Beauty awakens the soul to act.
—Dante

River of Words

Poems selected by
Robert Hass & Pamela Michael

Art selected by
John Muir Laws

Winners of the River of Words
20th Annual Environmental Poetry & Art Contest

A Project of The Center for Environmental Literacy in the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary’s College of California
Prologue

River of Words: The First Twenty Years

In 1995 the Internet was just beginning to enter public consciousness, its true power and magic yet to be realized. California native son Robert Hass had just been appointed the first United States Poet Laureate from West of the Rockies. That same year, the Academy of American Poets convened a group of educators, poets, publishers, librarians and booksellers who ultimately declared that the following April, and all subsequent Aprils, would be celebrated as National Poetry Month. April is also the month in which Earth Day is observed, a happy convergence that inspired another groups of educators, poets, publishers, librarians, booksellers— with environmental activists added to the mix—to create a program for children and youth called “River of Words.”

Earth, Poetry, Nature, the Arts, Rivers, Words—they all seemed to blend and bubble that year into a tool for educating youth about the importance of water, about the interdependent systems that sustain life and culture, about beauty and wonder and a panoply of other concepts that might help them grow into active and informed earth stewards and fully-alive human beings.

Our simple idea of combining poetry and art with hands-on, feet-wet, grass-stains-on-your-pants outdoor exploration hit a nerve with students and teachers alike. Our free annual environmental poetry and art contest, conducted in affiliation with The Library of Congress Center for the Book, quickly became a prestigious and vibrant showcase for children’s creative works. Our anthologies, like the one you’re holding in your hands, found their way into classrooms and libraries across the country, along with our “Watershed Explorer” K-12 curriculum and other teaching resources.

With the support of enthusiastic donors and volunteers, governmental agencies like the US Environmental Protection Agency, trade groups like the American Booksellers Association, businesses, humanities councils, nonprofit organizations like International Rivers, we grew a network of dedicated teachers and informal educators—park rangers, museum docents and the like—that helped spread our watershed-focused approach to understanding the natural and cultural histories of the places we live by teaching earth sciences in combination with the arts.

River of Words is now implemented throughout the United States and in over thirty other countries. Artwork by our young artists has been featured on book and CD covers, annual reports, greeting cards and t-shirts and in museums and libraries around the country. River of Words poems have been set to
music by classical composers, and recorded and performed by many musicians, including acclaimed mezzo-soprano, Frederica von Stade. During the last twenty years (our first twenty years), our young poets have recited their poems at TED Talks, state houses, poetry festivals, conferences and other venues. Through the visibility River of Words affords, children’s voices, concerns and visions are being given the attention and respect too often denied to work by young people.

Those voices come through loud and clear each year in the tens of thousands of entries to the River of Words Contest—poems, paintings, drawings and photographs by children from 5-19 years of age. As the first reader of the all the entries, I have the distinctive job of, essentially, taking the pulse of the world's children annually. Inevitably, themes emerge, often revealing just how aware children are of the planet's woes, and how vulnerable. After September 11th, poems were rife with words like sorrow, falling, terror, tears, grief. Some poems addressed the tragedy directly, others metaphorically: seedpods exploded, raindrops crashed to earth, etc. When the United States invaded Afghanistan, that year's contest entries were full of military imagery—beetles battled, storms attacked. In the last few years, US entries from many parts of the West are marked by references to the massive drought decimating the region.

The catastrophic event that most gripped the imaginations of the world's youth, however, was the 2004 tsunami in Thailand, perhaps because of the terrifying footage of the wave engulfing the seaside hotel that was widely broadcast, or perhaps because of children's primal fear of drowning. Eleven years later, River of Words still receives vivid poems and paintings of that disaster. It is clear that our children, hard as we try to protect them, are acutely aware of the perils facing the planet. The arts give them avenues of expression that reveal, at times, the heartbreaking extant of that awareness.

Because I have been witness to this unique phenomenon, reading more poetry by children each year than possibly anyone on earth, I feel it my sad duty to report a very disturbing—but understandable—change of tone in the work submitted to the contest this year. The level of despair and hopelessness depicted in the 2015 entries was shocking and unprecedented. Some days, I could scarcely read through my tears. My only consolation was the realization that utilizing the arts to express their fears gave children some needed measure of comfort and self-efficacy.

River of Words' hallmark and greatest strength always has been our emphasis on active and positive responses to environmental challenges, both through creative expression and community action. Our anthologies have reflected this approach, with the children's work so full of life-affirming sentiments and acts. This year it was much more difficult to publish a book that presented
a hopeful view of the future from the earth’s young people; as a generation, they are no longer hopeful.

As overwhelming as the implications of this information are—and I have shared this with you here to prompt discussion and action on everyone’s part—for River of Words, it means an even stronger commitment to helping children find the hope and power in knowledge and collective action. For our organization, this commitment is strengthened by the fact that we’ve survived for two decades, that we’ve helped to make “watershed” a household word, that we’ve advanced the cause of environmental literacy and the transforming of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) education—the new national pedagogical focus—to STEAM by adding the essential Art ingredient.

Most gratifying perhaps, is the delightful, full-circle fact that the teacher of one of our finalists this year is Anne Atwell-McLeod, who, in 1996 at the age of 13, was our very first grand prize poetry winner. We have seen many of the students we’ve honored over the years go into education, which—as a teacher-driven program—makes us very happy indeed. Quite a few others have gone into environmental sciences, one working on a research vessel in the midst of the Great Pacific Garbage Gyre.

The success of our program as manifested in the lives we’ve seen enriched, changed, improved, emboldened—perhaps even saved, as in the case of our Afghan Hazara winner who received asylum for his entire family after we got him out of a refugee camp in Quetta, Pakistan—inspires us to keep striving, looking ahead, dreaming as we did twenty years ago toward a more sustainable, peaceful and just planet. Many thanks to those who helped us get this far and welcome to those of you who want to join us on the journey. It’s a bumpy but wonderful ride. Adelanté!

—Pamela Michael

Founding Director, Center for Environmental Literacy
Co-founder, River of Words
River of Words: The Language of Landscape

Nurturing Environmental Literacy, Compassion and Creative Expression

At one time in the United States, not too many generations ago, virtually all people grew up knowing what watershed they lived in. Rivers then were our only interstate “highways;” most still ran wild across the landscape and in our imaginations. We celebrated the central role they played in our lives in story and song—“Red River Valley,” “Oh Shenandoah,” Life on the Mississippi. Children spent much of their time outdoors, exploring the world around them—searching knee-deep in creeks for tadpoles, building forts in empty lots, weaving daisy chains, collecting rocks, climbing trees. Their experience of the natural world was visceral, frequent, and fun.

Decades have passed since botany, geography, or natural history were paid more than rudimentary attention in most classrooms, and fewer than half our elementary schools have full-time art teachers. This devaluing of the very fundamentals that sustain, define, and nurture us—our land and our creativity—has already robbed many of our children of a true sense of belonging to a particular place. Few of them have any real knowledge of where their tap water comes from, where their garbage goes. They know little of who lived on their land before they did and what songs and stories they created, what art the landscape inspired.

