

# RADIAN VOICES

New Poets and Poems from  
Books That Saved Me,  
Birmingham 2025



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# FOREWORD

**By Erika E. Wade**

Being entrusted with leading a poetry workshop is both a joy and a journey. Each time I ask myself: how can anyone presume to know the poetic arts well enough to guide other poets through them? This time, I posed another question too: *and, what does it really mean to be a poet anyway?*

Many of the participants in the *Books That Saved Me* program had never called themselves poets before. That word hung over their heads like storm clouds in Alabama's peak season. Some had never written a poem, let alone shared one aloud. That takes a lot of bravery. Fear or hesitation could have easily taken root. Instead, what unfolded was something far more generous: courage, curiosity, and an openness to discovery.

Working with the brilliant poets whose work fills these pages taught me as much about poetry as I could ever hope to teach them. To be a poet—especially now—means being brave enough to commune with the human experience and commit your perspectives down to verse. Yes; we studied the importance of form, line, and thought to a poet's toolbox. Yes; we held ourselves to high standards of community, accountability, and craft. But this workshop became more than lessons in writing; it became a reckoning with the texts that shaped us.

We engaged with banned books spanning eras and continents. We let them disturb us, guide us, and remind us of the power of words to unsettle and liberate. And we let them embolden us to be braver on the page, and braver human beings in general.

I hope as you turn through these pages you find not only beauty, wisdom, and vision, but also an invitation to claim your own voice as a poet. If you ever find yourself in a workshop with me, I hope you'll come ready to use the creative process to unearth a little more of yourself.

Poetry can save us—if we let it.

# INTRODUCTION

*Books That Saved Me* is a new program created by PEN America and piloted during the Summer of 2025 in Birmingham, Alabama. In partnership with the [Magic City Acceptance Center](#) and the [Educational Foundation of America](#), eight free workshops led by poet and [Poets Across Lines](#) alumnus [Erika E. Wade](#) brought participants together across generations using poetry, a love for books, and their own Birmingham stories as a bridge to better understand themselves, each other, and the power of the written word.

Some of the participants had written poetry previously, and even been published; for most, though, this was their very first time approaching the craft. Whatever their prior experience (and ages ranged from age 13 to 65+), they were now sharing with each other their time, stories, hearts, and the myriad ways that books – and banned books in particular – had changed them. They came together to listen closely, write from their hearts, and forge community. Their work culminated in a public reading of a selection of their works at the Birmingham Botanic Garden on Sept. 13, 2025.

Book bans in public schools and libraries have risen dramatically across the country. They disproportionately impact LGBTQ+ and BIPOC authors and content, but rob *all* readers of the right to experience narratives from a wide range of perspectives. This program aimed to give participants an opportunity to share their own life experiences, reflect upon the stories they shared, and write poems about how these banned books helped shape who they are today.

*Books That Saved Me* was coordinated, managed, and supervised by Sabrina Adams, Senior Program Manager of National Engagement, with support from Andrew White, Program Director for Membership & National Engagement. None of it would have been possible without support, dedication, and care from Erika E. Wade; Amanda Keller and Magic City Acceptance Center; poet and educator Imani Williams; our friends and partners at Birmingham Public Library and Birmingham Botanic Garden; and the wonderful participating poets.

# GLEND A BROWN-WADE

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**Dr. Glenda Brown-Wade** is a motivational speaker, small-business coach and Founder and President of the Y.E.A. Foundation. She works with youths and women by providing resources needed to those seeking to enter or re-enter the job force. She brings a “Get it Done!” perspective as she coaches clients in financial literacy, job skills training, housing assistance, business start-up, and tax preparation. Her high-energy, humor, and a cut-to-the-chase style blended with motivation and encouragement found their way into poetry, as she wrote her first poems for this workshop. Glenda holds a BS degree in Social Work, Master’s in Organizational Management, the Doctor of Jurisprudence and 20+ years of experience in her field. Now, she “kind of” calls herself a poet as well. She has one daughter, Erika E. Wade, and a son, Kevin L. Brown.

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## Day One

Hello Day One.

