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Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

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“Holding a Poem in the Body”: The 2019 *Lion and the Unicorn* Award for Excellence in North American Poetry

**Krystal Howard, Catherine Kyle, and
Rachel L. Rickard Rebellino**

Winner:

Elizabeth Acevedo. *The Poet X*. Harper Teen, 2018.

Honor Books:

Joy McCullough. *Blood Water Paint*. Penguin Books, 2018.

Tony Medina. *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy*. Illustrated by
Floyd Cooper et al. Penny Candy Books, 2018.

Naomi Shihab Nye. *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*. Illustrated by
Dawn Henning. Greenwillow Books, 2018.

In his introduction to the 2018 edition of *The Best American Poetry*, Dana Gioia (best-known for his 1991 essay “Can Poetry Matter?”) remarked on an “odd statistic” in the most recent National Endowment for the Arts poetry readership survey: “The youngest group of adults (ages 18–24) read more than any other segment.”¹ Gioia concluded that this made sense because “American culture is often led by youth trends” (xxiii). Surveying the body of North American poetry published for young readers in 2018, it is clear that the reading tastes of young and emerging adults are influencing the larger world of poetry. When asked the question, “Why does poetry matter?” U.S. Poet Laureate Joy Harjo observed, “Poetry is the voice of what can’t be spoken, the mode of truth-telling when meaning needs to rise above or skim below everyday language in shapes not discernible by the ordinary

mind. . . . Poetry is a tool for disruption and creation and is necessary for generations of humans to know who they are and who they are becoming in the wave map of history.” Harjo’s comments about the power and purpose of poetry ring especially true when considering poetry for young people. This year’s *Lion and the Unicorn* winner and honor books all give voice to the lived experiences of young people in the process of becoming, making space for both disruption and creation. Each work also represents a range of poetic forms often used by authors for young audiences: the contemporary and historical verse novel, the poetry picture book, and the traditional poetry collection. Additionally, the authors of these works are both seasoned and debut poets, their audiences ranging from young children to emerging adults.

In our unanimously chosen winner, Elizabeth Acevedo’s much-lauded,² electric verse novel *The Poet X*, the fifteen-year-old speaker of “Holding a Poem in the Body,” Xiomara, emphasizes the interconnectedness of the developing mind of the poet and the body of a young woman:

I let the words shape themselves hard on my tongue.
 I let my hands pretend to be punctuation marks
 that slash, and point, and press in on each other.
 I let my body finally take up all the space it wants. (79)

This poem and Acevedo’s verse novel as a whole represent the way in which contemporary poetry for young readers meditates upon the union of voice, identity, and the body. Like Acevedo’s *The Poet X*, which is dedicated to “all the little sisters yearning to see themselves,” one of this year’s honor books, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy*, written by Tony Medina and illustrated by thirteen different artists, is “For Black and Brown children / Whose every breath is affirmation / Against erasure / Whose very being is confirmation / For generations.” *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy* is a collection of illustrated tanka, its title alluding to Wallace Stevens’s 1917 poem “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird,” Raymond R. Patterson’s 1969 Black Arts Movement poetry collection *Twenty-Six Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s 1997 collection of essays *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, and, less overtly, June Jordan’s 1969 illustrated poem *Who Look at Me*.

Similarly, another of this year’s honor books, *Voices in the Air: Poems for Listeners*, a collection by Naomi Shihab Nye, makes a project of courting poetic influence, citing close to eighty voices who guide her as a poet, from Emily Dickinson and Galway Kinnell to Edward Said and Langston Hughes. As the incoming Young People’s Poet Laureate, Nye’s introduction to *Voices in the Air* echoes Harjo’s emphasis on poetry’s purpose: “Where is my map—where are we please? Can voices that entered into our thoughts

when we were little help us make amends with the strange time we're in?" (xi). Also drawing on the power of artistic influence, this year's final honor book, Joy McCullough's debut *Blood Water Paint*, is a historical verse novel based on the true story of seventeen-year-old Artemisia Gentileschi, a celebrated seventeenth-century Roman artist who found strength and inspiration in painting ancient heroines after experiencing sexual violence at the hands of her painting instructor. In a decisive scene where Artemisia resolves to take her assaulter to trial, she evokes the memory of her beloved deceased mother, explaining to her father, "*Mother believed in / telling stories*" (216, emphasis original). With this call to the past, a protagonist's body, voice, identity, and heritage overlap as the young woman prepares to seek justice. With similar nods of gratitude toward past sources of inspiration, all of this year's selections look boldly to the future, affirming a line from *Voices in the Air*: "Be brave / Little things / Still matter most" (115).

