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

NATIONAL STUDENT POETS PROGRAM
2018
About the National Student Poets Program

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. The Student Poets receive college scholarships and opportunities to present their work at writing and poetry events throughout their term. During their year of service, they develop and lead community service projects, presented to a wide range of audiences in underserved communities throughout their regions. National Student Poets Program Alumni remain connected, continue their community service projects after their years of service have concluded, and serve as mentors for each incoming Class.

The National Student Poets Program is supported by funds from the Institute of Museum and Library Services.

artandwriting.org/NSPP
facebook.com/NationalStudentPoetsProgram

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Table of Contents

About the National Student Poets Program

2 Letter from the National Student Poets Program Partners
3 2018 Jurors and Past Jurors

4 Darius Atefat-Peckham, Midwest Region
8 Daniel Blokh, Southeast Region
12 Heather Laurel Jensen, Southwest Region
16 Alexandra Contreras-Montesano, Northeast Region
20 Ariana Smith, West Region

25 For Teen Poets, by Teen Poets

Eligibility
Letter from the National Student Poets Program Partners

We are honored to introduce these gifted young writers to the country through the National Student Poets Program (NSPP) and to welcome the class of 2018 to the Program’s legacy. Our goal with NSPP is to identify teen poets with unique and powerful voices, to invest in training and mentoring them, and to launch them on a year of service.

During this year of service, they share their original work, inspire others to read and appreciate poetry, and bring communities together.

The network of museums and libraries that IMLS offers the perfect setting for staging many of the readings and workshops that these talented students conduct. These young writers bring awareness both to the many different types of literacies as well as to the essential services that museums and libraries provide to their communities each and every day.

In our work with young writers, we have seen audiences eager to access the powerful language and personal narratives that poetry provides. We have seen National Student Poets conduct readings for community members in work uniforms or cowboy hats. We have seen them bring poetry workshops to settings from reservations to military bases to rural community colleges. And we have seen their audiences jump to their feet and applaud.

These gifted young writers have been drawn to poetry and have embraced it as a source of inspiration, connection, expression, and fun. For a young person, the structure of a poem provides a container—to hold on to a big idea, offer a lens through which to see the commonplace as rare, and generously share intimate moments of the heart and mind.

Dr. Kathryn K. Matthew, Director
Institute of Museum and Library Services

Virginia McEnerney, Executive Director
Alliance for Young Artists & Writers
We are grateful to our Jurors for their support of youth poetry in America.

Class of 2018 Jurors

Jennifer Benka*, poet and Executive Director of the Academy of American Poets.

Cortney Lamar Charleston, Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Fellow and Cave Canem Fellow.

Diana Goetsch, award-winning poet and National Endowment of the Arts Fellow.

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

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

Al Letson, poet and host of State of the Re:Union.

Adrian Matejka, poet and winner of the National Poetry Series and the NAACP Image Award.

January Gill O’Neil, award-winning poet and Cave Canem Fellow.

Alice Quinn*, Executive Director of the Poetry Society of America.

Damian Woetzel, President of Juilliard and recipient of the Harvard Arts Medal.

Past Jurors

Kwame Alexander
Esther Belin
Robert Casper
Michael Earl Craig
Mayda Del Valle
Toi Derricotte
Martin Jude Farawell
Carolyn Forché
Andrea Gibson
Kimiko Hahn
Joy Harjo
Terrance Hayes
Rickey Laurentiis
Robin Coste Lewis
David Lynn
Glenis Redmond
Roger Reeves
Naomi Shihab Nye
Patricia Smith
Rose Styron
Jeff Tweedy
Kerry Washington
Alfre Woodard
Jacqueline Woodson

