I AM DELIBERATE AND AFRAID OF NOTHING

POETRY & PROTEST

POEMS BY ALUMNI OF

THE NATIONAL STUDENT POETS PROGRAM
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March 2020
“I am deliberate/ and afraid/ of nothing”:
POETRY & PROTEST

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money
in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)
lived happily during the war.

From “We Lived Happily during the War”—Ilya Kaminsky, 1977–

We currently straddle sociocultural strife and our willingness, even eagerness, to avoid it. Thus, among its many uses, the art of poetry provides a bridge leading us out of our apathy. I chose to include an excerpt from Kaminsky’s poem to open this collection of protest poems in large part for its prescience, but in larger part for its impact. In the past few months, its verses have found their way into Instagram stories, protest signs, and meaningful conversations about its subject matter. This is what our poems are fighting to accomplish. We seek to spark meaningful conversation, and poetry is a mechanism that allows our protestations to be “enough.”

While it has been said time and again that the only people who read poetry are poets, this mistruth continues to be combated by the Poetry Coalition’s many contributing member organizations. It is because of poetry’s prescience that the Poetry Coalition presents “Poetry and Protest” to celebrate the symbiotic nature of art and activism, and that alumni and current National Student Poets present this chapbook of work dedicated to reflecting on this theme.

We exist in a world in flux, and poetry is our way to find something like equilibrium. A poem allows for more empathy and subtlety than the barriers—the borders—built by our current social climate’s reductive conversations. The works within this collection celebrate empathy even as they decry modern horrors, prejudices, and tragedies. We hope you enjoy the breadth and scope of these powerful voices and their vision of the future through the lens of the present.

Christian Butterfield, Class of 2019
Managing Editor
The Oklahoma Teacher Walkout, as Told through Things I Learned

Julie Dawkins, Class of 2019

1. I learned the way to the Capitol: how Lincoln Boulevard shoots straight to the bronze gleaming atop the dome, practically an invitation. I learned how to jaywalk across four lanes of traffic and where to park—a couple blocks away on grass amongst cars painted in support.

2. I learned that some years the Arts Festival arrives twice. Once with sculptures and oils, the scent of fried food simmering low with the photography and live music; this time it arrived with lawn chairs and bullhorns. The white tarps hiding the construction on the Capitol building that those within refused to apply to the education department acted as background for the canvases of posterboard bought by teachers for their overcrowded classrooms, catchy puns and Mary Fallin’s face pasted upon Toy Tyke cars. Protests hummed in brassy notes as the band kids and former band kids-turned directors gathered, we’re not gonna take it, no, we ain’t gonna take it, we’re not gonna take it anymore.

3. I learned my state districts; I learned I am scared of confrontation, even with state reps who vow to never raise taxes and who with a general aura of condescension preach consolidation and procedure. He left us to the overpowering scent of lemon and an end table of thank you cards, signed by constituents grateful for taxes left low. I learned regret at things left unsaid; I learned term limits and reelection dates.
4. I learned the kindness of people. Free hot chocolate on the days where frigidity huddled the masses tighter into scarves; free sno cones on the days a week later when the sun beat into the grass and shorts too short for school dress code dotted the lawns. Sandwiches given out, candy sold by kids. Voter registration booths.

5. I learned numbers. SB1023; §5 hotel tax, §800 million in funding, 72 Republicans, 27 Democrats, day 1, 2, 3, 9, “as long as it takes”
49th in education
49th
49th
Thank God for Mississippi.
“Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of too much.” —Saidiya Hartman, from *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*