The opening poems in this year's award-winning book, *The Poet X*, highlight the collection's play with linguistic, cultural, and familial tension. Acevedo's protagonist, Xiomara, is frustrated because her voice goes unheard, yet she is unable to hide her developing body. Her mother's expectations surrounding religion, womanhood, and "good" daughterhood press Xiomara from all sides. This tension is reflected in the way Acevedo plays with closed and open forms, poetic influence, language, stress, and the line. For instance, in the poem "Not Even Close to Haikus," the seven-syllable title suggests the middle line of a haiku, yet also declares that it and the lines that follow are "not even close" to falling inside the form as traditionally taught in U.S. schools (60–61). The poem consists of five three-line stanzas separated by asterisks, evoking the possibility of a haiku series while refusing to adhere consistently to the strict 5–7–5 syllable count common to English haiku. Likewise, the content of the poem—a difficult interchange between Xiomara and her mother—pushes against the traditional content of the haiku, which often includes nature and the seasons as subjects. At the same time, this poem draws on some of the characteristics of traditional haiku, such as the juxtaposition of two subjects (Xiomara and her mother), heavy reliance upon imagery, and metaphor.

Even the first lines, "Mami's back is a coat hanger. / Her anger made of the heaviest wool. / It must keep her so hot," demonstrate this tension (60). The characterization of Mami's anger as heavy and hot alludes to the natural world, but the poem attributes these references to Xiomara's cold and resentful mother. The next stanza, featuring dialogue spoken by Mami, further indicates her character: "Mira, muchacha, / when it's time to take the body of Christ, / don't you *ever* opt out again" (60, emphasis original). Readers know from the third poem in the verse novel, "Mira, Muchacha," that this phrase, translated

as “Look, girl . . .,” is “Mami’s favorite way to start a sentence” to indicate to Xiomara that she has “done something wrong” (6). In this poem, Acevedo uses the tension between the closed and open form of the haiku to reflect how Mami insists on her daughter’s acceptance of her religious traditions despite Xiomara’s desire to assert her own voice and sense of self outside of these traditions. This juxtaposition appears again in the poem “Hope Is a Thing with Wings,” another modified haiku. This fifteen-syllable, three-line poem alludes to Emily Dickinson’s “‘Hope’ is the Thing with Feathers,” yet rebels against the haiku form and the resiliency of Dickinson’s “hope”: “Although I doubt it, / hope flies quick into / my body’s corners” (263). The uniformity of the five-syllable line in this poem evokes a sense of closed space from which the speaker of the poem longs to escape. Just two poems later, these tensions are even more evident. In this poem, “Haikus,” the speaker explains the haiku’s form and content: “Traditionally / contrasting ideas are / tied together neat.” She continues, “I’m like a haiku, / with different sides, / except no clean tie” (265–66). Even here, in a poem *called* “Haikus,” we see Acevedo resist a too-rigorous adherence to the English haiku’s traditional syllable count. In this artist’s coming-of-age narrative, Xiomara is depicted as using writing to assert her voice and sense of self, and Acevedo emphasizes these assertions by both summoning and resisting conventions of poetic craft.

