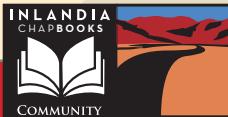


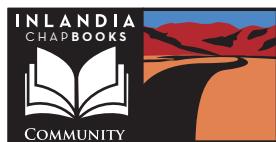
TEEN POET *Laureate*



2025-26 FINALISTS

A JOINT PROJECT OF THE RIVERSIDE
COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION AND
INLANDIA INSTITUTE

TEEN POET LAUREATE FINALIST CHAPBOOK 2025



AN INLANDIA INSTITUTE PUBLICATION
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Teen Poet Laureate Finalist Chapbook

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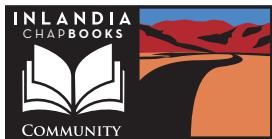
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* 2025-2026 Teen Poet Laureate. Names in bold = poets of note.

INTRODUCTION

Dear Poets,

This year marks the fifth year of the Teen Poet Laureate partnership between Riverside County Office of Education and Inlandia Institute. We are so proud of all the poets we have had the privilege of getting to know over these last five years!

Many of you we have seen grow into your art year after year. As you graduate and move up and out, we know the world will be richer for the words you have gifted it.

Teen Poets Laureate to date have been:

Bethel Albe (2024-25), a senior at Chaparral High School.

Bibinaz Nami (2023-24), a data science major at UCLA.

Zoe Leonard (2022-23), a political science major at Mount Holyoke College.

Katie Xin (2021-22), an economics major at Stanford.

This year, we are thrilled to name **Hayley Foo** as the 2025-26 Teen Poet Laureate!

She is joined by Runners Up **Lauren Cruz De Armas, Caitlin Buensuceso, and Avarie LaMothe**, and Poets of Note **Calob Dinsmore, Matthew Depew, and Damien Russell**.

All finalists deserve special commendation and we are grateful for your poems.

Robert Penn Warren once said, “The poem... is a little myth of man’s capacity of making life meaningful. And in the end, the poem is not a thing we see — it is, rather, a light by which we may see — and what we see is life.”

Being a poet means engaging deeply with the inner self as well as with the external environment. To be a poet requires seeing life as it is, in all of its beauty and its flaws, and the ability to illuminate it with words.

May your light shine on.

Cati & Louisa

*AMPERSAND

by Hayley Foo

Great Oak High School

the world is long & wide & splitting at its seams
& i carry the weight of distances i cannot name
& you carry the weight of me
too human & too heavy & too fleeting.
existing & not existing is the being of
a breath & a pause & the silence after
alone & together & together alone
& still we laugh & still we reach & still we fall.
a vow is a knot & a thread & a trembling kite string
& the wind is stronger than the word forever
& the sky unspools without asking
& i hold the string until it cuts my palms.
we wait & wait
for the echo of a moment already gone
& a song already sung
& a you who has already left.
the alleys bloom silence
& the cracks bloom ache
& the soul blooms truth
& the truth blooms absence.
& still i hold on
because the shape of &
is always two things
twisting to become one.

TAKE FLIGHT

by Lauren Cruz De Armas

La Quinta High School

All our life we've wanted to take flight
As our words overwhelm the pages
We can't help but realize the burdens we've overtaken
The wondrous fantasies, alive, created
This imagination I've mistaken for the
Reality that I ache in
The stories I've fortaken
The life I was ready to awaken
Yet these stories have not been made without strife
For all of my life I have been a lily, waiting for the light
Writing at night, hands aching,
Until all I can remember is the sound my pencil is making
How I imagined a land
where stories would be written, at long last,
A place where everyone is willing to listen to what i have to say
Oh, when will I get to experience this day?
Now, I realize the chance to have
The land I dreamt of, I can almost grasp
as I am blinded by the vision I can now see, with the promise
Of opportunity
-in front of me
I am imbued by the passion that will soon become reality
Now you are given the opportunity of creation
To lay the foundation for an
artistic nation
As the words of poetry surround me
You are alive with the prophecy
That your envisioned estuary
Will become a guarantee
All that you see, all that we can be
Will be a life infused with unshakable
Originality

For this creativity is all that we can breathe
As we suffocate with the promise of lively dreams,
Now you have the chance to make this vision a reality
As you are creating the reality
We all so desperately
Need
!

MUNDANE DAYS

by Caitlin Buensuceso

Centennial High School

The day is Thursday. Watermelons sliced open and sunlight is flooding the rear view. I awake to the sound of wrens nesting on my porch; you pull the curtains closed and drift off to sleep. Gilded hues illuminate bright golden barriers between your side and mine, covers over your head, warm water dripping on the tiled floor. Mundane days, blooming buttercups and hummingbirds on our doorstep drinking nectar with haste and our youngest slowly picking at strawberries. Nature is rushed, but there's no need for that now. Stay a while, won't you? The sun beams from overhead and you down a cup of coffee before you start the car. Our eldest runs back to give you a muffin, you smile and kiss her back. Mundane days. I spotted a gray hair running down your neck and you fussed trying to pull it out; you don't have time to do that now but you'll find a way to get rid of it. Lover, stay a while, won't you? Read them a story before you go back to bed.

