



INTRODUCTION

Here are two things to know about me.

First, I came into this world on the lines of a poem. I was born in Chicago in the middle a sticky, sweaty summer. I was a big baby, my mother was a small woman, and she was uncomfortably hot waiting for me to arrive. To cool herself, she recited “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” by Robert Frost over and over again. Do you know it? It starts like this:

*Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

Can you imagine how that poem might make you feel on a sticky, sweaty day?

Second, when I was small, my father made me memorize poems and recite them out loud. Most of the poems came from a book called *Black Voices*. I still remember the black-and-white cover and the first lines of “Mother to Son” by Langston Hughes:

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*


In the poem, the mother tells her son never to give up; if she's strong enough to make it, he is too. I didn't understand that when I learned the words, but I understand it now. Poems can be like that—secrets that reveal themselves over time.

My father wanted me to know Black poets, and through them, to know myself. He planted seeds early and watched them bloom. Now it's my turn in the garden.

I wanted the poems in this book to be a celebration of Blackness. And while it is impossible to capture all the things Blackness can be, I had a few ideas about where to start:

Blackness is fire
We are children of the sun
We are indigo children
And red clay children
And silt and sand and loam
Foundational


We are ocean born
And ocean claimed
Sky folk
Hope



Our hair our hands our minds
Have more beauty than words can carry
even the words we invent ourselves
and we are *always* inventing

We laugh at boxes on government forms
At language with one set of rules
We are the rules
We are no rules
We are improvisation, poetry, jazz, rhythm and rhyme
Rock and roll
Call, response
and blues
We are song and dance and drum
We are beyond imagining
Dream children
Beloved and
Our lives matter

The poets in this collection are from many different countries and cultures. Their work spans decades—and not nearly enough languages. You'll find words like *Negro* and *colored* and *black* with a lowercase *b*. What we call ourselves depends on the time, the place, and our mood.




There are all kinds of poems here—haiku and hip hop and anthems and prayers and jump rope rhymes and personal memories and universal truths. There is a *lot* of truth in these pages—I think poets are better at telling the truth than just about anyone. But this book can't contain everything or everybody. What's missing? *Who's* missing? Can you fill in the gaps?

Not all of these poems were written for children, but I think you'll still find magic in them. I encourage you to visit them again and again. Some of these poems are brand new, written specifically for this collection by Derrick Barnes, Winsome Bingham, Rio Cortez, Nikki Grimes, Ella McLeod, and Alicia D. Williams. All of these poets have much more to say. And they have friends. I hope you'll seek them out.

Now, are you ready? Are your eyes open? Your ears? Your heart?


Ours is not a small voice. I invite you to listen.



Traci N. Todd

Traci N. Todd
September 2025



An illustration of a young girl with dark skin and hair in a bun, wearing a red patterned top and a yellow skirt, standing on a white cloud. She is reaching up with her arms towards a large, glowing blue cloud that contains many white stars of various sizes and shapes. Some stars are connected by thin white lines, forming constellations. In the background, a city skyline with dark buildings and lit windows is visible under a dark purple and blue night sky. A large, bright full moon is in the upper right corner, and a shooting star streaks across the sky. The overall scene is dreamlike and magical.

THE DREAM KEEPER

Bring me all of your dreams,
You dreamers.
Bring me all of your
Heart melodies
That I may wrap them
In a blue cloud-cloth
Away from the too rough fingers
Of the world.

Langston Hughes

THIS BODY II

My body is
perfect and
imperfect and
Black and
girl and
big and
thick hair and
short legs and
scraped knee and
healed scar and
heart beating and
hands that hold and
voice that bellows and
feet that dance and
arms that embrace and
my momma's eyes and
my daddy's smile and
my grandma's hope and

my body is masterpiece and
my body is mine.

Renée Watson and Ellen Hagan



MORNING LITURGY (EXTRACT)

There is so much beauty within
beauty attached to my names
beauty attached to my skin
beauty attached to the grace in my walk
beauty attached to my tongue
beauty attached to my flaws
look at me, brewing stars in my skin.

Ijeoma Umebinyuo



NARCISSA

Some of the girls are playing jacks.
Some are playing ball.
But small Narcissa is not playing
Anything at all.

Small Narcissa sits upon
A brick in her back yard
And looks at tiger-lilies,
And shakes her pigtails hard.

First she is an ancient queen
In pomp and purple veil.
Soon she is a singing wind.
And, next, a nightingale.

How fine to be Narcissa,
A-changing like all that!
While sitting still, as still, as still,
As anyone ever sat!

Gwendolyn Brooks

ROBERT, WHO IS OFTEN A STRANGER TO HIMSELF

Do you ever look in the looking-glass
And see a stranger there?
A child you know and do not know,
Wearing what you wear?

Gwendolyn Brooks