Although written primarily in English, Acevedo’s poetry fluidly shifts in and out of Spanish, reflecting Xiomara’s Afro-Latinx background. An early poem, “The First Words,” contains a repeated refrain of “Pero, tú no eres fácil,” which Xiomara translates in the final line as “You sure ain’t an easy one” (9–10). In “A Poem Mami Will Never Read” and “In Translation,” the lyric and the imagery evoked provide a unique experience for the bilingual and monolingual reader alike. The two poems appear in succession, the first written completely in Spanish and the second, as the title suggests, translated into English (233, 234). Fitting with the verse novel’s attention toward tensions, this pair of poems depicts the internal struggle and external negotiation with which Xiomara must engage as she tries to manage her bicultural identity and her relationship with her intensely devout mother. The multifaceted nature of her voice reaches out to her mother in Spanish in “A Poem Mami Will Never Read” when she concludes, “Tu silencio amuebla una casa oscura. / Pero aun a riesgo de quemarse, / la mariposa nocturna siempre busca la luz” (233), and this same stanza on the following page in the poem “In Translation” echoes, “Your silence furnishes a dark house. / But even at the risk of burning, / the moth always seeks the light” (234).

The struggle between the significant binaries in Xiomara’s life (English/Spanish, poetry/religion, self/family) culminates in a heated dispute with her mother during which she burns Xiomara’s poetry journal. In “If Your Hand

Causes You to Sin,” Xiomara watches years of her writing smolder on the floor: “as [my mother] recites Scripture / words tumble out of my mouth too, / all of the poems and stanzas I’ve memorized spill out” (305). In the next poem, “Verses,” Xiomara and her mother’s voice appear in dialogue on either side of the page, Xiomara’s “verses” in English evoking her autobiographical poetry and her mother’s verses in Spanish evoking the traditional Catholic “Hail Mary” prayer:

<p>“I’m where the X is marked, I arrived battle ready—”</p> <p>.....</p> <p>“The X I am is an armored dress I clothe myself in every morning.”</p>	<p>“Dios te salve, María, llena eres de gracia;”</p> <p>.....</p> <p>“y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesús.” (306)</p>
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The Spanish within the book is not italicized or otherwise marked, a choice that Ashley Pérez and Patricia Enciso argue resists “the presumption of a monolingual, monocultural white readership” (9). This assumption of a broader audience for youth poetry that includes young people of color and readers fluent in multiple languages can be similarly seen in two works for young readers published this year that also impressed us: David Bowles’s *They Call Me Güero: A Border Kid’s Poems*, a verse novel chronicling the life of a middle-schooler living on the U.S.-Mexican border, and Susan Middleton Elya and Ana Aranda’s *Our Celebración*, a picture book about a festive summer day.

One of our honor books, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy*, both anticipates a broader audience for children’s poetry and consciously takes on the task of reimagining childhoods of color. In their article “(Re)Imagining Black Boyhood,” Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson note how Black boyhood in the United States “has been rendered both unimagined and unimaginable” (28), as too many people assume Black children—and especially Black boys—are older than they are, while dehumanizing these same children by comparing them to animals. Dumas and Nelson go on to note that Black boys specifically and children of color more broadly are consistently positioned as “outside the public imagination of what childhood means” (30). Medina’s collection begins with “Thirteen Ways: An Introduction.” In the poem, Medina counters the narrative of public unimaginability, describing Black boyhood largely in terms of peaceful, ordinary moments: boys “inhale fresh-cut grass,” “hug and kiss their moms,” “wear their daddy’s

shoes and ties,” “Gigg[e] in steamy mirrors,” “have snowball fights,” “sit in their quiet / And think about things,” among other everyday acts. Confronting the historical flattening of their humanity by White institutions, Medina writes, “Black boys are three dimensions of beauty / Black boys are made of flesh— / not clay.” He concludes, “We celebrate their preciousness and creativity / We cherish their lives.”

What follows are thirteen tanka that provide glimpses into the joys and pains of everyday life in Anacostia, which the book’s paratextual material explains is a historically Black neighborhood of Washington, DC. Medina partnered with a different artist for each of the thirteen poems, giving the book a wide range of artistic styles and tones. From photorealistic paintings and stylized ink drawings to abstract art and collage, the illustrations are fresh, vibrant, and unique, echoing the variety of experiences the poems take up.

In the book’s first tanka, “Anacostia Angel,” Medina writes:

Fly bow tie like wings
Brown eyes of a brown angel
His kool-aid smile sings
Mama’s little butterfly
Daddy’s dimple grin so wide.