WOW! SHE SHOWS BLACK EXCELLENCE!

by Avarie LaMothe

Heritage High School

Black excellence.

Black excellence.

A hidden counter-narrative, imperative to understand.

We use this term for the students in this room,
and for every Black student who achieves what many believe we cannot
grasp, What others are never asked to perform.

“Black excellence” seems an innocent phrase,
But what we reclaim was shaped by those who disrespect our name.
The constant pressure we shoulder, a silent expectation,
stays with us as we grow older.

An expectation we must prove our worth, our very value,
to embody the “excellence” adults in our lives demand—
To become the excellence the adults in our lives want us to be, an
excellence they crave for not only the black community to see
They seek the world’s acknowledgment of our greatness, but this comes
with its own consequences.

Because then, being Black and simply existing is not enough.

You must be Black and excel.

You must be Black and get good grades, play a sport, be better than
your peers. Acknowledging the stereotypes set by others,
while also exerting immense effort just to prove them wrong—
when our mere existence already does.

There’s no doubt: Black people are excellent. Our ancestry in Africa
is forever tied to us. We are humanity’s cradle. The earliest math,
discovered in Congo. Geometry, born in Egypt. Astronomy, explored in
Mali. We’ve performed some of the world’s greatest architectural feats.
We developed rich oral storytelling. We invented and fought, not even
to be seen as excellent, but as human.

And then we fought and invented again, and we continue to now.

Black people have created enough to last all our lifetimes,
but that doesn't mean we stop inventing.

We are excellent by trailblazing forward,
knowing we will be discriminated against,
knowing we will be stereotyped most.

Knowing white supremacists may never accept us.

But that's okay, because we are the future they will miss.

So, there is no such thing as "Black" excellence.

There is only so much excellence in this world because of Black people.

We don't need to aspire to be "excellent",

To be the socially acceptable Black person, who unlike their peers is
educated, unlike their peers is respectable.

You've never heard of "white excellence" because they believe they are
already a part of the word.

In truth, perhaps we need that kind of arrogance because the fact is the
word "Black" cannot be said without "excellent" accompanying it and
the word "excellent" would not hold its profound weight now without
Black people.

So every Black person in this room should know today:

Your value was given to you the moment you were born.

MY BOY HARLEY

by Calob Dinsmore

Western Center Academy

My Harley waits with patience at the door,
His wagging tail a drumbeat pure and true.
He asks for nothing, yet he offers more—
A heart of gold, forever loyal too.

Through fields he runs, his spirit swift and free,
Each joyful bound a hymn of simple grace.
No treasure shines as bright as what I see,
The faithful love that glimmers in his face.

When nights grow long, he settles by my side,
A steady warmth against the creeping cold.
No fleeting storm can dim or ever hide
The trust we share, more precious than pure gold.

So may the years be kind, their blessings stay,
For Harley's love outshines the passing day.

THE TRUTH

by Damien Russell

Western Center Academy

I tell you the truth when I say, no human should slave away, I tell you the truth when I say, no man should suffer hate.

I tell you the truth when I say, good men are often skipped for being seen as weak or needy when those that skip them are not worth the rewards that come along.

I tell you the truth when I say, the reward is not always worth the risk, I tell you the truth when I say, society needs to be fixed.

I tell you the truth when I say, parents don't always know everything, I tell you the truth when I say, you will forget all I have ever said.

I KNOW WHY THE CALI TREE SCREAMS

by Matthew Depew

Santiago High School

The wind carries embers,
whispers charred secrets,
and the tree bends, not from age,
but from a scream that's always been there.

Listen.

Do you hear it now?
A hollow cry in the brittle leaves,
a crack in the marrow of the bark,
the language of wildfire
cruel, ancient, endless.

Once,
her roots were drunk on fog,
her branches heavy with sunlit mornings.

Now,
the air tastes of smoke,
ash settles in her veins,
her shadow flickers,
a ghost against an orange sky.

They say the fire speaks;
greedy, ravenous.

But the tree,
the Cali tree,
screams instead.

Screams for her sisters who turned to smoke,
screams for the nests that fell as sparks,
screams for the soil, now burned and bare,
too tired to cradle new life.

Once,
flames were a dance:
brief, beautiful,
a way to start anew.
But now they are monsters,
growing hungrier,
louder,
every year.

The scream spirals into the valleys,
up the hills,
over the rooftops.
It cracks open the silence of dry creek beds,
splits the night sky,
and still, we pretend we do not hear.

She leans toward the wind and wails:
“Do you know why?”

The answer is in the sparks of powerlines,
the parched rivers,
the forests gone brittle with thirst.
It is in the blackened skeletons of redwoods,
the sunsets stained with sorrow.

