

Vernmeer⁶ gave to the sun's illumination
stealing like the tide across a map
to his girl solid with yearning.
We are poor passing facts,
warned by that to give
each figure in the photograph
his living name.

20

1977

6. Jan Vermeer (1632-1675), Dutch painter noted for his subtle handling of the effects of light.

GWENDOLYN BROOKS 1917-2000

Gwendolyn Brooks is perhaps best known for the poem "We Real Cool," memorable for its depiction of young, black, urban men and its skillful use of syncopated rhythms, enjambment, alliteration, rhyme, caesura, ellipsis, and tonal complexity. Much of her best work is in compressed short poems that display both formal mastery and keen social insight. The central subject of her verse is the black inner city. Like Edgar Lee Masters (another Illinois poet) in *Spoon River Anthology*, Brooks often presents the "characters" of local people, whether the preacher or the gangster, the dreamy young girl or the madam of a brothel. Her miniaturized narratives reveal a life story in a few quick strokes.

Brooks learned the hard discipline of compression from two sources. The modernists famously demanded that superfluities be eliminated, that every word be made to count (*le mot juste*), and this seems to have been the guiding principle of the Chicago poetry workshop she attended in the early 1940s, in which she read T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and E. E. Cummings. Brooks also learned this lesson from the spare, hard, stripped-down idiom of the blues, which Langston Hughes urged her to study. Like the authors of the blues, she uses insistent rhymes and terse simplicity, and she can be at once understated and robust. Despite Brooks's reputation for directness, her poetry, like the blues and other African American oral traditions, evinces a sly and ironic indirection.

In presenting her vivid characters, Brooks knows what to put into her poems and what to keep out. Her laconic but exuberant poems reflect the mixture of reverence and control she portrays in her character Annie Allen, a girl who, pleased to be "rid" of a "relative beneath the coffin lid," instead of affecting solemnity when no one is near, "struck her tongue out; slid" ("old relative"). Eliding pronouns and articles, suspending the verb "slid" at the end of the line, Brooks says more by saying less. Even when responding to emotionally and politically violent events, Brooks practices restraint. In "The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till," written after the fourteen-year-old was murdered, in 1955, for whistling at a white woman, Brooks holds back from venting grief directly. She locates it instead in the violent, unresolved tensions between tightly woven oppositions of color ("red," "black"), size ("red room," "red prairie,"), and feeling ("kisses," "killed"). "And she is sorry," Brooks writes of the mother's searing grief and rage. Here, as elsewhere, Brooks mixes colloquial black speech ("a pretty-faced thing," "black coffee") with high poetic discourse ("Chaos in windy grays"). Brooks dexterously moves among various rhetorical registers and forms: her poems range

from the formal to the vernacular, from ballads and perfectly rhymed sonnets (especially early in her career) to what she called, at Chapman College, the "wild, raw, ragged free verse" of her later work.

Determined to represent the everyday lives of African American city dwellers, especially women, Brooks lights up the most ordinary details with a sudden rhythm, passionate observation, or exciting refrain. As she says in "A Street in Bronzeville," she would like to have "a dream send up through onion fumes / Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes / And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall." She prefers wild girls to safe ones ("Sadie and Maud") and endorses all that is "luminously indiscreet" ("The Sermon on the Warpland"). She seems to agree with the title character of "Big Bessie Throws Her Son into the Street": "Hunt out your own, or make your own alone. / Go down the street." She is for gumption, for independence of spirit, not for compromise.

In 1967, Brooks had an experience that changed the temper of her poetry. Attending the Second Fisk University Black Writers' Conference, she met some of the younger poets espousing a new black cultural nationalism, notably Amiri Baraka (then LeRoi Jones). Brooks felt she had awakened "in some inscrutable and uncomfortable wonderland." She was later to write: "Until 1967 my own blackness did not confront me with a thrill spelling of itself" (*Report from Part One*). On her return to Chicago, she organized a poetry workshop for young African Americans, including a teenage gang called the Blackstone Rangers. She assisted in community programs and tirelessly worked to inspire younger black poets.

Brooks was born on June 17, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, but she grew up in Chicago, was educated at Englewood High School and Wilson Junior College there, and identified herself with that city. After her graduation in 1936, she worked for a quick "spiritual advisor" who sold potions and charms to the needy, her job being to write hundreds of letters to prospective patients. Her office was in the Mecca Building on South State Street, where many poor families and derelicts lived. At the end of what she said was the worst period of her life, Brooks refused to take on the duties of "Assistant Pastor" and was honorably fired. Her book *In the Mecca* (1968) draws much of its material from this experience.

Attending a poetry workshop at the South Side Community Art Center, Brooks displayed extraordinary talent. She won contests sponsored by *Poetry* magazine and various organizations and was able to publish her first book in 1945. In 1950, she became the first African American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize, awarded for her book *Annie Allen*. She was appointed poet laureate of Illinois, a post in which she succeeded Carl Sandburg. She traveled in East Africa and in the former Soviet Union. At sixty-eight, she became the first African American woman to be appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. Of her awards, perhaps the most agreeable to the poet was the 1981 dedication of the Gwendolyn Brooks Junior High School in Harvey, Illinois. She was married to Henry Blakely and had a son and a daughter.

