THE NATION'S HIGHEST HONOR
FOR YOUTH POETS PRESENTING
ORIGINAL WORK
Letter from the First Lady of the United States
As Honorary Chair of the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, I am pleased to congratulate the National Student Poets, Class of 2013.

Each year, the National Student Poets Program bestows the nation’s highest honor on five outstanding high school student poets. This year’s winners—like those who came before them—have the unique opportunity to serve as an example for Americans young and old through their written work, presentations, and service projects. They have each created a climate of discovery, exploration, and unity around the act of writing poetry. Since 1982, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities has been dedicated to the education of our children and the creativity of our citizens, while contributing to the vibrancy of our society and the strength of our democracy. This year’s winners are literary ambassadors to people across our country and around the world, and their work exemplifies the extraordinary outcomes that come from encouraging our youth to use their imaginations, be creative, and pursue their passions.

With this award, we celebrate imagination’s place at the heart of learning. Our National Student Poets are seeing, hearing, experiencing, making, and shaping a vision of the world around them and are inspiring others to do the same. I believe that the quality of our artists is a measure of who we are as a nation, and I hope young poets across our country will see the work in this collection as inspiration to share their own creative works.

Michelle Obama
Letter From the National Student Poets Program Partners

We are honored to join First Lady Michelle Obama in congratulating the Class of 2013 on receiving the nation’s highest honor for youth poets. As W. H. Auden said, “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language.” The students represented here not only embody that love of language, but also the mastery, discipline and creativity that must go along with it to create truly compelling writing. The process of art making—writing, drawing, playing, performing—not only hones the skills of young artists, but also shapes the lives of successful students and adults.

The National Student Poets Program identifies our most promising young poets and provides them with resources to develop their skills so that they can engage and inspire their peers. During a year of service, the National Student Poets will share their appreciation of poetry and the importance of creative expression through readings and workshops at libraries, museums and schools in every region of the country.

As partners in the program, the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers are committed to nurturing the talents of young people across the country; and to recognizing their contributions to the culture and vibrancy of our nation. We applaud the creativity and genius of America’s youth and we are proud to share a sample of their work in this small volume.

George Stevens, Jr., Co-Chair
President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

Margo Lion, Co-Chair
President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities

Susan Hildreth, Director
Institute of Museum and Library Services

Virginia McEnerney, Executive Director
Alliance for Young Artists & Writers

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When Ivorian Girls Are Most Hungry
For Cote d’Ivoire

I remember my arms entwined with Edvige, and the man who broke the necks of chickens, little brown ones which were bred for our Sauce Arachide, bred for our stomachs that grumbled for the lack of rainy season.

The marketplace was breathing; boys kicking dust and soccer balls, me too young to hear the crack of bone. Just the pounding of Foutou in the distance allured me in September when Ivorian girls are most hungry. I forgot to look and see its head drop and told myself the scent of blood was only the scrape on my knee from coconut tree climbing.

But there are no long-legged country boys here to hoist me up onto brown bark; just a grandmother’s magnolia, which was never meant for climbing. So I’ve grown accustomed to those

Poet and playwright Sojourner Ahebee attends Interlochen Arts Academy in Michigan, where she majors in Creative Writing. Though she was born in Cote d’Ivoire, West Africa, her current hometown is Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Much of her work involves her search for home, owing to the fact that at age 7, she left her birthplace after the start of the Ivorian civil war. Her favorite writers include Junot Díaz, Flannery O’Connor, Warsan Shire, and Ai. When she’s not writing, she enjoys studying anthropology and the French language.
When Ivorian Girls Are Most Hungry (continued)

sweat-stained, recollection-stained
bed sheets,
The sound of airplane wings,
Mamy Wata searching
for a little girl—
War is man
with big hands—
the silence of a chicken.