One day,
her scream will fade,
too quiet to hear,
too heavy to carry.
But for now,
she stands in the ash,
her roots smoldering,
her branches trembling.

And I listen.

I SAW THE TV GLOW

by Jocelyn Higgins

Mountain View Middle School

Palm trees reach the sky,
Boombox music flowing in the ocean breeze,
Clouds and parts of rain fill the sky,
A house filled with various people, yet they don't know.

Laughter was in the atmosphere, but still clueless,
A TV I saw one day glowed, but I didn't understand.
Years later, I slowly start seeing it, again and again.

Different channels filled it each time I kept looking at it,
but it kept changing every time.

I wanted to ask them what it meant, but I didn't want them to know.

Fear ran through me even though they claim they will always
Support me and my feelings, but I don't know if they really mean it.

I went to check on the channel and I saw something new.
Something different... something yellow, white, purple, and black

But this time, it won't go away. No matter how hard I try,
It just won't.

How do I try to turn it off? I don't think I am able to do so.
Despite me turning it off again, again, and again it keeps shining
through the covers. The thing I do know is it won't go away soon...

That is what I am sure of.

UNTITLED

by Jeremiah Garcia

Cherry Valley Student Center: Springs Charter Schools.

Frayed On display
My mind turns blue,
You twist and tie knots in my brain,
Manipulative,
You never changed,
Oh,
When I think about you,
I crown you with the weight of my fear,
Nunca se sabe how much you hurt me,
My chest shatters in two when I think about you,
Oh you.

RACE AGAINST THE RAIN

by Donovan Rodriguez

Cielo Vista Charter School

The rain slowly enters the sunny field
Taking over the sky and forcing us to yield
All hope seems lost in the gray void above
A broken-winged, defeated little dove
And as you lie there, not knowing what to do
You pray for guidance from the Lord above
You wait and wait, and it seems like there's no answer
But as you wait, you hear faint laughter
A smile starts to crack on your solemn face
The gray clouds disband for the light and grace
The journey is finished, you've won the race.

THE ART GALLERY

by Liliana Gonzalez

Cielo Vista Charter School

It felt as if I was entering another world.
The immersive paintings,
The gentle portraits.

I could almost imagine,
the precise strokes of the brush,
as it streaks across the canvas.

This whole scene,
it felt like a delicate and fleeting moment,
like a fogged up mirror during the winter.

The faded watercolor at the edges was like a distant memory,
soon to be forgotten.

The small moment of silence felt fragile,
as if my gaze alone was enough for it to crack.

I hold my breath,
becoming afraid that a single breath,
could wipe the artwork clean.

THE DROWNED SILENCE OF THE SEA

by Anahi Romero Rosas

Cielo Vista Charter School

The ocean tries to take a breath but it cannot cleanse.

See the glimpse of fear in the eyes of animals that are tangled in plastic.

Hear the whales wail to us but it is us that are causing them to be frail.

Touch the pieces of plastic scattered on the sea floor like pieces of a
broken mirror.

Smell the fresh ocean lading that is slowly fading.

The ocean is forced to taste the toxic plastic that we have discarded.

The ocean tries to fight the killing disease we have given it.

Muck is spread across the ocean like a bruise across skin.

The ocean is a trash can for people that we had forgotten to clean.

Who will answer the urgent call from the sea's drowned silence?

WHEN WILL IT STOP

by Khaleesi Gallardo

Cielo Vista Charter School

The sky turns to the color of a bruised apple.
Smoke rising, the burned pine scent circulating in the air.
People are concerned about the smell and the smoke.
While a tsunami of fire comes rushing to the forests.
The trees are crying for help as they are slowly getting burned.
The trees are hurting trying to protect themselves.
The smoky air I inhale, heavy and ashy.
The ashes falling from the trees as they are getting burned.
Nature is running out of time, losing its life bit by bit.
The environment is traumatized.
Trees are collapsing like a city getting destroyed.
Animals running different directions searching for help.
Loud sirens running towards the fires.
Water carried by helicopters circling the forests.
Water getting splashed onto the trees.
The trees end up brittle, burned and black.
Leaving them damp and nothing left but burned bark.

MIDWESTERN SILENCE

by Aymarie Daugherty

Rancho Verde High School

Wisconsin is lonely.
not the kind cured by laughter
or softened by company.
A Midwest loneliness—
the kind that clings to your skin,
Sinking into bone
Everyone carried it—
masked by small talk and careful smiles.
It was subtle—
like the rasp in your voice after a sickness.
I told myself that I would never step
 foot on that land again.
But just a year later, I found myself back.
This time, when I got out of my car
 to see an empty town square,
something inside me had shifted.
This time the silence didn't drown me
It calmed me
This time I could appreciate the sounds
 of rabbits rustling in bushes.
I could smell the sharp, cold air, scented
 with pine and melted snow.
This time I saw the snow-covered street—
once lifeless—
as a quiet work of art.
How each tree told its own story
 through the texture of the bark,
I imagined how long they stood there,
watching silently.
This was when I realized
the people there weren't lonely,
they were just at peace.
And now, so was I.

