

Happy birthday, dear Gwendolyn

Miss Brooks would be 100 years old today. Her poetic-prophetic vision is worth celebrating.

by [Elizabeth Palmer](#)

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I never imagined I would gather with a large crowd around a cake to sing “Happy Birthday” to a dead person, but a few days ago I found myself doing just that. We had just viewed a [short film](#) celebrating the legacy of the Pulitzer Prize-winning Chicago poet [Gwendolyn Brooks](#), who was born 100 years ago today.

The film, which portrays its characters through puppets and silhouettes, imagines what the poet might have imagined as she watched seven boys playing pool at the Golden Shovel in the middle of a school day. These young hooky-players inspired what would become her most famous poem, “[We Real Cool](#).” As the film’s puppet version of Miss Brooks looks in on the pool hall, she wonders how the boys feel about themselves, what their lives are like, and how they relate to the people in their lives. A recording of Brooks reading the poem is followed by a hauntingly beautiful musical rendition, which combines jazz and Motown with elements of rap and incorporates

some of the lines from Haki Madhubuti's poem "[Gwendolyn Brooks](#)."

Brooks's vocation, which the film captures well, was to be a witness. She saw into the everyday lives—the joys and shortcomings and tragedies and hopes—of the people around her, especially African Americans living on the south side of Chicago. Her poems linger in the quotidian particularities of urban life. Two people sit down to eat at the local diner. A woman mourns the babies who were lost to her abortions. Parents sadly send their grown son out into the world. A renter hopes for lukewarm water as she waits for her neighbor to finish using the shared restroom. A group of boys skips school to play pool and drink gin.

Behind these vivid, generous details of ordinary life is a prophetic voice. Brooks calls her readers to re-envision their own responsibilities in a world that is contingent, fragile, and broken. Angela Jackson, in her new [biography](#) of Brooks, calls "We Real Cool" an "unforgettable portrait of lost young men of color whose lives are over far too soon." Jackson continues:

These young men are not thriving. Lurking, they hang in shadows, never in the sun of their manhood. Striking, they bring harm to each other and possibly others in the community. They sing sin, celebrating negativity in a hedonistic way. They drink and carouse. They jazz June, living unfettered in the spring of their lives, which are over too soon. Gwendolyn does not mince words. These young men die from homicide or neglect, medical or social. The impact of the poem lies in its indictment of a society that has alienated these young black men. It is a protest poem.

In December of 2000, Brooks died. After her death, [Terrance Hayes](#) wrote a poem called "[Golden Shovel](#)," which pays homage to "We Real Cool" by ending each line with a word from the poem, in order. Since then, the Golden Shovel has grown into a popular poetic form. A new [anthology](#) of Golden Shovel poems juxtaposes the original Brooks poems with the Golden Shovel poems they've inspired, written by poets from Billy Collins to Tracy K. Smith to Sharon Olds to Alberto Ríos. My favorite Golden Shovel poem (which is actually a double Golden Shovel—the words of the original Brooks poem appear reading downward on the right-hand side and reading upward on the left-hand side) is Patricia Smith's "[Black, Poured Directly Into The Wound](#)," which is based on Brooks's portrayal of Emmett Till's mother in "[The Last Quatrain Of The Ballad Of Emmett Till](#)." The Golden Shovel, as a form, reminds us

that the creative lament and celebration of one poet can give birth to the laments and celebrations of thousands of others. That this form has flourished is a testimony to Brooks's remarkable ability to convey life in its fullness with an economy of words.

My favorite Brooks poem, "[truth](#)," gently asks readers to consider what it might feel like to extricate ourselves from "the dear thick shelter / Of the familiar / Propitious haze" as the sun emerges in our darkened world. The answer isn't what readers might hope for, but it rings true. It's hard to move into the light. There's comfort in suffering, in unawareness, in inertia.

At the end of the film, Miss Brooks exchanges a long, serious look with one of the pool-playing boys before he turns and follows the other six. Is there a hint of a smile on her face? It might be too much for us to hope that this encounter could change the trajectory of his life. But at least he has been seen by an astute observer of the human condition—and now by all those who read her poems.