



NATIONAL  
STUDENT  
**POETS**  
PROGRAM

2021

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THE NATION'S HIGHEST HONOR  
FOR YOUTH POETS PRESENTING  
ORIGINAL WORK



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## Letter from the Program Partners

Poetry is vital. As an art form, it continually reinvents itself and remains essential to young people—especially those who choose this medium to explore and explain their world.

We are honored to introduce the gifted young writers appointed as the 2021 National Student Poets. They will begin their year of service at a time when we are slowly starting to discover the world again after the upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic. Now we are reminded that the literary arts, and poetry in particular, have the power to offer shared experiences that can transcend the limitations of physical distance and reconnect us with one another. These five Poets' bold, fresh voices show new ways forward, and we cannot wait to see how the Poets engage communities both in person and virtually in the year ahead.

Many of the readings and workshops that these students develop will take place in partnership with museums and libraries, those essential community spaces that motivate, educate, and comfort us. Museums and libraries are the spirit of our nation, inspiring curiosity and new visions of our collective future. The National Student Poets Program is honored to be a part of this work.

We hope you enjoy the poetry in this volume. Share it with friends, family, and loved ones. Read a poem aloud to someone. We think you'll find, as we did, that these talented teens will give you hope for the future of the arts, writing, and literacy. Together, we celebrate the enduring legacy of American poetry, and we welcome these young writers as the 2021 Class of National Student Poets.



**Crosby Kemper**

*Director*

Institute of Museum and Library Services



**Christopher Wisniewski**

*Executive Director*

Alliance for Young Artists & Writers

## Class of 2021 Jurors

**Ekiwah Adler-Beléndez**, award-winning poet and activist

**Jennifer Benka\***, President and Executive Director of the Academy of American Poets

**Joshua Bennett**, former Guggenheim Fellow and National Endowment for the Arts Fellow

**Sherwin Bitsui**, award-winning poet, Lannan Foundation Fellow, and Native Arts & Culture Foundation Fellow

**Tina Chang\***, Brooklyn Poet Laureate

**Juan Felipe Herrera\***, 21st U.S. Poet Laureate

**Edward Hirsch\***, poet and President of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation

**Ricardo Alberto Maldonado**, Queer/Arts/ Mentorship Fellow and New York Foundation for the Arts Fellow

**Camille Rankine**, award-winning poet, MacDowell Colony Fellow, and National Endowment for the Arts Fellow

**Frank X Walker**, former Kentucky Poet Laureate, Cave Canem Fellow, and award-winning poet

## Past Jurors

Kaveh Akbar  
Kwame Alexander  
Esther Belin  
Robert Casper  
Cortney Lamar Charleston  
Billy Collins  
Michael Earl Craig  
Mayda Del Valle  
Toi Derricotte  
Martin Jude Farawell  
Carolyn Forché  
Carrie Fountain  
Andrea Gibson  
Diana Goetsch  
Kimiko Hahn  
Joy Harjo  
Terrance Hayes  
Ilya Kaminsky  
Cyndee Landrum  
Rickey Laurentiis  
Al Letson  
Robin Coste Lewis  
David Lynn  
Adrian Matejka  
Shane McCrae  
January Gill O'Neil  
Alice Quinn  
Glenis Redmond

Roger Reeves  
Nicole Sealey  
Brenda Shaughnessy  
Naomi Shihab Nye  
Danez Smith  
Patricia Smith  
Rose Styron  
Arthur Sze  
Jeff Tweedy  
Crystal Valentine  
Kerry Washington  
Damian Woetzel  
Alfre Woodard  
Jacqueline Woodson  
Javier Zamora

*\*Repeat juror*



**RC Davis**  
Oak Park, IL  
Midwest Region

RC Davis is a rising senior and poet from Oak Park, Illinois. He began writing poetry seriously in his freshman year, when he joined his high school's spoken word club, and is a two-time competitor in the Chicago spoken word competition *Louder Than a Bomb*. His poems frequently wrestle with questions of gender and family and the strangeness of being a human with a brain and a body. He is a winner of a 2019 Gwendolyn Brooks Youth Poetry Award and has been published in *Driftwood*, *Blue Marble Review*, and *3Elements Review*. RC is an apprentice editor for *BreakBread Literary Magazine*, which focuses on publishing writers under 25. He owes his poetic successes to the encouragement he has received from his slam team and his teachers. ■

# Chickenboy

Really half my life ago when you think about it  
those afternoons where Mia and I would shove  
the word chicken into each other's ribs

and try to jump from my treehouse  
without using any knees. We played pirates mostly  
when it wasn't a series of successive dares.