THE FOREST

by Clarabelle Alvarez

Great Oak High School

My heart feels rooted with the giant redwoods

It thumps in perfectly synchronized beats
with the pulsating roots of life

My blood runs a vibrant shade of crimson in comparison
to the fresh stream of water providing
this land with nutrients

Meanwhile the wind dances in my hair, the same wind
that gently whispers in the canopy above

The roots on these trees are much similar to mine

The roots in which I grow, in which I remember my past

We are one in the same

We all are

We grieve this land as we do our own body,

Without the realization that our mind can either blossom
or defeat our newly bloomed flowers

That we can either make or break our souls with just our thoughts

We can either make or break our earth with just our actions

maybe we are more similar than we are meant to believe.

WHAT IF I DID?

by Adelaide Young

Vista Murrieta High School

What if I do it?
What if I make it?
What if I finish it?
What if I write it?
What if someone reads it?
What if someone likes it?
What if it just works?
What if it gets published?
What if I make it?
What if I do it?
Well, if I do
Then someone will read it
Someone will like it
Maybe it'll just work
Maybe it'll get published
What if I make it?
What if I do it?
If I don't, I'll never know
So I will do it
Now I've done it.

FOLKLORICO GIRL

by Adam Duran

Centennial High School

Cue the trumpets, guitars and violin.
Here she comes twirling, stomping, clicking, and executing another spin.
Her vibrant skirt swirls with every secuencia.
She stands proud, alive, and shines for each audiencia.
The most beautiful Folklorico dancer of all time.
With her smile and eyes that gleam brighter than any sunshine.
And the colorful ribbons entwined in her raven hair.
She dances with pride, honor and Arianna flare.
She dances to share her amazing cultura.
She's agile and shows her technical bravura.
Any dance from Veracruz to Michoacan.
She is a master who captivates and shines on.

AM I ENOUGH?

by Damien Morales

Western Center Academy

In front of a home, sat a flower bed.
Where beautiful flowers grew and flourished,
dainty daffodils and sweet sunflowers,
radiant roses and tender tulips.

The flower bed, kept nice and tidy,
would go unmatched in perfection.
With no imperfections, not even a weed,
every one of the flowers specially planted.

With each day, a man arrived,
picking only the prettiest flower for his wife.
And each day the flowers grew,
the man came back for more.

Hidden within these gorgeous flowers, two
small yellow dandelion weeds grew. They
blossomed hoping to be picked someday. So
they waited every single week.

Time went on, the patch got smaller,
less flowers to choose from.
The bed got lonelier and lonelier
until there were only a couple flowers left.

The man noticed the growing weeds,
judging they weren't worthy of being picked.
The saddened dandelions felt hopeless,
feeling that they would never be picked.

One of them decided to change,
turning into a blossom of fluff.
The other decided to stay,
feeling that it would never be enough.

The following day, a child came outside,
while strong gusts of wind swept by.
The flowers perking themselves up,
except for the dandelion and all its flying pappus.

The child picked the yellow weed,
to take to his mother inside.
The now bare dandelion without it's fluff,
stood there wondering, "Am I perfect enough?"

THANK YOU

by Dirce Herbert

Western Center Academy

I always see you at school everyday,
And when I don't, I realize the page was left blank.
Almost like the forgotten morning dew.
I've begun to realize just how much you light my world.

You seem to see through my mask so easily,
Knowing when I'm sad,
And even seeing when something's not right.
I don't know how, but you do.

So thank you for seeing me for who I am,
For helping me in my everyday life,
Helping me understand my self,

And it's crazy.
Cause I've known you since time started,
And every day I learn so much about you.
How you laugh, the way you think,
Even the way you talk to people.

You might not realize it yet
But you're truly a kind person at heart
People may not get you, but it's okay.
Because I'll always be there.
Just like how the sun shines for the moon.

I AM THE RIVER

by Emely Rios

Western Center Academy

I am the river,
always moving,
even when no one is watching.
I carry the secrets of the trees,
the whispered songs of the wind,
and the tears that fall from the sky.

People stand on my banks
and see only the surface
calm, smooth, harmless
but underneath,
I am strong enough to carve valleys,
to move mountains one grain of sand at a time.

I have seen children grow,
their laughter floating across my waters,
and I have carried their sorrow, too,
after the world taught them
how heavy a heart can be.

I am the river,
and I will keep moving,
long after they are gone,
because that is who I am
forever changing,
forever flowing,
but always here.

STRESSED

by Jake Ravenna

Western Center Academy

Have you ever had that feeling
When you looked at the clock
And realized you missed the bus
So you run down the block
And you know you'll be in trouble
When your parents see you missed class
And you forgot to do your homework
So you don't think you'll pass
And these worries stay on your mind
Until the end of the day
And you sit there in worry
Of the hell coming your way
And then you sit down and realize
Your worries were for nothing
Because at the end of the day
Your worries were bluffing
And it will all be ok.