I understand that you felt inadequate.

You're not a poet

never thought that this was your trip.

Day One,

just get through the assignment,

try not to make a nut of yourself;

or just try not to show it.

*Write a poem, she said. About what,*

*I said.*

My words are hard and abrupt,

not soft and pretty, like a poet.

Then, the words started to flow,

transferring thoughts from my mind to paper.

*Is that what a poet does? Is this poetry?*

*Am I becoming a poet?*

It is now Day Four. Are you?

A poet?



# Funny

I thought about writing a  
Rhythmic poem.

I thought about writing a  
Rhymic poem.

I thought about writing a  
Rhymic poem.  
About Love.

Well, damn it;  
I can't think of anything.

That's That!!!!

# Read Between the Lines

Don't like no  
camera.  
Don't like no  
banning books.  
Don't like people who  
spin the facts.  
Your fake truth is not a fact, it's still a lie.

Don't like no people who are  
afraid to stand up for the truth.  
Who are you afraid of?  
Is he blackmailing you with his hidden truth?  
Stop the madness!!!

Don't like no sneaky politicians who lie,

You said, just vote!  
I DID!  
Where are you?  
Come out of the shadows,  
Speak up,  
Protect,  
Just do something!

Stop the madness and make us whole..  
Restore hope again,

Before GOD comes again.

# Ode to Ms. Mya

After over 100 years  
How do you see me now?  
Shall I tell you how?

I am Smart and Bold.  
I am Brown, nearly Gold.  
I am Eloquent, Regal, and Confident.  
You may find my tone intimidating  
When I speak from my Throne.  
How do you see me Now?

After over 100 years,  
Are you still intimidated?

# Recollections

In 1971,

we rode the first yellow bus up the hill.

She said, *I can't teach the Blacks.*

*Sit them alongside the window, maybe they can help each other.*

She had two left legs: did that make her Superior?

In Fairfield, Alabama,

the sign said: *Whites Only*,

but I could see them through the dividing glass windows.

We entered through the door on the left.

They entered through the door on the right

Their dentist was the same as mine.

Recollections.

In 1967,

I was happy and afraid.

We drove to Grandma's house in Coy, Alabama.

Hungry.

Children's faces glued to the dusty windows of the car.

*Drive to the back of the store, they said.*

*Wait in the dirt at the back of the store.*

Order.

Wait.

Wait.

Wait.

*Wait.*

Picked up the burgers.

He spoke with an ignorant country twang;

called my dad *boy*.

Recollections.

In 1963,  
I was six years old-scared; don't know why.  
Mama in the kitchen listening to the radio.  
Washing the same dish, over,  
and over,  
and over and over again.  
Crying and singing an old gospel song.  
    King was there.  
    Shuttlesworth was there.  
    Abernathy was there, and  
    Children were there too.

Where are my sons?  
Where are my brothers?  
Recollections.

In the 1970s and 1980s  
I rode the first yellow bus up the hill.  
Integrate? *What is integration?*  
She said, *I can't teach the Blacks.*  
She said, *put them in the two rows next to the window;*  
*maybe they can help each other.*  
He said,  
he said, *Why do you want to go to college?*  
He was the college counselor.

Five years later  
redemption.  
Invited to deliver a speech at graduation.

After years of being told, *You are inferior-*  
finally HOME.  
Dear "Ole Miles."  
English, Literature, and Algebra Tutor.  
Had it all along.

Masters class.

In **Big bold, red ink**

she said, *you write like English is your 2nd language.*

The paper earned a Grade, "C."

Ironic–

same paper, different teacher, different student.

Grade "A."

My recollections are memories buried and

confined to the deep creases of my mind.

Until *he* appeared with games, cons, and

a crown made of horns and thorns.

The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy.

Who will we choose?

The thief and destroyer, or the life giver.

Why have my recollections of days gone by,

resurfaced as my reality today?

Over time, I've prayed

for these recollections to reflect a world of love and peace.

It is now 2025.