and its title is not an apology. I am done with scalpels and glittering suspicions—hand me a blunt instrument, please. Abolish the sorceresses and sommeliers of suffering who agonize over who can conjure up the most indelible bloodstains, the dirt that lodges in the throat, the tiniest bodies underfoot. No more calibrated traumas. Instead we veer headlong into indulgence, grow radiant with our utter lack of virtue: running to feel feral rather than an act of corrective winnowing, more cigarettes with dessert because we have no interest in rendering our bodies more optimized machines. In the park at dawn, I turn wondrously brainless with every new crush—this world is worth saving for a single coil of pearls newly blooming from an earlobe, serpentine curls grazing the pure cylinder of a neck, that new sugarchromed pop song I can’t stop singing along to. If this poem would die for anything, it’s our collective right to remain as clumsy and touchable vessels, existing only to be adored—or at least tenderly observed, in the same way my eye can’t stop lingering on the still-wet velveteen grass, the plump and blushing Pink Lady apple tucked into my deepest pocket, the baby bespoke in a silver puffer gurgling and happily fastened to the plain of her father’s chest. The ripening sun cultivates me deeper into ache, turns me delirious with hope: call this poem a glorious invocation of excess, of everything beautiful we deserve to keep.
the gift (culiacán, sinaloa)

**Camila Sanmiguel**, Class of 2017

I.
Culiacán. I feel so lucky in Culiacán today. I feel so lucky that I have found myself on a particularly dull page in this novel when the gunfire begins to spew across the plaza on this dazzling afternoon in Culiacán.

on the bench where we first met. the cathedral serenely perched at the head of the park before a pristine web of hedges and an army of gleaming statues of Mexican war heroes.

in the santissimo the adoration chapel where we pray at all hours where we pray where we pray

stained glass crunches and the sun spits on us as the shots fire.

II.
in the desert’s outpost on the outskirts of the city the vultures – hanging over
stumps of cacti in the mountains – shiver when they hear the blasts.

then they return to their spectating, claws tightening into thorns, unruffling feathers.

a gift of innocence. a debt of prayer. stealing their inheritances with side-eyed conversations like

a knee-jerk self-destruct coping mechanism and other things we get from our mothers:

an affinity for big stone earrings, a constant internal self-shaming marked by a grandmother’s clouded rosary beads, the fog shoreline toddler memories of the nephew that was abducted by narcos as a teenager, and the tenderness that hides a fear of the impermanence of dust, the paperweight memory of quartz buried in the desert’s quiet violence.

dios de dios. luz de luz.
dios verdadero de dios verdadero. engendrado no creado. through Him all things were made.

III.
the host on the penthouse balcony in culiacán overlooking the park smokes and watches
the drowsy child on the street selling candy. the boy grows wings just before the shots begin.

on the piano’s rack inside the sprayed-open glass doors: a symphony of wrinkled sheet music
nestled in glass splinters, blooms of warped printer ink smudging the edges of bar staff.
inside the greenhouse the chefs dart in between herb trees chopping sage before the wedding.
in the apartment the piano heaves a shudder before it detonates.
outside the sky hiccups at 2:12 as the schoolhouse doors swing open.

IV.
the weeds on the sidewalk curl toward the sky shoving at the corners of clouds shivering
ranch dandelions nestled in tumbleweed meadows like top-spinners and shrines. wrinkled sheet music with blooms of warped printer ink smudging the edges of the bar staff. the boy grows wings.

I used to wonder how quartz was made. I used to imagine glints of stone suddenly shooting from the earth with a tremor, punching through the cracks of dry sand and shoving cacti roots aside in their wake. I imagined lumps of quartz splayed across the ranchlands until children came running and shrieking to take as many as they could fit in their baskets, to be sold to travelers as souvenirs or to be crafted into cheap earthen jewelry.
the way pearls came from oysters, I thought the earth cooked the quartz under the careful awnings of the desert. just underneath the earth’s crust, beneath what we played on.
altars of tenderness and sometimes anger, bleeding from the well-worn red velvet cushions on the prayer bench.