GODS' GAMES

by Katherine Phan

Ramona High School

If creation belonged to Gods alone -
then may my pen dance across the skies and
make a mockery of all that is known.
For it shall be prouder than any man.

To dare to question the rules we live by.
Where burning men swim and drowning men sing,
told my truth to a world of worshipped lies
to fools set ablaze by their chosen king.

In this world, I am a mere dreamer.
But in every word my pen leaves this page,
lives a world where my words mean deeper,
Where we could smile without silent rage.

To be human is to play the Gods' games.
So live a life worth knowing your name.

THE WEIGHT I HOLD

by Marley Roughton

Western Center Academy

I carry the weight of wanting to be better.
Some mornings I wake up and already feel behind.

I carry the weight of never being able to make people proud.
Even when they smile, I wonder if it's enough.

I carry the weight of comparing myself to other girls.
Like no matter how fast I run, someone's still ahead.

I carry the weight of grades that never feel good enough.
Letters on a page shouldn't determine my future, but they do.

But I carry the hope that tomorrow could be different.
Maybe I'll finally feel like I'm enough.

I carry the strength to keep going even when I'm tired.
Every setback proves I can stand back up.

I carry the lesson from mistakes I wish I didn't make.
They still hurt, but they're shaping me into someone stronger.

I carry the weight, but I'm learning it won't break me.
I carry the weight, but it's making me who I am.
I carry the weight, and one day I'll be proud.
I carry the weight, and still, I rise.

TO JUST BE

by Maryam Rizvi

Eleanor Roosevelt High School

I often dream of being something I am not,
Something I cannot be,
Something that would never be expected of me,
An anomaly.

Up on stage as a musical genius,
An actor,
A writer,
A creator,
A teller,
A crier.

I want to shock the assumers,
Disgust the traditionalists,
Refute the prophecies of the fortune tellers,
Laugh at the tyrants.

I want to watch the Heavens in peace,
Not long to be an angel.
I want to set fire to birthday candles,
Not memories nor visions.

But,
Don't be fooled.
I'm not an inspiration –
Not to the oppressors
Whom I've stopped making smile,
Nor the thieves disguised in suits
Who no longer have jingling pockets,
And not the abusers
Whose tongues have been left to rot in their mouths.

I want to be written about
Instead of the one writing.
I want to be looked up to
Instead of looked down upon.
I want to be admired
Instead of the one admiring.
Not for eternity,
But just until
The girl in the mirror
Can wipe her tears
And smile back at me
With a glint in her eyes.

PICTURES WITH WORDS

by Nayelli Moya

Western Center Academy

Words on a line
Words making pictures
Pictures painting beauty
Pictures framing chaos
Chaos ruling humanity's mind
Chaos throughout our world
World full of people
World overflowing dreams
Dreams of a better future
Dreams about making it to tomorrow
Tomorrow, can it come
Tomorrow, please be better
Better than today
Better than yesterday
Yesterday was wild
Yesterday defines chaos
Chaos brimming a college campus
Chaos packed a lead gun
Gun which pierced a heart
Gun who shattered souls
Souls mourning their father
Souls mourning a friend
Friend of controversy
Friend speaking powerful words
Words living on forever
Words cut short by death
Death which is inevitable
Death that was intentional
Intentional finger pulling a trigger
Intentional thought in a brain
Brain that found it rational
Brain that had enough

Enough of a different opinion
Enough of a different person
Person speaking their mind
Person telling others
Others who'd had enough
Others blocked him out
Out of their head
Out the other ear
Ears that didn't listen
Ears that turned deaf
Deaf towards hurt
Deaf despite chaos
Chaos unfortunately inevitable
Chaos within words
Words that took a life.
Words that killed that man
Man...
Life...

MY CONSTANT

by Rylie Veliz

Western Center Academy

We were having a family dinner
Like we always do
The aroma of fettuccine filled the space
like a hug of warmth,
My dad's infamous recipe
We let the dogs out to play
Chasing after each other
Running back and forth
In circles and zigzags
Up and down the length of the yard
Milo was *mine*
We grew up together
My dog for 8 years
My best friend
And only constant
Through my first breakup
He gave the best cuddles
Any bad day
His fur was always warm,
waiting to be pet
Every bad test grade
He would lick my face till I smiled
He slept in my bed every night
Every day I fed him (2 scoops)
He was my responsibility
I was *his* constant
But then running in the backyard
Milo collapsed.
Just like that he was gone.
In a matter of seconds my whole life turned upside down
None of us knew what to do
Barely getting a chance to say goodbye

We drove him to the nearest vet²
They said there was nothing they could do
That it was time to say goodbye
But I couldn't
I couldn't think straight
I couldn't breathe
I couldn't say goodbye
But I knew it was time
I had to say bye to my best friend
My world
My everything
My only constant in life
was gone.

