. I hate that.

Look at those 2 o's with a smash in the middle—
that spells good-bye.

Don't ever say "purpose" again,
let's throw the word out.

Don't talk big to me.
I'm carrying my box of faces.
If I want to change faces I will.

Yesterday faded
But tomorrow's in **BOLDFACE**.

When I grow up my old names
will live in the house
where we live now.
I'll come and visit them.

Only one of my eyes is tired.
The other eye and my body aren't.

Is it true all metal was liquid first?
Does that mean if we bought our car earlier
they could have served it
in a cup?

There's a stopper in my arm
that's not going to let me grow any bigger.
I'll be like this always, small.

And I will be deep water too.
Wait. Just wait. How deep is the river?
Would it cover the tallest man with his hands in the air?

Your head is a souvenir.

When you were in New York I could see you
in real life walking in my mind.

I'll invite a bee to live in your shoe.
What if you found your shoe
full of honey?

What if the clock said 6:92
instead of 6:30? Would you be scared?

My tongue is the car wash
for the spoon.

Can noodles swim?

My toes are dictionaries.
Do you need any words?

From now on I'll only drink white milk on January 26.

What does minus mean?
I never want to minus you.

Just think—no one has ever seen
inside this peanut before!

It is hard being a person.

I do and don't love you—
isn't that happiness?

Dear Friends,

The beloved poet William Stafford used to mention that poets are called to be better “witnesses” than we might otherwise be. Paying close attention, listening better, is not an extra accessory in our days, it is a lifeline. He also discussed how some poems might be as fluid and direct as “lucky conversation transcribed.” I would say both these descriptions relate to the found poem “One Boy Told Me.”

As a child I was fascinated by eavesdropping on conversations not directed my way—in a grocery store check-out line, for example, or an assembly hall where people were gathering. I had not yet had many occasions to be on planes or trains, but those would later become some of my other favorite eavesdropping venues—along with school cafeterias and restaurants in general. Occasionally I might write something down that I’d heard and free-write from there. I was drawn to language that triggered curiosity or seemed somehow mysterious, unexpected, or delicious. Something that felt “perfectly said” or timed. Now that a lot of the world is frequently living on-line, we have more ways to check in on how other people say things—I’m especially interested in comments posted after You-Tube music videos. We can feel how personal and subjective music is—how people report on their own experiences after hearing someone else’s song. Poetry also encourages such personal responses.

For poetry, a “found poem” might happen when someone else’s spoken or written language sneaks into the poem we are writing. Or, signs might enter a poem—fading ghost signs on the sides of old buildings, strange directions on a package of macaroni, news stories, or posted instructions in another country—just a few possibilities.

In “One Boy Told Me,” every single word came verbatim from the mouth of a two or three year old Madison Cloudfeather Nye. Maybe it’s wrong to have my name on the poem at all. I was simply the selector and the arranger. The arrangement or breaking of the lines was my call as editor.

In those days, I was keeping special notebooks simply sourced one hundred percent from the mouth of our little son. I might add a detail about the time and place he said a certain thing—“Grocery store parking lot, July 7, 100 degrees.” It struck me early, he was the best metaphor-maker I had heard in all my life. His gorgeous phrases

were frequent and flowing, without an ounce of self-consciousness—he didn’t realize they were beautiful, or funny. William Stafford used to say we’re all poets when we’re little and some of us just try to maintain the habit.

I ended up with seven crammed-full notebooks and never told him about them till he was about 13 and sick at home with the flu. The only ones he had seen till then were the ones included in “One Boy Told Me” which he denied remembering at all. I carried the stack to his bed and said, “Have some fun! This is all YOU!” He didn’t believe it. He thought I had made many things up and said he had little recollection of anything contained in there.

This is why we need to take notes, friends. We won’t remember. When we’re thirteen, we may not remember at all the wild and wonderful ways we talked when we were younger. Also, I know for certain I would only have remembered a few of his magical lines, had I not written them down. We may not recall what the world seemed like to us, or the boundless questions we asked. I’m so grateful for a poem which contains a beloved person’s unadulterated child-self and always hoped that the title suggested clearly that it didn’t come from me. This is probably the hardest thing about using “found poem” lines—incorporating proper attribution.

I’m very grateful for all your letters and questions regarding “One Boy Told Me.” It makes me sad to mention that our precious “one boy” is no longer alive—it’s the very worst and most difficult thing we have experienced in all our lives—but his words and perspective are alive, in more poems and essays than one. His spirit is alive, in us. And the joy of early childhood which wonders and ponders and finds its own ways to say things, remains one of the most shining and luminous gifts of all our lifetimes. Hopefully, if we’re lucky, observant humans will keep taking notes.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Dear Naomi Shihab Nye,

My name is Win. I am 12 years old. I chose your poem “One Boy told Me” because it left me super curious on what this poem was about. I believe how you formatted the poem was great, and your choice of words and phrases really made the poem a lot more interesting. You made every single line interesting which is why I find you as such a big inspiration. Like I would’ve never thought of oatmeal cookies making my throat gallop but when I think about it they really do! The way you changed my mind about things was really cool. I really connected with this line in your poem because “When I grow up my old names will live in the house where we live now. I’ll come and visit them.” I feel like it really connected with my life and how I feel. I love how the names are like metaphors for memories. I have lots of people that I have lost in my life and I feel like this line perfectly resembles how it makes you feel when you lose someone. The name is like a memory to me. I have a couple questions to ask about your poem. Is it about something a little kid told you like the title said? Is it a bunch of things you have to say? Is it you sending a message to the world? Is it just a bunch of words put together? What was your inspiration for writing this poem? Did you have a big idea for the meaning of this poem? Did you make this poem to stand out from other poems? Why did you make this poem?

When I write poems in school I usually just make a couple big ideas and use metaphors to say them in different ways. How do you usually start or make your poems? I usually get very bored when I write poems. How do you make it so that it’s fun? Is there a specific style or technique you use? When I read my poems it’s hard to know what I think of them as I don’t know if they’re good or bad. What do you think about when you read One Boy Told Me? I usually write my poems inside, which do you like more outside or inside? Do you think that one changes how you write your poems?

Sincerely,

Win

Washington, D.C.

Dear Win,

Thanks for being interested in “One Boy Told Me.” I’m glad the oatmeal cookie line rang true to you! Of course I had never thought of such a thing before either.

I’m sorry you have also lost many people in your life, I guess this is ultimately the human condition, but never easy to experience. It’s touching that a name itself can evoke memory for you. Reading other people’s poems has been very helpful to me too.

As poets we often don’t want to pin down a particular “message” that a poem is trying to send, but rather to create a scene, an atmosphere, a transporting possibility—it doesn’t exactly have to be a single meaning or condensed few words of truth. I like to ask myself—does this poem take me anywhere? How does it get me there? The great Serbian/New Hampshire poet Charles Simic asked why we are often expected to paraphrase poems in duller language. Exactly!

I’m sorry that you get bored when you write poems and would hope for exactly the opposite experience for you!

Are you choosing topics that you care about, that interest you?

Are you forcing yourself to use some poetic devices—like rhyme—that feel dulling to you? If so, perhaps try writing in a more open form? I think it’s good to experiment with writing in forms—villanelles, haiku, sonnets, ballads, etc.—but open forms often refresh our engines more.

Many people think modeling your own writing on an existing poem written by someone else can be a useful practice. You’re not copying them, you’re just being sparked by their format or style. The marvelous Marvin Bell used to say, “Read something, then write something. Read something else, then write something else. And let your writing be informed by what you read.”

I like to list questions sometimes too—some of them stay in the poems and some get taken out in revision. Questions are little doors swinging open. What’s in there? Inside writing and outside writing are both wonderful practices. Take care!