*Why not now?*

# SATURA DUDLEY

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**Satura Dudley** is a poet and fiction writer from Birmingham, Alabama, centering her work on her experience as a black woman. She graduated from the University of Alabama at Birmingham [UAB] in 2024 with her Bachelor's Degree in Political Science with a concentration in Human Rights and a Minor in African American Studies. She was named The Face of Birmingham in 2019, featured in seventeen magazines in 2018 and received the EJ Bradford Courageous award in 2021 for her dedication to activism. Satura Dudley is the Executive Director of Cell A65- a grassroots organization. She hopes her work illuminates the experiences of black women and people, and their stories. She selected three pieces to represent her current work 'Creatures', 'Whispers' and 'Linked' which are her reflections on the world.

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# Creatures

Shall I perform for you

Should I glide across the stage just barely showing skin

Drool oozing from your mouth

Should I mistake it dripping on the floor for applause

When the thunder of your hands finally clap should I pretend  
it is not to shake the ground

to expose me further

What should I dance for you

Your hungry eyes could not follow

I will bend and twist leaving your eyes cross

they slip out of their socket and roll to the stage longing for a closeness  
eyes cannot feel

What should I sing for you

Your ears bleed with real words so I speak softer

Hoping you won't notice it still running down your face

My words cause confusion amongst the crowd

Their minds destroying themselves

A beautiful creature that speaks is an abomination

For why would the dog say hello back?

For why would the cat say no?

What autonomy do you have outside of your owner?

What autonomy does your owner pretend to have outside of their pet?

Do you let me perform?

Or do I let you watch?



## Linked

Hold me close, with tight hands  
I do not recognize  
Feeding me warmth  
Cloth on my wound  
Our blood does not run together  
But our rivers do  
Your eyes watch around me  
Safe and Protective  
I know you not  
And I am home

# Whispers

We know hatred  
He crawls in the corner  
You cannot miss his eyes  
You cannot meet them either  
They glow of red and drip  
Bloodied Tears  
Their voice crackled like a flame,  
Breathing loud  
With not much to say  
They mumbled to themselves  
Cowordice  
Unable to speak loud  
'Do not touch' they mumble and choke  
A fear of relief hides in my handprint

# OCTAVIA KURANSKY

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**Octavia Kuransky**, an Alabama resident via San Francisco, California began writing after retirement from teaching business to low-income women. Her work took first prize in the 2023 Alabama Writers Collective Anthology and has since appeared in various anthologies. Octavia curated the Magic City Poetry Festival artwork at the Birmingham Museum of Art 2024 and 2025. She lives with her cat Betty, her snail Adam and coaxes sunflowers from seed in her backyard.

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## knowing and the wing upon we fly

This is how it began - he stepped on my toe. In the narrow aisle we danced the dance of avoidance.

"Sorry," he said to the floor. I smiled into the air. He turned to avoid further accident and possible contact. But product fell, packages rolled. He bent. I bent. The impact of heads caused a fall backwards - mine.

It was the skirt over my face that hurt the most but I made no move to fix it. The possibility of his blue eyes looking with concern upon me seemed more important than modesty.

"Oh!" he said. "*Oh I am so sorry!*" I pulled down my skirt but still lay on the floor.

"Let me help you." he said but I felt no helping hand. A second passed. Two seconds. Five seconds.

"Are you all right?" I heard him say.

Unexpectedly – a remembering. Yes, that day in high school: my brown face among all the white ones. The loud deliberate distance crowding the halls. The tic tic of a snicker once I'd passed. The back of my throat a flat metallic taste. The long weeks, the months, the years unable to swallow. Then.

Now: how to rise from this floor? A deciding moment! A sudden surge of some hot liquid through my middle, a clarity, a sharp and cutting cure!

"Yes!" I said into the air where his question still floated. I blinked just to make certain. "Yes! I am!" (Now I pushed myself from the floor not caring it was not graceful.) "Yes! I am! I am all right!" I said.

I don't remember what he said after that.

# Sunflowers

*for George Orwell, 1984*

Unfortunately

sunflowers are too tall for the front yard

Also, they insist upon growing their faces pointed east.

The view from my window also faces east. I see only the backs of their heads.