I grow old, I grow old.
I feel so lucky today, to be in Sinaloa. light seething under the curtain until it doesn’t.
At the peanut festival, a man is staring at my neck. We’re in the line and sweating in the small-town Alabama sun and he must think I’m looking at the peanuts but I notice his gaze turning toward my neck, turning away, returning. Ricochet and ricochet his stare and I prepare for anything: for push, for insult hurled like rock, for hurled rock, for the weight of swung fist. The line drags forward in the noisy heat. I move up, the man moves up, a boy wearing red Converse like mine moves up beside him. The man asks his maybe-son what food he wants and now it’s my turn to turn toward him, turn away, return. The crowd around us clumps like the killing dance of bees. I order boiled peanuts, count seconds down before I can scurry away, but when I turn he’s there staring at me and me at him and I am scared and his mouth opens and he says, “Hey, man, I like your Star of David necklace.” “Thanks,” I say and walk away too fast, though my gaze ricochets back and I see him order for his son, black hair I hadn’t noticed falling in soft loops over their heads, red Converse bold and bright against the road.
Incense

Gopal Roman, Class of 2016

The smoke in that room—burnt onion peel, transparent, dissolved into the air. My mom brought the incense from her mother-in-law’s house. Pleasures like food under cell door. The fire crumbs fell to the silver below, carved faces buried alive. Tarn-X for the gods. She put the holder and the sticks in separate bags—just became wife, now smuggler. Turned off smoke detector, dosed 6 minutes for prayer on the oven timer, and cried when I coughed.

   The label fell off in the cargo. Warehouse throw-away incense now sacred sandalwood.

I’d leave the room, ash on my forehead and in my throat, and spit. Wash everything off.

   This morning, you say, she rose. Took a stick—some floral scent this time—and held it as it burned. Tell me, did she let go?
My body is not war,
Or bomb.
Is not hands up, or don’t shoot, or how many more young people have to die before you get the
fucking point.
My body is not the mummification of political turmoil.
It is where you go to bury the bodies, then bring them back to life.
It is where you finally put down the hunting knife and the dead animal you keep trying to kill.
My body is not a grave,
It is the church on top of a hill where you meet the ghost of your dead brother.
He will tell you about how war turns boys into hollow shells like jack-oh-lanterns.
He will tell you real men are scared of their shadow.
He will tell you that if you say “war” enough times in a poem you can taste blood without killing
anyone.
My body can feel when men die, just like a poem.
And my body can hold creeks of of sorrow and surrender, knows how to hold in screams and
knows waving a white flag does not mean someone won, just that there is no more fighting.
My body knows war, my body is at war with itself.
But it refuses attack,
Or microaggression,
Or bullet rounds,
Or death,
Or dispute,
Or heartbreak,
Or anything automatic and assault-like.
My body refuses war.
red rock swallowing the sun, I ask the land for forgiveness. corporations have torn wounds through this desert deeper than any canyon worn smooth by ancient rivers. they have come like locusts, scraping the desert life from the water stained stones, packing its body into bullet shells. not so long ago, they injected explosives into the bedrock and now they blame invisible hands for the chemicals that poison our animals, the linings of our empty stomachs. sometimes I hear the land’s cries in the night, her voice shattering against the crumpled face of Comb Ridge— Daughters, children, I am sick and hurt. I am weary of manipulation and radiation. Daughters, children, come home to me. Come home to me. Come home. an ocean away, protestors surge against police lines in Mauna Kea, are handcuffed, and dragged from their living mountain. beneath them, the land, cold and mottled with telescopes, slowly slips into the sea. saltwater is said to heal wounds, and the Earth Mother’s are still shallow enough to scab while there is time. these days, we chain ourselves to our beginnings, our hands as quick and desperate as bluebirds to protect the seeds from which our peoples sprung. in the devastation, strangers attempt to lasso the sky and dissolve beings they cannot see into wealth, into weapons, and yet the land still sings— Daughters, children, I am standing. I am weary but I am older than they will ever know. Daughters, children, protect me and come home to me. Come home to me. Come home.
you waltz # through the vampires # in the elevator ## tuck yourself into the bed # with the dead bud in it # you sing # to dispel demons ## the ghost in the drain is whispering # you still # wear yellow dresses # it was never # about hagiography # it was about your tombstone # & writing something different on it ## you fix your updo in the mirror # permeate # you brown # the yolked heads in the skillet # you & terror # decide to be platonic # you try on new obituaries # the zombie in the bathroom is eyeing your breasts # your brain # the dead woman’s gown # is hissing # slam your skeleton # headphones to solange # she sings you # the Sound # of Rain
On monday june 10