100 WORDS FOR MY SISTER

by Anastacia Ybarra

Western Center Academy

October 29, my sister's birthday. She turns nineteen this year.
My sister and I hold opal stones.
Driving to meet her, we parked on a dirt road.
Buying tourmaline-colored camellias and innocent white daisies, we're
back on the road.
She doesn't live far, just an hour away.

Past her rusted metal gate, slowly up the winding dirt driveway.
On her porch, we give her our grace.
Greeting her roommates before stopping at her room.
Placing the flowers in her hair and the opal on her terrestrial body.
Her face of stone, words engraved, she would always be three days old.

FLUMEN TEMPORIS

by Benjamin Tillinghast

Santiago High School

A river flowing past the wind,
It flows so fast until the end.
Though little moments, like the bridge,
And down, until the river bends
Or when you're lost among the rainbow salmon,
As they swim up and back to where they came,
It makes you wonder if they'll reach heaven,
Or if life and death are truly the same.

It makes you wonder about the life that we live—
The time that we have, and the song that we sing.

Can you say that you truly give?
Or if the actions you've taken truly ring?
Mementos made like writing a poem
Of life remembered in time's good omens,
The time that we have is truly what matters
But still a river moves on, not the stillness that staggers

For the river flies, past the fields of Elysium,
The heavens we desire, yet often we fear
And dives further, beyond Pandemonium,
The knowledge of freedom or terror we bear.

To forget, or to remember
Many stop to think by the side of the river.
For as the river rushes past the wind,
How far does the river go?
The world of life and time coincide,
But can we truly ever know?

Because rivers rush and fountains flow
Because lovers love and gardens grow
When rivers rush, time never slows
The little moments make the whole,
Otherwise there will be holes
When you're focused on just the bridge
Just the garden, or just the ridge,
When you're trapped inside a moment,
As the river rushes past the wind,
Life is nothing but a memo.

ARE WE REALLY DIFFERENT?

by Emma Wright

Western Center Academy

You feel teens always cradle their device,
You scold that my habits come with a price,
You explain about all the anxieties,
But is it different from the nineties?
I'm on the couch texting friends on my cell,
You communicated through aol.
I am sharing about my day on calls,
You did the same except plugged into the walls.
I gaze at latest new trends on a screen,
You stared at the same in a magazine.
You say you managed without internet,
But now it has become a huge asset.
Living in a digital universe,
It is not easy, it can be a curse.
You believe I am obsessed with my phone,
But am I not almost your teenage clone?

WELCOME TO CALIFORNIA IZZY BUCY

by Izzy Bucy

Palm Desert High School

When I was young and even now I was never
scared of snakebite or scorpion sting
The first rattlesnake I'd ever seen my mom's fiance hit
head-on at 110 MPH in a Mustang
on the strip of the 111 that runs up into the high desert:
Yucca Valley, Thousand Palms, Desert Hot Springs.

I have been standing in the two little cut-out highbeamers
burning in the dark
watching my mom's fiance take a pocketknife that reads
Don't Tread On Me and cut the rattle
out of the rattlesnake with the mouth still gaping
paralyzed from the stun of the tires or the heat or the blinding lights
and drop it into my hand still-warm
for years

The desert — it developed my life in the way
I imagine a good conversation would
I think it cultured my mind, changed the sleight of my hand,
and furrowed my eyes into a perpetual squint

People here always think they're on the cusp of winning big
Lottery tickets
Casinos by night
Play it as it lays
exploding IVF clinics and cynics and martyrs
sons and daughters
overfed estates
multi-million dollar mansions
golf courses
empty dinner plates
billionare expansions
summer homes, snowbirds
resorts and shorts and
scraping together your living

I see my neighbors being dragged into trucks
I become a passerby in the story that details how
my family even got to this country
The work of a translator is never done
It starts at the spoken word and ends at being put into a cop car
Am I being arrested, or detained?
("y quando te preguntén si tienes tu mica, que dirás?")