Floyd Cooper’s accompanying illustration shows a mother and father embracing their young son, who holds a sippy cup of Kool-Aid and beams out toward the viewer, open-mouthed. His yellow and green bow tie matches the wings of a butterfly, who flutters near the top of the frame. In the background are buildings, cars, and telephone wires, but the family takes up most of the spread, foregrounding their importance. In his “Notes” section at the end of the book, Medina states, “Tanka are really fun and challenging to write. I try to write mine where every line can stand alone; and I try and focus on making images more than telling or explaining.” In “Anacostia Angel,” the illustration mirrors the poem, representing its images fairly literally, with the addition of the actual butterfly. The poem’s language is buoyant with repeated allusions to air and flight: the bow tie is “like wings,” and the boy is compared to an “angel” and a “butterfly.” Likewise, Cooper’s illustration is full of upward motion, with the mother’s hair and the child’s pointed finger rising toward the top of the page. Cooper’s rendering of the actual butterfly complements Medina’s poem by connecting the child to the butterfly not only linguistically, but visually. Since butterflies are often associated with gentleness, beauty, hope, and of course transformation, Cooper’s decision furthers the intentions Medina lays out in his introduction, emphasizing the boy’s liveliness, joy, and potential.

Other poems—and their accompanying images—are more abstract. For example, in “Do Not Enter,” the eighth tanka in the collection, Medina writes:

Ashes pepper sky
 Over deserted landscape
 Of broke-down buildings
 And cars propped on cinderblocks
 Where hope hurtled through the wind.

Kesha Bruce's textured artwork consists of overlapping squares and rectangles individually painted shades of blue, red, black, white, gray, and pink. Some of the shapes have thick, sapphire-blue brushstrokes on them; others feature bright turquoise spots of varying sizes set against a red-orange background. Similarly, other sections have black splotches against a light gray background, white splotches against a peach background, and a variety of other permutations. Small splatters of black paint run along the left side of the images, alluding to the ash-peppered sky of Medina's tanka. Together, the words and image evoke the contrasts present in the poem's setting. Medina's "deserted landscapes" and "broke-down buildings" exist alongside the "hope" that still "hurtle[s] through the wind" just as Bruce's vibrant, jewel tones nestle against more understated sections. The artwork also plays on the poem's title, as readers unpracticed with abstract art may not initially know where to "enter" Bruce's painting. Unlike Cooper's illustration, which draws viewers' gaze directly to the family, Bruce's painting has numerous, arguably competing, focal points, simultaneously inviting and resisting "entry." Together, the words and the image speak to the tension of the setting, where both "ashes" and "hope" dwell.

Medina's collection celebrates the hope and joy of Black boyhood, celebration mirrored in another notable work of children's poetry published this year: Richard Wright and Nina Crews's *Seeing Into Tomorrow*. Crews pairs Wright's haiku with collaged photographs of Black boys in a variety of outdoor settings, providing depth and specificity to what are largely nature poems filtered, as Crews explains in an ending note, "through a young brown boy's eyes. A boy, like Richard Wright, who found wonder in the world around him." This wonder is especially evident in the final poem. The three lines of Wright's haiku—"A spring sky so clear / That you feel you are seeing / Into tomorrow"—are spread across the page alongside the image of a Black child gazing ahead and a fractured, photographed sky flying across the double-page spread alongside one, lone typewritten page that reproduces the haiku in tiny letters.

Naomi Shihab Nye's *Voices in the Air* echoes the optimistic tone of Medina's and Crews's picture books, but her optimism is tinged with an apt melancholy. Like Acevedo's poem "Hope Is a Thing with Wings," Nye also includes a poem inspired by Dickinson, hers called "Emily," the third poem in Section II: *Voices in the Air*. It begins: "People do not pass away. / They

die / and then they stay" (35), and continues with a question posed to its eponymous "Emily":

What would you do if you knew
that even during wartime
scholars in Baghdad
were translating your poems
into Arabic
still believing
in the thing with feathers? (40)

Nye muses that perhaps Dickinson "wouldn't feel lonely" had she this knowledge, concluding with the thought that Dickinson's poetry—and perhaps Nye's as well—manages a kind of connection that transcends time and space, suggesting that part of the poetic project involves the simple fact of "Words finding friends / even if written on envelope flaps / or left in a drawer" (40). The enjambments in the first stanza of this poem encourage the reader to linger in the spaces left among the words, clauses, and lines of this single-sentence question. The sweet internal rhymes of the first line ("you"/"knew") and the vision of Dickinson writing her poems alone in the quiet of Amherst contrast with the image of Iraqi translators engaging with Dickinson's work "even during wartime." Her words of hope recast amid—as Dickinson wrote—a "storm— / That could abash the little Bird / That kept so many warm—."