Claire Lee, Class of 2012

my father packs
all eight of us
me my mother my
aunt my uncle my
two cousins our
one halmoni and
himself into the
minivan, shuttling 67
miles down Nevada
state Highway 160 to
California’s Highway 190,
with the speedometer’s red
needle stuttering over
the 85 mark. Well I’m
running down the
road tryin’ to loosen
my load blares the
strained loudspeakers
of the minivan, a white
Nissan scuffed along
its sliding doors and
residue and light stains
marring its once plush
microsuede seats,
remnants of other
families probably
their kids or maybe
even adults, who’ve
spilled who knows
what on the fuzzy,
sweaty upholstery, my
little cousin’s off-key
voice a chirping
bellow take it
eeeeeeaaaaasy
from the third row
as the minivan
hurtles up and
down left and
right swaying
this way and
that, the rest of
us seven passengers
with our heads swaying
here and there
following gravity’s
pull, the centrifugal
force of my father’s
cornering as he chases
the winding, dipping
road that bisects
the golden badlands
of Death Valley’s Furnace
Creek Formation dating
back to the Miocene
age, with its stromatolites
within its limestone deposits
shaped by wind, water,
and the earth’s plate
tectonics, still hard at
work as the minivan
careens our way through
under my father’s gentle
hands. Outside and on
both
sides of the road, the
eroded
siltstone formations
more
than 5,000 feet thick rise
up out of the ground, like
yellow veins sprouting
from
one another, one large
unending
bloodline tree. If our
minivan
were to break down here
in this dusty dry desert
surrounded by these
golden
yellow veins, I wonder
if anyone would know we
were here
ANOTHER RACIST JOKE

Eileen Huang, Class of 2015

limps onto a darkened stage dragging with it the new body of a boy, flushed in creek water. The body is empty, gutted heathen-thin and nobody knows its name but everybody laughs. In another punchline, the joke limps onstage with a head unzipped in two, or chinked inwards like the hood of a car, a body made spectacle. We keep the joke locked in a glass box, in a dark room, where we ask it to perform as authentically as possible—dance, dance, Chinaman—where we laugh at its accent, the way it pronounces Easter as Esther and language as dead. The best joke is almost like a poem, the way it ends with surprise, clarity. The poem demands a punchline, so I tie it a pair of miners above a track. Another punchline: John Chinaman with a tiny dick. John Chinaman with a queue, soiled rattail. Another punchline: My father’s name. It looks like someone slammed their head into a keyboard. Another: Me eating the meat of their dogs, feasting like a bitch.
Walking Past the Mayfair Theater, Now Abandoned Baltimore

Joey Reisberg, Class of 2016

The marquee lifted up like a bird’s wing—
and, suddenly, the headless woman sculpted
on the facade could see the trolley-bound length of Howard Street,
our worn ritualistic commutes.
She is glamorous, one leg turned over the ledge.
Convinces pigeons to roost around her for company.
I think what I love most about cities are their demands.
Keep looking—
says the statuary, the skyscrapers.
Small trees grow in the upper floors, through the windows.
A movie theater segregated for most of its existence.
1955: buses of Morgan State students
demonstrated on Howard & Lexington
then business fled by night to the suburbs,
and the block woke up gutted.
No more dreamy projection booth,
just police helicopters, their beams
of moralizing fire.
Salvage what sticks out
with a clean nub for a neck,
staring down the yuppiest of condominiums.
I only want what’s possible:
a future large enough to house us all.
Automaton