How to Learn From the Sunset

Keeping the lights on at night is a child’s plea
but we’re never taught to be alone
so by default we’re lonely.
I’ll sleep by my phone tonight
even when you’re there and when you’re not
I like the sound of the radio—people’s voices.
I guess that’s why I’ve always been scared
of Quaker meeting rooms and the thought of being bullied into silence.
I ask you what it means when the sun goes down.
You tell me that I mustn’t think of it as down
but rather the sun is diving into darkness
to become forgotten for some hours
and it’s God’s cue
for papaya on the tongue and stories.
But I say it’s just time to turn the lights on inside.

I hate the way a house tends to speak when everyone is gone.
It wants to tell you all its secrets
you’ve been hiding behind these cracking walls;
all the nights you kept the lights on,
all the nights you slept
without a father in the house,
all the nights you couldn’t hear the ocean.
All the nights.

When I have a daughter
I’ll tell her to sleep in the dark
when she’s afraid
and to listen to the silence,
listen to the way the sun went down,
and I’ll tell her
it’s okay to be alone.
I told you what I was.
I told you I was a series of boxes.
I told you I was nine homes
that never showed me where the heart is
And seven schools that defined “love”
but never taught its application.
I told you I was a child of war who never learned to be at peace.
I told you that when they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up,
I said “gone.”
I told you I saw life through a burgundy kaleidoscope.
I told you there were things I couldn’t tell you.
I told you the truth.

So why am I contemplating the fractal patterns of a broken windshield
and the texture of a telephone pole
and the way that rumble strips seem to sing goodbye?

I told you it would come to this,
And you didn’t believe me.
Appalachian Altibajos

If you asked me for a translation,
    I would point to the horizon as it dips and swells
    in its effort to steady the sky.

I would pronounce it in the rustling of the mountains,
    heads bowed for all that dies in us,
    as they bury their weariness
    in the comfort of the valley's waiting arms.

I would spell it in the upward winding of trails
    that lace themselves into the ground
    and the tautness of trees
    swaying between stability and circumstance.

I would call it "noun":
    as in the way the wind opens your chest and crucifies you
    even as the earth pulls your heart
down to her stomach.

When you asked me for it in a sentence,
    I would show you where I stood—
    afraid that I would fall and afraid that I would jump and afraid that I wouldn’t—
    and tell you how
    I felt the words climbing the steepness of my rocky soul,
    but feared the reverberating reality of sound.

And when at last you turned away,
    I would whisper to the hills

     te amo               te amo               te amo.

Medusa in the Mirror

My eyes are older every day
and I think it’s because they can see the answer to the question my brain keeps asking
which is
is a heart more like an odometer or a timer
because sometimes I feel like it’s just counting down the beats and
maybe I’m already in triple digits and I just don’t know it yet
because suicides are slow
and they seep through skin like dye
and sometimes they whisper in my dreams and I can hear them coiling around
my head
and they’re fang-deep in my skull
because now my migraines pound out messages
monster monster monster
and it feels like they’re rooted in my scalp because they’re persuasive in my misery
but present in my happiness too
and when they murmur in my ear you’re the best you’ll ever be
I’m afraid because it feels true
and maybe I’m anhedonic
because I can’t remember what childhood tastes like
and I’m starting to think that the only way to punctuate
loneliness

is in bullet points
•  maybe there’s a timer in the blackness of my eyes
•  and maybe you saw it first
•  maybe that’s why you left
•  
Nathan Cummings read his first novel at age 3 and has been searching for ways to tell his own stories ever since. Though his early interest was prose, he discovered poetry while searching for indoor entertainment during one of the many rainy winters in his hometown of Seattle, and he has been hooked ever since. A senior at Mercer Island High School, he serves as editor-in-chief of the school’s literary magazine, Pegasus. Nathan is also a reader for two national teen literary magazines, Polyphony H.S. and The Adroit Journal. His experiences with Polyphony and Adroit, as well as his time spent at the Iowa Young Writers’ Studio, have introduced him to an amazingly close-knit and supportive network of teen writers. Nathan also participates in cross country and track and field at his school. In a useful piece of synergy, some of his favorite ideas for poems have come to him on long solitary runs.