* Indicates a repeat juror
Darius Atefat-Peckham
Interlochen, MI
Midwest Region

Darius Atefat-Peckham is a senior at Interlochen Arts Academy in Interlochen, MI, and an Iranian-American poet and essayist. At Interlochen, he serves on the editorial team for the literary magazines “The Red Wheelbarrow” and “The Interlochen Review.” His work has appeared or is forthcoming in “The Texas Review,” “Brevity,” “Rattle,” and elsewhere. Darius also has work forthcoming in the “Other Voices International Project Anthology” (Reelcontent), “Iran Musings: Stories and Memories from the Iranian Diaspora,” and the bilingual anthology “Persian Sugar and English Tea, Vol. II.”
The Beautiful Day Dance

for my father, widower at 33

Mornings, when I woke up,
my face sagging, defeated, Dad would
smile at me and wave his arms above
his head, his legs kicking beneath
him, a desperate flail but a chance to
show that he could move his body as well
as anyone—when the sunlight seemed to
break and spill down his raised chin like
egg whites and the chill bit into us both—he’d sing.
The song isn’t as important to me now as the
beauty of the dance (and I’m sure the melody was a
repetitious rip-off of Zippity-Doo-Dah, though
sometimes we tilted our heads beneath the sky
and just yelled it, despite the neighbors, dispelling
puffs of warm air from our mouths as we screamed
It’s a beautiful day, to the blue that filled the space
behind the clouds, to whoever was listening—to the
way I sweat at nights, Dad rubbing the wet T-shirt
that clung to my back, whispering, It’s all right,
we’re okay, over and over, like a chorus, to the broken
limbs and the deaths that rendered us, for a time,
living memories, regretfully alive, but thankful that
we could always spin ourselves around, arms spread wide
to live and dance and)
to sing anyways—
to sing always.
My Father Learns Sex Education

Is masturbation a sin, Father? Tommy Gold
smirks, and that’s how it begins—a room
full of sweaty pubescent boys in the heat,
dust clots rising in the beams of painted windows
and his Southern Massachusetts accent ringing
out like song. Well, the priest begins, but the boy
meant it like a joke and now they’re all hanging
by the edge of their seats because Ben ran
through the ice last winter and Sam played with tools
in the woods behind his mother’s place. There’s the quiet
whisper of breath in-took like the shudder
of wind through candle flow. Light fills
the room like smoke that fills a small cabin,
sickly smell of pain relief and pedestals stripped
of longing, hazy eyes barely crossed and my father’s
photo on the nightstand, a cigarette dangling from
his lips—a place where we watch eight-year-olds,
teach them to be boys, then men. Where a boy asks me,
Do you smoke? And I have to explain
that I’m not better than him, that I’m just not
brave enough. Some would say that resistance is
braver, but who can fight shattering pain and
relief from it. The priest says no, his head hung,
toes tapping the floor where the breaking begins—

Pardon me, Father, but thank God for that, because if so,
I’d surely go straight to hell, Father. Tommy smiles, the joke
landed, and the group of boys laugh, too, settling
back in their pews, satisfied with smoke puffed
in their cheeks, the physicality they held delicate in callused palms. My father there, too, laughing nervous, his hand resting on his knee, wrist dangling as if hinged, weighted with time—grown-up Protestant in a place where it doesn’t matter what religion you identify because one kid can take another to the middle of the woods and split him open with an axe to see what it feels like, where a boy can grasp at broken shards, fallen through the ice, my father thinking: If there is a way straight to hell, thank God—thank God we haven’t found it.
Daniel Blokh is a senior at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham, AL. His work often concerns his Russian-Jewish immigrant parents and his experience as a first-generation American. Daniel writes to make something more of lonely and difficult experiences, using the lyrical possibilities of poetry to convey to readers those feelings that surpass logic. His work has won Princeton’s Lawrence L. Milberg Poetry Prize and been published in “The Kenyon Review,” “Cosmonaut’s Avenue,” “Cleaver,” “Permafrost,” “Blueshift,” and more. Daniel is the author of the creative nonfiction book “In Migration” (BAM! Publishing, 2017) and two poetry chapbooks, “Holding Myself Hostage in the Kitchen” (Lit City Press, 2017) and “GRIMMENING” (Diode Editions, 2018).
my father never hunted
doesn’t touch meat
lives softly enough to enter