Taylor Fang, Class of 2019

when the story is read aloud the city
folds into a string
of images. no one is looking
at us, Gen X Y Z,
the dark flecks of our fingers
blanked by the white light
in our screens.

we are too lucent,
full of iterations.
multiples of myself
where I discover a radar
under my pillow.
where my fingers
whisper to the console:

once, we spoke
with the language
of dreamers, an atlas of islands
where you could lose yourself in the calls

of birds, in the telegrams
forgotten in translation.
age of fragments:
clouds slit with shrapnel, birds
like flecks of silver
in my iPhone lens—

an augury, an omen
in the patterns of flight.
tweets flickering across screens, an act
of creation, myths transferred
to breath.

I want to return
to my dream
in a world of metal,
my dream losing seeds
into other people’s clothes,
tracing its path
back to the ocean.

myth that wants
escape, myth that understands
how technology
succumbs to nature, how technology cannot
and will never understand
the language I speak.
listen to me,
I want to say.
these words mean something
unbreakable, these words
mean something
more than metal.
straight men and other horror stories

Christian Butterfield, Class of 2019

here we are.
me stuck helpless in king kong’s meaty palm.

the cinema screen flickers as giant ape towers over new york, clutching a woman precariously in his grasp,
and the end-credits roll:
straight boy cast as king kong, gay boy as that woman helpless, flinging herself from one empire state building to the next. straight boy as king kong roars, gay boy pretends to cower. because kong is primal. because kong is power. because kong drops me until he doesn’t

there’s always more movie until there isn’t.
there’s always more bones until they’re broken.

we are alone on this god-forsaken tower.

just kong and woman and police officers telling woman to fling myself onto the pavement.

but not yet.

if this were a different movie,
it would almost be romantic.

straight boy as king kong as casanova as gay boy as

that woman falling from that tower.
but straight boy as king

kong beats simian fists against barrel chest, the drum beat cast
as the sound of my bones cracking
against the pavement

and the end-credits continue to roll:

straight boy as king kong,
i am begging you.

fling me from that tower.
scoop me up again.
ICE AGE

Maya Eashwaran, Class of 2016

In this life, I unfreeze blood and crawl to a shore of something, watch the shadow of my skin scrape in, out, sheathe woman bone in something called resistance. Each day I hallucinate the mistruths of my body, shovel my lungs with wet snow until avalanche. Eons away, I watch my face freeze in water, in funeral, eons away I rupture, I fault-line, skin twisting in anticline at the site of friction, I clinical, I bear-body, I unexplained anger, a hinged thing swinging, weighted, a soft thing, a thing invasive, I. Each day I glacier my tongue until it no longer tells me what to say. Chew my gums until oven red something to resemble life. I mammoth-skin. I sabretooth, a body bodied in foreign, I pomegranate, a fruit borne from grenade, I an organ slick beating and silent, I mammoth or woman or both or something ice. In this life at the shore of something I emerge ancient to tell stories of a woman not only scorned but buried alive.
Being born at the cultural crossroads means always dealing with two sides
Some of which are conflicting
In tongue
In hope
In harmony
Meet me at the crossroads where two continents force rejoicing again
my tongue burns itself
On the melting pot of 2 dialects of Arabic and a forced English
Being unintentionally boiled in the back of my throat and welded together in an
inaccurate splurge of neither language
But nonetheless, still used as pavement to fix the gaps of broken roads
One language for love, another for survival
Leading the way to home
Meet me at the crossroads where two homelands meet
Do they share tears here?
Sprout olive trees?
And create crowns of lotus?
Will they wrap grape leaves together?
And feed our village?
Or do they become vultures of each other’s wishes?
And starve us.
Leaving our bellies filled with only a longing for home
But nowhere to find it.
It has an eagle that sits upon an olive tree in the parting of the Red Sea looking onward to
where home may be
But the only traces of home I can find are on the rib cages protruding from my stomach
home feels like Palestine, but my hands are locked behind my back
America is made home, but the key doesn’t fit
Is it worth being born on the bones of the causes I fight for?
Do the crossroads know that the first generation will wander through the desert
So their children are given the promised lands
And the two diverge through the fight for return
Do the crossroads know that the road between us never ends?
That we continue one another with each passing generation? With each longing for home?
And the only chance of remembering each other is revisiting the crossroads after we find our way back.
There I will tell you stories of when we shared smiles here
Made beds of soft lotus
And planted olive trees
And cooked maktoubah and mahashi
Enough to feed a generation
For the journey back home
metals class