Those final fraught lines, as Nye reports in her endnotes, refer to the recently published collection, *The Gorgeous Nothings: Emily Dickinson's Envelope Poems* (175). Even as war presses on all fronts, even as storms roil on every horizon, Dickinson's "Thing with Wings"—and poetry itself—manages still to take flight. As the first Arab American author to be named Young People's Poet Laureate, Nye's most recent collection for young readers evokes political and cultural themes while asking the reader to slow down, to look, to listen. In her introduction, Nye notes, "Walking outside—it's as quiet as it ever was. The birds still communicate without any help from us. In that deep quietude, doesn't the air, and the memory, feel more full of voices?" (xiv). Additionally, as in Dickinson's small fragments, Nye's poems in *Voices in the Air* find meaning in quotidian details. In "Missing the Boat, Take Two," for example, Nye draws a Dickinson-esque parallel between missing a boat and death. She writes:

We sat on a long wooden pier,
waiting for a boat for one full hour.
Stared at gentle wavelets,
chatted with a sailor,

read about Maine,
reminisced. (163)

The speaker then explains that the boat then “sneaked in” from behind, “loaded passengers,” and “slipped away from the dock,” all without her noticing. “I hope dying could feel like this” (163), she concludes. Rather than expressing frustration over missing the boat, the speaker takes the turn of events in stride. Nye focuses on the tranquil details of the pleasant time spent on the pier: the enjoyment of nature, good company, and memories. The speaker does not fume about missed opportunities (“missing the boat,” as the idiom goes), nor does she curse the vessel’s captain. Instead, she appreciates the time she was given, greets the unexpected with a gracious heart.

Elsewhere, Nye uses this same appreciation of everyday details to highlight the horror and tragedy of lives cut short by violence. In “Before I Was a Gazan,” she writes in the persona of a young boy searching for his math homework. The speaker wonders whether he left it “on the table after showing to my uncle” or “on the shelf after combing my hair,” images that suggest a loving family and a supportive home (138). The boy looks forward to “turn[ing] it in,” stating that he wants to “make my teacher happy, / make her say my name to the whole class.” Yet in the same sentence, an ordinary day at school is eclipsed by destruction:

. . . everything got subtracted
even my uncle
even my teacher
even the best math student and his baby sister
who couldn’t talk yet.

The boy concludes, “now I would do anything / for a problem I could solve” (138). Contrasting the simplicity of elementary school math problems to the incomprehensibility of the vast, ongoing geopolitical conflicts tragically familiar to young residents of the Gaza Strip, Nye invites empathy, reminding readers that these conflicts result in the real deaths of real people. People who loved and who were loved. People with real hopes. Real fears.

Nye’s engagement with politics is echoed in a number of the other works we examined this year. Our winner and honor books are all activist texts, each offering a narrative condemning systemic inequity. The prevalence of this underlying emphasis on justice in the winner and honor books aligns with the larger themes we noted in many of the books we received. Over half of the works in the multigenre anthology *We Rise, We Resist, We Raise Our Voices*, edited by Wade Hudson and Cheryl Willis Hudson, are poems, many by superb poets such as Marilyn Nelson, Margarita Engle, Carole Boston Weatherford, Kwame Alexander, and Jason Reynolds. Several of