and leave the world a shadow
a breeze on doorsteps he wakes
at 3 am like his father did

wanders the house a little pours
his cereal then reads the news
until i wake on the ride to school he’ll talk

about the latest friend
i didn’t get to meet this one
was only 52 and lived

back in kharkov each night they flushed
their throats out with vodka and let evening
make meat of them it took years

to learn the way a body like a hurt
dog holds its history in tight
jaws my father shouts

at the car swerving in its lane
ahead of us then asks have you considered
being vegetarian i say maybe

which we both know means
i don’t want to go to the trouble
of saying no and we’ve pulled up

to the school he hasn’t had a chance
to talk about the news or say
how proud he was to watch
another morning swell up
to the cracks of night I haven’t had
a chance to wish him happy

birthday and anyway
what is there to say but goodbye
my son and goodbye

my father
who is my son
whose eyes I carry into
any rearview mirror any 3 am drive home
when one car sideswipes another behind me

my father
who knows we live in worlds of wheels
all trying to catch us
Portrait of My Dedushka, Avenging His Career in Science

If the boys on my street cackle one more time, if their fathers mutter “zhid” under their breath, I swear that I will teach my hand to form a fist again. Even feverish with Parkinson’s, I have wiped the wetness of enough regret to remember how to make my hand into a weapon. After all, I don’t work in a factory for nothing. Last week I was turned away from yet another job because my nose was too long, because my last name was Blokh and I had Jewish written on my documents. I saved my hands in my pockets then, but they have built momentum ever since. Yes, let the landlord call me “zhid” again, let my neighbor curse my curly hair, let the men on the street yell at my wife just one more time and they will taste those words for life, think of what they uttered every time they run their tongues over the memory of a tooth, every time they feel the bruise of newly curved noses.

To My First Language

Old dog, I don’t have time to take you on walks anymore. I try to throw you bones but you’re a slow thing, heaving to my side when I am lonely, low growl faltering. My new dog comes at a finger’s snap. He’s cuter. He has sharper teeth. He watches you lumber through the yard and waits.

I wonder if one day he’ll kill you, drag your body to my room where I will try to mourn it, softly, slide my hands through memory of faded fur. My parents taught me how to love you so I could feed you when they left us. They dreamed about the two of us alone in this big house, this makeshift model of a homeland, yard where they pictured snow, imagined winters coming over us, your body around mine for heat.
Heather Laurel Jensen is a junior at Red Mountain High School in Mesa, AZ, who trusts poetry’s power to create community and connection. She believes the accessibility of poetry enables understanding, empathy, and reconciliation in the midst of conflict. She is co-president of Young Authors of Arizona, an art and writing nonprofit that provides teenagers with publication opportunities and an extensive creative community. Heather is also president and founder of her school’s poetry club, which competed in state finals in the Louder Than A Bomb Arizona Poetry Festival, where she won two individual awards for her poetry. Outside of poetry, she creates conceptual and portrait photography and participates on her high school debate team.
Brother as Canary or Mines or Both

my brother shattered a glass pan
and didn’t sweep it up,
so when my mama came downstairs
and screamed at him, he bought
himself a canary,
bright yellow, wrung its neck.
my brother was a feathered coward
and he would go to those mines
all the time. he would bring bottles
to smash and matches to burn
so he could be his ancestors,
but better, with shadows
taut on his back. he’d come home
and lay on his bed for hours
looking for an exit that would suit him.
he wouldn’t talk, just stole tiny jewels
from my mother and pretended
he had found them. and the
sanctity sloughing off him
should have caused a collapse
yesterday. and yesterday,
i found his bed empty after a night
passed. his sneakers gone. the policemen
found the body of a murdered canary
studded with gravel and boy blood,
and mama woke to coal
beneath her fingernails. i’ve taken
care of her. all the cave’s clay
in my bed slats now, the asbestos—
brother, do you care about that?