Alexandra Contreras-Montesano, Class of 2018

I once saw him whisper into a sophomore’s soft, brown hair. He isn’t careful, even though he’s been caught before. I’m careful not to touch people’s hands. The skin on my palms peels every day. I can’t talk, I can’t sleep. In my silence I hear the clicking of his jaw. When I try to sleep, the insides of my eyelids glow the same color as copper before it melts.
ALL WE DARE DO NOW

Michaela Coplen, Class of 2013

Wake up. We will wake up, 
and we will climb into the day, 
and dare to let the sunlight 
catch our skin. 
We will dare to begin again. 
We may wear fear like armored scales, 
and carry your heavy hatred sound, 
but you can never weigh us down. 
We plant ourselves in hallowed ground. 
We tunnel under every wall. 
We will not answer when you call— 
we call ourselves by different names. 
We'll dare to wake up unashamed, 
in bodies we dare call our own. 
We'll wake up, and begin again 
the battles we have fought before— 
We'll build within ourselves a home. 
We'll dare to leave an open door.
Someone Hopes for a World without Protest

Juliet Lubwama, Class of 2017

In the alternate universe, everybody’s order is wrong at Starbucks and no tables are upended. Everybody passes history because nobody double checks. The satin skin, the hands that have never known calluses, the tongues tranquilized to call coffee caramel, make it all worth it, in the end. Also in this universe, poets wake up again and again to a kettle boiling over, tyranny enough to write. Water liquefies the skin it touches, hot enough and life enough to rectify a nationhood. Now the universe crumples over its own existence—what else is protest but waking again and again and again, to stop the scarier again—ready and whistling—from slipping through the door? What else is protest but the silent explosion, the walking, the crying, the laughing so loud at 4am to be named violation, the being bumped into and igniting? I need my coffee extra sweet and honor that drink like destiny—you dare call that a pity?
On Monday, January 20, 2020, more than twenty thousand people gathered outside the State Capitol in Richmond, Virginia, to protest new restrictions on firearms. A gun control advocacy group had planned a counter-protest but canceled at the last minute due to safety concerns. Inside the capitol, public tours went on as usual.

There is a woman in a blue dress, bare arms folded toward the capitol, a shot gun slung across her chest, a still-forming heart pressed up against her navel. Hear ye, hear ye, yells a long-sleeved man with a bullhorn and a tricorn hat. It’s not over until it’s over. No one is there to disagree. Four counties over, a woman charges at the TV, her bare arms hurling a glass of milk at the image of the man. Some brute like you shot my daughter, she screams, shot her here, here, and here. She jabs a finger into her skin—hip, liver, heart—and sinks onto the carpet, her fully-formed heart pulling tight by the strings. The same flag flies over them both. Inside the capitol, a little girl hears it snapping against the pole. She presses her bare arms to the glass, her breath clouding the pane. Did someone get shot out there? she asks the tour guide, a bleary-eyed man who keeps two pistols under his bed, a man with half a bullet beneath his skin, not far from his heart, which beats softer than most. No, he says, no one got shot, his eyes watching a woman in a blue dress walk over and sink her fingers into her daughter’s hair, bare arms shielding either side of the little girl’s head. Mommy, did you hear that sound? the girl asks. But the woman is not really here. Her hungry eyes search the crowd, leaping from man to man
until suddenly she sees her, blue dress and bare arms, and their eyes meet just long enough for each woman’s heart to turn to the other and softly ask: what are you doing over there? No more than a beat. Four counties over, the TV’s shot, the last of the milk is sliding onto the carpet. A shot rings outside the capitol, but no one seems to hear it except the lady on the flag. She stands over the crumpled figure of a fallen man, her foot pressing down on the place he hides his heart, the Latin motto too much for her to bear, arms weary of being shot at for every sort of cause, by every sort of man. Nothing is ever new here, her liver mutters to her heart, and nothing is truly over, whisper back her bare arms.
Thoughts on the Theme