A Song in the Front Yard

I've stayed in the front yard all my life.
I want to peek at the back
Where it's rough and untended and hungry weed grows.
A girl gets sick of a rose.
I want to go in the back yard now
And maybe down the alley,

To where the charity children play.
I want a good time today.

They do some wonderful things.
They have some wonderful fun.
My mother sneers, but I say it's fine
How they don't have to go in at quarter to nine.
My mother, she tells me that Johnnie Mae
Will grow up to be a bad woman.
That George'll be taken to jail soon or late
(On account of last winter he sold our back gate).

But I say it's fine. Honest, I do.
And I'd like to be a bad woman, too,
And wear the brave stockings of night-black lace
And strut down the streets with paint on my face.

Sadie and Maud

Maud went to college.
Sadie stayed at home.
Sadie scraped life
With a fine-tooth comb.

She didn't leave a tangle in.
Her comb found every strand.
Sadie was one of the livingest chits
In all the land.

Sadie bore two babies
Under her maiden name.
Maud and Ma and Papa
Nearly died of shame.
Every one but Sadie
Nearly died of shame.

When Sadie said her last so-long
Her girls struck out from home.
(Sadie had left as heritage
Her fine-tooth comb.)

Maud, who went to college,
Is a thin brown mouse.
She is living all alone
In this old house.

Of De Witt Williams on His Way to Lincoln Cemetery¹

He was born in Alabama.
He was bred in Illinois.
He was nothing but a
Plain black boy.

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.²
Nothing but a plain black boy.

Drive him past the Pool Hall.
Drive him past the Show.
Blind within his casket,
But maybe he will know.

Down through Forty-seventh Street,³
Underneath the L,⁴
And—Northwest Corner, Prairie,
That he loved so well.

Don't forget the Dance Halls—
Warwick and Savoy,
Where he picked his women, where
He drank his liquid joy.

Born in Alabama.
Bred in Illinois.
He was nothing but a
Plain black boy.

Swing low swing low sweet sweet chariot.
Nothing but a plain black boy.

The Vacant Lot

Mrs. Coley's three-flat brick
Isn't here any more.
All done with seeing her fat little form
Burst out of the basement door;
And with seeing her African son-in-law
(Rightful heir to the throne)
With his great white strong cold squares of teeth
And his little eyes of stone;
And with seeing the squat fat daughter

1. African American cemetery in Chicago.
2. A line from a spiritual.
3. The main street of Bronzeville, Chicago's black ghetto.
4. Elevated railway.

Letting in the men
When majesty has gone for the day—
And letting them out again.

1945

The Rites for Cousin Vit

Carried her unprotesting out the door.
Kicked back the casket-stand. But it can't hold her,
That stuff and satin aiming to enfold her,
The lid's contrition nor the bolts before.
Oh oh. Too much. Too much. Even now, surmise,
She rises in the sunshine. There she goes,
Back to the bars she knew and the repose
In love-rooms and the things in people's eyes.
Too vital and too squeaking. Must emerge.
Even now she does the snake-hips with a hiss,
Slops the bad wine across her shantung,⁵ talks
Of pregnancy, guitars and bridgework, walks
In parks or alleys, comes happily on the verge
Of happiness, happily hysterics. Is.

1949

The Bean Eaters

They eat beans mostly, this old yellow pair.
Dinner is a casual affair.
Plain chipware on a plain and creaking wood,
Tin flatware.

Two who are Mostly Good.
Two who have lived their day,
But keep on putting on their clothes
And putting things away.

And remembering . . .
Remembering, with twinklings and twinges,
As they lean over the beans in their rented back room that is full of beads
and receipts and dolls and cloths, tobacco crumbs, vases and fringes.

1960

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.
SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

1960

The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till⁶

AFTER THE MURDER,
AFTER THE BURIAL

Emmett's mother is a pretty-faced thing;
the tint of pulled taffy.

She sits in a red room,
drinking black coffee.

She kisses her killed boy.
And she is sorry.

Chaos in windy grays
through a red prairie.

1960

Boy Breaking Glass

To Marc Crawford⁷
from whom the commission

Whose broken window is a cry of art
(success, that winks aware
as elegance, as a treasonable faith)
is raw: is sonic: is old-eyed premiere.

5. Fabric with irregular surface.

6. Fourteen-year-old African American murdered in Mississippi, in 1955, for whistling at a white woman.

7. The writer and editor who suggested Brooks write a poem on the survival of inner-city African Americans.

Our beautiful flaw and terrible ornament.
Our barbarous and metal little man.

"I shall create! If not a note, a hole.
If not an overture, a desecration."

Full of pepper and light
and Salt and night and cargoes.

"Don't go down the plank
if you see there's no extension.
Each to his grief, each to
his loneliness and fidgety revenge.