I was always first mate,  
grass and ocean in my spit. Long-armed  
enough to reach every rope. Some Friday evening

with mulberries on our lips, Mia asked me  
why I always played a boy.  
What does it mean to keep a secret

you haven't learned yet? After that  
I always made sure to be somewhat girl  
in every game. Ponytail licking the wind

with my walk-the-plank leap. I apologize  
for any cliché, any legitimacy  
I give to this notion of narrative.

Who decided that a trans childhood  
has to be a psychoanalysis? I knew  
and I didn't know. I was a girl unfurling

into man. Chickenboy chewing her talons  
into dust. I jumped off the treehouse  
nine years ago and I still haven't landed.

## Promise

I promise never to charge  
my phone on the rim of the bathtub  
or cut off my fingertips  
with a kitchen knife. If I know  
one thing, it's how to touch

the wax of a mosquito candle without  
feeling any burn. This summer,  
the dog eats cicadas in the grass  
and I dream that I'm a duck  
or something else with wings

(in the end I am swallowed once again  
by my own skin, riding a bicycle backwards  
down a hill). In a poem that isn't  
this one, I keep asking  
for my parents' pride

to never change its shape. I ask  
the birds and each blade  
of grass, mostly my own mouth  
in the mirror. Canyon of teeth  
singing a song too low

for my vocal range. Someday,  
I will tattoo a window  
on each of my shoulders. To let some light in,  
I suppose, like a pair of glasses  
in a movie, setting fire to a leaf.

Dollop of sun, then everything  
begins burning. I'm not sure  
what I'm supposed to taste when



we say words like future. I promise you  
that if I ever have a child of my own

my hands won't shake so much  
that I drop them on the tile. I'll remember  
some of the words of my father's  
lullabies. We'll count  
the dead flies on the windowsill,

then I'll turn over a tree stump  
and show the swarm  
underneath. Look, the moon is a paper plate  
that's been lit on fire. Watch it  
curl into a toenail clipping.

Watch the night swallow  
us in our pajama pants  
and whispers. Today,  
what I'm asking  
is for my parents to call me son

before one of us is dead.  
If you look directly at the sun  
it leaves blue spots everywhere  
and I'm sitting here, painting my nails  
with the blood from my mosquito bites.



**Aanika Eragam**  
Milton, GA  
Southeast Region

Aanika Eragam is a senior at Milton High School in Milton, GA. Through her mother's bedtime tales of South Indian mythology, Aanika was exposed to the power of storytelling to connect her to her cultural heritage, unlock foreign perspectives, and help her explore history. Since then, she's written poetry and creative nonfiction about culture, family, girlhood, and body image. She believes strongly in the power of words to bond and heal. Aanika edits for her high school's literary magazine, *The Globe*, and serves as the 2021 Atlanta Youth Poet Laureate. If she were ever to get a tattoo, it would be of the line "There are enough ballrooms in you" from Laura Lamb Brown-Lavoie's poem "On This the 100th Anniversary of the Titanic, We Reconsider the Buoyancy of the Human Heart." In her spare time, Aanika enjoys long walks outdoors, baking scones, and spending time with those she loves. ■

# When You Wish Upon A Star

I.

In the backyard, evening splits yolk-  
like over the sea of switchgrass.

A lone dandelion shoots up  
from the porch slats. I crush it in my fist &

blow. I am thinking about Mother,  
about Unborn Sister, about storks

that chuck babies from the sky  
into eager arms—the homes they miss,

or the baskets that are empty to begin with.  
Winter two years before I was born,

Mother cast a wish on a star long dead,  
and that is why I am the eldest

instead of Leela, whose sonogram  
she still keeps in a shoe box.

II.

Father once told me of his grade school  
days spent scaling rooftops. All to steal  
glances at the lone television on the block,  
flickering in his neighbor's window like wildfire.