Disturbingly, few American schoolchildren can name more than a handful of the plants or birds in their own neighborhoods, yet studies have shown the average child can identify over one thousand corporate logos. This sorry scenario is increasingly true in other countries as well, even those that still value the role of art in society.

River of Words released its first Watershed Explorer curriculum in 1995. Our place-based approach to teaching art and science in tandem was hailed as innovative and particularly effective in getting students—best of all, hard-to-reach students—excited about learning. Our novel curriculum combined kite-making and flying with the study of wind, atmosphere, birds and aerodynamics. We coupled sketching and botany, nature journaling and poetry making, for instance, allowing children to explore topics creatively, using both left-brain and right-brain skills. Our curriculum, now considered a pioneering effort in the field of “place-based education,” uses the child’s own community—its natural and cultural history—as the context for learning across the disciplines.

This investigative, hands-on approach to learning is what River of
Words has spent the last nineteen years re-introducing to the educational process. One look at the art and poetry in these pages—so full of energy and place—affirms the wisdom (and astonishing success) of our mission.

Seeking to better meet the needs of urban children, we have spent the last several years developing a new curriculum, called One Square Block, in which students will explore one square block of their communities (be it the block where they live, the block where their school is located, or some other relevant plot of land) in increasing depth over the years. At the younger grade levels, this will involve—among other things—taking a rich and detailed inventory of buildings, people, plants and animals, etc. that exist on that block, learning to see the rich diversity of elements around them. In the later grades, more and more intricate layers of detail get added in—land use history, transportation, geology, climate, and much more—ultimately producing a very detailed and vibrant picture of the block being investigated.

Using this highly-focused, place-based approach, students will be able to move from looking at their local landscapes as a mix of scattered and unrelated pieces, toward seeing it as an integrated set of systems and patterns shaped by natural and human processes. While River of Words’ Watershed Explorer curriculum has proved an inspiring resource for teachers for many years, we think One Square Block will provide the same catalytic inspiration for students to explore and interpret their environments, while appealing to a broader array of community and learning settings. Our hope is that One Square Block will help students to build a profound appreciation and sense of self-efficacy toward environmental and social issues through in-depth learning and sharing about their own places in the world.

Developing One Square Block, piloting and refining it, and putting it into use in classrooms became a much easier task in July of 2011, when River of Words became a part of the new Center for Environmental Literacy at one of the country’s most respected teacher training institutions, the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary’s College of California. The Center for Environmental Literacy explores and promotes educational programming and professional development opportunities for educators to integrate nature and the arts into academic curricula designed for elementary, middle, and high school students, as well as for St. Mary’s research and coursework. We are lucky indeed to be part of a lively academic community and are already drawing on the expertise and creativity of the faculty and students.

Finding a supportive academic setting for River of Words was only a distant dream when Bob Hass and I started River of Words almost two decades ago. Our hope was that focusing students’ attention on their own homegrounds
would give them an informed understanding of place that would help them grow into active citizens. We sought to nurture creativity and promote the idea that while not everyone can be an artist, everyone can be artistic. We’ve tried to add elements of wonder, discovery, interpretation, dexterity, and surprise to learning—natural history treasure hunts in schools; oral history projects at senior centers; visits from local birders, farmers, artists, poets or newspaper editors.

Our small and hopeful idea has grown into a program that trains hundreds of teachers each year and touches the lives of tens of thousands of children annually. Hundreds of communities—worldwide—participate in River of Words-inspired art exhibitions, creek clean-ups, watershed festivals, poetry readings, award ceremonies and celebrations.

As you will see in the pages of this book, the world’s children are perhaps its most truthful and sensitive observers. With the help of our Watershed Explorer and One Square Block curricula and the guidance of educators dedicated to providing their students with learning opportunities that connect them to local landscapes and the natural world, many children—through their poetry and art—are helping all of us see and understand the earth in new ways. In doing so they are learning about themselves and their communities, and making sense of the world around them. All with just paper and pencil, open eyes, ears—and hearts.

Can there be any doubt that education is the key to sustainable living, tolerance, and cross-cultural understanding? “Beauty will save the world,” Fyodor Dostoevsky said. We offer the thoughtful and heartfelt creations in this book as our best hope for the future.

—Pamela Michael

Founding Director, Center for Environmental Literacy
Co-founder, River of Words
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Save Nature, Save Yourself  Marian Patrisia, age 15
Iasi, Romania
A Day on the River

The birds are flying high in the sky.  
The river is frozen over with ice.  
I imagine going out there,  
twirling and twirling  
like an ice skater.

On the ice I spot a golden-eyed duck.  
I wonder if he’s cold like me.  
His feathered Mohawk made him look  
like he was in a rock band.  
I wondered where the birds go  
to get their hair cut.

I heard horns like there was a parade,  
and my teacher told me,  
“It’s the trumpeter swan.”

On the bank, the grass  
was as tall as me  
I imagined I was a lion cub  
looking for food.

I sat down and drew  
everything I saw.  
I didn’t want to forget this day.  
Beyond the grass, I found  
a lot of rocks so sparkly,  
I wished I could make them  
into a dress for my mom.

Janajah Mondaine, age 9  
St. Louis, Missouri
Crows
Sara Rajpathak, age 6
Redmond, Washington
How to Be a Hawk

Feel the wind on your face.
Soar across the sky
with your huge wing span,
five feet of bronze wings flapping.
Focus on the mouse running away.
Scoop him up.
Think: “My chicks are hungry.”

Screech as you spy other animals,
and watch them retreat
to holes, nests, and crevices.

Enjoy being the predator.
Sink your shimmering gray talons
into the wing
of an old vulture, a common fight
for your territory.
Bring him down.

Soar across the land feeling
proud of your hawk’s sight.

Rule the air.

Griffon Bannon, age 11
Brunswick, Maine
2015 River of Words ART GRAND PRIZE WINNER
Category II (Grades 4-6)

Night of the Fireflies      Chloe Kellogg, age 11
Rochester, Washington      Rochester Middle School
Teacher: Leslie Hill
A Thousand Years for the River

The river will sing of silver
   A thousand years before
When steps were fresh and breath was sweet
   A thousand years and more.

The river knows of the red, red blood
   A thousand years before
When breath was lost and blood streamed free
   A thousand years to the sea.

The river cries for secrets hidden
   A thousand years before
When tears were gentle, whispers spoken
   A thousand years to be woken.

The river laughs at little loves
   A thousand years before
With vows exchanged, promises made
   A thousand years to fade.

The river whispers too late, too late
When years are past and days no more
The river weeps for what has gone
And waits for the light of dawn.

Mei Baek, age 14
Fairfax, Virginia
Migrating South  Sarah Knoblach, age 14  
Grant, Alabama  Madison Academy (Madison)  
Teacher: Peggy Hickerson
Okefenokee

We used to volunteer at the swamp
you and me both & Charlie
fixing boats, killing spiders, keeping it clean.

Yankees came to see the gators.
I mostly came to see you.