Luisa Banchoff (Class of 2012, Southeast)
At a time when it is so easy to shut ourselves off from people whose beliefs and experiences are at odds with our own, poetry insists that we stop, listen, empathize. I see this as one of the many ways in which poetry can be a potent social force.

Michaela Coplen (Class of 2013, Northeast)
I wrote this poem the morning after Trump’s election in 2016. I couldn’t get out of bed. As I struggled to make sense of what had happened, I started writing. I was reminded that for many of us, mere existence—and consciousness, and speech—is protest in itself; our country has tried to deprive us of these throughout its bloody history. Is still trying. This is what made it possible for me to move forward: knowing that my aliveness, the very fact of my cognition is already and inherently a site of protest—and deciding then that getting out of bed was just the first step in all the defiance I might dare.

Aline Dolinh (Class of 2013, Southeast)
Poetry’s potential to serve as a means of protest against overwhelming cruelty and power has always felt deeply urgent to me. However, I think this poem came from a place of frustration and that it’s very easy to use that framework as a way of denying poems—especially those written by poets of marginalized identities—their fundamental difficulty and pleasure, of only rendering them “valuable” insofar as they render the speaker’s trauma or grievance with the world as something palatable and clearly edifying. I believe poems can also be acts of protest in their refusal to reenact these miseries for an unfamiliar audience. There’s something to be said for viciously insisting on the space to keep writing about all the small wonders and quotidian hungers that we experience on a regular basis, because I truly don’t know what our poems are fighting for if not the understanding that all of us deserve fuller, more beautiful lives.

Gopal Raman (Class of 2016, Southwest)
Protest, fundamentally, is reclamation. Reclamation of identity, memory, and agency. Even—often especially—in small moments, protest pulls power back to those who it has been taken from.
Joey Reisberg (Class of 2016, Northeast)
Just as poetry seeks to push language in inventive and surprising directions, so too must protest shake us out of complacency and comfort. With love to Algeria, Bolivia, Iraq, and all around the world where protesters have recently fought for justice.

Maya Salameh (Class of 2016, West)
Toni Cade Bambara once said the role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible, and I abide by that in my poems, which I consider protest songs. Poems threaten orders that suffocate by envisioning more breathable futures. Being Arab in America means I often feel like a walking hyphen, and my poetry practice is the only country where my citizenship isn’t conditional.

Kinsale Hueston (Class of 2017, West)
Poetry and protest are intricately woven together and present new outlets to our communities in storytelling, healing, advocacy, and action. For me, as an Indigenous organizer, poetry often reveals the intense emotion behind social movements I have a stake in, and amplifies that which we cannot see from the outside.

Juliet Lubwama (Class of 2017, Northeast)
For me, poetry and protest means an assertion of your presence. Poetry means taking space for your voice, and in that way, it can inherently be a protest, a revolution and resistance. A world without protest is a world without poetry—both are necessary languages for reclamation, for honoring ourselves and our histories, whether it takes place on a page or anywhere else.

Camila Sanmiguel (Class of 2017, Southwest)
I am deliberate, and afraid of nothing.