Yours, Naomi

Dear Naomi Shihab Nye,

For a few years now, the mystery of the inner machinations of a child's mind floated around the box of curiosities within my head. I always imagined it'd be a wild landscape of perpetually growing flora. Therefore, reading your poem "One Boy Told Me" was the same as getting a detailed lecture from a professor. That lecture guided me to the answer I sought like a GPS, and I can now confidently define the thoughts of a child with one word: free. But another idea was kindled by the flame of your poem. In the middle of chuckling at some of the silliest stanzas, I would sometimes be taken aback by the sudden transition into some of the most philosophical or brain racking phrases I'd hear from a poem. So, that kindled idea was how sophisticated the wild and animated psyche of a child can be. I was yet again being lectured on how complex the seemingly unorganized mind of a child was. "Your head is a souvenir," is possibly my favorite thought-provoking phrase in your poem. Why would a child want to determine a head as a sort of relic? Well, a souvenir is usually used as a keepsake; a medium of joyous reminiscence. We also know that the head is the sole benefactor for our ability to live, love, and learn, including the myriad of times either the collective conscience or brilliance of one man has advanced humanity to where they are now. In this sense, the child realizes the spectacular depth of the human mind and that it should be fervently celebrated.

So that brings me to my second favorite example of seemingly spontaneous genius: "Yesterday's faded/ but Tomorrow's in Boldface." This phrase here more accurately depicts that "uncoordinated" showing of genius. These are words of inspiration regarding the idea of moving forward. Yesterday faded away as it likely has trivial importance to the current state of things.

This boy understands that to live in the past is to live a life of regression. Tomorrow is emphatically bolded because it is progress incarnate. There is hope in the prospect of another chance to grow; another chance to not repeat what had gone wrong yesterday. Going back to the word "faded," I think it can take us further within the phrase. To fade is to gradually disappear. Would this then mean that- instead of completely forgetting Yesterday- the tribulations of the past should be used as growth before they disappear? And when you fully learn from yesterday's mistakes, the pain of those

memories completely fade away as hope and a stronger sense of self fills the areas of decay? There are a few other perspectives of this single phrase, but I think I got my point across. This level of comprehension leaking from the mental facilities of a boy is not what one would expect while viewing a kid in the stereotypical light. But the child is still human— he is still intelligent— and therefore, when you mix those occasional lines of profound thinking with the more pervasive phrases of random silliness, you create this axiomatic image of a child by fully representing that inconsistency of genius. A child is merely an adult who has yet to fully utilize their intellect, and I wholeheartedly believe you to have tactfully displayed that.

Before I finish this letter, I want to bring up your poem's ending stanza. The phrase "I do and don't love you—/ isn't that happiness?" is the best in the poem. The meaning behind this is almost a mystery, but my entire being says that it is true. That is likely because it refers to relational happiness specifically. For many years, even preceding my curiosities concerning the mind of a child, I have always wondered what a seemingly perfect relationship would look like. I believe that a close to perfect relationship isn't one based purely out of camaraderie, intimacy, or compatibility. I think, for the most part, that the close to perfect relationship is one where, if fights were to occur, the link between the two ultimately remains entirely unaffected. That means that, no matter how potent the friction of an argument or problem in the relationship is, those two can easily forget that problem and still love each other as much as they did before the bout occurred. If this is the case, I can see why this is genuine happiness; you would not have to worry about arguments or fights ruining the relationship. Just like the mind of a child, the people in the relationship are essentially free as they don't fear the prospect of losing their loved one through an argument. It is almost unconditional love. Would you find this accurate to the meaning of that final phrase?

Sincerely,

Jordan

Ohio

Dear Jordan,

Thank you for writing to me. Honestly, the last paragraph of your letter is so profound, I wish governmental leaders could read it—the American Congress, for starters. It's a very wise view of outcomes, of conflict and yes, somehow I think a small child had insight into some aspect of that truth, without even being able to describe it further. Opposing views don't have to remain "walls" or "argumentative impasse" but might be accepted within fuller unconditional relating, everything contained.

I love it.

You also picked out my very favorite of all the lines—"Yesterday faded, but tomorrow's in boldface." When I was 3 years old, I surely did not know what "boldface" was, but our son, as a little computer whiz who could read before the age of 3, did. When he casually said that line one day, we were walking down a street. No one had been mentioning time or computers at all. He just popped up with it and my whole poetic mind shivered.

Which brings up a point. We have to write things down quickly, or we may forget them by tomorrow. I did not take notes on his remarks while he was looking at me, but the moment we got home, I sneaked off to a corner and copied it down. I was very aware of not wanting to make him self-conscious—the mother spy with her ever-ready pen.

I'm also appreciative that you like "I do and don't love you..." because that went on to mean more to me with time. It was a sophisticated line, one a teenager might easily say, but surprising for a 3 year old. The little kicker—"isn't that happiness?" bowled me over.

You know, long before we ever had a child of our own, I was a regular babysitter for many other families with toddlers and I used to come home smiling from the conversations we'd had. One little piano prodigy liked to tell me the proper ways to pronounce the names of composers. Another little metaphor-maker would refuse to take a bath using fanciful excuses—"I already bathed today, in the sunlight!"

We are living in a poem, Jordan. You have a great ear and an imaginative eye and I'm glad you appreciate the head as a souvenir, because it contains the mouth too, which is always spouting precious treasures.

Wishing you happy writing.

Yours, Naomi

Dear, Naomi Shihab,

Hello, my name is Kaleena. I am a student in Alaska. I have decided to write to you today because of your poem, "One Boy Told Me." I love the way you came up with this poem by using your sons' words. To me this poem is affectionate and beautiful because of the phrases and sentences your son has said. It showed me that your son seems like a thoughtful and caring little boy. There are many times when he says something that you know is coming from his heart, but he said it in nonsense form, as little kids do.

I love relating to your poem because I am the oldest and only girl out of all my siblings. I have five little brothers that love to talk and say a lot of random things, but also thoughtful things that come from the heart. My oldest brother, in my opinion, is the most thoughtful out of the other four, and he would always ask the random but thoughtful questions. In your poem "One Boy Told Me" Your son asks a question that comes out as thoughtful, as a little boys mind would wonder, "Is it true all metal was liquid first? Does that mean if we bought our car earlier they could have served it in a cup?" Questions like these are what my brother would ask me all the time. One time he asked me "Why do fireworks just disappear in the air after they pop? Can they teleport in the air?" Of course, after his silly questions I laugh, but after reading your poem, I wish that I could keep track of the things he would say and ask because sometimes you could make something great out of it, for example "One Boy Told Me." Now that he is growing up and not asking as many questions like that, it makes me miss the past. It makes me realize how precious time is in the first few years of life because you're only a kid once.

I would now like to ask, what made you come up with this poem? How did you just think to write down some of the things your son says? Or did you hear about it somewhere or maybe thought of doing what fellow poets have done as well? It really does amaze me of how you came up with this idea of making a poem like this.

Your poem “One Boy Told Me” has inspired me to start keeping note of what my little brothers say. My point in doing this is to look back on all of my brothers sentences and remember who they were and what they were like as little kids. It is a great way of remembering who a person was/is. Maybe I will also make a poem out of it too. Thank you, Naomi Shihab, for inspiring me from this wonderful poem you have created.

Sincerely,
Kaleena
Alaska

Dear Kaleena,

I appreciate your letter very much. How wonderful to hear that you have started taking notes on what your five little brothers say! And to think of it—five brothers! That is a lot of talking! My husband also grew up in a household with five brothers and one sister.

I did not select a poem out of my sacred son-quote notebooks for some years after I had written all the notes down. It took me a while to see them as a possible necklace—he was in third or fourth grade by then, more literal, and did not use metaphors so freely. I missed that earlier person a lot. He was still “thoughtful and caring,” as you kindly describe, just not as descriptive. One day while pulling things off the shelf in my little studio, I noticed those notebooks and decided to look for a certain quote—then got carried away, plucking some more favorites.

The truth is, this poem could have had three hundred lines in it.

I often suggest that people of any age write down at least three things from every day they live. They could be quotes, comments on little things that happened, questions, small observations—anything. They don’t have to be connected at all. Don’t reread what you’ve written till at least a month goes by—think of it, you’ll have ninety things that belong to you, bits and pieces of the map of your month.

Some of them might easily grow into poems.

I wish you inspiration every day, fun with your brothers, and joy on the page!

Warmly,
Naomi

Dear Naomi Shihab Nye,

My name is Nithin and I live in Missouri. I was thankful to have read your poem as it transported me back to the little dessert-before-dinner boy I once was. Each line plunged me further and further into an endless abyss of nostalgia. Being a rowdy child I recognized many of the lines as it was once in my arsenal. After a litany of my smiles, laughter, and feelings of envy I decided that your poem is a must-read due to its ability to remind humanity of a lost time. This poem reminded me of phrases and sentences I heard while I was a counselor at a children's summer camp. As a summer counselor I would hear children speaking with the same vernacular and with the same childhood wonder.