We burn here on purpose, like growth is a disease
turn dead things to ash, like it’s medicine.
Then Bugaboo* happened, then Honeyprairie*
And now the water’s clogged by ash & dead fish & the smell is
acid & bitter & tasting flakey like old bones—wet
like his funeral.

I was never scared of the gators like Charlie was.
I don’t like the snakes, personally.

We rebuilt the boardwalk that summer, crushing pitcher plants underfoot
Tramping through coons & rats & bears & turtles & panthers & birds
and tiny moss flowers just starting to bloom.

I never understood how you could drown in water only 4 feet deep.
Maybe it was the hurricane; maybe a gator held him down
in the mud & the peat
But he was dead nonetheless.

I found Charlie floating calm like Ophelia—
His eyes full of rainwater.

Now it’s just you & me and the bobcats
The time moves slower here, like faith
And a slowly dying sunset
Lazy summer thunder over a swamp.

Jaycee Billington, age 17
Folkston, Georgia

*Bugaboo and Honeyprairie were major fires in the Okefenokee Swamp.
2015 River of Words ART GRAND PRIZE WINNER
Category IV (Grades 10-12)

Untitled    Ashley No, age 15
Bayside, New York

- River of Words 2015 -
Haiku is an unrhymed poetic form that originated in Japan hundreds of years ago. Haiku usually contain three short lines of five, seven and five syllables respectively. These compact, subtle poems typically depict the natural world or seasonal change, and emphasize plain, direct language and intensity. As the haiku form evolved, many of the “rules” have been bent or ignored, though the character of the form has been preserved: a brief moment in time, for instance, or juxtaposed, colorful images, or a sudden revelation.

Haiku

Speckled bark
An abstract mural
Etched upon the evergreens

Nick Hintze, age 13
Seattle, Washington
Lakeside School
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Ancient Symbol
Naia Vincent, age 12
Braselton, Georgia
The Da Vinci Academy (Gainesville)
Teacher: Lyndrid Patterson
When, rolling over into valleys
We are left trapped as if under the covers
And our world is but what is immediately before us
And somehow that seems enormous.

Hills and peaks that stood strong are all drunk up,
By the softness of the air that gives way
To many things that do better as one,
Watercolors that have not been given time to dry.

The sky has opened up
And it lets its clouds fall down to earth
To dance around the shoulders of the hills
Like a milky shawl.

Only now are headlights fires
That bleed halos into the air
Only now can the world’s breath
Cool your warm salty cheeks.

Only now can lines and borders
Finally be abolished
And the sea can take to the air,
And the earth dissolve into the sky.

And only now my breath is yours,
Yours finally mine
Because nothing is ours to keep.

Emma Delaporte
Mill Valley, California
The Late Harvest

skittish squirrels
scampering from branch to branch
in a flurry of fur
the acorns
falling
to a soft lush
bed of sparkling dew
silently glistening
as the sun
starts to shimmer
into existence
Mushrooms
silently poking
their capped heads
out of the moist
sandy soil
and banana slugs
harvesting
the fruit of the earth
In the rushes
whimbrels lurk
seeking the small fish
of great appeal
Hummingbirds speedily
hunting for juicy
flowers to drink
All living things silently rushing to harvest

Matteo Almaguer, age 12
San Rafael, California
Marin Homeschool Poets (Occidental)
Teacher: Devika Brandt
Three Little Girls

Three little girls
Who are ponytails in the wind
And quick legs and long arms
Who are the blue house across the street
And a zip line strung between two cedars
Who are cops and robbers in the morning
And giant tetherball in the afternoon.
Three little girls who are harsh chlorine smell
And tired red eyes
Who are RC cars zipping around a tennis court
And Indiana Jones in the forest
Who are sledding down the icy hill
And frolicking under the leafy canopy
Three little girls who joined my fairytale.

Trevor Anderson, age 14
Kirkland, Washington
Lakeside School (Seattle)
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Untitled  Savindu Hiranniya Herat, age 12
Kurunegala, Sri Lanka

• River of Words 2015 •
Seven:

One two three. One two three four five.
One two five seven. Seven! Did you see that? Seven!
The smooth edge breaking the pond’s tranquil surface
Seven steps and the skipping stone sinks.

One: My eyes widen in awe of my father,
His arm draws back, he snaps his wrist
And with one fluid motion, releases the stone.
Following close behind, my eyes trace its steps.
The stone skips across the pond with ease.

Two: My fingers glide across the surface of the stone,
I focus every ounce of energy into my right arm.
I snap, it sinks. The stone makes a great splash.
The water hits my face, but does not strike me.
Instead the water renews me, it encourages me,
And I begin the hunt for another stone.

Three: The perfect stone. I’ve found the perfect stone.
I go to give it to my dad, extending my hand,
The stone lying placidly within. But
He grabs my hand instead, pulling it back.
He leads me into the snap, and together we release
One two three! The stone sails, then skips one, two, three!

Four: Every time I come here it’s always the same.
What’s the point if no matter how many times it skips
In the end the stone always sinks.
At the bottom of the pond are countless rocks buried forever,
Buried just like the man who first brought me here.
So what’s the point if no matter what we always sink.
Five: I come down to this old pond a lot now
Because for me it’s more than just a pond.
Every tear that hits the surface,
And every stone that lies on the bottom, is a memory.
And these memories are mine to make, and to keep forever.
So each new stone I skip is another memory
Added to my collection.

Six: I can see her eyes widen as I pick up the stone
With the same effortless grace as my father before me.
I draw back, snap my wrist, and release.
The stone is followed by her eyes as it skips.
I can see the excitement take over, and I guide her hand.
We skip her first stone together.

Seven: One two three. One two three four five.
One two five seven. Seven! Did you see that? Seven!
The smooth edge breaking the pond’s tranquil surface,
Seven steps and she has added her first memory.
Her first memory to a pond, ready to hold a lifetime’s worth.
Seven.

Brooke Bacigal, age 16
Ada, Michigan

Sea Turtle  Alexandra Gibbs, age 11  Alexandria, Virginia
A Growl of Whiteness

The rise and the fall
A never-ending motion
A motion creating power
Power that gradually deteriorates
First, the explosions of magnificent blues and hints of green
Then a growl of whiteness
Barricading toward the shoreline
Getting smaller and smaller and smaller with every inch of movement
And then this motion repeats
Wave after wave

Siena Blair, age 13
Tiburon, California
Del Mar Middle School
Teacher: Dana Lomax

Saving Water
Alan Kim, age 13
Los Angeles, California
Journal Entry 10.18.14

I will not apologize for falling so easily
As the clouds need not forgive the rain for tumbling;
Nor the shore anger at the rushing waves.
I will not say sorry for falling into your eyes—
—A river of light swallowed me whole…
A laugh, sharper than the coral, drew me in
Rising with the tide, your smile lifted me.
But just like the tides, things change.

Coral expires,
Rivers conclude,
Water races on
Ignorant of the debris—swept up by its force—
Magnificent allure.
Power second to none.
Cause of unimaginable damage
But I will not apologize

I saw the beauty beneath the surface
And I dove.