HEATHER LAUREL JENSEN • SOUTHWEST REGION 13
Elegy Apologizing in Hindsight

I hear: July will bring the second coming, monsoon season, and a stock market crash. Each light on the water tower will blink and then strobe. A cougar will sleep under my trampoline for weeks. Dogs will break into every antique shop and devour fine china. From there the moon will roll across a cliff and crush the nearest mobile home.

Today they are dredging my best friend’s body from the lake. She is wrapped in a pink tarp and identifiable by her ponytail. The edges of each day are ochre and pulling up at the corners like linoleum. Occasionally when I take a shower, there is vomit already in the bathtub. I should not be here,

not like this. Three weeks ago we were kneeling at the gulf of a psych ward, with my hands pressing a Ziploc to her nose and mouth in lieu of a paper bag. In hindsight,

I am not even an effective attempt at a solution. A threat is still a threat when you pretend it’s benign. Sorrow is still sorrow with my headphones in. Her grief was still grief when I avoided it. In the future, I hope to be unafraid
of asking questions. Her parents will join a nunnery. The lake will drain through a metal slit in the earth. Her old things will appear on every subway in the world. In hindsight, I will look for the cliff crumbs in the cuffs of her jeans. In hindsight, I will call the hospital and tell them her name.
Alexandra Contreras-Montesano is a senior and a writer at Burlington High School in Burlington, VT. She loves all writing and art, but favors poetry and photography. Her poetry is inspired by her identity and experiences as a Mexican-American living in a state with little diversity. In her spare time, Alexandra enjoys horseback riding and reading avidly. She supports social justice issues and often uses her writing as a platform to enact or inspire change in areas that she feels need it. Alexandra thinks of writing as a tool that can be used to fix things that are broken in the world, and she hopes to do a lot of fixing.
Puebla

Puebla is chocolate-dipped, syrupy
as I spoon it out of the close-knit towns surrounding Mexico City.
I just want to gulp it down,
suck the marrow from the cattle that get leaner every year.

It smells good, being home.
Or being in a place that was once home.
I can't help but hold my breath,
abducting it in my lungs because wind here
is a different flavor than the wind there.

I thought the thing I missed most was the heat,
the sizzle your bare feet make against
the packed dirt of the evening road.
But I was wrong because I am intoxicated by
the way my grandma clasps my hands to her heart,
like I never left.

Puebla tastes salty,
as I lick it from my top lip,
brushing it from the corners of my eyes,
letting it fall, absorb into my skin.

I know I can't come back until the next
thunderstorm season.
It gets easier to come and harder to leave.

I wish I could stay in this town
where everything feels like cayenne
mixed with just the right amount of lime.
It burns, but you laugh until the sour.
Repentance

I forgot to eat my vegetables the other day.

That’s why you found broccoli in the garbage.

I drank water from the tap once and didn’t get sick.

I drank water from the tap again, and I did.

I know you don’t earn a lot of money.

I hate the feeling I get when you try to hide it.

I think Dad left because you told him to.

I think you told him to leave because he was going to anyway.

I spent the last dollar on a necklace I really wanted at the store.

I don’t pray before we eat.

I know you don’t either.

I hate it when the neighbor tells me I hit like a girl.

I was the reason he had a black eye and they don’t invite me over anymore.

I never hit anyone else after that, with my fists.

I think the door needs to be oiled.

I can hear when you get home late because of the sound.
I’ll never drink.

I know how Grandpa died.

I get nervous every time you have a sip of wine.

I failed my permit test and then I never took it again.

I don’t let my friends go over the speed limit.

I can’t get rides from Sarah anymore.

I remember when you took me out of preschool.

I think it was because one of the children was kidnapped.

I heard the reporter say he had turned up dead.

I didn’t ask why we were moving to the States because I knew.

I tell you I like it here because it’s safe.

I sometimes feel less safe here than Mexico.