Nobody knew where I was and now I am no longer there."

The only sanity is a cup of tea.
The music is in minors.

Each one other
is having different weather.

"It was you, it was you who threw away my name!
And this is everything I have for me."

Who has not Congress, lobster, love, luau,
the Regency Room, the Statue of Liberty,
runs. A sloppy amalgamation.

A mistake.

A cliff.

A hymn, a snare, and an exceeding sun.

The Blackstone Rangers⁸

I
As Seen by Disciplines⁹

There they are.
Thirty at the corner.
Black, raw, ready.
Sores in the city
that do not want to heal.

8. A tough Chicago street gang. Blackstone Street is the eastern boundary of Chicago's black ghetto.
9. That is, law enforcers. "Vexed by some who misread this first section as her own condemnation,

Brooks insists that, in any reprinting, the entire poem be published as a unit" (D. H. Melhem, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*, 1987).

II The Leaders

Jeff. Gene. Geronimo. And Bop.¹
They cancel, cure and curry.

Hardly the dupes of the downtown thing
the cold bonbon,
the rhinestone thing. And hardly
in a hurry.

Hardly Belafonte, King,
Black Jesus, Stokely, Malcolm X or Rap.²
Bungled trophies.
Their country is a Nation on no map.

Jeff, Gene, Geronimo and Bop
in the passionate noon,
in bewitching night
are the detailed men, the copious men.

They curry, cure,
they cancel, cancelled images whose Concerts
are not divine, vivacious; the different tins
are intense last entries; pagan argument;
translations of the night.

The Blackstone bitter bureaus
(bureaucracy is footloose) edit, fuse
unfashionable damnations and descent;
and exulting, monstrous hand on monstrous hand,
construct, strangely, a monstrous pearl or grace.

III Gang Girls

A RANGERETTE

Gang Girls are sweet exotics.
Mary Ann
uses the nutrients of her orient,
but sometimes sighs for Cities of blue and jewel
beyond her Ranger rim of Cottage Grove.³
(Bowery Boys, Disciplines, Whip-Birds will
dissolve no margins, stop no savory sanctities.)

Mary is
a rose in a whiskey glass.

1. Kind of jazz. *Geronimo*: Apache Indian chief who led raids against the whites in Arizona.
2. Informal talk, repartee. Harry Belafonte (b. 1927): American singer and activist. Martin Luther King (1929-1968): American civil rights

leader. Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998): black nationalist leader. Malcolm X (1925-1965): black nationalist leader.
3. Street of overcrowded tenements in the black ghetto.

Mary's
 Februaries shudder and are gone. Aprils
 fret frankly, lilac hurries on.
 Summer is a hard irregular ridge.
 October looks away.
 And that's the Year!

40

Save for her bugle-love.
 Save for the bleat of not-obese devotion.
 Save for Somebody Terribly Dying, under
 the philanthropy of robins. Save for her Ranger
 bringing.
 man amount of rainbow in a string-drawn bag.
 "Where did you get the diamond?" Do not ask:
 but swallow, straight, the spirals of his flask
 and assist him at your zipper; pet his lips
 and help him clutch you.

50

Love's another departure.
 Will there be any arrivals, confirmations?
 Will there be gleaning?

55

Mary, the Shakedowner's child
 from the rooming-flat, pants carefully, peers at
 her laboring lover. . . .

60

Mary! Mary Ann!
 Settle for sandwiches! settle for stocking caps!
 for sudden blood, aborted carnival,
 the props and niceties of non-loneliness—
 the rhymes of Leaning.

65

1968

The Boy Died in My Alley⁴

Without my having known.
 Policeman said, next morning,
 "Apparently died Alone."
 "You heard a shot?" Policeman said.
 Shots I hear and Shots I hear.
 I never see the dead.

5

The Shot that killed him yes I heard
 as I heard the Thousand shots before;
 careening tinnily down the nights
 across my years and arteries.

10

Policeman pounded on my door.
 "Who is it?" "POLICE!" Policeman yelled.
 "A Boy was dying in your alley.
 A Boy is dead, and in your alley.
 And have you known this Boy before?"

15

I have known this Boy before.
 I have known this Boy before, who
 ornaments my alley.
 I never saw his face at all.
 I never saw his futurefall.
 But I have known this Boy.

20

I have always heard him deal with death.
 I have always heard the shout, the volley.
 I have closed my heart-ears late and early.
 And I have killed him ever.

25

I joined the Wild and killed him
 with knowledgeable unknowing.
 I saw where he was going.
 I saw him Crossed. And seeing,
 I did not take him down.

30

He cried not only "Father!"
 but "Mother!"
 Sister!
 Brother."
 The cry climbed up the alley.
 It went up to the wind.
 It hung upon the heaven
 for a long
 stretch-strain of Moment.

35

The red floor of my alley
 is a special speech to me.

40

1973, 1981

4. Brooks said the poem fuses two separate incidents involving an honors student, Kenneth Alexander, killed running from a policeman, and a boy Brooks saw running in Ghana in 1974.