Anna Brent, age 18
Lafayette, Colorado
Peak to Peak Charter School
Teacher: Kristie Letter

Trevor
Jamie Thurston, age 17
Madrid, Iowa
North Polk School (Alleman)
Teacher: Lori DeBoer
Voice

I can hear it,
the whispers of the trees,
melody of the wind,
the woven tale of the soil,
echoing into the past,
into the future.
Nature has a voice
If only you’d listen.

Lauryn Brown, age 15
Polk City, Iowa
North Polk High School (Alleman)
Teacher: Lori DeBoer

A thin silk thread, adrift
Floating between
Shriveled autumn berries

Grace Clarke, age 13
Seattle, Washington
Lakeside School
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Tending to the Crops
Jordan Booth, age 16
Birmingham, Alabama
The Altamont School
Teacher: Marygray Hunter
Frank’s Tree    Frank McGee, age 13
Huntsville, Alabama    Madison Academy (Madison)
Teacher: Peggy Hickerson
Hong Kong United

Running for my life, the pounding of my heart thumps in my ears
Sounds of sirens blast
An arc of tear gas hisses through the air
My eyes water with pain, my sore throat burns, screaming for air
I slam head first on the cold cement pavement
Am I a criminal?

High-pitched screams echo in the night
Yellow umbrellas open up in unison
Huge crowds dissolve, bodies falling into each other
Shouting “Freedom,” my dry mouth is cracking with pain
I again surge forward with the few hundred thousand students
Seething with anger at the police reaction.

What have I done wrong? I just want to vote.

My once fresh vegetables and meat
Rotting in my tiny restaurant in Central
My eyes filled with tears
I have spent my whole life to build this business
These two weeks, everything gone
How can they not see?

Watching the students blocking the streets
I quiver with anger at their actions
It hurts to see children hungry
The anguish in my father’s eyes
The students have protested day after day, week after week
But I have no choice in this

Their selfish movement!

N. Chan, age 14
China
Umbrella

The rhythmic thud of drops on my yellow umbrella
Above me the clear sunny late September sky
Fear and anger whelm up within me
cries of horror echo in the air
tear gas showering through the sky
disrupts the once peaceful crowd

Sprinting through grey hazy clouded roads
I feel my esophagus contract
tears running down my cheeks
despair rises with agitation

The police—our fathers, our brothers, our friends—
turn now upon us
vows “to serve and protect” are broken
Yet together we, the people, stand
“Unity” we sing

Umbrella, our only protection
No longer shield us from rain
but from weapons
Unarmed we stand
Under umbrellas

W.P. Lo, age 17
China

These two poems were written in response to the Occupy Hong Kong demonstrations in the Fall of 2014.
A look through the window
Reveals the cloudy weather,
City lights appear
4:30 this November day.
People hope for snow,
While clouds hide the mountains,
Tall with wolves and high pines,
Different from the Himalayas,
Yet somehow the same
In this connected world
Where colorful parrots play in jungles,
The sun shines on dry Australia,
Subzero temperatures envelop Antarctic penguins,
Hurricanes form in tropical oceans
While people hope for the first snow
4:30 this November day.

Michael Champenois, age 16
Provo, Utah
Provo High School
Teacher: Abe Poduska

City Sky
Natalie Sparks, age 14
Huntsville, Alabama
Madison Academy (Madison)
Teacher: Peggy Hickerson
Tanka

Shiny, yellow boots
Squeal against the dirty tiles of the dim room—
Rain strikes the sturdy roof
A lonely dancer performs
To an audience of silent shadows.

Margaret Chi, age 13
Seattle, Washington
Lakeside School
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Lightning      Amrita Lakhanpal, age 13
Birmingham, Alabama      The Altamont School
Teacher: Marygray Hunter
Fish Catching

Ducks grow fat on water
like unmoored hyacinths.
I’ll sit along the pier and let it brine.

expand in my lungs:
headstrong and luckless.
Love set you off like perennial blooms

in a dwindling sea. The sun has turned the wooden
cats febrile and rearing, wet hands tendering
the Bastet-furred shorelines.

Memories of Lent anchor the flaunted symmetry
of nymphet legs, revolving numbly
in fanfares of cold drench.

I can hear the piper call of victory
over wan Medusa eyes, one legless fish
the Ozymandias of them all.

Extinction hums between shaman knuckles,
the valuable clutch of gazing flounder.
Living and rotting, its mouth gasps in wordless ovals.

The water is treeless. Impatient.
I prick myself on purpose.

I do it with hooks. There is an exceptional
magnetism between the fishhooks and fingertips
when time evolves into shuddering gills and

chimneys punch through the roof of a fish’s
mouth house. Grape leaves blacken and levee
delicatessen flesh for us old dogs.
Nimbus clouds shade over my sister’s disappointment. Vermillion bait rings free on our empty hook. Their fish juts, scales kissing the panicked dock, evergreen howl vanishing beneath chill surface, a miniature truss. Our fishhook arches curiously. She touches it also.

Michelle Chen, age 15
Whitestone, New York

Seaside Serenity  Garrett Jackson, age 14
Laguna Niguel, California
A Trail of Ashes

A trail of ashes
Left behind
As the fierce wind blows away
The burnt remains
Of a campfire song.

Sophia Coco, age 13
Mercer Island, Washington
Lakeside School (Seattle)
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

A Bright Night      Felix Ding, age 6
Union City, California
Makah Days, a Ghazal

The early fog of daybreak cloaks the deserted street of vendors’ stalls, Blurry eyes fighting back the tears of a yawn

Voices crowd into a buzz as money starts to trade hands The flashing signals and horns jammed together, everyone in a rush.

Scents of sweet, puffy fry bread, spread with jam and honey, Waft across the throngs of people A butterfly flitting gracefully in the breeze, dancing over fields of daisies

Long sweeping necklaces, strung with glinting olive shells and colorful bright beads The tinkling notes of a wind chime, carrying a soft melody

Tender salmon, melting away with each silky bite Spring sunshine, trickling through dew-sprinkled grass

The deep resonating beats on deerskin drums, blending with the rumbled singing of traditional songs Reverberating trembles of earthquake ripping through your chest

Erica Debley, age 13
Lake Forest Park, Washington
Lakeside School
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Freedom
Kathleen Briner, age 17
Alpharetta, Georgia
Chatahoochee High School
Teacher: Kathryn Paxton
Prevail

Some friends are like autumn leaves
They brighten our lives for a season,
Then,
Just as leaves are blown away by the wind,
They move elsewhere in life.

But best friends are like pine trees:
The too must be nurtured,
But when hard times come,
They prevail.

Grace de Valois, age 15
Polk City, Iowa
North Polk High School (Alleman)
Teacher: Lori DeBoer

Peacock Callie Grissom, age 11
Birmingham, Alabama The Altamont School
Teacher: Marygray Hunter
River

Bloodsucking bugs and yellow-bellied salamanders,
Grainy sand and plastered mud,
Harsh rapids and overgrown banks,
Extensively deep and surprisingly shallow,
   Sawed logs and sharp grass,
Egg-laying salmon and rainbow trout,
Ravishing islands and sudden drop-offs,
   Russet beavers and howling coyotes,
   Stunning gems and bland rocks,
Relaxingly mellow and lastingly strong,
   Briskly giving and mercilessly taking,
   River

Emily Elkins
Rochester, Washington
Rochester Middle School
Teacher: Jon Ehmke

Our World, Our Future   Ahmad Shekib, age 13
   (Afghan national)   Quetta, Pakistan
Hatif Art Gallery   Teacher: Hassan Ali Hatif
Red Kayak

The red hull of my kayak cuts through the black water
glides on an invisible force much greater than itself,
through the high rapids.