the verse novels we received—Joy McCullough’s *Blood Water Paint*, Lita Judge’s *Mary’s Monster: Love, Madness, and How Mary Shelley Created Frankenstein*, and Margarita Engle’s *Jazz Owls*—celebrate the too-often neglected lives of historical figures, and numerous picture books, including Holly Thompson’s *Twilight Chant* and Patrick J. Lewis’s *Phrases of the Moon*, offer gentle, environmentally conscious poetry. A number of books for younger readers published this year include less politically oriented poems, but those poems are complemented by authors’ notes urging readers to view the poetry as resistant, as in the paratextual materials in *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy* and *Seeing Into Tomorrow*. Wab Kinew’s *Go Show the World: A Celebration of Indigenous Heroes* employs a similar technique. The text of the book, which the author describes as a rap, calls attention to the accomplishments of a variety of contemporary and historical Indigenous people, and an author’s note explains that Kinew sees his poetry as both reclaiming under-told histories and affirming the role that Indigenous people will continue to play in confronting the world’s challenges. The book concludes, “We are people who matter. / Yes it’s true. / Now let’s show the world what people who matter can do.”

The political implications of our final honor book, Joy McCullough’s verse novel *Blood Water Paint*, become particularly salient when reading the story in the context of the #MeToo movement that rose to prominence in late 2017 and early 2018. In her article “Articulating Artemisia: Revisioning the Lives of Women from History in Biographical Poetry,” Helen Rickerby reflects on poetry’s ability to bring historical nonfiction to life in ways that connect with readers on a more emotional level than strictly factual prose. Rickerby’s book *My Iron Spine* contains poems about and in the voices of numerous women from history, including Sylvia Plath, Emily Dickinson, Joan of Arc, Marie Curie, and Artemisia Gentileschi, the protagonist of *Blood Water Paint*. In “Articulating Artemisia,” Rickerby writes that even when a poet’s aim is factual accuracy, “There is some wiggle room: poetry is allowed to, and perhaps needs to, follow its own rules to be beautiful, and, I think, even truthful” (23). She adds, “The research only gets you so far, it’s the magic and meaning you want in poetry. And it’s a sense of a person in motion that makes them seem to live” (27). She acknowledges that there is “tension” in imagining—and writing—what historical figures might have thought or felt in private, but argues that doing so can make them “more than just a collection of dry facts” (27–28). In a similar vein, McCullough’s *Blood Water Paint* brings Artemisia Gentileschi vividly to life, sharing the biographical details of the famous Renaissance painter’s story, but also connecting her to women from the distant past and, subtly, present day. A “Resources” page at the back of the book includes information about the Rape, Abuse & Incest

National Network and other organizations, linking the centuries-old story of its central character to the lives of contemporary readers: “You may recognize yourself in parts of Artemisia’s story in much the same way Artemisia recognized herself in Susanna and Judith’s stories. . . . Whatever your story, I hope you tell it to someone when you’re ready. There’s power in the telling.”

Positioning stories as tools for recognition and liberation recalls an idea expressed in *Reading Children’s Literature: A Critical Introduction* by Carrie Hintz and Eric L. Tribunella. The authors suggest that historical fiction and nonfiction for young people often intersects with trauma theory, explaining, “To the extent that history is constituted by trauma, the stories we tell ourselves, and the stories that we call ‘history,’ can be understood as attempts to repeat, work through, and master traumatic events” (239). Specifically, *Blood Water Paint* takes up the intergenerational trauma of gendered oppression and sexual violence. Artemisia draws strength from tales of ancient heroines her mother told her when she was young: those of Susanna, who was falsely accused (and eventually acquitted) of adultery when she refused two men glimpses of her nude body, and Judith, who beheaded the general Holofernes after troops under his command murdered her husband. Both women risked their lives fighting against the cruel injustice of powerful men, emerging victorious but suffering immensely along the way. After Artemisia is assaulted, these heroines part the veil of story and art, seeming literally to appear before her:

There’s a choice to be made.
Judith stands beside me.
not an

image on my canvas
voice in my head
story of my mother’s

but so real she’s cradling
my bloody hand in hers.