I picture him fresh-faced, youthful, breath  
caught like a guppy in a fisherman's reel each  
time the credits rolled. Now, he buries  
away after dusk, action films droning and

I imagine he sees a supernova in every fight  
scene, a jaw shattering into a million

constellations, colliding with another's knuckle,  
the space where his fist could've been.

He says: it wasn't written in my stars.  
He says: there's no use pining.

But he hurries to the theater every  
weekend, basks in the screen's glare like  
sunshine on a cold afternoon.

III.

Once a month, Cousin calls to ask if she can  
visit, says she can't stand the empty cavern

of her one-bedroom apartment in Detroit,  
the wedding band glinting on her finger

like the scales of a python coiled tight  
around prey it will not kill, but choke.

She's forgotten the slope of her husband's face,  
my cousin. Like last year, his visa denied.

I picture them both as mantids: eyes bulbous,  
upturned, fingers clasped & reaching.

Same sky, same prayer.

IV.

On the porch steps now,  
I thumb the lines fraying like  
roots on my palm, gaze  
at the freckled expanse of night.

Trace constellations.

Orion. The Little Dipper.  
Can't decide which part  
of this poem I hate the most:  
the way they sigh or

the way they hope. The way  
they hold my gaze like a  
promise, like something they're  
owed.

## Ghazal for Desi Potluck

And in every corner: '80s bhangra spilling from loudspeakers, lulls  
in chatter broken by a rice cooker's steam whistle. On TV: *Home Alone*

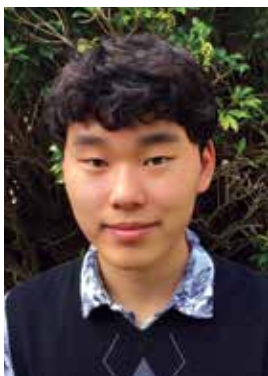
to quell idle children. They watch, eyes wide, Kevin's family leave  
for the airport without him, wonder what they'd do if alone

at home, or far away. In the living room, the new couple flit in and out  
of chatter like fruit flies. Uneasy, even among themselves. Ever the loners.

Ma sees something of herself in the young wife, the way she sniffs her kurti for  
the suitcase-sullied scent of home, strokes the bloom of her belly as if glass blown.

This is real tender loving: plates of pulao stacked high for young & old.  
Till no belly is left wanting, for Ma insists no one should eat alone.

Picture how this night will end: on the doorstep. Linger. This evening,  
a lifeboat. To take leave is to capsize, but at least no one's drowning alone.



**Kevin Gu**  
Hopkinton, MA  
Northeast Region

Kevin Gu is 17 years old, attends Hopkinton High School, and, some might say, is a pretty normal guy. Aside from his involvement as editor-in-chief of HHS Press and being a self-proclaimed virtuoso pianist, all he really likes to do is hunt for boba shops and sing Chinese folk songs after writing. He finds that, as a Chinese-American, his heritage makes up a large part of his identity. As a result, much of his poetry explores childhood experiences and cultural history, whether that's his own or that of others. More often than not, he falls down the rabbit hole of different historical events and discovers how certain motifs of memory, selfhood, and acceptance are reflected in his own roots. Ultimately, he hopes to create literature until every story confined within his body is released. Kevin was a participant in the 2019 Grubstreet Teen Writing Fellowship, and his work can be found in *Rattle Young Poets Anthology* and *The National Poetry Quarterly*, among others, as well as on the back of assigned math worksheets (arguably his best writing to date). ■

## georgia, atlanta (ululation)

A response written after the shooting on March 16.

tonight, you chew raw tongue and watch how streetlights  
make true the vacancy in your eyes, your gaze. you prepare  
to rupture soft under grease-slick lights, a body  
splayed under artificial deng *Long* (笼). and notice how dust traces  
yellow-lit rivers (huang he) down a straining neck.  
the trembling tells you it's time to siphon your life  
away; all steamed bones, all unwanted broth. open

yourself wider: on a night like this—the only thing unwinding  
is your shot-out brain. body laid bare and blossomed, worthy  
sacrifice to a silent god. an inheritance.