Cold water splashes over the hull,
beautifully suspended in midair for a second,
only to fall back down to the deck of my kayak.

Following a yellow kayak, I float down the river
becoming one with the currents,
currents that must be handled with caution.

Stones pass underneath my boat,
the largest ones reaching up
gently touching the bright hull.

The rapids take away everything,
all my pain and problems
they strip them off and float them down the current.

Left to right:

The Midnight Owl
Edward Wu, age 12
Naperville, Illinois

Great Horned Owl
Maxwell Sanderson, age 6
Santa Cruz, California
Watershed Art Studio
Teacher: Linda Cover

Creek Owl
Maddie Lauria, age 7
Cumming, Georgia
Brookwood Elementary
Teacher: Susan Voshell
I pass by a single rock, it stands tall in the midst of all this water.

Moss grows on the cliffs, it hangs on the rough rock face, growing and thriving despite the hard conditions.

I seem to fly now not afraid of the churning water, of the dark depths that threaten to swallow me up.

The sky above so dark and grey, is reflected below as a single lightning bold cuts through it making the sky shine pure white.

Mia Foster, age 12
Missoula, Montana
Sussex School
Teacher: Jennifer Ellis
I am certain, in dark times and in the deepest of darkness, that there is light.

The sea is our great mother.
She whispers I love you in all her shells—
When I put one to my ear I can hear her
Singing in my bloodstream: you belong to me.

Fresh red mountains bubble out of her—
She hushes them, hissing and boiling,
Soothing them to rough blackness,
Then eroded soil. She will eat them up.

The waves are her lips and teeth,
The sea foam her laughing tongue—
She gnaws at the bones of the earth,
Carves out sea arches from the hardest stone.

She is the vast, exalted cradle of our ancestors.
She has swallowed up men
And the ships of men
In her cold round darkness.

In her there are black and eyeless places;
In her, dancing, little gossamer souls
Make their own light far from the sun.

Emma Finch, age 16
Carmel, California

A Journey Towards Peace
Neha Ray, age 16
Kolkata, India
Comparison

If you hold a seashell up to your ear, press it close, the shell of skin mimicking the curling curve of calcium carbonate and you’ll discover—like fingerprints on sandpaper—the ebb and flow and back and forth the endless rush of the ocean Not present, but caught—like sea green eyes—within you Within your veins—subway tunnels under skin—and the endless thump of your heart caught, like a fist to the face—within the curving shell of your ribs.

*Maxine Hartnett, age 16*
*Boulder, Colorado*

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*Peace & Love*
*Mezhgan, age 16*
*Quetta, Pakistan (Afghan national)*
*Hatif Art Gallery*
*Teacher: Hassan Ali Hatif*
New Mexican Lightning at Noon

I have been the wooden floors
dented, scratched, slid over with
one-year-old knees, tripped over with
two-year-old feet.

I have been microscopic cursive letters
flowing from the graphite pencil tip of a
six-year-old, wobbling, sea-sick loops across a
wide-ruled notebook, defying lines.

I have been chocolate-streaked candy wrappers,
carefully stashed between bed and wall
collecting dust with tissue paper ghosts,
hiding just out of sight.

I have been the Santa Barbara fog,
creeping unexpectedly over mountains and
under fingernails The kind you can almost taste.

I have been San Francisco sunrises,
rare, buzzing with energy,
and colorful as the flags that hang in the Castro.

I have reached a grey limit and exploded,
shrapnel of color glancing off my fingertips
facets of kaleidoscope red and yellow shattering
every time I took a breath.

I have been New Mexican lightning at noon.

Now
I am envy-green Ireland
pubs overflowing with music and stale ale.

Now
I am the white-washed house with the creeping blood-stained begonias
and the wild lavender, overgrown and constantly windswept
Now
I am long evenings tinged pink
clinging to the air around a well-worn mug,
tasting the tea that spills over the rim.

Now
I am explosive, I am the impulsive gambler
rocking back and forth on a weathered stool,
counting the ways I can be brave.

Now
I am the glittering grey gutter water that flows from beneath the
sidewalk cracks,
and

Now
I am the wind that lifts you up
when you find yourself slipping slowly back
down to the earth.

Ella Gardner, age 15
San Francisco, California
Lowell High School/California Poets in the Schools
Teacher: Susan Terence

I Wish the River Will
Not Dry Up
Jerry Yu, age 6
Atlanta, Georgia
Shujun Art Studio
(Lilburn)
Teacher: Shujun Munns
Panther

There is a panther
Lurking behind the bushes
Old and wise, he knows
The deer of the creek are parched
And do not defend their fawns.

Victoria Krylova, age 12
Greenville, Tennessee

To Sashay in the Wind

Cherry blossom leaves
Sashay in the rustling wind,
How gently they sink.

Steffen Lee, age 13
Centralia, Washington
Rochester Middle School (Rochester)
Teacher: Jon Ehmke
Autumn

Leaves changing colors
Winds sending chills down my spine
Time for a jacket

_Harly Lomahan, age 12_
_Dawsonville, Georgia_
_Dawson County Middle School_
_Teacher: Aimee Park_

i step in it,
too deep for my
rainboots, water creeps
inside,
wetting my
socks,
a wetness that clings
long after I dry. i step in it,
a solution of
50% memories,
and 50% tears.
too deep for my
rainboots, it sloshes over the
edge,
wets my feet.
each time I feel ready to
move on,
when feet are
almost dry, i let
myself smile. I step in it,
too deep for my
rainboots, 50% memories,
and 50% tears.

_Maisie Maclay, age 14_
_Olympia, Washington_
_Nova School_
_Teacher: Janet Hubbard_
The moon
lingers in the cloudless sky—
too proud to hide.

Clare Madden, age 13
Kenmore, Washington
Lakeside School (Seattle)
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

Night Mountain Goat    Mira Darham, age 16
Bozeman, Montana
Fall

The taste of apple on my tongue,
Light and crisp and sweet.
My lungs fill with the cold
Morning air, a rush of life and steam.
Thoughts of autumn fall through my mind like
leaves of gold and orange,
Of cinnamon doughnuts and pumpkin patches,
Getting lost in corn fields.
The sweet smell of decomposing leaves and wetness in the air, and wood
Smoke tendrils
Drifting through my mind
When geese flying towards the south
The sky filled with V’s, I see the outcome of last year’s seeds.
Softness of my cat, and nights when the moon is bright and yellow,
When the stars are far and cold.
The taste of apple on my tongue
Light
And crisp
And
Sweet.