When you found this poem I told you none of it was true.
Ariana Smith is a senior and a film major at the Las Vegas Academy of the Arts in Las Vegas, NV. Born to an African-American father and a first-generation Filipina, she has used poetry as a medium to connect to her multicultural identity since she was a little girl. Now, Ariana focuses her work on modern issues facing black youth. She believes poetry is a tool for creating social change by touching the hearts of an audience and opening their eyes to unique human experiences. She looks up to poets like Audre Lorde and Aimé Césaire, who contextualize the black experience in the African diaspora. Ariana is a member of her school’s Black Student Union and a Young Ambassador for the Smith Center for the Performing Arts.
Descendant

Grandfather, birthed from burning crosses in dense
And sticky Georgia, smoke clinging to black skin,
Like fresh cotton to nimble fingers, breathing in
Freedomless zephyr, Sunday shoes stuck in rich wet moss.

Grandmother, blooming out of rose milkweed
From the Carolinas, twig-like brown legs
Skipping across weeping willows.
Her clouds were frothy and pastel,
Pearlescent velvet swaying like tiny dancers above her.

Father, product of an exodus from south to north,
The other side of the sunshine.
My father, a lingering love,
Weaved from ancestral needle and thread.
Bloodline like a river, flowing through stateline,
Mississippi currents of dripping peach vine.

I descend from the other side of the train tracks, resembling country border,
From suctioned lips to rattling jazz trumpet measures,
From hot buttery biscuits on the kitchen stove,
From mamas and aunties with kaleidoscopes for eyes and
A Freedom Riders bus set aflame
In a city that was already Burning.

An eternity of southern acrimony,
A forbidden home,
Familiar, familial,
A fresh wound
That never seems to scab over.
There lay heritage,
Blood, Spirit, Bone.
Generations gone with the wind,
Surviving through me,
My heart strung to theirs like DNA.
Their flesh, dissolving like a sugar cube,
My body,
Still on stolen land.

Someday,
We will all taste liberation
On the tips of our tongues.
Sisterhood

When your sister is your hairdresser, you need no mirror. —African Proverb

What are we?
   —An omen, a sacrifice.

Crumbling soil and the salt
Of the sea remind her of
Igbo Landing.
The sun, her star,
A golden light onto brown body,
Carnelian stone.
Women with skin the shade
Of vintage stepping-stones,
Skin like fire,
Her touch singes—
Her flesh, an armor.
The muscle of ancestors,
Lineage like silk in our blood.
Girls planted seed by seed
By our grandmothers, grown from spells
Before forced Christianity.
Brown girl, brownstone,
Sitting on the stoop watching
The little ones play double Dutch,
Beads hanging down past their
Ears like raindrops.
Hands of master artistry
Braid wool into tight rows
Of Underground Railroad
Escape routes.
Curls like shackles,
Twisting and shaping,
Shifting and welding,
Sleek baby hairs that stick
To scalp like chewing gum,
Poppin’ bubbles like
Our men.

My sisters.
   We so fly
   but we never
   leave the ground.
For Teen Poets, by Teen Poets
Advice from National Student Poets on reading, writing, and sharing poetry and leading workshops

Past National Student Poets share some of their tips and tricks for reading poetry aloud, improving poetry-writing skills, and sharing poetry with others in workshops and classroom settings.

Reading Poetry

If you’re intimidated by the thought of reading poetry, don’t start with an analyzing mind-set. Simply be ready to feel and experience the world that the poet has created.

Read anything you can get your hands on. Read different poetic styles, and read poets from different backgrounds and nationalities.

The categories on poets.org can help you find poetry about any subject, tailored to any audience. Use this to explore, to find poets and poems you’ve never encountered before.

The Twittersphere can introduce you to many contemporary poets. Start with one, read the work retweeted from the poet’s peers—and always share what moves you.

Ask people you admire for poetry recommendations, write them down, and read them!

Always encourage yourself and others to ask as many questions as possible. Poetry is about what you feel—so you don’t have to be afraid to be wrong.