I step out to a certain waving motion going on. Definitely uncalled for.

One would think they would be more careful, want to protect their big heavy heads on those skinny vulnerable necks.

And this occurs regularly!

I hear a murmuring among them.

Just the stalks rubbing together said the man I lived with at the time.

He was the one who told me sunflowers were too tall for the front yard.

You're making something out of nothing. You do that a lot.

He turns into the house. Slams the door as usual.

The sunflowers quieted for a moment.

Perhaps I should stay with them. Until they start up again.

I hope they start up again.

Before they quieted, I thought I heard my name.

## The Discussion

It begins in the kitchen behind the apron

The kettle screams from the stovetop and

she turns: You know (there isn't really a pause here)

You know you really can't trust anyone too much anymore

The headlines rattle from today's paper (again there is really no pause here)

You see you see in her hands wave the headlines

They rattle the molecules of steamy air and I can see she still bites her nails

She repeats (no pause here)

Look here look here

I *told* you so

But - I begin and a pot slams to the floor

No! her fists drives into her hips but

not before I see she still bites her nails (I don't know why this bothers me so)

No! blaring trumpet voice she has but *switches on the radio*

You really really can not trust any one too much any more

But - I begin again

A sudden slap stops my action

Be a fool then! The spittle from her mouth (I can feel it still)

Be a fool then!

Now the dog barks!

Every body has an opinion.

The facts! I call up from the floor. The facts!

What facts? The father enters the room.

What facts you talkin' about? I got the rent! The dinner's on the table.  
Trust that!

The discussion has now concluded.

# DEJUANA MCCARY

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**DeJuana McCary** is a gifted writer and storyteller. The gift of writing flows from her Spirit as new waters of creativity and is supported by her deep vision of Spirituality. She holds the space for grace, truth, gentleness and Laughter.

She is a Retired Radiation Therapist and worked in the medical field for 45 years. During her professional journey, a personal essay comparing the journey of the cancer patient to the velveteen rabbit was published. She has shared a perspective of Holistic medicine and Radiation Therapy.

Believing in Social Justice and Equality she is active in First United Methodist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

During the last 15 years DeJuana has traveled, crossed new paths into improvisational singing, and loves to be with her partner, LaDonna and her dogs.

She gets her life spark from sharing stories with an “aha” moment to invite the listener to see life in a new perspective.

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# **Raising the Vibration of the Planet**

## **A Sonnet for Global Harmony**

In whispers of the morning breeze,  
A call resounds across the seas,  
To raise the planet's vibration high,  
And touch the stars in the boundless sky.  
Each gesture small, a ripple starts,  
A wave of love in countless hearts.  
So let us dance with joy and grace,  
And cherish every living space,  
Together, we can shift the tide,  
Sending a loud echo across the canyon  
With the stormy seas  
the earth quakes  
With courage  
Our lives remake

## Sonnet of silence

Leaving this morning in a hurry to go  
Yellow and blue socks draped across the chair  
Not realizing your adolescent feet would not return there.

The clanging of the bells  
Calling you in  
Not knowing the hell that would begin

Scraping of chalk on the board  
Neurons aiming to see the score  
Not safe from the bullets forevermore

AR-15 took aim  
Not even aware of your name.

## Stories to Share

Laughter rolling like jelly beans  
Unique tones and flavors  
These memories I would always savor

Perched on the edge of the chair  
Hearing stories and family secrets  
To never share  
Now Aunt Lois is no longer there

Chicken and Dumplings  
In Grandma's big stew pot  
Help me to remember  
Things I forgot

Chocolate pies with beads of sweat on the meringue  
Stood tall  
Especially after that Mississippi rain.  
The sweetness of chocolate resting on my lips  
Forgetting it would go straight to my hips.

Ninety-four and she still cooks  
With weathered hands  
Having grown up on a sharecroppers land  
My mama  
Stirs, mixes, and blends  
Just like my grandma used to

Memories boiling over in that custard pan  
Missing her mom and sister too  
Sitting around that Worn wooden table on Sunday afternoon.  
Smiling with our hearts  
Sharing the stories of which we were a part.