The innovative idea of using your kid's quotes as a basis for your poem is an intriguing writing style. Direct quotes capture the innocence, truthfulness, and straight-up absurdness of what younger kids concoct in their minds. "One Boy Told Me" is a poem unlike any other that I have read. It reminds me of intrusive thoughts constantly revolving around my brain. The difference is adults/pre-adults are forced to have a filter and are often ridiculed due to some of their thoughts.

The beauty of the poem shines apparent with the innocence and the lack of second thought before speaking. As a child, my mind would constantly switch topics of contention almost instantaneously. Just the other day an old friend's parents told me a story about me eating buffalo wings while swimming because I decided they had to be better together. Similarly, the style of writing perfectly captures the spontaneity of children. The title itself perfectly describes the poem and gives the reader an idea of the point of view. My favorite line of the poem is "Only one of my eyes is tired./ The other eye and my body aren't." I enjoyed that line because that was one of my go-to phrases when my parents caught me falling asleep while watching a show or being with friends.

Do you think the poem found you instead of the other way around? The construction process of the poem interested me. You described that you "just found it in the air." I wonder if words have a destination rather than simply being open to everyone. I think that maybe you were meant to come across those words and phrases. I think it is a likely possibility that your son spoke those words with you because he felt a

comforting embrace and warmth with you as a person. Instead of being a found poem where you had to discover it, I believe it's a poem that was meant to find you. After reading this time-reversing poem I decided that I need to hear more. I am extremely excited to hear you read at the Midwest Poets Series at Rockhurst's University to learn more about you and your delightful yet innovative poems in person.

Thank you for your time and well-made poems.

Sincerely,
Nithin
Missouri

Dear Nithin,

Thank you for your very gracious letter about "One Boy Told Me." Of the letters I read, yours contained one of my favorite provocative lines, "Do you think the poem found you instead of the other way around?"

My answer is, Yes. It probably did. We need an aptitude for poems, a readiness as they come along for us. We need to be in the habit of quietude, as well as expression—to make space with some mindful times in which we empty out all distraction and arrange some of what we have heard or thought. Any day is more fascinating than it may first seem on the surface. Sometimes when a day feels saggy or blah, I tell myself, "Okay, you feel low, just stay very quiet and listen for what's here. There's going to be a surprise for you." Invariably, there will be a surprise. I hear from someone I haven't heard from in a long time. I find something I had entirely forgotten about. I read something incredible that shakes me into a better mental zone. Two details converge to create an entirely new possibility or tiny idea. So yes, a readiness.

You mention the "lost time" of childhood which stirs a nostalgia in you. How well I know what you are talking about! Poetry has always helped me reconsider this time—before we became quite so complicated or overwhelmed. Since I was a child a long time ago, I often think about how I never received an email my whole entire childhood (didn't exist then), and I did just fine. No one had a cell phone to find anyone else. No one was ever "messaging" me. But I felt the world shimmering, vivid with

messages. We were still all in touch—somehow. I never had to delete a single thing. We had no Google maps, but found our ways to anywhere we needed to go. How is it we were so smart then?

I'm haunted by all this. Poetry helps us stay connected to our earlier selves and also helps our future selves evolve. Spontaneity, which you mention, is a crucial muscle of personality which will help us survive with more ease. Poems triggering spontaneous responses help us exercise that muscle. It makes me happy that you feel resonance with your own younger vernacular when you read lines like "Only one of my eyes is tired..."

I hope poetry will continue to befriend you at all your ages. Thanks again for your thoughtful reading.

Yours,
Naomi

Dear Ms. Naomi,

I am in [redacted], where I've spent the past month or so of my creative writing class reading the gorgeous poems of other people and occasionally penning my own, but your poem, "One Boy Told Me," is something of a revelation. A found poem woven from the poetry of a toddler is, strangely enough, the sort of poem I've been wanting.

The poem is beautiful, and its beauty is one not found in most. I love melancholic poems, the poems that act as a prophet of doom, but more than those do I love the poems that embrace sentiment, those that refuse to hold their nose up and take themselves too seriously. 'One Boy Told Me' is the latter for me. You can write about how your son swore to 'only drink white milk on January 26', and then in the very next stanza is a line that spears me in the heart. 'What does minus mean?' your son said. 'I never want to minus you.' This balancing of the playful and the profound is done so well throughout, so beautifully. And not to mention your story of the poem's inception at the start of your reading, which I thought was honest and heartfelt. You told an anecdote of when you read the poem to students in China, who said that you ought to only write found poems from then on. It was an aside that offered an interesting framework to what was to come: in a found poem, should its success be attributed to the person who lent the lines, or the person who stitched them together? Is it a blend of both talents?

I do not have a son, so I fear something of the poem is a touch lost on me. I am a son though, the son of a mother who has documented my youth since she adopted me so many years ago. It's very strange, an almost queasy feeling, to see videos of myself when I was two or three years old. I want to tell that boy something, but I can't, and I'm not sure what I want to say. He is frozen in time, and perhaps for the better. Can you relate to this feeling? When reflecting on this poem, are there any things you want to say to the toddler whose legs were full of music and whose toes were dictionaries? Are there things you want to say to yourself at the time you wrote it? How is your son, and has he figured out whether loving and not loving someone at the same time is happiness? I would like to know, myself.

Thank you so much for the poem and for the thoughts it inspired in me,

Josh

Virginia

Dear Josh,

It made me so happy that you like poems which don't "take themselves too seriously." This definitely made me think of the joy to be found in all sorts of funny poems for all ages—wry, witty poems, like those of Lawrence Ferlinghetti who was actively writing till he was one hundred, or Ron Padgett, whose amazing poems were used in the magical movie *Paterson*, or Gary Snyder, whose poems sometimes made me laugh out loud when I was young, or Sharon Olds, who finds ways to make even difficult experiences feel also humorous, or...so many other poets I've loved throughout my life. People don't mention pleasure enough when they mention poetry. It's not such a dutiful, laborious art as some want to make it out to be!

So, thanks. A found poem is a good place to begin. Maybe we could each make a practice of trying to write one every day. We could write conversations—partly true, partly invented. We could wander around the block and eavesdrop, or spend time in a new location in our school to hear what gets said there.

Your question about where the "success" of a found poem belongs is an interesting one. I would attribute the real source of joy to the originator of the lines and take second seat as "selector and arranger."

The line “I never want to minus you” is now the line I carry with greatest tenderness.

If we love somebody and love listening to them, their voices will echo in us always. I can still hear my teachers echoing inside, the kids I played with in my neighborhood, my parents—nothing is a total minus.

Poetry serves remembrance. I do think it wants to help us survive. You are lucky to have videos of your early self, and yes, I can understand your ambivalence about seeing them—apprehending the various angles of time offers a haunting sensation that, as we develop new attributes, or qualities, we may lose some crucial ones too. Poetry and art helps us stitch a seam between lost and found, forgotten and recalled.

I wish you a life full of beauty and sentiment and inspirations unending.

Warm regards,

Naomi

*dream where every black person is
standing by the ocean*

& we say to her

what have you done with our kin you swallowed?

& she says

that was ages ago, you've drunk them by now

& we don't understand

& then one woman, skin dark as all of us

walks to the water's lip, shouts *Emmett*, spits

&, surely, a boy begins

crawling his way to shore

Dear each of you,

One thousand golden thank you's for all of your brilliant and curious letters. I was so, so moved with all the stories you shared, all the ways you read the poem, all the wonder and intelligence you all composed those letters with. It was a little overwhelming in the best way. The future of language is in good hands with you all writing, reading, thinking, and loving into it.

Thank you for the way you all engaged with the magic, mystery, and history of the poem. The poem started off as a much longer piece where a parade was marching down the street, calling each Black person out of their homes until we all made our way to the ocean. While I loved a lot about that longer poem, the real gem was the scene at the ocean where we all spoke to her and she answered back. The image of Emmett Till crawling his way back to shore, back to life, is what I held dearest in the poem and so I got rid of the rest of it and cut straight to the chase. I believe poems are prayers, spells, portals to other dimensions, and all kinds of mystic machines. When I wrote of Emmett coming back to life, what I hoped for was to summon a future where our children are safe, where no one has to die a senseless death at the hands of someone else's ignorance and anger. I think by writing poems where violence is erased or reversed is a powerful tool to help build the futures we want to see. I love that poems are big enough for whatever we want to happen to be true.