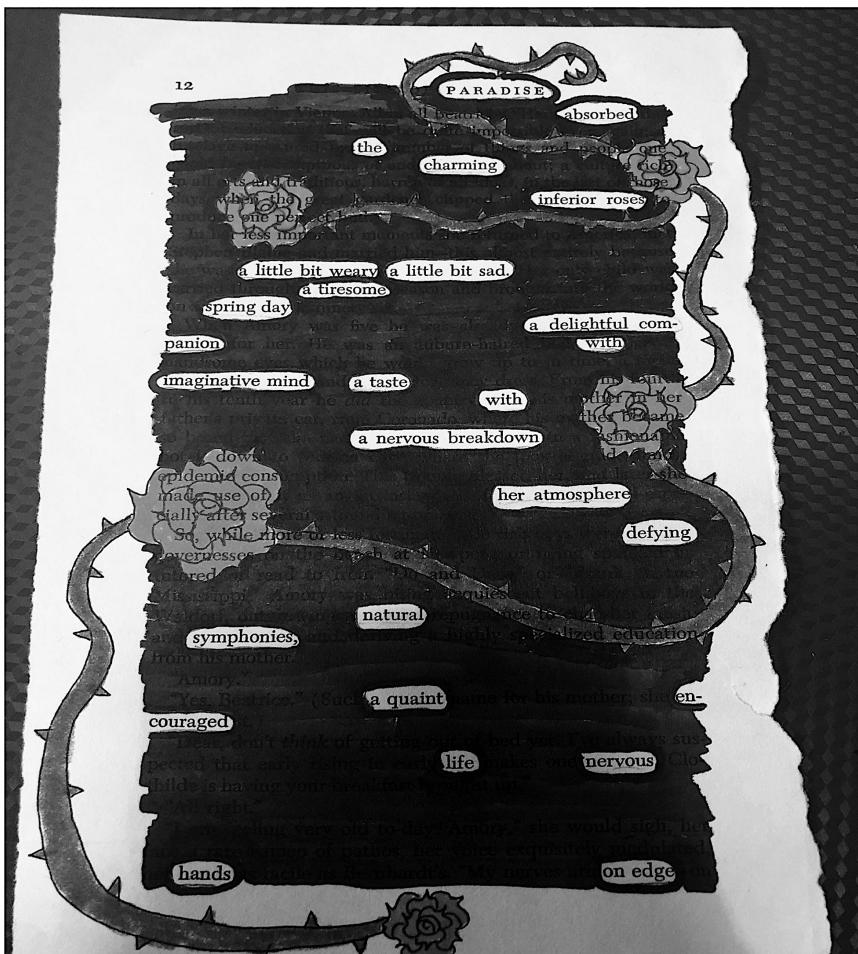
When we were young and even now we were never
scared of snakebite or scorpion sting
Instead we learned to fear unmarked vehicles until we entered them
And men dressed in all black until we became them
Cousins and friends we'll never see again but whose
names pile up in our mouths like eulogies
Rearranging shadow in our vocabularies
so we'll just have to be more cautious
More conscious
Restrict ourselves to the easy camaraderie of the English language
The impersonal whiteness of a shut mouth
Mapping out footfalls within the walls of our own homes
Which cannot legally be breached without a warrant

The desert lies awake
I am a tourist to the events of my own life
and a bystander who stands for nothing at all
I am an aggrieved victim
And an heir to an impossible fantasy which I have been denied
My name is California
And I know that rattlesnakes strike only when tread on"

GIRL OF ROSES

by Leah Menache

Palm Desert High School



MY NAME IS

by Miliani Powell

Western Center Academy

MY NAME IS:

Mili.

Miliani.

Miliani Powell

But to the very who know me better

few

than I do

K N O W how my name f l o w s

To those who don't know the flow,

think my name is a M

Y

S

T

E

First, they stare

R

Second, the sound comes out

Y

but the flow ain't i H

Y

R G

t

So if you continue to read.....on

Then

Maybe

Juuuust maybe

The flow will start flowin'

So let me START from the Top

An empty glass bottle is how this tale

story

whatever you want to call it BEGINS

But the bottle isn't always empty

Sometimes its FULL

Sometimes its half —> way

and Sometimes it OveRFloWs

I TRY to keep it c o v e r e d

But

That only causes cra cks

I TRY to keep it inside
But
When it overflows it overflows
And
Most times it flows for a L time

O
N
G

What comes out of the bottle **CAN** be a
.....mystery
but what really comes out
Are the ...f e l i n g s...
I tried to keep {captured} in the bottle
And I'm GOOD at that.

But some days the bottle is plastic and
We ALL know plastic
Don't break as easily as glass

BUT

Plastic is

F L I M S Y
and clear

And when the bottle is plastic we know
the rule of just fitting in
And I followed that rule
So I wasn't ~laughed~ at
#joked# at
Or _kicked_ to the _____ of the bottle
bottom
where it's all... *lonely*
(I learned that loneliness is a good thing sometimes)

Some days the bottle is **M E T A L**

METALLIC

STRONG

SHINY

HONORABLE

HARD

PROTECTED

RESPECTED

Getting a METAL BOTTLE is

SURPRISINGLY

hard to come by when.... people,
you know?

But METAL BOTTLES are the best
(maybe that's why they're hard to come by)

I guess in the END what I'm trying to say is:

My bottle changes un

ex

pe

It's irReGuLar

ct

D I F F E R E N T

ed

ly

At least, *I* know that there is *glue* to fix the cracks
and *tape* to close off the holes
and *stickers* to cover the dents
Who can **H A T E** stickers?