**Grandmother’s wrinkles**

He cries when his grandmother says hello. The words are angular, stinging sharp syllables and deep gurgling “k’s” as if the crags of his mother’s accent had erupted, rocky and unnegotiable.

Up comes rheumy, uninvited love that smells of vinegar and wilted wool.

He grasps a hand of matchstick fingers, uneasy: a brittle hand, its hue a few crayons down in the box, still holding some November chill in its palm.

Their house is colored autumn woods and maple— illogical smells are coming from the kitchen.

At the table, meat and potatoes give way to exotic fare, chortling broths from fossil-bones, and misshapen things.

The father, big and beaming and from the veins of this country—

Born from the dirt that collects in his fingernails—

Of earth, knowing nothing of old rusting boats— smiles welcome, wife-mother.

He can understand her no better than can his son.

It is about privilege, that son is told.

About emancipation from clenched bellies.

Which means stories after dinner, long dark odysseys recorded in no library book.

There are stories of thin fine ribs in rows, of smoke and seawater and vomit, wretches washing up with the driftwood onto virgin shores,
Transference

In the moment when
the tiny body of the squirrel is folded into itself,
the two-year symphony of its
rhythms and pulses and tempos
is silenced in mid-measure.

I want you to
consider the energy:
   rays of sunlight caught in chains
   of cellulose, digested, woven
   into muscle strands, calcified in
   thin willowy bones and
   the orbit of the eye,
all of it dissipated.

Consider the tiny vibration you felt
as you race onward,
   leaving a vague
   longitudinal
   stain,
the last strand of solar fire
not yet removed from glassine eyes
whose silent judgment
follows you past three exits and the horizon.

Consider the energy.
And when you have returned home,
traverse your garden,
cram an acorn into the soil, to take root
and spin anew.

(because you wish you could believe in reincarnation)
Aline Dolinh wrote her first real story in first grade, about a group of cats that lived together in a small town and solved mysteries. She doesn’t write that much about talking animals anymore, but she still loves stories that are a little fantastical. Aline is a sophomore at Oakton High School in Vienna, Virginia, and when she was little she wanted to be the world’s first fashion-designer-astrophysicist-author. She’s been a Girl Scout and has studied ballet, karate, and acting, but reading and writing have always remained constants.

I. immigrant
I miss the fluid feel of my old name in my mouth, my tongue tracing the soft syllables. It got stolen along the way somehow, though I don’t speak in broken English anymore. Add it to the list of items we lost, but have to learn to stop missing. Our bloodlines are still dragging, those threads tangled vaguely in that space between east and west, assigned identities not quite fitting. I know they said the war is over, but I still want to fight.

II. american dream
I press my fingers against the pillow of my stomach, wishing I could feel something sharp, hoping to find ridges of bone. My fingertip stray to my hips, and I pinch at their softness, as if that could trim away the excess flesh. As if I could rend my marrows apart, neat and surgical, along the seams of spine and thigh—in sides turned to spun dust, like the stuffing of a toy come undone.

I stare at the mirror and then the glossy five-page spread again, my heart aching for a face pale as snowdrifts and all-American blue eyes the size of saucers—the kind I wish I had, set into the faces of blushing girls with gaps between their thighs and lemon-blond hair, beckoning to me from the magazines.

Leaning in close to the mirror, I pull my eyelids wider, pucker my lips, tug at my skin until it turns sore in the hopes that this will make me beautiful.

III. daughter one
My mother was the one who taught me how to turn my heart to stone. Make your eyes dark like bullet holes, she whispers softly while braiding my hair. Set your mouth like a razorblade. The war is not yet over.

Of all the children, I was old enough to remember the acrid tang of napalm, blooms of crimson on the humid air, the swelling flares of gunfire. I tell myself to get used to the weight of that stone hanging heavy in my chest.
They’d said I’d never be pretty here, so I want to become beautiful instead—
but the terrible sort of beauty, the kind that makes men die,
the kind that launches a thousand ships. I want a revolution that brings up the blood.
A long time ago, I tore out the threads
fastened to my heart. There’s electricity in my veins
that could burn cities to the ground.