I think of Franny Choi's poem "Field Trip to the Museum of Human History," in which students in the future visit an exhibit and learn about police for the first time. Franny doesn't say "we need to abolish police and prisons," she shows us the world where that has already happened, she calls the future closer to us. I think of Kyle Carrero Lopez's poem "After Abolition" which conjures with a similar magic. I think of Dr. Eve L Ewing's poem "I saw Emmett Till this week at the grocery store" where Emmett Till lives beyond fourteen, where he is unloosed from the grips of his violent murder that we know him for and instead we get to see him as a regular, old man shopping for fruit and candy. Dr. Ewing's poem points too towards a world where the violence we've accepted as daily, normal, traditional, historical, and typical are

undone, where we are freed from what once felt set in stone. A future big enough for all to exist. I want that for all of you. Poetry is but one tool that helps us find our way there. It's a way to dream. I thank you all for dreaming alongside me.

Warmly and eternally,
Danez Smith

Dear Danez Smith,

I vividly remember the moment I watched you perform “Dinosaurs in the Hood” through a Youtube video and had to watch it again to let the words sink into me. This was how I fell in love with Spoken Word poetry. It was specifically your performance and your words along with so many others that proved to me that there was not only an expression of art that could encapsulate the most raw emotions but a community that would embrace it. It has been a few years since then and I am really developing my own relationship with my words. I want to start my letter by thanking you because I imagine that artists like yourself will never realize the impact that you make on complete strangers or the inspiration you are to a random little girl like myself whose experiences could be so vastly different from yours.

Your poem, “dream where every black person is standing by the ocean” is captivating in every syllable of every word. Your title holds so much history at its heart and the diction is just to die for. To begin before the beginning of the poem with an image rather than a word is intentional even in its vagueness of simply being “by the ocean.” Your poem especially spoke to me because of your interpretation of the ocean and its role. I have written many poems about the ocean as it directly relates to immigration and the worlds of distance I feel between here and Vietnam. The waves on the shore can offer the impression of peace with its lulling movement; that is the ambience that I immediately received upon reading your poem for the first few times. But as we know, the deep waters are also mysterious and mighty. Since we are still on the shore, the dark beyond is only a glimpse on the horizon or a lurking shadow. There is an aspect, a lens in which I feel that I can soak in your words and internalize them in ways that fit myself even if perhaps they were not your intention. The ocean has literally swallowed so many people as they try to make it across. I remember when someone once told me that one of their biggest fears was of the ocean.

I was so confused at the time, but I think I can now understand why the vastness of the water is frightful in the way that outer space is infinitely expanding. It forces us to confront an entity so much grander and more powerful in comparison to ourselves which is why the line that hits me the most is, “& we don’t understand.” It is simple and it is the truest thing. But in the face of this great force of blue, a woman confronts it and demands that a boy be returned. To imagine such a request from a majestic and formidable force seems absurd in the way that arguing with the world and the rigid way that things are seems absurd. But I guess sometimes, you have to come to the edge of whatever ocean you are at and shout. In desperation, some form of rehabilitation will come.

Your words are always written and performed with such sincerity and vulnerability. I know there is so much to this shorty poem that I do not have the capacity to digest let alone unpack but I know that in the way it has shifted my perspective, I have experienced a glimpse of your power. I hope to one day have the same impact on another stranger.

Sincerely,

Olivia

California

Dear Olivia,

Congrats! You have already had that impact on me. I am so moved by your letter, not because of the kind words you’ve said about my work (thank you, btw), but because I think one of the great gifts we can give to artists is to tell them where there work takes us, whether it teleports us into a memory or reveals something in ourselves we have not yet had the language for. As you talked about your relationship to the water, I went several places. One was back to my first time experiencing the Ocean in Panama. I’ll never forget staring out into the ocean on a lightless beach at night, not knowing where the ocean ended and the dark sky began ahead of me, all that ancient sound hitting me. I felt so incredibly and wonderfully small. I often think about it as one of the most profound spiritual moments of my life as I came to, after blacking out in awe, in the water crying and kneeling in the shallows. Thank you for gifting that memory to me today.

I also was taken by your words back to the many moments I've shared with fellow poets also from Vietnam. Not to be like "I have a Vietnamese friend" or anything like that, but I think it's amazing how we can all come from such different background and places and still all understand something so human about each other across these differences some would like us to think divide us. I think, however, there is something about all of the many souths of the world understand different than everyone else. Maybe it's something inscribed in us by the heat, maybe something the earth whispered into us long ago. But we know it, we miss it, we stare at the water and know that in the waves is a road back to another home. I thank you for reminding me about the paths we've taken by the water.

Also! It's it powerful just to say "we don't understand" or "I don't know"? It is why I'm a poet and not a scientist. There is so much room not to know in poetry. We are part of a tradition that is charged by questions and skeptical of answers. What we don't understand can feed us for a lifetime in poetry.

I hope that the poems you're writing are exciting and mysterious to you! I remember when I was your age, before YouTube was even a thing and I would watch *Def Poetry Jam* on the stolen HBO in our basement every Friday. I surely was grateful for how it helped blossom and deepen my relationship with poetry, but I was also so settled to know that there was a family of feelers, thinkers, dreamers, lovers, ragers, and makers that language gave me access to. I'm glad my little dinosaur poem could be even a little helping in inviting you into your lineage as a poet. I hope I get to encounter your work one day and we can sit down and dream as poets do. Stranger to stranger, poet to poet, thank you.

Warmly,
Danez Smith

Dear Danez Smith,

I am a high schooler from Wisconsin, and I have recently had the pleasure of reading your poem *dream where every black person is standing by the ocean*. I was introduced to your work in my creative writing class, and I found your poem most intriguing and impactful. Despite its limited number of stanzas, the message it conveys is strikingly profound beyond its finite space.

I am a lover of perspectives. Great joy can be found in the discovery of life's stories, and their varied experiences. In particular, the lesser-taught history of African Americans and their voices is one I often find myself fascinated with. I have visited the National Museum of African American History and Culture, spending hours winding through the exhibits and reading until my eyes tired out, absorbing the intricacies of African American history from its beginning to the modern day. I have read *Revisiting 5 + 1*, in which the Black Identity is explored through artists' work following the Civil Rights Movement. At a young age, I played basketball at the [redacted] Community Center, where a bulletin board overflowed with pictures of missing African American children, with staff and parents who tenderly tried to explain its harsh realities.

It is for that reason I write to you today. *Dream where every black person is standing by the ocean* beautifully encapsulates the perspective of generations of African Americans. The first three stanzas of the poem set the ethereal tone of the story—a conversation between an entire population, and one otherworldly woman. Is this woman a spiritual representation, either of modern religion or ancient deity such as Yemoja, or is she representative of the ocean itself? Nevertheless, the portrayal of the intergenerational connection of African Americans “you’ve drunk them by now” (line 4) is somber yet comforting all the same. Individuals fade into the obscure depths in time, but their pain and experiences are passed down to their kin, never entirely lost to the water. Much like the children on that bulletin board, the tireless waves may swallow them up, but it is through our memory and equally tireless fight that they are not forgotten.

The fourth stanza transmits a powerful message. I am unsure if the woman is the same or different as the character in the first three stanzas—one of the figures I spoke of above, or potentially a representation of death herself—yet she plays an integral role as the connection between the living and the dead “skin dark as all of us / walks to the water’s lip” (lines 6–7). In an indiscernible tone, she shouts the only capitalized word in the piece, lending further significance to the name *Emmett* beyond his crucial role in African American history. I wonder if every name is announced in such a manner, every person given their significant passing, or if the ocean-impacting spit of the woman is reserved for particularly significant individuals that impact the movement of the ethereal ocean.

The final stanza brings a glimmer of hope to the apparent gloom of the otherworldly dreamscape. Connected with the spit of *Emmett* from the previous stanza, “a boy begins / crawling his way to shore” (lines 8–9) shows how African American individuals and culture always return to fight another day. I wonder if the choice to use “crawling” bears a connection with a segment of the famous Martin Luther King Jr. quote: “if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.” I interpret this stanza as a demonstration of the undying persistence of African Americans, enduring every setback to crawl to shore victorious all the same. In time, hopefully the crawling grows less and less laborious, the progress more and more established.