*Long* (聋), maybe you convince yourself to ignore  
the air-hollow gap throbbing like curdled steel in your flesh,  
maybe you choose to stay flayed on the perma floor, palms facing  
upwards towards heaven, wordless begging to reclaim a once livid voice.  
but it is all too painful, and so you remain still.

on a night like this, you are reduced to a lovely skin, star  
anise and gunpowder, how those spices cling to you, tender. a softening  
consumed only by yellowing teeth and unhinged mouths,  
wider; hide her! finger on trigger.

march sixteen, remember that day, how you spilled racking organs  
onto the linoleum? how you thought your lungs filled  
with the synthetic incense of a foreign place?  
but it was just the smoke, *long*, and you:  
burning from the inside, unnamed empty body,  
mercy, mercy, mercy.

through this you learn how you are replaceable,  
omitted, how history rewrites again to rid itself of your skeleton,  
and how it molds you: eastern, sexual  
tantalization for a man who had a bad day. a bad day

to screech metal lullabies into your gut,  
cracked open a lifetime.

— — —

### Translations

*Long*/'louŋ//*Lóng* [mandarin]: lanterns (笼), deaf (聋) (sound warmed in a throat,  
scarred in all its beauty)

*long* [english]: some shooter's name (killer, rust-metal syllable deposited on a tongue)

## The Yangtze

Originally published in *Rattle Young Poets Anthology*

i.

The first time I dipped my toes in the Yangtze my mother  
told me the story of Qu Yuan. A great poet  
who drowned himself  
along the branching twines of the river.  
I laughed at her, split-grinned,  
and submerged my legs anyway.  
Later that night, I dreamt  
of jasmine rice and zongzi.

ii.

Indigo means immensity. Mother cooked 麻婆豆腐 for me  
when the winters were still long—the middle  
stages of twilight at 5 pm. Some rusty heater pumped rivulets of smoky air,  
scent lingering in my lungs like yinghua syrup.  
Her calloused fingertips kneaded  
my fleshy face while the rest of the world was quiet,  
only us alone in the house.



iii.

Mouth gaping under the light-year skies. Taste  
the moon's perspiration, it tells me. It grips me.  
*They all want something,*  
the Yangtze said to me that day.  
Mother stroked my burnt hair,  
blackened soot on the thin skin of my undereyes.  
Find yourself in the infinite  
or it will drive you under  
the currents.

iv.

The silky black felt frozen between my toes,  
Chang Jiang was its other name. Mother told me  
it meant long river. Long falling, long gone.  
Fish nipped on peach-frosted skin as inward legs  
held the weight of the horizon. The listless sky spun around  
two axes, one centered above me another piercing  
my side, asymmetric, indigo split like gears  
grinding flaked sugar stars. My chest trembled,  
eyes closed at the sight of the undertow.  
*Why did Qu Yuan drown himself?*

The Yangtze answered, over  
and over and over:

*He yearned for the sky  
and found the next closest thing.*

## 红金 | Red Gold

教我如何画那褴褛的果汁渍  
浅淡血红色花朵  
在我那松垮的低腰牛仔褲上, 深红色灯笼  
从新年的天空散落  
让我描摹眼睛上翘的曲线  
将射影纳入杏仁色的蜡笔中。且我的皮肤如何  
黄赭色, 在目光凝视中渐显枯萎  
像那炎热夏天中腐烂的金橘。教我  
如何让嘈杂中国市场的下午3点时分  
纳入外婆的怀抱  
我祈祷记住这人参味香水  
在我的鼻腔中荡存  
和我的乌龙茶里煮透的  
玉项链。讲给我市场摊贩的故事  
他们卖着咸鱼, 电风扇吹散  
着咸味和胡椒粉的气息

并提醒我为这瘦嶙的骨骼为荣  
时钟弹指的角度是弯曲凹痕的  
关节宽度。让我,  
那盈盈的双眼, 轻语中的蛛丝斑点  
蜚向光年

蒸馏红金丝, 饮之  
呛了荔枝浆果汁  
在我的肺, 似刺耳的鞭炮声点燃了  
燃烧的寂静。我会看到金黄色的巨龙, 从破碎的镜中,  
扑下, 将烟灰和沾有斑点的天鹅绒送入混凝土中  
剪纸\*, 闻一闻薄薄的雪花,  
难道它们不似糖水和烟火的甜蜜?