Be completely receptive to and immersed in other young poets’ readings and performances, because their writing will—and should—change your mind.

Writing Poetry

Make a note of every new poet/poem that you hear about, and make a concerted effort to explore the poetic techniques. This is how you educate yourself on the art of writing: by reading as much as possible, as broad a range as possible, in all genres.
Kids are poets even before they start writing. They have clear voices, and they are fearless when it comes to tackling any new challenge. You can always learn from them, and can carry that element of fearlessness with you and incorporate it into your own writing.

Even on the toughest days, make some time to reflect and journal about what you’ve noticed, the small details that give life its texture and vitality. In doing this, it becomes easier to adopt a poetic and creative mind-set.

Your preparation and background do not define you. Drive, perceptiveness, empathy, and character are what define the poet.

When you first start writing a poem, don’t be too focused on perfection or having the right form. Focus on putting your emotions and thoughts on the page, no matter how messy they are at first. This is how you discover the core of your poem.

Sometimes a poem requires editing and revision over months or even years. Your writing can become something living—something that requires monthly care as it changes and grows, just as you do.

Write with urgency. The best words on the page are the ones that itch to be manifested, to be spoken into life.

There is a language that exists only in your mind, a vernacular that feels entirely your own, which fellow poets will recognize as distinctly yours. Nurture and use it.

Don’t be afraid to make mistakes or to start over. As the poet Donald Hall wrote, “Affirm that it is fitting and delicious to lose everything.”

Write as much as possible, but remember that you are still a writer—and a good person—even when you’re not writing.

Never throw your drafts away. Keep them for later, when you will get good ideas from these drafts, or at least a good laugh.

Always keep a running folder of (properly attributed) memorable quotes. You can even glean them from conversation or on public transportation. Sometimes the best subject matter comes from schoolmates or strangers.
Don’t be afraid to write what hurts. That’s often where the most kinetic poetry originates!

Never shy away from trying out new ideas. Your notebook is a place to experiment. Not everything you write will be perfect; not everything you write will win awards or be published. And that’s okay! Write for the sake of writing, not for the sake of showing it to other people.

Don’t ever let attention become the purpose of your work. Remember the value of silence, and of surprise.

At the same time, never let anyone consume your work without offering at least one criticism. Generic encouragement won’t help you to improve.

Take the initiative to meet other young writers. Whether it’s through a writing camp or an online group, find your peers—brilliant people who may become part of your writing family.

Don’t be afraid to write about anything and everything in your poetry. Every topic is worthy of a poem.

Always be open and grateful to the world around you, because this world feeds and nurtures the poetry you write.

Sharing Poetry and Leading Workshops

When performing, remember the three P’s, something National Student Poets learn from one of their mentors, the traveling poet Glenis Redmond: Plant, personalize, and project.

1. Plant yourself in place, standing with strength and conviction.
2. Personalize by preserving your unique voice. Don’t try to sound like anyone else, and make sure you are being true to your authentic self.
3. Project: Make sure you’re speaking loudly enough that everyone in the room can hear your words.

Also, when performing, imagine the words you are speaking are coming from the center of your body. Your poetry is powerful, and it deserves a reading that is authentic and rooted, not rushed.
Practice, but not too much. As you perform, rediscover the poem you created—this discovery will be present in your voice and energy.

When reading a poem out loud, allow your body to become an extension of it. Keep yourself rooted to the ground, and embody the poem in how you present yourself.

Reading a poem out loud isn’t just recitation. It’s performance and vulnerability.

In workshops, encourage all participants to contribute to an environment of growth either by sharing what they wrote—even a small excerpt is enough—or by sharing how they feel about what they wrote.

When leading a workshop, identify misconceptions about various poetic forms. Expose the accessibility of haiku, sonnets, and other types of poetry.

Be intentional about what poems and authors you share with what audience. Consider introducing works and forms that people may not have seen or heard of before.
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 United States citizens 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.

From the pool of Scholastic Awards National Medalists in poetry, thirty-five 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.