I thoroughly enjoyed reading and rereading your poem, and as a lover of perspectives, *dream where every black person is standing by the ocean* surely delivers. I know I cannot begin to fully understand and appreciate the complexities and depth of your work, given my lived experience may be very different from that captured in your words, but nevertheless I am grateful that you can foster a platform for those who do deeply relate to your work. You bear a torch of culture, history, and perspective—one that will grow brighter with time and impassioned dedication to your artful craft.

Sincerely,

Alan

Wisconsin

Dear Alan,

Thank you so much for your letter! I am delighted and encouraged to read about your love of perspectives and your hunger for knowledge. I too was so, so dazzled, hurt (in a good way) and moved by the Museum. It took me two back-to-back trips to take it all in. I was a mess of tears and wonder as I wondered around and took notes. I also just recently visited some of the fantastic art museums in Boston and was so taken with the work of Frank Bowling where I read about 5 + 1 for the first time. I felt so emboldened by their puzzling of what Black art can be, what it should or could do in the work. I wonder about this current generation of young folks like yourself and how you all will disrupt the world with your art and vision in the wake of everything that has happened and is happening in the world these last few years. I think Gen Z and the now little ones coming up behind y’all (are they Generation A? Is the world starting over now?) will hopefully save humans from ourselves. I think my own

generation has a lot to unlearn from our elders and a lot to gain from y'all. It feels like every generation is made in the shadow of their urgencies, but I often feel grief and guilt for the world we are leaving for future generations. May all of our perspectives collide and meld into something useful for them.

One of the reasons I love poetry is because the poem really happens where the poet's language meets the reader's mind. The poem then is a collaboration between what I put into language and what you pull out of those same sentences. I love how you think about this poem! I didn't myself see Yemoja when I wrote the first "she" in the poem. I saw it as the ocean herself, but I love thinking about it through those eyes, what there is an Orisha who speaks to us when we come to the ocean with our questions. I wasn't raised in spaces I was taught about any kind of African deities, I grew up in a very Christian community with a little bit of Islamic influence via my father, so I didn't have any knowledge of Yoruba culture until I studied them by way of African diasporic dance in college. I say that to say that I don't typically call on that particular pantheon of deities when I write, but I do love when someone older speaks through my work without my intention. I see that in the ways and habits and art of many Black Americans, the ways we are African without even knowing we are. Retention is a powerful lover that holds on to us across time and whispers through up in sneaky ways. So, no its not Yemoja, but also yes, it is, too. Thank you for offering this new way of seeing the poem!

I see the woman with "skin dark as all of us" to be representative of the power and majesty of Black women. To me, Black folks are a matriarchal people and when I think about the power of the Black community, I think about the powerful Black women who have led and propelled our movements and struggles, the women I think of when I think about power, peace, revolution, sanctuary, and grace. I can close my eyes now and see her deep onyx skin in my mind's eye, like she's been cut out of the night sky itself. I also see Mamie Till when I close my eyes, and I think about what it meant for her to make the grief around her son's murder such a public and movement inspiring force. I think Mamie knew the grief she held was a grief that all of us knew and would know. I think that's why it had to be Emmett's name in the poem, too. It wouldn't have been the same to say some name that immediately doesn't conjure grief in the mind. I needed the reader to know the particulars of this miracle we are witnessing. I imagine if the scene in the poem continues we would hear a litany of names we know and don't know, until all the people stolen from us are crawling out of the sea.

Also! Crawling! I didn't know that MLK quote, but thank you for pointing to it. For me crawling speaks to innocence, to youth, but also I think that if there were people who had been in the water for years they would know a kind of weightlessness and freedom that would make standing a difficult task. So crawling, crawling as he goes from the sea back to a world where he once was a victim of its bitter gravity.

Thank you again for your letter, Alan! You have given me a lot of new ways to think about this poem and I am indebted to you for it.

Warmly,
Danez Smith

Greetings Danez,

My name is Daniaa, and I am a student in Michigan. Might I just begin by saying that you are a very gifted intellectual, and it warms my heart to see a sibling so accomplished in a field that black people only make up six percent in. I picked your piece as the title itself spoke to me and I felt as if I could make a strong connection to it and did just that. This piece sang such a beautiful song to me, giving me a different view on both the world and black history. Your work. So brief, yet it speaks a thousand words. I struggle concisely, so your poem's length alone baffles me. Regarding the piece itself, I simply adore the literary and poetic devices sprinkled within your tune. From allusions to alliteration, it paints such a beautiful picture. I also admire your use of the and symbol as opposed to the actual word itself, what a creative and well-thought-out choice. Moreover, the ocean being a metaphor for memory as well as an allusion to the middle passage suicides was genius. One of the things that I love about your work is that it is very indirect. You never actually wrote out the word "ocean," complementing the piece's complexity and excellence. This poem has numerous layers and I love that you force the reader to deep a little deeper. To unpeel each layer one at a time. In addition to that, the correlation between, "... you've drunk them by now..." and "spits" had my mind racing as I became intrigued by its brilliance. "... you've drunk them by now..." which is to say we are knowledgeable in as well as possess the history of our people as it is a part of us as a culture. And "spits," is to say regurgitation, or recalling and speaking about the past. When you speak of things, you remember them, thus, giving them new life. Once you forget something,

its memory, and therefore the person and their legacy, are dead. Although these lines struck a great interest in me, I would have to say that my favorite is, "...a boy begins crawling his way to shore." The woman remembered Emmett's story, thus bestowing a gift of life upon him that he was unable to live. Physically gone at age fourteen, yet he has managed and will continue to outlive billions because people remember his story. And rightfully so, as we must continue to give this boy that life that he was so wrongly deprived of. This single line possesses an indescribable power and brings about such an ingenious and compelling end. I am also fond of said line as it guided me to your lovely message: we must not let such crucial history get lost in the vases of time; we must remember and continue to speak about it and educate the generations to come. And what a beautiful and veracious message it is. You have given me a new perspective on life and death. I have come to the realization that one's life does not conclude once they take their last breath. Their life ends when they are forgotten, only then does someone truly die.

I would love to know what prompted your passion for literature and how you managed to make such a name for yourself in the wondrous realm that is writing. What steps did you take to become the prominent author that you are now? Did you endure any hardships while on this journey? And would you be so kind as to share any advice you might have for an aspiring black writer and black history enthusiast? What is your favorite book genre and how many books do you have on your glamorous, white bookshelf? And finally, how many piercings do you have? I simply adore your nose ring and feel the same way toward the spelling of your name!

I would like to share with you a personal story of mine as, believe it or not, you have helped shape me into the woman I am today. My experience regarding my skin has not been too pleasant to say the least. In fact, I have endured an Odyssey just to get to where I am now. Now, I adore my skin and am in love with its pulchritudinous glow and unique history. I am a black history advocate, spreading black stories through a favorite passion of mine: writing, just like you! In fact, you, my friend, fill me with inspiration and I hope to become as published as you are one day for, I wish to change the world. Helping us get even an inch closer to world peace is my lifetime goal. But the future is far ahead of me so, as of now, I use my social media platforms to spread awareness and stories concerning our people; both good and bad. Nonetheless, it pains me to say that I was not always like this. Three years ago, I wouldn't dare utter

the word “black” under any circumstance, even if the conversation had no association with race and would die before I could speak on racial issues or confront the bigotry of some of my peers; both non-black and the same color as you and I. I would gladly accept silencing myself if it meant more acquaintances. Plus, it wasn’t like I took pride in my skin anyway. I was ashamed to simply get the mail. I would rather miss out on events such as dances, social outings, and even school, if it meant sparing the world of my hideous pallet. “Damn the Lord,” I would think, confused as to why someone who “loved me” would curse me with such stygian skin. Now I just hope that my father forgives me. I was so foolish, so blind. It took me thirteen years to realize what a blessing he had bestowed unto me. It took me over a decade to accept myself. Prior to thirteen, I limited myself to dark articles of clothing and hair. From age one to twelve, I locked any and all authenticity in a box, never daring to open it for any being. My voice. My physical appearance. My character. All packaged away in a lonely chest. Twelve years of interaction with a white-washed, ignorant fool I gave to people. Twelve years of deceit.