## Why do I write

The reflection of the soul emits spirals of energy in so many different methods.

Writing for myself gives me a safe place to open the curtains of trauma and loss, my emotions are

Chiseled in the stone walls for my memories.

Like Hieroglyphics from the caves of Ancient Egypt the drawings tell more than the words

Can ever say.

What symbols speak when you have no voice

Feeling as if you have no choice

Even in silence you can stand strong

Like a tall oak tree in the tornado you see

The storm will not remove you from your center

Not releasing even a splinter.

Soul storms come every day

Safety is around you as the winds of God sway

So hear the voice and know

That joy comes through God's image gives me hope for what is uncertain in what is ahead.

Even if we knew the future we could not predict the interactions with others and how they heard us.

As I learned a couple of weeks ago, people listen through their triggers.

So, what are your triggers?

The silencer of your past trauma

Aims a bullet right within

Hoping those memories will not descend

My triggers rise up

Waiting to see if they will overwhelm me

As yeast rising in the warmth of the air

Can I tell you my triggers

Would I even dare

Removing the scale from your blind eyes

With Courage I might let you inside

As the smoking gun aims at my heart  
Tears roll down my barren cheeks  
Yes I might let you have a peek  
Trusting you now  
Here they are like the first illuminating star  
critical words which emit daggers of toxicity right to my heart.  
This is challenging to repeat  
A hoarse raspy voice comes from within  
Can I trust you with what has been  
Writing from behind the doors  
Seeing the piercing light of God  
Allowing me to finally see  
Trusting others includes  
Trusting me.

# MAATI SANOVIA

(Haleemah Muhammad)

---

**Maati Sanovia (Haleemah Muhammad)**, mama of 6 and grandmama of 10. She is also a Retired Registered Nurse of 30 years, committed yogini, elder, performing poet, published Author and passionate speaker.

She is the founder of Ka Vibrations Yoga. She is the creator of MaYoni'aT Womb Yoga and offers a Certification in this practice. The Goddess Deck is also her creation and supplements the Womb Yoga offerings.

She is a community activist and co founded the Malcolm X Center for Self Determination in Birmingham, Alabama which operated for many years.

She is a 500hr Registered Yoga Teacher with Yoga Alliance.

Certifications include 200Hrs in Kripalu Yoga and Kemetic Yoga and 500Hrs in Shati Yoga.

She has been teaching yoga since 2009 in community centers, libraries, YMCA and private clients. Her classes have been taught outside the US as well.

Author of "A Journey to Forgiveness: Disowning 3 Generations of Violence", compelled by the murder of her mama at age 80 by the husband, age 85.

Author of "NEITHER this NOR that Nourishing the Soul in Moments of Being", dedicated to her grands, biological, extended, inherited, communal, and yet unborn.

For more information, please visit [www.maatisanovia.com](http://www.maatisanovia.com)  
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## Beautiful things list

Funmi Daji Zen

Funmi

Dolls and Unicorns

A soul reincarnated

Her energy explodes

Are you ready she ask

Brace yourself she answers

Her long legs wrap around my hips

Arms around my heart

The bed catches her as I let go

Again Again she demands

Beautiful brown Eyes meet mine

Her head nods, last time she says

You got me she ask

Yea you do she answers

unrestricted, we both laugh

Daji

Fairies and happy hippos

A wild and untamed soul

She floats around me

Xhoxho she says

My smile is her answer

Her tiny hands reach for mine

I lift her up, she giggles

Just as quick, she unravels her body

Where you going I ask

A pause, she takes my hand

She guides me to the room with space

The twirling begins circling until she's dizzy

Beautiful brown eyes meet mine

I reach as she melt in my arms

Her laughter is contagious

Unrestricted, we both laugh

Zen

Dinasours and trucks  
Resilient and unstoppable  
His laughter tickles my soul  
His wobbling activates my inner child  
On my knees, I follow  
Small finger pointing, he reaches  
I give it to him, he smiles  
He throws it, I say roll it  
Beautiful brown eyes searching mine  
He rolls it, I clap  
His smile a compass to my heart  
Unrestricted we laugh