In CONCLUSION of what I wanna say

The flow continues to f l o w

However it f l o w s

Whatever it f l o w s

Wherever it f l o w s

Wheneve r it f l o w s

THAT WORD

by Seth Rich Neal

Riverside Poly High School

hey what's up my
wait i can say that, can't i
Even though my skin is brighter, do you mind?
i mean it's just a word
My sister's boyfriend has the same complexion
i mean voted for obama in the last election
i just helped a brotha out in the other direction
i mean it's just a word
my other friends say it anyways
i don't use it to throw shade or any hate
after all you people use it at a constant rate
i mean it's just a word
come on my
let me say it it's fine
i only use to rhyme raps some times
i read book and it said that line
you're starting to act like it's some kind of crime
i mean it's just a word
my people made it
so understand that i can say it
it's been 200 years so that meaning has faded
i mean it's just a word
you're clearly not picking on your hands and knees
and if you aren't blind your kind is finally free
so i need you to see
that it's just a word

Oh word?

It's honestly naive ignorant and absurd
that you feel i am not disturbed
by you asking for permission to say this slur
you're starting to touch my nerve and i'm fighting the urge
to really throw a fist and give you what you deserve
but i'd probably end up on the news for acting like that word

THE PRODIGAL DAUGHTER'S APOLOGY (IN ADVANCE)

by Abigail Handojo

University of Southern California

“Creative writing? As a major? Oh, that’s *great*,
And what do your *parents* want you to do?”
Is the million-dollar question on repeat these days
They don’t believe me when I say you let me choose

Can’t blame them, I doubt I’d believe me too
Every open mic I do, you defy the rules of generations
I mean, what kind of Asian parent lets their child pursue
A career anyone can get without specific education?

Insane, right?
Like, what glitch in the matrix is this?
Why would you sacrifice so much,
For the pursuit of my happiness?

Unlike what people think,
I don’t have expectations to meet
Just your trust that I’ll get back on my feet
If I fall

Contrary to popular belief,
I’ve never had to fight you to be free
Never had to make my case or plead
At all

You’ll let me traverse the road not taken
Well, what if it’s a dead end?
Do I stay there at the standstill,
Or turn around and try again?

I know it’s been done before,
That for traditional Chinese families, it’s the norm
But I don’t want to leave home just to return once more
If I don’t succeed, what is the long haul all for?

Blood, sweat, and tears,
I can't take any breaks—
Penny-pinching worst fears,
When I'd hate to see you pay—
Eyebrow grease and restless years,
For my mistakes

And they'll say:
“What a waste of hope and sleep
Precious time and well-earned money
If your only child doesn't succeed?
Sure, it was a fifty-fifty,
But she chose to chase her dreams
She should feel grateful... and guilty,”

God, what is your contingency
If this doesn't work out for me?
I mean, I want you to be proud, obviously,
But most of all,
I don't want to be...
The cross you constructed just to carry
Or the baby you birthed just to bury.

I'm glad you have faith in me,
Mother and father
If it ever comes to this,
I hope you can forgive your prodigal daughter.

THE FORT WE BUILT IN FALL

by Lillian Vargas

Western Center Academy

It was a cool October day in 2018.
The air carried a crisp breeze—
the kind that creeps up your jacket sleeve—
but the streets were warm and golden with light,
as if the sun was letting us know
there was just enough time left in the day
to keep the play going.

There were six of us—a scrappy crew,
kids with scraped knees,
callused palms,
handlebars in hand,
and far too much energy to stay indoors.

In my front lawn,
beneath the half-colored trees and giant pine,
we built a fort.

Sheets borrowed from my neighbor's laundry line,
sticks gathered like buried treasure
were propped, tied, and draped
until it stood—
not tall, but proud—
as if it might just weather time.

The walls were thin and the roof hung low,
but as we crouched inside,
it became our little world.
We filled it with stories,
and laughter—
the kind that echoes long after it's gone.

The fort is now gone,
the sheets reclaimed, the sticks reburied,
but sometimes in autumn,
when the breeze trickles back up my sleeve,
I swear I hear us inside,
keeping the play going.

ABOUT THE RIVERSIDE COUNTY TEEN POET LAUREATE

The Teen Poet Laureate project is the culmination of many hours of conversation and planning between Inlandia Institute Executive Director Cati Porter and Riverside County Office of Education Arts Administrator Louisa Higgins, themselves both poets. Like most of the nation, they were inspired by Amanda Gorman and her reading at the 2021 presidential inauguration. Together, they brainstormed how they might introduce a similar program to benefit teens locally. The Riverside County Teen Poet Laureate program is now in its fifth year. Many people helped bring this project to fruition.

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Abigail Handojo
Adam Duran
Adelaide Young
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Anastacia Ybarra
Avarie LaMothe
Aymarie Daugherty
Benjamin Tillinghast
Caitlin Buensuceso
Calob Dinsmore
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Damien Morales
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Cielo Vista Charter School
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Rancho Verde High School
Santiago High School
Centennial High School
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Palm Desert High School
Western Center Academy
Cherry Valley Student Center: Springs Charter Schools.
Mountain View Middle School
Ramona High School
Cielo Vista Charter School
La Quinta High School
Palm Desert High School
Cielo Vista Charter School
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