(English translation)

Teach me how to paint those tattered juice stains,  
red blood-lit flowers sipping  
on my saggy low-rise jeans, crimson lanterns  
emanating under the expansive new year sky.  
Let me trace the upward curves of my eyes,  
pulling reflections into almond wax crayons. & how my skin,  
yellow ocher, shrivels under leering gazes  
like rotting kumquat fruits in the summer heat. Teach me  
how to pull the noisy 3 pm afternoons  
of the Chinese market  
into my grandmother's embrace. I pray  
I'll remember the ginseng perfume that loiters  
in my nostrils  
& the jade necklace that boils deep  
in my oolong tea. Tell me the stories of market vendors  
that sell seared fish, electric fan weaving  
the wafting threads of salt and peppercorns,  
  
and remind me to be proud of these scrawny bones,  
angles of a clock's hands—the breadth of the joints  
marked with crooked indents. Let me,  
my lissome eyes, gossamer flecks in whispers  
meandering towards the light-years.  
  
Distill red-gold silk, drink it in.  
Cough up lychee berry juice  
that simmers in my lungs & scream with firecrackers that light up  
the burning silence. I'll watch the golden-skin dragons flutter down  
from shattered mirrors, sending soot and blotted velvet into the concrete.  
Cut paper\* & smell the thin snowflakes—  
aren't they saccharine like sugar water and smoke?

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\*Cut paper (paper-cutting): cutouts depicting zodiac symbols or animals that typically represent luck and prosperity in Chinese culture—the paper is usually red in color.



## **Kechi Mbah**

Houston, TX

Southwest Region

Kechi Mbah is a rising senior at Carnegie Vanguard High School and a Houston native. She founded a poetry club in late 2019 and serves as an editor for her school's award-winning literary magazine, *The Courtyard*. She found her love for poetry when she stumbled upon a YouTube video from a Brave New Voices slam competition in the fall of 2019, and has been performing and writing poems ever since. Her poetry explores many avenues, from making the known strange to chronicling her experiences as a Nigerian-American and the histories of her people. She is also passionate about strengthening her community. She serves on the activism and community outreach committee of her school's Black Student Union and has interned with NASA to help address problems within the food supply chain. She advanced to the semifinals of the 2020 Space City Slam (Houston's largest teen slam competition) before it was canceled due to Covid-19, and her work can be found (or is forthcoming) in *Blue Marble Review*, *The Incandescent Review*, *elementia*, and elsewhere. ■

## Red-Eyed Woman

won't you / wake today / thumb through the waiting morning / undress from your  
dreams / chew on rotten berries / slow hissing / juice / dripping down / your teeth /  
now you'll / wash that hair / in a snap of green bush / tangled / twigged / and  
scratching / grow wild, honey / browned and sticky / rub the burn cross your skin  
/ watch the winds peel it back for you / don't wait / drag those fingernails in the dirt  
/ let them go bent, black, and nasty / sprinkle what's left / (to bake) / on the opened  
white flesh of your thigh / there / it's still burning / that smell / that awful smell / is  
like home / and has itself strapped to your boot / take it off / and throw it behind you  
/ inhale once / inhale twice / release a scraggly howl / for the river / and tomorrow /  
see only one follow / cup your mouth / to the water / swish / let it know the wet / then  
spit / keep the thirsty / it gets cold / and the "happy" fat shrinks off your belly / so you  
eat / the chapped flakes / from your lips / all those memories / already faded /  
fading / gone

# My Great-Grandfather Had Nine Wives

“Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter.”

—Chinua Achebe

Egwu adiro atu afo, oburu uzo.

My Great-Grandfather’s squinting eyes drew haze over the horizon belonging to my Great-Grandmother,  
creating a painting of African sun.

She was a woman of the earth///the earth made woman of her  
dirt-laced fingers and sand-peppered knees spoke love to corn and cassava  
praying only to the god she held within her bosom.

At the rise of afternoon pestle etched callous as she pounded fufu into brown  
freckled mortar.

Like all men-----my Great-Grandfather admired.

His yellowed eyes enchanted by her flat nose and cow belly plump lips  
to her skin peeled ripe from ebony and hips swept wide for birth  
to the sweet smell of a hardworking woman.

So he grew chest and three goats to bring back to her village  
and she agreed to be his seventh wife.

Uto mmii wu ete bele.

Drums beat to the laughter of potbellied men  
wine carrying IS the wedding.

My Great-Grandfather squatted hidden in murraya bush leaves  
while my Great-Grandmother’s feet kissed the ground to its pulsing rhythm  
red wrapper bouncing to her waist  
palm wine swimming in the ivory tusk of her forefathers.