In these years I would attend a predominantly white school district. Everywhere I turned scintillating fields of white. Everywhere my eyes seemed to wander, ubiquitous aliens. White shoes, white socks, white paper, white skin; omnipresent. Even now, as in the Advanced English classroom, I am engulfed by jasmines; ambushed by white widows. Detecting a familiar face in such etiolated conditions was taxing; an arduous endeavor and because of this, I would lose sight of myself completely. Don’t be too loud! Don’t wear big hoops! Your natural hair is dirty and nappy! I would put on a mask and refuse to take it off 144 months and it would grow more revolting, more repulsive each day. Evidently, all those years of masking made me question my own identity. Who was I? I possess the same interests as Sarah, does that make me white-washed? I should not audition for this part, what a joke a black Belle would be. Not that I would be confident enough to merely try out. Not that I would be good enough for consideration. What does my true voice even sound like? Does liking rap make me ghetto? Questions like these inundated my mind every hour of every day and soon enough, I became Diane. That is what I have entitled my lamented alter ego. She had straight, heat damaged hair and refused to leave the house without her adidas hoodie and odious attitude. She was a judgmental, uncharitable C student with an “ignorant, comedic friend” masquerade. She feared that her intelligence

would intimidate people and since she favored popularity over everything else, she pretended to be the densest one in the classroom. Every so often I have dreams, or nightmares rather, concerning her that never fail to arouse me with my eyes wide open and my breath in fragments. Though, these nightmares aren't all bad as they force me to take accountability for my past actions and, most importantly, ensure I do not revert to bad habits.

So, what ignited my reversal you ask? Well, on one fateful summer's day back in 2020, I watched a black history documentary with my grandmother. After the piece concluded, she gave me an unexpected, though uplifting, lecture. She went on about how she saw her younger self in me and how radiant my skin was. She complemented my thick, short hair and told me I was special. Different from her other five grandchildren. One could only imagine the humiliation I felt, for I had received praise that I had not earned. Ashamed of my previous actions, I vowed that from that day forward my disingenuous habituates would cease, threw my mask in the garbage, and never looked back. And what an extraordinary decision that was, for I have lived more these past three years than I have in my whole lifetime.

I wasted approximately 626 weeks wishing, begging, pleading that my face was the equivalent of my palms. But now. Now I anxiously await July, eager to be blessed with even more melanin. I hated my skin and the "restrictions" tethered to it. I thought my best quality was my greatest weakness and would only associate such a gift with its negative attributes. Sure enough, if one were to take a scale and weigh the two, the balance labeled "positives" will undoubtedly move downward. Reading the seventh line of your astounding piece made me realize what a phenomenal people we are, what warriors I am a descendant of. Our brothers, Emmett Till, George Stinney, Maceo Snipes. Our sisters, Addie Collins, Carole McNair, Carole Robertson, Cynthia Wesely, suffocated so we could breathe. Collapsed so their children could soar. Although I became enlightened three years prior to reading your work, you have managed to educate me in ways that surpass my wildest dreams. Because of you, my friend, I am more prideful and comfortable in my skin than I could ever imagine. Words cannot express my gratitude, but I will try anyway: thank you.

My name is Daniia [redacted], and I am an intelligent, kinky haired fifteen-year-old who loves writing, acting, and expanding her vocabulary. I enjoy listening to classical music and wearing my afro out in the summertime. My favorite color is amethyst, and I would love to open a homeless shelter when I am older. My voice is deep, and I know now that in no way does your background limit your potential. Anyone can reach for the sky; you just need the courage to do it. My name is Daniia [redacted]. I am black and I am proud.

Dear Daniia,

It's a pleasure to meet you via these words. Thank you so much for the kindness of your letter. Your reading of the poem was so clear and aligned with where I was when I composed those lines.

I want to assure you that there is nothing wasted about the time you spent coming into yourself. Our journeys are not defined by destination, but by the experience and knowledge of the road itself. You having such a wonderful epiphany about your own beauty and power at twelve is a gift! There are people who go their whole lives seeking the lessons that you have accumulated at such a young age. There is nothing wasted about that, but rather now you have a story that you can use to help free other Black folks you'll know over the course of your life from the limitations and false accusations shackling their minds. You have a mighty amount of knowledge and vision for someone so young. I know being three years free feels maybe small in this moment, but give it time. Once you're my age you'll be able to say that you have been enlightened to triumph without our Black abundance for most of your life! I'm glad your grandma leaned into you and that her words shook something deep within you. Shout out to your grandma, I hope you continue to sit at her feet and get as much knowledge as you can from her. Our elders are an incredible treasure and it sounds like you have yourself a diamond of a grandparent. Tell her I said thank you for loving on you like she did. I hope "Diane" never feels useful again and that your future is filled with spaces that allow you to be your abundant self always. Our culture, our ways, our simple being is a gift despite what some would like us convinced otherwise. Hold on to the lessons that allowed you your limitlessness. They are not wasted time, but knowledge that you can use to inform and encourage others around you.

We have a lot of shared dreams, Daniia. I also hope to start a shelter one day in my life. I do spend some time volunteering with youth who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness. I see art making as another kind of shelter-work. I think poetry can provide a shelter for the mind and heart, a protected space for readers to come for peace, for wonder, for joy, for united anger and grief, all the myriad and wild ways we are human. A space to be wrong, a space to be held, to be angry, to fear, to dream, to rebel, to love. I'm glad to hear you also want to join that mission!

To be honest, I don't know how I made it to where I am. I think there are equal parts preparation and skill and luck involved. I know many brilliant poets who can write circles around me that for some reason haven't published yet or at the same volume, but I also think that there is no set timeline to any of this. I always hold on to the fact that Toni Morrison was forty-one when she published her first novel and she went on to be, in my opinion, America's best writer of all time. I think there is a little luck and wonder and divine intervention to all success, but I will try my best to detail what we can do to assist those divine interventions at placing us where we want to go. I think one of the biggest things you can do to be a great writer is to be a hungry reader. I wouldn't have been able to publish the three books I have if it wasn't for the hundreds or thoughts of books and poems that I devoured, hungry for the possibilities of language. I think what makes me a decent poet is that I'm a huge lover of other people's poetry. I try to read writers who I feel a kinship with their stories and their experiments in language as well as writers who see the world and play in language in vastly different ways from myself. I think of writers like Shane McCrae or Francine J. Harris who write in bewildering ways I can only marvel at from my own position in language, but to witness what they do with English makes me bolder when I return to my own work. Not only writing, but I think it is good for any artist to be gluttonous in their intake of all art. I stay in a museum, I am always game for a movie, I want to hear everyone's favorite album. Taking in as much art as possible makes it easier for me to take risk in my work because I have witnessed so much risk and curiosity in the work of others. I think my instructions for any one would be to take in as much as possible and to write as wildly, honestly, and as unflinching as you can. Don't hold back. Sure, there are hardships, but life is informed by hardships. I hold on to the words of the great poet Lucille Clifton who said "come celebrate/ with me that everyday/ something has tried to kill me/ and has failed." How miraculous of a line is that?

How big is that truth? What doesn't kill us doesn't kill us, we get to keep living while telling the tale of the many ways we've survived. Go boldly into your life, as you already are. Keep that fire and charge ahead.

As for the rest of your questions: about 400-500 books in the house currently and like four piercings now? I used to have more. Don't get me started on tattoos, I've lost count. And I too enjoy the spelling of your name. Those two i's in the middle feel so magical. Like there could be two people inside you, like there is too much of your magnificent self to be limited to a single I. I'm thinking now about Walt Whitman's famous line: "I am large! I contain multitudes!"

Be too much for this world, Daniia. Don't veil your Black brilliance for anyone.

Warmly,
Danez Smith

P.S. "I am engulfed by jasmines; ambushed by white widows" is an incredible line of poetry. I need you to sit down and write that poem ASAP!

Dear Danez,

My name is Jayla, and I attend [redacted]. In English class, we have recently been reading the poems that the Academy of American Poets chose for National Poetry Month. After reading all of the poems, I feel that "*juxtaposing the black boy and the bullet*" stuck out to me the most.