His disappearance was not announced. It was normal. We fall into the ruts of normality even when we are suffocating.
The sun like a magnifying glass. Blistering ourselves looking up.
My cousin was taken when he was twenty by the war that draped itself over my country and never left.
Shoving at the edges of activism.
Grandmother always on the ends of things, each of her children between brackets. Golden butterflies outside the factories in California, Mexican-American migrant worker who changed her name and canned fruit and prayed and pushed back at death until finally, a rare neurological disease rendered her
paralyzed after eighty-five years.
Trees scraping at the sky, us standing at the periphery.
*Ripping at fragile seams. Violence always stealing air from lungs.*
My hands were shaking when I told Carnegie Hall about the border, about Yaneth:
just a child under the searing sun, pain beneath a magnifying glass in the Texas
desert, the second woman who ever loved me, my nana. Smuggled into a new
country on a searing day, following her baby. What an unimaginable unfairness it
is to run.

*My first poems were protests: ink bleeding into palms, brilliant and damning
in the sunlight.*
Juni, my cousin. I am deliberate, and afraid of nothing. To be unafraid is an
unspeakable privilege: always at the periphery, all of us. Uncomfortably
spectating over the same atrocities unfolding again and again under the
deañening noise from the dust, life whistling between the trees. Smashing pens
into rocks, cracking plastic tips of shoelaces, undoing them like regrets. I will
never regret my words again.

Daniel Blokh (Class of 2018, Southeast)
Poetry presents you someone else’s truth and gives you the space to experience
it, packs power into brevity. I can’t think of anything more effective for combatting
dehumanization than falling into utter empathy, and that’s exactly what lyricism asks
you to do.

Alexandra Contreras-Montesano (Class of 2018, Northeast)
I used to think that poetry could only be protest if it was overt and loud but as I have
grown up I’ve realized that some of the most impactful forms of protest that I have
encountered have been the quiet poems that simply disrupt what we think we know. The
people I admire the most are the people who use the truth as the ultimate protest. I think
poetry is the major method in which truth can be sharpened into a shield, or a sword, when
necessary. Poetry serves to protect those who have been hurt, or will be hurt. Poetry
itself is healing, which is the strongest and loudest protest anyone can make.
About the Poetry Coalition

The Poetry Coalition is a national alliance of more than 25 organizations dedicated to working together to promote the value poets bring to our culture and the important contribution poetry makes in the lives of people of all ages and backgrounds. Members are nonprofit organizations with paid staff whose primary mission is to promote poets and poetry, and/or multi-genre literary organizations that serve poets of specific racial, ethnic, or gender identities, backgrounds, or communities.

Each March, members present programming across the country on a theme of social importance. Programs range from publications to panels, readings, and other public events. The March 2020 theme is “I am deliberate/ and afraid/ of nothing: Poetry & Protest.” The Poetry Coalition is coordinated by the Academy of American Poets, who are grateful to the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation and the Ford Foundation for their support of this work. For more information please follow along on social media at #PoetryCoalition.

About the National Student Poets Program (NSPP)

Annually, five students are selected for one year of service as literary ambassadors, each representing a different geographic region of the country. By elevating and showcasing their work for a national audience, the Program strives to inspire other young people to achieve excellence in their own creative endeavors and promote the essential role of writing and the arts in academic and personal success.

The National Student Poets Program—a collaboration of the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers—links the National Student Poets with audiences and neighborhood resources such as museums, libraries, and other community anchor institutions, and builds upon the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers’ long-standing work with educators and creative teens through the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards.

The Program represents an investment in the art of poetry and also in creative teens with exceptional leadership potential. It aims to develop this next generation of leaders by providing youth poets across the country with opportunities to hone and practice the many skills poetry can sharpen—including acute observation, careful attention to detail, empathy, and public-speaking abilities—while engaging in an intellectual study of leadership grounded in community service. artandwriting.org/NSPP