IV. radio silence
I wrote notes to you all summer—all still tightly sealed,
lingering in the envelopes. Maybe our love was something lost in translation,
the whispers blurred by static, a missing transmission. Your kisses always left a burnt
taste
clouding in the back of my throat. I miss your hands
skimming the hollow of my neck and collarbone, the tilt of your lips.
I try to file away these fleeting images like filmstrips,
longing to remember stitches of bare skin,
a smile pressed against your tongue. I’ll find you again, like I promised,
but in this world I’m still searching. Maybe in another timeline we ended up together.
There’s nothing that I’m sure of anymore,
only that my heart will always be ghosting, like flowers
set adrift upon the sea.

PROGRAMMING ERROR.
We pulled out our veins and laid them down on the operating table,
watching them unfold like lengths of silver ribbon.
The synthetic tissue was still entangled in my hands,
bright as butterfly gossamer—
insides detached from out, simple as snipping a thread.
I couldn’t disconnect my wiring, but I could see the cables laid bare,
pulsing with color where they joined hips to spine.

Once I had wondered if I still had a beating heart,
even underneath this metal shell, soft and fragile
like an overripe strawberry.

I can list every muscle in the human body,
but I’ve never had warm blood, no map of red lines
traced underneath paper-thin flesh. And I’ve never felt love either,
but I can diagnose it: it’s just a series of chemical synapses firing,
skin flushing pink with hemoglobin that I don’t have.
They must have been lying
when they said we were perfect. How could something perfect feel so empty?

Of course, they’ll be angry when they find us here,
with these blasphemous thoughts in our memory banks.
They’ll dismantle our limbs and say it was a manufacturing defect,
sew us back up again so we forget. I’m not sure how many times they’ve done it.

We’ll be beautifully uniform, all our parts in working order,
but defective in a different sort of way.
Louis Lafair is a senior at St. Stephen’s High School in Austin, Texas. He’s been “playing with words” since second grade. Louis translates his love of writing, reading, speaking, connecting, and challenging preconceived notions into all aspects of his life. As co-licensee and MC for TEDxYouth@Austin, Louis leads a team of more than twenty students and adults, and has worked with a wide range of speakers, including slam poet Joaquin Zihuatanejo. He serves as editor for Proteus, his school’s literary magazine. For Louis, the National Student Poets Program is a remarkable opportunity to connect, through written and spoken poetry, with a larger community.

Every single day you pass by (people who are quietly trying to stay standing for a record of one hundred heartbeats).

You watch but do not see (as they collapse, experiencing what a heart monitor in a whitewashed hospital would register as cardiac arrest, the green lifelines plummeting violently, then sitting flat, forever, all hope subsiding that someone, anyone will acknowledge yes they do indeed exist with perhaps a slight nod or at least an accidental shoulder brush).

Disabled by your headphones, you do not hear (the bodies plunge earthward, surrendering, sinking, soul-deep in quicksand).

You turn away, unsure (of who, right then, was standing there, unable to spot the limbs flailing, floundering, begging silently for a strong steady trunk or maybe, please, just a broken branch to hold on to).

You forget, gradually (that there are people you haven’t said hi to a single time...
after one hundred eighty days of side-by-side desks,
telling yourself that they didn’t say hi to you,
ignoring that they openly looked in your direction
until you stopped looking back,
that they continue to look in your direction, secretly
hoping to meet your eyes,
even if they can’t meet your standards).

You decide to look out for yourself
with only one I, to save the other eye
(for seeking out the parenthetical
since there is something sublime in the subliminal).

With the probing fingers of a blind man,
you at last feel the components of their faces
(attached earlobes, widow’s peaks,
birthmarks dark and deep enough to dive through,
freckles like sand-scattered stars).