The reason this poem stuck out to me is because of the loss I recently experienced on my sister's birthday. My cousin, whose nickname was "Tutu," sadly passed away due to gun violence. His death affected my father the most because Tutu really looked up to my dad, and all Tutu was trying to do was get his life together. Honestly, I didn't see Tutu much, only for holidays, but that didn't matter because any time I *did* see him, it would feel like we'd seen each other everyday in between. His death was so unexpected, and the fact that it happened on my sister's birthday made it hurt more. Not only do we have to celebrate my sister's birthday on that day from now on; we also have to "celebrate" his death. Ever since his death, I'm always scared. I'm not scared for me, but I'm scared for my family and friends. For example, it scares me

when my mom or dad takes too long to come back from the store, or when my friends don't let me know if they have gotten home safely. Every little thing gives me anxiety because you never know what to expect. It's sad that, from a young age, I was taught that, if I ever heard shots, to stay away from all windows and to stay low. It's sad that I get scared throwing the trash out at night; it's sad that, in the summertime, I barely go out because that's when most killings happen. It's sad that this is "normal," but it's my reality.

I would just like to thank you for reading my letter, and I really do look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jayla

Wisconsin

Dear Jayla,

My heart, my anger, my grief, my prayers go out to you and your family. I am so sorry that your cousin's life was cut short so senselessly, that his road to a better life was interrupted by such unneeded violence. My prayers to your father as he grieves that young man. Tutu deserved better. We all do. I am sorry that you are walking around with that big fear on your shoulders. I hope that with time, as grief subsides, the fear can also inspire action. I think about Mamie Till, Emmett Till's mother, who refused to let the murder of her son pass by quietly. She turned her grief into activism and spent her life trying to make this country a safer place for Black folks. I don't think that is your responsibility, but if you are looking for a place to put that energy, think about how you can make even a tiny difference in the lives of those around you. Maybe that looks like writing poems that people can resonate with and shelter within. Maybe that looks like volunteering or joining an anti-gun violence organization in [redacted]. Maybe that looks like just loving on your family a little harder in whatever intentional ways you can think of. I remember getting the same warnings about windows and gun shots when I was a child. The neighborhood I grew up in wasn't safe for all, and bullets have no name. I hate the world sometimes, that our family members and friends can be ripped from us too quickly and easily, but what gives me peace and holds me above the water is knowing that there are people trying to change the world, who are trying to love us into a better tomorrow.

You deserve a summer without fear. You deserve so much. If I can offer any advice, and what good can advice do? but it would be to fight the urge to accept this wicked world as normal. Fight the urge to accept that this is the way it is. Change is possible. Hope is not worthless. Our reality is not stagnant. We can change our hoods for the better. I am sending all the love I can muster your way. Again, my prayers are with you and your family. I hope that fear unlooses you from its grips and that love can be a medicine for you and for our world.

Sincerely and warmly,

Danez Smith

Dear Danez Smith,

First, I'd like to say I love your poem. I love how you start every line with “&” for two reasons. One, I just like starting sentences with “and.” In middle school, my teacher would always tell me not to do that, but it makes sense in my mind. The sentence is a whole new thought, but still connected to the last sentence so I need “and” to make it flow. I also like your use of the “and” symbol. For some reason, I started to use it in everything last year, and I thought I was the coolest thing since sliced bread. So since I read your poem, you are the coolest thing since sliced bread. I just love this whole poem! I think what I like most is how you can see it.

Second, I'd like to tell you how I became familiar with you. Last year, a student named Amina read one of your poems at the Black History Month Assembly. It was *Dinosaurs In The Hood*, which I think is a fantastic poem. I love how you call stu out, but don't turn it in a way that is negative or sad. You're like, “Hey, this happened; it's a part of our history. And it doesn't happen in the world I envision, but let me show you what does.” Everyone loved your poem and her performance of it, too.

I always really looked up to Amina because of how talented she is and how unapologetically black she is. I really admire how she uses her talent to show her pride. That is something I really admire about you and your writing, as well. I've always had pride when I am around my family. However, when I wasn't around them, I was the only Black female in the room. I wasn't proud of that. It took me becoming a writer in high school and writing about myself to feel that pride everywhere I go. I think I was able to do that because I knew Amina who showed me it was okay.

Now, when I come across problems as I write about myself and my culture, I read and think about the work of other Black writers. *Dinosaurs In The Hood* is one that I often read in those moments. I don't have anyone I know personally to go to in those moments. All of my teachers are white, and I don't know any older Black writers. So, I read your poem and other people's, and I imagine what advice you guys would give me if I could ask you. I want to thank you for that, indirectly helping me over the last year.

You've been a big part of what influences the things I write now. I focus on the positives and joy in our community. I am publishing a literary magazine, *Black Dragon*, which has the theme of Black joy. The main theme of my senior Scholastic portfolio was Black joy and normalcy. So many times, society makes Black art feel like it has to be something revolutionary. It has to be saying something. It has to stand as a piece about Black people that can teach other people about us, instead of letting it just be a piece with Black people.

Artists like you and Amina have helped me stop giving in to that pressure. You've shown me that my art can be about anything and still be important and successful.

Thank you,
Marie
Virginia

Hello Marie!

Thank you so much for your letter! It brought me joy and hope in so many ways. Firstly, I am always glad to meet a fellow lover of the ampersand. & especially at the start of a sentence. Back when I was in high school I never had much of a knack for "proper" grammar, but poetry is a space where we are allowed to break and make whatever rules we want in the language we craft. I often say that punctuation and grammar for poets is about feeling and attitude, sometimes about personal or collective aesthetic as well. I feel like the same is true for all writing—who says an essay can't have the same funky syntax and grammar as a poem?—but I feel it is especially true for poets. Sure, I think our teachers might just want us to have a firm hold on grammatical rules before we go about breaking them, but I am of the mind that language is a malleable machine that can handle the ways we ask it to flux and flex to say what we gotta say. The ampersand in particular I feel in deep love with after reading the work of the

great poet Aracelis Girmay. Do you know her work? If not, I say RUN to the library and get your hands on one of her books. *Teeth* and *Kingdom Animalia* and *The Black Maria* are all truly fantastic collections, no bad place to start in her canon. Her work makes me feel free, possible, somehow both sharpened and softened. A tender exactness is what I get from her. A clear focus and aim from the lens of the brightest heart. & she be workin those ampersands better than anyone in the game!

I am touched by your story about Amina! If you are still in touch with her tell her I said thank you for choosing my poem to perform for the school. I'm honored. She sounds like an amazing young person. As do you! *Black Dragon* sounds like such a project of love. We need more places to hold our love. No, we don't need to be revolutionary, yet we are a revolutionary people in this long moment in time, in the context of this country. The pure fact that anti-Blackness is the oil that fuels the American engine makes us so. I love you craving out space for Black joy and normalcy. Recognize please that the work you're doing is indeed revolutionary work. We were allowed to freakin read! Language was used to enslaved us and yet mastery of language was outlawed for our ancestors, for free of what freedoms we would find within language. We are, thankfully, not a normal people. Even the Black mundane has a spectacular edge in his nation by nature of our simple being. As long as race continues to be part of the rubric of how citizens are judged and treated, we will be revolution. But still, we need spaces where we can be unburdened, where we can delight in our regularness. I thank you for making such a space.

I can't wait for you to enter the world and find so many Aminas and Maries and Danezs and Aracelises waiting to kin you. I remember times when I was in undergrad or graduate school at PWIs [Predominately white institutions] and felt so far from my people, which meant also I felt far from myself. But you we are out here, there is such a rich and ever-expanding world of Black writers and creatives and agitators and healers and space-makers out there waiting out there to be your co-conspirators. I'm glad you got your lessons about pride early in life, but on the other side of graduation is a world that you are already molding waiting on you to meet the folks who you will engineer better futures with. I'm elated to live in that world.

Can't wait to meet you out in the world, poet!

Warmly,
Danez Smith

Dear Danez Smith,

My name is Sarah Joe. I read your poem “Dream where every black person is standing by the ocean.” Easy to say that I was moved by your words. We don’t typically read many poems in school, less so about people of color, when reading your poem it was like I was transported back in time. My memories twisting and turning, intertwining with your words.

I was sitting in a 4th-grade classroom, I was one of four black children in our whole grade. I could feel the hardwood floor through the soles of my beat-up black converse. I could feel the weight of my sweater I kept in my locker for the cold classroom. I could feel the faint itch to pick at the beds of my fingernails, the light pain of them being rubbed raw.