## In Mourning

My intense longing  
Has my heart in mourning  
Propelling me towards  
A space unreachable  
Pinning for your existence  
Nothing feeds my resistance

The expansion of your reach  
Keeps me spiraling  
You can't breathe me back to life  
With the seasonings used  
To cause me strife

Scattering my brain with  
Thoughts unrestrained  
Like the winds of a sand storm  
My vision obstructed  
Living fully interrupted

My soul forgot her fate  
My mind ain't thinking straight  
My breath eroding  
My essence exploding  
My heart is crumbling  
My body is fumbling

Release the entrapment  
So I can gather the fragments  
To Reduce my intense longing  
Freeing my heart in mourning

## U Knew

Being of the oppressors hue  
Does not excuse you

Deflecting does not erase  
You knew

Complicit in my tragedy  
You acquiesced

A deadly calm  
Cognizant of the harm  
Assaulted in my bed  
You turned your head

Beaten into submission  
Blaming me for my condition

Harboring no guilt  
Participatory in a legacy you built

Feeling no shame  
Accepting no blame

A toxic dance unfolding  
Explosive reframe exploding

Swayed by the rapist charm  
You remained unalarmed  
Sometimes gloating  
Never loathing

No difference seen  
Between you and him  
You being and oppressors dream

# LAURA SECORD

---

**Laura Secord**, aka Mojo Mamma, is a poet, storyteller, teaching artist. Her novel-in-poems, *An Art, A Craft, A Mystery* was awarded the 2024 Authors Award for Poetry by Alabama Library Association and was chosen as the best Indie Historical Fiction of 2022 by Kirkus Reviews. A Pushcart nominee, her poems appear in Poetry, NELLE, the Anthology, *What Things Cost*, Hobo Camp Review, Shift, Simple Machines, Cahoodleloodling, Finishing Line Press, Burning House Press, and more. She's worked as a printer, union organizer, health care activist, teacher, sex-educator and nurse practitioner in community health and HIV care. She served as Director of Community Engagement for The Magic City Poetry Festival.

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## **gaze on a mystery**

**after Zora Neal Hurston**

take your naked self  
night-dress covered before the garden

at dawn those myrtle blooms  
glow pink

begin your prayers  
mosquitoes nipping at your ankles

ask the universe for happiness—  
rising sun shines on bluebird's peach chest

ask the universe for healing—  
green hummingbird dips  
its beak into a flock of blaze orange lily

ask the universe for peace—  
two mockingbirds confront each other  
then dive together into berry bushes

ask the universe for a heart open wide—  
the wind flips jewel-toned prayer flags  
over and over on their strings

# The Embrace

## after Hayward Oubre

Put your head on my chest  
and I will hold you; sob  
if you need, your bald  
brown head trembling  
against my heart, as  
your ancestors stood guard  
the last time we hugged;

(I could  
say we saw each other,  
but you were blinded  
by a prescription I wrote you  
decades before, and colleagues  
said your tears spoke to the fact  
I was the only doctor left  
whose face you'd ever seen);

all your people,  
generations, brown  
and loving you,

at that moment,  
as I held you  
for them, and

passed you back  
into their arms,  
none knew

I'd soon turn broken  
too, and eternally be  
buoyed by shared memory.

# Holy, The Books They Ban

after Allen Ginsberg

“The child must have a valuable thing which is called imagination. The child must have a secret world in which live things that never were. It is necessary that she *believe*. She must start out by believing in things not of this world, and when the world becomes too ugly for living in, the child can reach back and live in her imagination”. Betty Smith, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

...” Milkman laid her head down on the rock. Two of the birds circled round them. One dived into the new grave and scooped something shiny in its beak before it flew away.

Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground she could fly.”  
Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*

Sacred. Hallowed. Divine.  
Five crows congregate on power line.  
Spring Street and 3<sup>rd</sup>. Hot sun and chatter.

|           |                  |               |
|-----------|------------------|---------------|
| Sacred.   | Hallowed.        | Divine        |
| The word. | The human story. | Earth’s song. |

*Sacred*: A book opens worlds for a girl, a solitary  
mason bee, belly yellowed with pollen.  
imagination unlocked from compassion’s jewel box,  
where pages speak from other souls.