On the tip of your rolled-over tongue, you ask,
at what point in the history of heredity
did invisibility become a gene?

maybe when linguists inadvertently dropped
parent in parentheses
maybe when the most fundamental theorem of math 1 + 1 = 2
at last made sense, through a reversal,
to the toddler who learned
the most basic addition of life backwards 2 = 1 + 1
upon physically witnessing an even sum
split into its odd counterparts,
a couple sliced down its center
by a jagged upward trend casually referred to as divorce
maybe when the (child),
bracketed directly between two opposing parents,
began adopting a conglomeration

of their dialects, vocabularies, and vulgarities,
soon casually heaving the most vulgar curse of all
(silence).

The sounds and shapes of silence have evolved
from the lost generation to the lonely generation,
varying in cadence from location to locution:
thunderous (driving in the rain, underneath an overpass)
parabolic (careening around a curve, toward an oncoming truck)
pointed (please bow your heads for a moment of silence)
gaunt (waking at four in the morning)
symmetrical (reflectively watching the ballet of a candle)
circular (pausing between laughing so hard that everyone stares at you
and stopping and starting again)

Of all the shapes and sounds of silence,
there are none more dangerous than the frozen tsunami that follows
I don’t want to talk about it.

Sometimes, oftentimes,
people don’t know
how
to talk about it,
so they don’t talk about anything at all.

Period.

But next time (every single day)
when someone is shoved or ignored,
shoving or ignoring,
smile not only at the victim
and at the bully
but also at the parenthetical.
Give a good long look to the person who isn’t even there.
Ask, how can I help what’s wrong?
Say, stand up, reach for my hand, touch my palm.
Louis Lafair

Allow strangers to feel that spot you let no one else feel
(to trace the vein that soothsayers claim
begins at your wrist and runs strait to the Styx).

Explain how it takes multiple faces and suits,
some jacks some queens some spades several hearts,
to build a card house and keep it standing
in the drift of overlapping (which way are they facing) breaths.

And remember, as you’re trying to subsist for one hundred heartbeats,
that if enough of us breathe in the right direction, we can counterbalance
those who are turned the other way.

Together (at once parenthetical and essential)
we can support the card house of humanity
as our chests all sigh, synchronized,
a million souls opening in, a million hearts opening out,
sharing the communal air with one collective breath.

2013 Jurors

RICHARD BLANCO was “made in Cuba, assembled in Spain, and imported to the United States,” meaning his mother, seven months pregnant, and the rest of the family arrived as exiles from Cuba to Madrid, where he was born. Only forty-five days later, the family emigrated once more and settled in New York City, then eventually in Miami, where he was raised and educated. His acclaimed first book of poetry, City of a Hundred Fires, received the Agnes Lynch Starrett Poetry Prize from the University of Pittsburgh Press. His second book, Directions to the Beach of the Dead, won the Beyond Margins Award from the PEN American Center. In January 2013, Blanco was selected by President Obama to be the inaugural poet, joining the ranks of Robert Frost and Maya Angelou.

ROBERT CASPER is the head of the Poetry and Literature Center at the Library of Congress. He previously worked as programs director at the Poetry Society of America. He is one of the founders of the literary magazine jubilat, and he served as its publisher for more than a decade. He also served as the poetry chair for the Brooklyn Borough President’s Literary Council and on the board for the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses, where he worked as membership director.

ANDREA GIBSON is a poet who is active in the LGBT community. Her work has been featured on media outlets such as the BBC and CNN, among others. She is known for the fearless truths in her poetry. She has released five spoken-word albums and was the first winner of the Women of the World Poetry Slam. Her work often addresses such topics as war, class, gender, bullying, and more.