“/& we say to her/ what have you done with our kin you swallowed?/”

I could hear the sea of whispers as my classmates looked at us, my best friend squeezing my hand. Her knee bounces as she hides behind her curly hair. Her glasses are pushed up her face as her big brown eyes glisten as she holds back tears. My own tears stinging as the burn of self-hate bubbled in the back of my throat. The feeling was suffocating, all consuming, heart crushing.

“/&then one woman dark skin as all of us/”

Now I sit in my classroom, my Nike Blazers brushing the ground, I read your poem, I hear your poem, I feel your poem. I think back to what I felt this morning. To a time when the world was absolutely silent, I thought for a moment about what that might mean to me. I thought about my friends, laughing and smiling. Sometimes I feel like I’m watching my own life through a dirty window, like I’m watching another version of myself. I’ve been told that what I have is an out-of-body experience. That I’m not really watching myself, it’s merely a mindset. I know now that all this might sound rather downcast, but it is really where I do some of my best thinking, like I’m sitting in a chair, in a house by the sea, watching and thinking.

“/that was ages ago, you’ve drunk them by now/”

My first thoughts were the harshest. I wondered what your poem meant to you. What inspired you? Why open a wound when it healed so nicely?

My second thoughts answered my first. The wound wasn't healed, the whole was there it was simply covered in cheap plaster and painted a pretty color. This poem probably meant to you what it meant to me. Although I don't know what it really meant to me. I've tried to decipher it, I've tried to put it into words, but what will meaningless words get me, what would they do for me? I could feel it though, changing, shaping, raging, like a storm, like the ocean lapping at the shore. She reaches her long arms as if embracing the shore, pulling us in.

She swallows us whole, I cant help but think about my own mothers home.
“/& then one woman, skin dark as all of us/”

I think of my mother in all forms, at any age, running from her home with her sisters in tail to the sea as its arms await. The sea is calm her, basking in the love of the sun as she licks the shore and tickles the toes of passers by. I feel her very soul in the sand between my toes, in the breeze that blows, in the sun as it loves my dark skin. Sometimes I watch my mother, as she sits and she remembers the sea and the sun. It hears their call as I hear yours.

What the sea takes, she one day returns in the form of something else,

Sarah Joe (She/her)
New York

Dear Sarah Joe,

First of all, you better write! Your letter is dripping with poetry, as I read I felt like I was all of a sudden next to you and your friend on the floor in a classroom big enough to hold all of us who have ever been othered, now gathered and united as one mighty kin. It made me think of my own friends from elementary and middle school, some of whom I still know and treasure. It sent me back to the theater classroom in the basement of my high school where I first fell in love with poetry, when I first myself realized there was a window inside of me I could peer out of and write about the world and my life from the safety of my mind.

When you mentioned the window, that's where my mind went, to the room in me where I go to be a poet. It's a space that feels so similar to the experience you describe. It's the space where I go when a song settles itself into my bones, or when a piece of visual art unlocks a feeling in me I don't have language for yet. It's the same space I go to with my happiness, or my sadness, or my anger, or my questions when I need to take a step back and take a long look at the world I'm witnessing, to the dreams I'm having, to the life I'm living. Sometimes people go to that room and come out with dance, some with song, some with paintings or stories or some just go to that for a moment of peace and reflection. Something tells me that room for you might be a room where you write. Your words transported me as you say mine did you. The feeling is mutual, fellow poet.

You wondered what inspired my poem, what made me explore the wound. The poem started as a larger poem I called "parade" when I first wrote it. It was a poem in which I imagined following a random man reminded me of my aunt who, unfortunately, struggles with addiction and whom loving has left a tender wound on my heart most of my life, but in the poem I followed his jittery dance and eventually we're going down the street and calling every Black person out of their homes to join. It's a jubilant poem where we all walk down the street to the rhythm of beads and barrets clacking in little girls' hair, the sound of our feet making our dead raise joyfully from their graves. Eventually we march right up to the ocean and what happens then is basically the poem you read. I think I cut it down to just that scene because I wanted to cut straight to the moment of all of us together, where that one calls Emmett Till back to us.

I think Emmett's murder is such a deep wound for Black people, in the USA in particular, and I wanted to imagine a world where our collective gathering and missing could call our murdered children back to us. Emmett then is an avatar for all the children and kin we've lost to racist violence. I think that poems are containers for magic, for dreams, for tomorrows we want to call into existence. For me, addressing the wound is part of how we heal it and part of how we make sure the same wounds are scarred on us over and over. I hope the poem is a medicine for our hurt and a call to work on summoning the futures we have always deserved.

Thinking about the scene from the original “parade” poem is making me think of a scene from the novel *Sula* by the great Toni Morrison. Sarah, have you read any Morrison yet? She was, to me, the best writer ever to touch the English language. She loved us, Black people, so deeply. Her work is wild and rigorous and free. She could do anything with a sentence. If you haven’t already made your way to her work, I highly suggest you read *Sula* or *The Bluest Eye* whenever you can, as a starting place. All of her novels are golden, even at their darkest.

Sarah, I am also so so taken by your thinking about your mother. How she sits and remembers the sea. I think we as Black folks have a special relationship with water. I think water has been such a freedom and a violence to us at the same time, but I think the water understands us, and remembers how many of us in the Americas and the Caribbean lost a bit of our histories to the middle passage. I think water loves us, so many of our ancestors still held in its belly that it has no choice. I hope you get to spend time with your mother by her sea. I hope our paths cross one day, maybe by the water.

Hoping the spring and summer bring you so much joy. Hoping that the world continues to dazzle you from your window.

Warmly,
Danez Smith

books

Richard Blanco

Richard Blanco is a poet, memoirist, and Education Ambassador of the Academy of American Poets. He is the author of several books including *How to Love a Country* (Beacon Press, 2019) and *Directions to the Beach of the Dead* (University of Arizona Press, 2005), winner of the 2006 PEN/American Center Beyond Margins Award, and the recipient of multiple fellowships from Florida Artist and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts. Blanco is currently a distinguished visiting professor at Florida International University.

KB Brookins

KB Brookins is a Black, queer, and trans poet and the author of *Freedom House* (Deep Vellum Publishing, 2023). The recipient of fellowships from the Broadway Advocacy Coalition, Equality Texas, The Watering Hole, and PEN America, they live in Austin, on Jumanos, Tonkawa, Lipan Apache, Coahuiltecan, Sana, and Comanche land.

Mahogany L. Browne

Mahogany L. Browne is a writer, editor, and author of several poetry collections and chapbooks, including *Chrome Valley* (W. W. Norton, 2023) and *I Remember Death By Its Proximity to What I Love* (Haymarket Books, 2021). She is also the author of the young adult and children's books *Vinyl Moon* (Crown, 2022) and *Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice* (Roaring Brook Press, 2020). A recipient of fellowships from the Arts for Justice Fund, Air Serenbe, Cave Canem, Mellon Research, Rauschenberg, and Poets House, Browne is the executive director of Bowery Poetry Club and artistic director of Urban Word NYC. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

Marilyn Chin

Marilyn Chin is a poet, translator, and author of five collections of poetry including *A Portrait of the Self As Nation: New and Selected Poems* (W. W. Norton, 2018) and *Hard Love Province* (W.W. Norton, 2014), which won the 2015 Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. A recipient of the 2020 Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize and other awards, Chin is currently a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and professor emerita at San Diego State University.

Naomi Shihab Nye

Naomi Shihab Nye is a poet and author of numerous books of poems including *Cast Away: Poems for Our Time* (Greenwillow Books, 2020); *The Tiny Journalist* (BOA Editions, 2019); and *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners* (Greenwillow Books, 2018). A Guggenheim Fellow and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Lifetime Achievement Award, Nye served as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 2010 to 2015, and was the Poetry Foundation's Young People's Poet Laureate from 2019 to 2021. She currently lives in San Antonio, Texas.

Danez Smith

Danez Smith is a poet and author of *Homie* (Graywolf Press, 2020); *Don't Call Us Dead* (Graywolf Press, 2017), which was short-listed for the National Book Award; and *[insert] boy* (YesYes Books, 2014), winner of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award and the Lambda Literary Award for Gay Poetry. The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Poetry Foundation, they are also the winner of a Pushcart Prize and co-host the podcast VS alongside Franny Choi. Smith lives in Minneapolis.

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