Llewyn Merrill, age 14
Olympia, Washington
Nova School
Teacher: Janet Hubbard
Love letter to a dying season

Dear Fall,

You crept out the back door.
It's alright because
I never thought you would stay.
Your pink sunsets stark against the lavender sky,
Broken glass leaf skeletons shattering with every foot fall.
Your slightest shift of cold
Bluntly stealing my every whisper of heat,
Your clear sky left me aching,
But I could never surrender you
To a slow death.
Winter is a blurry thing,
But your edges are crisp.

Fall,
When you left
Did you know I'd miss you?
I never wanted to lose
Your fire leaf brilliance
To brown decay.

Can I call you Autumn?
Can I cast you in dying afternoon light,
Carry your misty morning in my inside coat pocket,
Breathe you in softly?
You smell like white lies
And almost wishes,

Fall,
I will miss every morning that tasted like goodbye.
I will miss every candy day you gave me.
Color my soul of the season of your glory,
You are a timeless place,
Juxtaposed moment,
Caught between—
    between sunlight and frost
between blossom and decay
The in between time of now.

I bless you with my gloved hands,
    Taking your edges
And carefully folding you into something I can keep forever.

Dear Fall,
maybe this is goodbye.

Echo Martens, age 14
Olympia, Washington
Nova Middle School
Teacher: Janet Hubbard

Ice Age

We are a lineage of broken monks
Who rest transient on foreign tongues.

We are purposefully leaving spaces open
To be touched by external motives

And overlaid with new grass
Because we know a solid sound

Will get too restless, and trees will make
Their own trip to heaven.

Noa Meerschwam
New York, New York
Beach Ghazal

The sweet sound of waves crashing on rocks
A baby’s first word
The pungent smell of seaweed splayed upon the sand
A sharp note of a violin
The cool feel of water splashing my feet
An ice cream on a summer’s day
The sharp bit of a sand fly
An annoying little brother
The scream of laughter at the volleyball court
Last day of school
Catching a wave on a surfboard
Finishing your chores
The orange sunset over the ocean
Ending a book
The sweet sound of waves crashing on rocks
A baby’s first word
The pungent smell of seaweed splayed upon the sand
A sharp note of a violin
The cool feel of water, splashing at my feet
An ice cream on a summer’s day
The sharp bit of a sand fly
An annoying little brother
The scream of laughter at the volleyball court
Last day of school
Catching a wave on a surfboard
Finishing your chores
The orange sunset over the ocean
Ending a book.

Toshihiro Nagase, age 14
Redmond, Washington
Lakeside School
Teacher: Susan Mortensen
The Final Chapter

I always thought that everything would be pulsating and Thunderous
As rain battered my face
And stung my raw skin.
Everything would be dark,
And it would last for days
As the world slowly
Starved
And became silent.

But I was wrong.

Instead, the sun shone bright
As we drove towards the sunlight.
The end was a flash:
Glowing and blinding, yet
Warm.
And we all held hands while we watched the world crumble.
We all held hands as the world faded into light.

Sally O’Keefe, age 16
Toronto, Canada
IT PLOPS BRIGHT THIRSTY TRANQUIL BOUNDLESS IT GLISTENS A LIQUID GEM PLUNGES DOWN A SLOW DESCENT IT CALMLY SHINES A DROPLET COMBINES ITS WHOLE TRUE FORM AS IT TOUCHES THE SURFACE A DISTURBANCE CREATES CIRCLES OF UNDULATING WAVES AROUND THE DROP THAT IS ENSHROUDED BY ITS WHOLE A SIMPLE SIGHT YET COMPLEXITY IS PRESENT A QUICK REACTION THAT IS SOON HALTED BY AN INCEPTION OF GRADUAL CALMNESS ENSUED BY IT COMPLETE SILENCE AS THE SENSES RETURN TO YOU SLIGHT BREEZE WHISTLES IN THE EAR AS YOUR LISTEN THE FEEL OF AN AQUEOUS SOLUTION TOUCHING YOU TRANQUILITY FROM THE AROMA OF NEARBY FOLIAGE THE RUSTLING OF NEARBY TREES OF SOUNDS OF MANY BUSTLING CICADAS BRING YOU BACK TO A NEW STATE ON REALITY OPPOSITE OF BEFORE AND WHAT YOU REALIZE NOW IS THAT WHAT YOU SENSED BEFORE WAS A SPECIAL FEELING THAT IS WATER

Drop  Jungkar Ombadykow, age 17
Lafayette, Colorado  Peak to Peak Charter School
Teacher: Kristie Letter
Lustrous fronds dance
In green enthusiasm, gusts
Cause fluttering rustles

Arryn Owens, age 14
Lake Forest Park, Washington
Lakeside School (Seattle)
Teacher: Susan Mortensen

The Lovely Frog      Vinci Chan, age 5
Hong Kong, China      School of Creativity
Teacher: Stephanie Yip
I am

I am saltwater swallowed as
a stowaway in breaths of air,
broken sand dollars filled with wishes
snapped and forgotten in moving boxes,
crushed in the necessity of change.

I am stippling graphite
hands ghosted with anxiety
shiver ing lines and unsure textures grasping
for a voice of their own.

I am dotted lines like paper cuts
on maps of nothing but sea
plotting ever-changing branches
through a territory that is not my own.

I am nights spent
serenaded by the creaking howls
of banshees
living within the skeleton of my guardian,
days spent pressed against sun-warmed skin
recording the prophecies of gods
that echoed through the water,
through my ribs.

I am hot fire on my toes,
my back,
sand like golden armor
tattooed on my skin,
swords plunged into ice water,
salty blue blood.
I am sheets bound around ankles
shackles of home,
yearning for the travel I once
twisted away from,
thoughts of everything that used
to compose my life,
that now compose my memories.

Emma Peasley, age 13
Missoula, Montana
Sussex School
Teacher: Jennifer Ellis

The City
Devyn Wright, age 17
Yardville, New Jersey
Steinert High School
(Hamilton)
Teacher: Andrea Schwing
Midmorning, Summer Rain

I awoke to the rain
whispering down among the birches.
The fields were calling me.

Queen Anne’s Lace. Black-Eyed Susan
bowed with dewdrops.
Late raspberries
like blessing.
Everything clean and misty is a gift.

Walking down the muddy road,
barefoot in the morning.

Friends from dreams who follow me
along the central margin of wet grass,
tell me of the things I love,
but do not yet understand.

Maya Roe, age 13
Sonora, California

A Series of Waves      Mark Oet, age 17      Solon, Ohio
Turtle

I see a turtle
looking up at me
in the water.
It’s almost like
I’m talking to it.
As the moon shines down.

Poppy Rose Sanner, age 5
San Rafael, California
Marin Homeschool Poets (Occidental)
Teacher: Devika Brandt

Turtle Life
Nicole Li, age 11
Johns Creek, Georgia
Shujun Art Studio
Teacher: Shujun Munns
‘Yes’-vember

Yes morning, Yes light
Yes darkness, Yes night
Yes rain, Yes shivers
Yes spider-web that quivers
Yes wind, Yes sweaters
Yes spiced golden cider

Yes fog, Yes gray
Yes leaves that decay
Yes soup, Yes fire
Yes summer does expire

Yes gourds, Yes pumpkin
Yes to all our decadent fixin’s
Yes greetings, Yes toasts
Yes racks that hold guests’ coats
Yes thanking, Yes “Grace”
Yes smiles upon each face.