Sacred. Hallowed. Divine.  
Dawn light streams through sleeping houses, whispers *awaken*.  
The heart longs to open. Fill the self. Overflow your story  
Along the sill, sunlit tent spider webs lace.

*Hallowed*: Me–13, imagines a Brooklyn tree, reading  
on the fire escape with Francie Nolan.

Me– pregnant, months confined to bed with *Soloman’s Song*,  
I become the crow flying Pilate’s name to the skies.

Sacred.          Hallowed. Divine.  
Books expand my world, heal grief  
Burst into life and expansive belief.

*Divine:* Every smile. Each shaded leaf. Joy in passing strangers' eyes. A  
purple blouse.

A perfect braid. A festive hat. The Mississippi Kite family soaring  
from the distant oak with searing song and white wings spread.

Heed the holy every day.  
Run under green ceilings of leaf and sky

# No Kings?

Vintage roses killed for concrete  
slab, and gold plate on his walls

He steals brown folks off the street  
and crams them into stalls

He wants to build a cyberdome  
to protect his gilded home,  
rots the food for starving kids, but  
fondles bullion bars,

while stealing brown folks from the streets  
and cramming them in stalls.

black vans, masked men with guns,  
the copters beat. mamas  
hear your babies scream  
and daddies sprint your feet,

while on gold chairs  
below goldleaf the wealthy  
kiss their king, condone our neighbors  
put in camps

(the thing we swore  
would never be).

So come and paint his world with gold  
and give him all you see:  
your truth, your name, your family,  
your voice, your conscience,  
honor, pride, and gold in fealty,  
until you find you're  
locked away

as well



# RAIJAH TINSLEY

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I am an 8th grader. My interests are playing basketball, cooking, drawing, writing and spending time with my family and friends. I hope to become an event planner.

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## Spread Kindness

In a world that often feels cold,  
A simple act of kindness can be bold.  
A smile shared or a helping hand  
Can brighten lives and help one stand.  
A kind word when times are tough,  
Can lift someone who has had enough.  
Small deeds of care are the seeds we sow,  
Planted in hearts and minds, making love grow.  
So reach out to others and don't be shy  
A little kindness can lift us high!  
Let's spread some kindness;  
Let's do our part  
Kindness is the balm that heals wounded hearts.

# ZAINA TINSLEY

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I am a 7th grader. I enjoy playing basketball, cooking and spending time with my family and friends. I hope to grow up to be a professional athlete, chef or a teacher.

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# Flowers

Roses, daisies, sunflowers I love to see!  
Oh, how flowers are so beautiful to me!  
They are pretty and colorful  
Swaying east to west in the wind  
Like they are waving at me  
I feel peaceful when I'm around them  
And the sunshine creates the perfect scenery  
Roses, daisies, sunflowers I love to see!  
Oh, how flowers are so beautiful to me!

# PENNY TUCKER

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**Penny Tucker** is a young writer currently attending the Alabama School of Fine Arts. She writes imaginative stories and poems commenting mainly on political and social issues. Ever since elementary school, she has been writing in journals, expanding her vocabulary through spelling bees, and making connections with different circles to deepen her understanding of the world and people's viewpoints. Growing up around librarians has contributed significantly to her passion about free speech in the writing world, and the PEN Workshop has solidified that even more whilst working with all of the brilliant talents each generation had to offer.