Right now, in this instant
you have to make a choice. (165, emphasis original)

Artemisia testifies against her assaulter only to be tortured with thumbscrews, torment designed to determine the truth of her testimony. Following this injustice, Susanna binds Artemisia’s wounded hands, comforts her with three simple words: “*They will heal*” (271, emphasis original). In the absence of her biological mother, Artemisia relies on these figures as a kind of emotional ancestry. She does indeed heal, and like Xiomara, uses her determination to fuel her art.

writer Ta-Nehisi Coates's comment that "[p]oetry is a natural cousin to comics," as both necessitate a "ruthless efficiency with words," the text of *Rebound's* comics is poetry, made explicit through consistent use of rhyme, one of poetry's most obvious devices. For instance, in "So Fly!" the first comic poem, one text box reads, "I'd steal the ball and make you cry," while the text box accompanying the next panel continues, "My game's so criminal, I'd need an alibi" (11). Alexander's other verse novel released this year, *Swing* (a collaboration with Mary Rand Hess) similarly includes occasional instances of visual art, this time in the form of pages from its protagonist's notebook. The intersection of illustration and poetry is particularly well utilized in Lita Judge's *Mary's Monster*, in which black and white illustrations hauntingly accompany Judge's verse. Though the poetry in each of the aforementioned books did not quite reach the same tier as our winner and honor books, we admired the experimentation within these verse novels, and we look forward to continued innovation in the verse novel form.

In the 2017 *Lion and the Unicorn* award essay, the judges remarked on a shift in their framing of the essay: "Of course there's more silt than gold, but we ended up smiling as we wrote, partly because we broke from tradition (and perhaps started a new one?) by choosing not to write about the failings of books we didn't like, and instead focusing exclusively on the excellence in those we did. That made us happy" (401). As three brand-new judges, we wholeheartedly embraced this new tradition, choosing to focus on those excellent, engaging books that stood out as innovative and powerful. Beyond their overarching excellence, several elements unite our winner and our honor books: their sustained attendance to poetry's power to resonate with those readers eager to consider, in Harjo's words, "who they are and who they are becoming"; their success at embracing poetry's diverse traditions while simultaneously innovating on them; and their deft ability to draw on the past, stay mindful of the present, and hopefully anticipate the future. "There is power in the word," Xiomara affirms in the penultimate poem in Elizabeth Acevedo's *The Poet X* (353). The paratextual materials of both Joy McCullough's *Blood Water Paint* and Tony Medina's *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Boy* remind readers that the poetry contained in those books has the powerful potential to heal and to transform. And in *Voices in the Air*, Naomi Shihab Nye illustrates the power of poetry as she returns to the voices of past poets who have resonated with her, who have inspired her to compose new poems that may help her—and us—better understand our contemporary moment. The poets we've discussed are among those voices that, in Nye's words, "help us make amends with the strange time we're in" (xi). As such, they're voices that ought to be heard, and their poetry deserves to be celebrated. Throughout this essay, we have repeatedly returned to the

ideas of hope and tension. Though many books can evoke one of those feelings, it is much more difficult to hold space for both hope and tension simultaneously. That task can become even more challenging in literature for young people, where adult authors are too-often tempted to favor neat conclusions that present the world in black-and-white as a way to “protect” the reader. Yet the authors we’ve discussed in this essay have used poetry’s power to disrupt in a way that resists reductive notions of childhood innocence while envisioning agentic child readers with the power to use poetry as a starting point from which they can figure their relation to the world, reflect on their identities, chart their own futures. After reading, discussing, and writing about the year’s submissions, we find ourselves pleased about the varied terrain of youth poetry and cautiously hopeful about its future. In exploring youth poetry’s developing geography, we, like the 2017 judges, have discovered some rich veins of gold therein, and we’re excited by the prospect of watching future poets craft for their young readers (in the words of author and illustrator Christopher Myers) a “more expansive landscape upon which to dream.”

Krystal Howard is Assistant Professor in the Liberal Studies Program at California State University, Northridge, where she teaches children’s and adolescent literature, integrated teacher education, and comics. Her research focuses on form and cultural studies in literature for young readers, and her areas of interest include poetry for young readers, comics studies, and multicultural children’s literature. Her scholarship has appeared in Children’s Literature Association Quarterly, The Lion and the Unicorn, Graphic Novels for Children and Young Adults, and The Artistry of Neil Gaiman: Finding Light in the Shadows. For more information, please visit www.krystalhoward.com.

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Notes

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² Thus far, *The Poet X* has been awarded the National Book Award for Young People's Literature, the Pura Belpré Medal, the Michael L. Printz Award, the Walter Award, and the CILIP Carnegie Medal, among others.

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