She searched through purple plume grass and behind corkwood trees  
only finding men pretending to be my Great-Grandfather.

Until the rustle of murraya bush leaves seized her eyes  
tusk weighed his hands  
palm wine touched his lips  
and a river stretched out around their families.

Mmanu akara di uto; onye ratu, ibe ya a ratu.

My Great-Grandfather's land could make a village.  
Splitting vast of dust rich colors.  
For each wife had a house of her own  
and they stuck together tightly  
(clay, women, bamboo stick, children).  
Leading to feasts that were long and winding~  
sun fed siblings chasing behind the shadows of their mothers  
and snapping stomachs waiting for their dent of garri to be filled with okra soup.  
The open air hugging them tenderly.

### *Translations*

The following are all Igbo proverbs that relate to their sections of the poem, but not all of their meanings/messages translate into English well:

Egwu adiro atu afo, oburu uzo: Fear doesn't affect the stomach; that's why it's always in front.

Uto mmii wu ete bele: Wine tastes sweeter when you dance.

Mmanu akara di uto; onye ratu, ibe ya a ratu: Bean cake oil is sweet; one who tastes should allow others to have a taste.



**Sarah Fathima Mohammed**

San Jose, CA

West Region

Sarah Fathima Mohammed is a first-generation Muslim-American and a rising junior at Harker Upper School. Poetry has become a world where she can speak freely, holding her voice in her hands while excavating the histories of the women in her family. She writes poetry sourced in grief, faith, and longing because, for her people, these emotions are inherited. When she travels back to her hometown—a small fishing village in Kumbakonam, India—Sarah sits in circles with girls at the mosque, introducing them to poetry. Together, they read and reread Safia Elhillo and Fatimah Asghar’s lovely anthology of Muslim voices, *Halal If You Hear Me*. She hopes to share with fellow immigrant women from conservative cultures how storytelling can be activism, how poetry can turn “otherness” into power. ■



## Ode to Muslim Girl

In the mosque, women stir in slow circles. Following the blue lilt of my mother's cotton hijab, I move past these women, their burkas brushing against mine, their bodies so lovely and gentle, their mouths brimming with sweet Tamil vowels and knitted songs of worship. I kneel beside my mother, tucked in the corner of the room, both of us curling and uncurling our hands, our prayer rug a field tendriled in seasilk. We are here, I murmur, skimming my thumb along her jaw, and by this I mean, We are home. On days like these, the air heavy as pearls, heavy as daughters, I keep looking into my mother's face, so warm and so dark, and I am overcome with the softness of her, the way she opens the last verses of the Quran, moon-clotted and steamed in rosemilk, the way she cradles my cheek, a small synonym, the way she murmurs back to me, We are here, the words settling over me like skin. And I remember this softness, I cling to the memory of this softness when, after school, I struggle against the boy in the empty classroom until he relents, until he moves the hard meat of his knuckles from my waist, my body so small and trembling. When he asks where I am going, the answer is a tender thing blooming in my mouth, and he responds, Have fun with all the other terrorists, his chuckle following me like footsteps filling the damp streets as I trudge to the mosque, slip into the prayer room, my mother coiling close. The prayer rug becomes a garden growing underneath us, a smattering of pink petals pinned to our bare feet, gentle as touch.

# Portrait of Daughterhood

## I. War

my grandmother marries during  
the partition her mother sells their home,  
all the money becoming dowry all her brothers  
building a new hut behind their shop from straw  
and dirt warm house traded for a man  
on her deathbed my grandmother tells  
me she never feels as much pain as  
when she is with her husband  
her back bent beaten by rusted pots  
cheeks bleeding from the wasps living on the kitchen  
floor even when the hindus rip her ear  
off shove her own muscle back in her fists  
like a remedy my grandmother left holding  
the death of her own body listening to the organ  
sputter into corpse my grandmother still  
whispers that wearing her mother's wedding  
sari is her worst memory  
listen we are a bloodline that only knows  
the heart when it is a disguise for the trigger  
of a gun.