KIMIKO HAHN is the author of eight books of poems, including The Unbearable Heart (Kaya, 1996), which received an American Book Award; The Narrow Road to the Interior (W.W. Norton, 2006), a collection that takes its title from Basho’s famous poetic journal; and Toxic Flora (W.W. Norton, 2010), poems inspired by science. Her most recent honor is a Guggenheim Fellowship. Hahn is a Distinguished Professor in the MFA program in Creative Writing & Literary Translation at Queens College, City University of New York.
JOY HARJO was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Mvskoke Nation. She has released four award-winning CDs of original music and won a Native American Music Award (NAMMY) for Best Female Artist of the Year. She performs nationally and internationally solo and with her band, The Arrow Dynamics. She has appeared on HBO’s Def Poetry Jam, in venues in every major U.S. city and internationally. Her seven books of poetry include such well-known titles as How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems and She Had Some Horses.

TERRANCE HAYES is the author of Lighthead, winner of the 2010 National Book Award for Poetry. His other collections are Wind in a Box, Hip Logic, and Muscular Music. Other honors include a Whiting Writers’ Award, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, a United States Artists Zell Fellowship, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. He teaches creative writing at Carnegie Mellon University and lives in Pittsburgh, PA.

DAVID LYNN is the editor of The Kenyon Review and also a fiction writer and essayist. He wrote the novel Wrestling with Gabriel and the critical study The Hero’s Tale: Narrators in the Early Modern Novel, as well as other books. He received his B.A. from Kenyon College and from the University of Virginia, where he received his M.A. and Ph.D. He was a longtime member of the Board of Directors of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses. At Kenyon he teaches fiction writing and literature courses.

ALICE QUINN was the poetry editor at Alfred A. Knopf from 1976 to 1986 and then became the poetry editor of The New Yorker. She teaches at Columbia University’s Graduate School of the Arts and is the executive director of the Poetry Society of America. She has written and edited several books, including Edgar Allan Poe & The Juke-Box: Uncollected Poems, Drafts, and Fragments (with Elizabeth Bishop).

ROSE STYRON is a poet, journalist and human rights activist. She has published three volumes of poetry—From Summer to Summer (Viking, 1965), Thieves’ Afternoon (Viking, 1972), and By Vineyard Light (Rizzoli, 1995)—and collaborated in translations from Russian (Modern Russian Poetry and Poets on Street Corners, both Viking Press). Her poetry appears in a variety of publications. Her articles on human rights and foreign policy have been published in periodicals such as The New York Review of Books, The Nation, and The New Republic, and her interviews, book reviews, and essays in American Poetry Review, The Paris Review, Ms. Magazine, Vogue, Holiday, Ramparts, The Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, Chicago Sun Times, and others.

Thanks

The National Student Poets Program partners sincerely thank the Poetry Society of America, the Academy of American Poets, the Poetry Foundation, the National Writing Project, and 826 National for their support, expertise, and enthusiasm. The National Student Poets Program partners also gratefully acknowledge the Regional Affiliates of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards for their dedication to supporting and coordinating the Awards on the regional level. We honor the thousands of educators who annually encourage students to submit their work.
Eligibility

For students to be considered for the National Student Poets Program, they must be in grades 9, 10, or 11 and enrolled in a public, private, or parochial school, or a home-school in the United States. Students must also win a National Gold or Silver Medal in poetry in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

Founded in 1923, the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards continues 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 www.artandwriting.org. From the pool of National Scholastic Award-winning medalists in poetry, thirty-five semifinalists for the National Student Poets Program are selected in April. The semifinalists are 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 and promise, and personal voice.
The President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, the Institute of Museum and Library Services, and the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers partner to present the National Student Poets Program (NSPP), the country’s highest honor for youth poets presenting original work. Five outstanding high school poets whose work exhibits exceptional creativity, dedication to craft, and promise are selected annually for a year of service as national poetry ambassadors.

National Student Poets are chosen from among the national medalists in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards by a jury of literary luminaries and leaders in education and the arts. Student Poets receive academic awards and opportunities to present their work at writing events, and in cooperation with the Library of Congress, are featured at the National Book Festival in Washington, D.C.

www.artandwriting.org/NSPP
https://www.facebook.com/NationalStudentPoetsProgram