November has gone out of style
Let’s try ‘Yes’-vember for a while.

Alyzandria Seventi, age 13
Rochester, Washington
Rochester Middle School
Teacher: Jon Ehmke

Snow on Rabbit
Pariprita Mallavarapu, age 9
Cumming, Georgia
Shiloh Point Elementary
Teacher: Tanya Cheeves
Advice from a Penguin

Danger is all around,
so beware of your surroundings.
Stay near others that make you happy;
they’ll also keep you warm.

If lost in a storm,
call out.
The ones you love will call back.

Keep yourself calm,
otherwise you’ll lose your egg.

Just keep swimming,
you’ll find the perfect amount of fish one day.
And when you do,
remember to come up for air.
Just keep swimming.

Electra Shock
Grand Junction, Colorado
Grand Junction High School
Teacher: Jill Burkey

Deer    Phoenix Snow-Silva, age 7
Boulder Creek, California    Watershed Art Studios (Santa Cruz)
Teacher: Linda Cover
Oh
The patience it takes
to make crafting a canyon your life goal—
to erode the infinitely durable
with pure tranquility.

So perhaps
I am a little ashamed to say;
I am not interested
in being the river
that wears down your canyon
—but rather—
the hurricane
that turns your world upside down.

Change is not easy,
but I am not interested in being easy;
I am interested in being what you need.

The waterfall that drops
marvel into your eyes

The waves that kiss
your cheeks each morning—

The tsunami that devastates
you in the most wonderful way.

Marie Spence, age 17
Lafayette, Colorado
Sunset Stillness      Audrey Horn, age 13
Keller, Texas
Quienes hablan de tí, te recuerdan
Un día en el cual ellos
Están muy felices y
También se sienten como una
Zarzamora fresca, fragrante y jugosa
A la vista de las personas
Las cuales te adoran porque su dios
Consentido y nunca
Olvidarán tu escencia y
Amor para tu pueblo y
Todas un día estaremos contigo entre
Las rosas más bellas del mundo

Whoever speaks of you, remembers
A day when they were very happy
Feeling like a ripe, fragrant, juicy
Strawberry, in the sight of all the people
Who adore you because you are their favorite god and they will never forget your essence and love for your town and we will be with you every day among the most beautiful roses in the world.

Selene Jazmín Venegas, age 13
Amatlán de Quetzalcoatl*, Mexico
Telesecundaria Quetzalcoatl
Teachers: John Oliver Simon
Ekiway Adler-Bermúdez

*Amatlán is the place where the great pre-conquest feathered-serpent god Quetzalcoatl was born. A shrine to the god dominates the central plaza.
I am a shining silver snowy plover singing beautiful songs to the blue whales.

I am a water lily dancing with frogs.

I am a mischievous red crab pinching the white ducks.

I am a field of vanilla grass helping the grey foxes hide.

I am a golden garter snake eating black muskrats.

I am a marsh of foxtails swimming with the salmon.

I am a brown gopher burrowing under the ground.

I am a willow tree weeping with the rats.

I am a bright green Night Lizard chomping on bugs at night.

I am a marsh marigold growing with the tadpoles.

Aidan Tubman, age 10
San Francisco, California
Lakeshore Elementary School/California Poets in the Schools
Teacher: Susan Terence

The Last Bite  Kevin Johnston, age 17
Cumming, Georgia
The Cottage School (Roswell)
Teacher: Katja Burkett
Imaginary Paintings

after Lisel Mueller

I. HOW I WOULD PAINT HAPPINESS
Lying on the ground,
beams of sunlight tickling my nose
my bare toes on the cool, green grass
with endless time to waste.

2. HOW I WOULD PAINT FREEDOM
A peaceful creek rushing through a valley
with no barriers to keep it back,
flowing in hopes of one day reaching the sea.

3. HOW I WOULD PAINT PERSEVERANCE
Standing tall, looking up
from the bottom of an enormous mound.
The top seems years away,
but it holds so many mysteries.

4. HOW I WOULD PAINT SORROW
Gray, cloudy skies,
but only for a short time.
The clouds will drift by,
and the gold will seep through.

Melissa Wilson, age 15
Grand Junction, Colorado
Grand Junction High School
Teacher: Jill Burkey
When Crimson Fled

Met a man today
who didn’t win the lottery.

Scratched three silver extensions
on shiny purple cards
Then bit his lip so hard that
crimson fled.

Banged the side of his
dented champagne colored
1978 Toyota Corolla
Car his father lent him when he got laid off.

Threw the parchments of Providence
into a cosmic abyss
where the waste lies with no destination
but barges and hills and fields
where sea gulls pray.

Shook his two iced teas hard
Gold Peaks he bought at
Hess Express
they appealed to him when he
saw glittering pieces of possibility
linging the green colored wall
Now the concentrated sweetness
repulses him.

Told him
I’ll buy the album you say no one will,
supply the pencils for you
lump charcoal lyrics
hard to swallow, we can chew
peppery sunflower seeds together
because they taste like the filet mignon
that we can’t afford.

Olivia Vande Woude
age 16
Charlottesville
Virginia
Berries

It’s the end of August
when the leaves first start to change
and the blueberries dot the hills
like a Van Gogh painting.
You ate the first one,
your hands stained red and blue.
The juice dribbled on your tongue
creating a summer lust for picking.
Our mothers sent us out
with pails and random containers.
We pushed and fell
through the wet blueberry fields.
The sky was gray,
and the morning felt heavy with dew.
We picked
until our hands were stained,
our clothes were dirty,
and our pails heavy with ripe berries.
We climbed home
over the bushes,
our stomachs full.

*Inspired by Seamus Heany’s poem, “Blackberry-Picking”*

*Zoe Wilson*
*Missoula, Montana*
*Sussex School*
*Teacher: Jennifer Ellis*
Playing Possum  Jackson Gibree, age 11
Cumming, Georgia  Shiloh Point Elementary
Teacher: Sandra Landers

Opossum and Company  Marisol Jenkins-Sorensen, age 10
Santa Cruz, California  Watershed Art Studios
Teacher: Linda Cover
Lunar Friend

it is an immortal night
shrouded in dusk.

my dad drives our car steadily
on a dirt road
along its bumps
along its cracks

while I peer out the side window
at the mirage of the full moon
hovering on its heavenly throne.

my dad takes a few deft turns
and I crane my head
in search of the moon
through every window of the car;

it’s always there—
stable,
vigilant,

filling the silence
with a wistful sonata,

illuminating the scenery,
revealing that every
tree, flower, and pond
has its own story…

we finally reach a campsite
and unload our bags,
but I don’t sleep that night;
I am mesmerized by the moon.

We’re friends,
the moon and me.

Jennifer Yen, age 14
Beachwood, Ohio
The In-Between

Twice, a fork, an intersection; you, the mutt

An enigma shouldered by blooded stain,
or prune juice. On the map, it did not say.