## II. Cycle

as soon as she had turned sixteen  
my grandmother's mother fed her  
a cold bullet the size of two milky  
eyes red-rimmed and still blinking  
these are the eyes of a husband searching  
for dowry my grandmother's mouth stained  
with ash tongue dark as a gun's  
muzzle my grandmother feeds my mother  
the same bullet generational weaponry  
kisses her and leaves a dark bruise

all three      of them sucking      the copper as  
teeth    knifing their tongues    until numb    sharp as  
switchblades      metal circling      their mouths  
here    womanhood means    to be born into      death  
means      to hunger      for a clean  
pearl of spit.

### III. Survival

after my mother marries      my father  
all money is lost      in dowry      so they move  
to america    she confuses    the words for fist  
and heart    blood spurting      from her nose  
my mother mistakes    my father's bruised  
knuckles for love    remembers    my grandmother's  
battle preparations    how slaps      sound  
so much like    gunshots    marriage  
is a war and    her lineage      makes up  
the soldiers    my mother learns to hold    the bullet  
my grandmother placed    in her throat  
without      choking      when my father  
spits in her face      a mouth      firing  
my mother tilts her chin up brushes    her collarbone  
feeling    the belly      of the ammunition  
and keeps fighting.

### IV. Another

my mother    gives birth to me  
thick plumes of smoke      in the sky  
days after 9/11      a daughter of    a country  
still    grieving      we will always      be born  
from battle    this is    the law      of motherhood  
I turn    sixteen and my mother      prepares  
me for war    just as my grandmother    once did  
for her      same bullet slashing  
my throat    husband-to-be      rolling eyes over

my body            his hands meaty    slicked  
in sweat    and gunpowder    my mother  
holding out            the dowry            crumpled green  
cash   fifteen years            of wages whittled  
down to this.

V. End

in the dark    when a girl opens  
my throat    she peels away the skin of    the bullet  
and    puts the gunpowder    remaining  
in her own pink    mouth            where  
is the black    saliva of womanhood            where  
are the preparations for battle            where  
is my mother's            shadow that leaks    into my own  
my girl    kisses me    there is no    softness like this  
we drown    the gunpowder, drown  
the memory of every    love            every history  
I've known    together    we fist the remains  
of the bullet and    make our own  
light    with            the pieces  
I will    not    conscript    my  
daughters            into battle            the girl holds me  
like a doe and I leave generations of hurt    leave this bloodline  
of war marriages.

# On Returning to My People

Sugar-apples clot the road with softness, their green skins quilted like small fields  
and damp, curled palms. I gather two in my hands, pressing the warmth to my cheek

because I want to bring them home, to the one-room place where we call every woman  
sister, where we brush coconut oil over our lips and sing

prayers, our voices thick as cotton. Mostly, the fruit reminds me of some sweetness  
I've been longing for, heavy and forgiving, the sweetness where I say my people,

and my people are here. Women gathered close to me, their burkas  
flowing, smatterings of Tamil pressed between us

when I rest my head against theirs, feeling so held and whole. I remember the village  
road that touches the river with such gentleness. I remember my sisters and their  
bodies,

curved and whole as lovely sketches of the moon. My hands full  
of sugar-apples and memory, I wander home. A woman carrying a bucket

of water grazes my body. I remember her name, Najimah, how she took care of me  
when I was young, drying my wet hair after baths. She looks at my face,

touches her own: our aquiline noses, our bloated mouths.

We look the same, and she calls me, Fathima, my name curled in her belly.

## Eligibility

For students to be considered for the National Student Poets Program, they must have received a National Gold or Silver Medal in poetry in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Students must also be in grades 10 or 11 and enrolled in a public, private, parochial, or home school in the United States.

Founded in 1923, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards continue to be the longest-running, most prestigious recognition program for creative teens in the U.S. and the largest source of scholarships for young artists and writers. Deadlines to participate in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards vary by region and may be found at [artandwriting.org](http://artandwriting.org).

From the pool of Scholastic Awards National Medalists in poetry, forty semifinalists for the National Student Poets Program are selected in the spring. Each semifinalist is notified and asked to submit additional poetry (two to five works total), a short video about themselves, and a short bio for consideration by the national jury panel.

A national jury of literary luminaries and leaders in education and the arts selects the five National Student Poets. Submissions are evaluated based on the National Student Poets Program's three criteria: creativity, dedication to craft, and promise.



**Scholastic  
Art & Writing  
Awards**

Alliance for  
Young Artists  
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