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## Meet in the Middle

You know you are in a cult  
when you are not allowed to ask questions,  
when you will be ostracized for contradicting the set rules,  
when there is a hierarchy you are placed on despite being apart of the  
human race

And the thing about cults  
is that when there is one radical,  
there will often be an opposite one following that,  
creating two followings equally as malign and corrupt,  
and when those two seem so loud,  
cults start to form into communities

And you might feel inclined to join a cult  
when it is depicted with words like traditional,  
sensible,  
money-smart

Or progressive,  
accepting,  
and diverse

But you must understand that these words are decorative

And to rescue someone from a cult  
you cannot fight the hate with hate,  
for hate is the foundation of the spark that ignites the anti-apathy that  
was never there to begin  
with

And you do not fight with love  
because love requires no fighting,  
because love is something that you *give*,  
and love has no place for condescension,  
nor does it hold space for comforting lies

And love does not have to be quiet  
love can be loud,  
because true love is not a sight we get to see often,  
so true love should be something to shout from the rooftops,  
because love is *powerful*

So when you are confronted with the hatred  
you say,  
“I understand what has led you to feel this way,  
what you have been through to get here,  
and what you stand to face today,  
and that you feel that you are allowed to blame me for that matter,  
but how you feel should not influence how you think,

and your experience is not the one of the world's,  
so meet me in the middle,  
and understand with me that no matter what color,  
what set of body parts,  
what type of brain,  
what God you worship,  
where you are from,  
who you like,  
and how much you own,  
being born with any label comes with its own struggles,  
and yes I do mean *any* label no matter how much power you think a  
group yields,  
because being a child of this Earth is a *blessing*,  
but we make it a curse for ourselves,  
so instead of bickering about who has it worse,  
we need to start making it better for all of us,  
because we are all already equal,  
but we are equal in the fact that we all suffer.”

And in order to spread the love  
and to be the one to receive the love on the other end,  
not the one that validates,  
not the one that performs,  
but the one that *understands*  
You must step out of your own cult,



bring back the principle,  
and meet us all in the middle.

# Shades of wOMAN

Women travel across dimensions  
because Women are in some sort of unspoken alliance, they say  
because Women's instinct is to tear each other apart,  
they say  
because many truths exist at once when you're a woman

Where as Women,  
we are black,  
or white,  
or blue,  
or red,  
and the black hates the white as the white hates the black,  
and the blue hates the red as the red hates the blue,  
and the black is often blue and bruised,  
where the white is often red and bled -  
bled far too long,  
and the other bruised too rough

But when we walk outside and the sky is pink,  
we all come together and love each other over hate  
when we say,  
"We hate Men! Down with them!",  
but what is a man?

Men are not men  
Men are not black,  
nor white,  
nor blue,  
nor red

Men can be purple and gray,  
just like His eyes,  
because God is a man,  
and a man is not a man  
and a dog is a man's best friend  
and bites him just as hard as he does the woman  
because what are all of us if not bitten,  
bruised,  
and bled?

# Witchcraft

The boys called us witches at school. I can't be offended, or say that they were wrong, because we danced with our feet in the grass with wax candles in our palms, letting them drip onto the ground and into the soil, singing the spells that we cast. Our pajamas clung tightly to our bodies and caught fire on our skin, flaming as we watched the Moon and sang to the stars around it, summoning the Sun to come out again.

The Sun answered our prayers like it has for thousands of millennia. It lit up like a candle in the sky and charred us like meat as we paved down the concrete road. Down the road and upwards in the sky, she looked like a monochromatic picture frame as I was an old photo, but we matched skin to skin with cropped tops and short shorts and burning red like witches.

Our lattes melted in the Sun as we poked each other with plastic straws. This is how the days went before we stepped out of our bodies at night, eating gnomes on our neighbour's lawns and hanging from trees without a breath to catch, because there was no need to breathe. And when leaves fell we crumpled them shut, burying them underground so that the gnomes would forget the next day.

I called to her basement door and she came out pale, so we danced with our feet in the grass with wax candles in our palms, letting them drip onto the ground and into the soil, singing the spells that we cast. Our pajamas clung tightly to our bodies and caught fire on our skin, flaming as we watched the Moon and sang to the stars around it, summoning the Sun to come out again. This time it didn't though, and neither did she - I was no longer dead, so the sky wouldn't change as fast for me.

**ERIKA E. WADE**

**GLENDIA BROWN-WADE**

**SATURA DUDLEY**

**OCTAVIA KURANSKY**

**DEJUANA MCCARY**

**MAATI SANOVIA**

**LAURA SECORD**

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**ZAINA TINSLEY**

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