To tempt, to dispel foregoing moment—

um, for going directionless how do I stop

coveting ignorance like a swaddled child

If the ground beneath me imploded, I stood right there pointing a finger in three opposite directions

out of sight and gas, a single weasel basked in the dim glow of car headlights that Cora wanted to keep

and rather than driving in reverse, we stopped altogether

a wool blanket pulled from the trunk, gray to match the air

fake prayed to the clouded sky no one wants to go to Hell
on the feeling of being lost, we contemplated leaving a fork in straight-line motion

I don’t even remember which road we took afterwards but that was never the important thing.

Grace Zhao, age 16
East Setauket, New York
Butterfly Smile  Sloan Milam, age 8
Smyrna, Georgia  Springmont School (Atlanta)
Teacher: Theresa Dean
Heritage Goat  Guy Twa, age 16
Birmingham, Alabama  The Altamont School
Teacher: Marygray Hunter
Imagine of Face Arghawun Hatif, age 15
Quetta, Pakistan (Afghan national) Hatif Art Academy
Teacher: Hassan Ali Hatif
“On Writing,” features poems that are not directly related to the theme of our contest, “watersheds,” which admittedly, we have always interpreted rather broadly. In selecting “watersheds” as our theme in 1995, we sought a meaningful, scalable lens through which children and their teachers could observe the natural world. Our goal was (and is) to get kids’ imaginations working, to get them exploring the places they live, and to give them tools, practice and recognition for effectively expressing what they discover.

Because our anthologies are used extensively in classrooms—and by students on their own—as guides for how to write good poetry, over time we began receiving poems that reflected on the process of writing itself, often in ways we thought would be an inspiration to young writers. So, we started including a few of these poems on the craft of writing in our annual collections, to the delight of teachers and students. Enjoy this year’s offerings!
Five Ways of Thinking About a Pencil

I.
Inhale deeply
the rubbery scent
of a corrected mistake.

II.
O Eraser, how many times
Have you saved my grade on an assignment?
A failed math problem—becomes a success!
Rewriting that haiku so that it shimmers like a piece of sea glass.
Redoing that line in art class that makes all the difference.
O Eraser, you are like a phoenix—
From the ashes of the old
You pave the way for the new.

III.
Running late
Forgot hair tie
One swift motion
And the dutiful pencil
Doubles
As a stick for your bun.

IV.
A thin sliver of dark silvery graphite
Pushed through the plastic cone’s tip
Pure Carbon, like a softer diamond
And yet we call it a “pencil lead.”

V.
A symbol of literacy
A tool of learning
Writing empowers

Tea Freedman-Susskind, age 13
Redmond, Washington
Lakeside Middle School (Seattle)
Teacher: Susan Mortensen
Forever

Poems hide
in the black crevices
of a used basketball,
in the chewed skin
of a yellow pencil, each indent
with its own nervous story to tell.
They hide in the skid marks
left by a London town car.
Poems plunge
into the ocean as I do, each summer.
They lie next to me in the old, rickety hammock,
and we climb the Highlands together
in our rented Range Rover.
Poems burst and crack
in the homemade popcorn machine
on our abandoned
third-floor game room.
They swim on the mucky bottom
of Lake Ossipee
and crouch alongside me
on the shoreline of the enigmatic water.
They cramp
— with my sticky, smelly feet —
in much worn basketball sneakers,
in the stacks of blue jeans
that barely fit in the
largest drawer of my white dresser.
They roll down the hills of the Boothbay Football Field
Where I spend all my extra time.
Poems scar my knees and cut my hands.
They leave imprints on my life
that will last forever.

Maggie Larson, age 13
W. Boothbay, Maine
Center for Teaching and Learning
Teacher: Anne Atwell-McLeod
Imagine

Imagine you could compose a mountain with just one word
Maybe you could even learn to twist the clouds and
paint the sky blue, that blue sky, blue
A wish would build the unknown grace in each and every creature
Good night moon light would not be there without my smile
In the sky up there the stars, my sneeze
Never would we know anything without me, would we?
Everyone, everything, every name would not be known,
would not be seen with me. I am your mind.
May the wind be your word and the water your wish
Imagine what would be there, what would be your wish, your word
Nothing, everything is
Done by me, your imagination.

Corinne Webster, age 12
San Anselmo, California
Marin Homeschool Poets (Occidental)
Teacher: Devika Brandt

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Exploring the Ocean      Alex Zhong, age 11
Lilburn, Georgia      Shujun Art Studio      Teacher: Shujun Munns
In a Poem

My mind flies across miles of memories,
Dances in valleys of verbs,
Jumps in piles of prepositions,
Runs through avalanches of adjectives,
Skips through plains of pronouns,
Wanders through arches of adverbs,
Floats through canals of conjunctions,
Explores islands of interjections,
Crosses necks of nouns,
In a poem.

Mcenzie Friedman, age 14
Polk City, Iowa
North Polk High School (Alleman)
Teacher: Traci Friedman
Seasons of Hidden Poetry

Poems swim in the turquoise pool,
smooth glass until I shatter the surface with a dive.
They linger in the tangy air of the Georgetown beach
that smells of seaweed and summer.
They soar with me as I canter on a horse
for the first time at camp.

Poems fill be like the spicy sweet chai,
my go-to drink
when I watch “How I Met Your Mother” with Payton.
They float through the air with the changing leaves
that form a sea of amber and gold
as they reach the ground.
The are the mess of pumpkin goop
I squeamishly scoop out with my hands
when I carve the glowing suns.

They hide in the sweet, creaming hot chocolate
that warms me inside after a day in the sno.
Poems waft through the kitchen
with the aroma of baking gingerbread cookies—
little me who will be gobbled up in the blink of an eye—
and they fly down the sledding hill with be at break-neck speed.

Poems flood my mouth
with the sweet juice of fresh fruit
that tastes better when winter’s gone.
They hide in the new grass that shoots up
and struggles against the brown stalks winter left.
Poems fill the air with the scent of the earth and the chirp of birds:
a reminder that winter is gone.
Poems hide everywhere,  
in everything—  
a world of secrets,  
waiting to be written.

Sydney Sullivan, age 13
Brunswick, Maine
Center for Teaching and Learning (Edgecomb)
Teacher: Anne Atwell-McLeod

The Curious Triumvirate  
Wei Shiow Fong, age 12
Vestavia, Alabama  
The Altamont School (Birmingham)
Teacher: Marygray Hunte
Raindrops

They leap, fly, then fall, plummeting downwards,
Letters unleashed, cascading down a page of the sky.
Caught and lifted, swooping to melt into a cloud
Raining down, twirling together, like so many drops of moonlight
Falling, crashing, exploding, breaking
into a million opal shards to be crushed underfoot
Flowing into each other to form new meaning
Running into a straight course
A common destination
Rivering, glittering, shining in the sunlight
A conscious effort to converge, to form a meaning, a purpose.
A million tiny eddies swirling together to form, miraculously,
a single piece of silver filigree
A river of words,
Poetry.

A. Mayan Caplan, age 11
Denver, Colorado