

LISTENING TO ILLINOIS VOICES

James Ballowe, Chicago Literary Club, November 30, 2020

This evening I will present the work of three of Illinois' most outstanding

poets, all of whom have spent their adult lives in Illinois, although all were born out of the State. Most of you likely know their names and the work that they have done, primarily because they have received accolades as poets

from our State and the country. I have been fortunate to be counted among their friends and have been asked to read poetry with them. Their names are

Gwendolyn Brooks, Lisel Mueller, and Kevin Stein.

The first on my list is Gwendolyn Brooks who was born in Topeka, Kansas, in 1917, was brought to Chicago as a baby, and lived on the South Side of Chicago until her death in the year 2000. After she published *Annie Allen*, her second book of poetry, she became the first African-American to receive a

Pulitzer Prize, and she was also awarded a medal by the National Endowment for the Arts in 1995.

I first got to know her well when we read poetry together at the Cliff Dwellers. Later I read with her in an auditorium in Hyde Park before a typically packed audience of young people and their parents. And a bit after that, my wife and I picked her up in Hyde Park where she was living and drove her to Peoria where she was the commencement speaker at Bradley University. Later I found an upright manual typewriter to replace the old one on which she always composed her poetry. She and I continued to correspond frequently until she passed in 2000 after serving thirty-two years as the third Illinois Poet Laureate, following the tenure of Carl Sandburg.

In 2015, as a founding editor of the literary magazine *Fifth Wednesday Journal*, published by Vernon Miller, a former administrator and professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago, I interviewed Haki Madhubuti, a poet and the publisher of the Third World Press for the past fifty years. In that interview, he credited Miss Brooks with influencing his own poetry and leading him to become a publisher of the work of others. Haki has recently

received the National Book Award for his poetry. The Third World Press, founded in 1967, is perhaps the most influential Press devoted to the poetry, fiction, and non-fiction of Black writers. Incidentally, Haki began making his mark as a poet under his birth name Don L. Lee. But following a trip to Africa, he changed that name to his current name, which means *precise or accurate justice*.

Gwendolyn Brooks' legacy and influence are undiminished. She set a standard for the position of Poet Laureate here in Illinois. It is not just honorary. It is a job. As Kevin Stein, our most recent Poet Laureate wrote, "In America, our state and national laureates have been asked to devise their own programs for promoting the art of poetry among the populace. Most recently in Illinois, Gwendolyn Brooks encouraged, sustained, and rewarded poetry writing among Illinois residents among elementary and secondary students, particularly among the African-American community." Stein readily accepted this precedent set by Ms. Brooks and found himself travelling throughout the State of Illinois, as she had done, to encourage the understanding of and participation in poetry by young and old citizens.

At the age of 68, Ms. Brooks became the poetry consultant to the Library of Congress. And during her travels as Illinois Poet Laureate around the State, she made an immense impression on those she visited. In Macomb, Illinois, the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for African American Literature remains an important part of the Western Illinois University campus. And in Chicago, Chicago State University where she taught for over a decade as Distinguished Professor of English established the Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Creative Writing.

“The Lovers of the Poor,” the poem of hers that I am going to read now, displays her use of irony and even humor to accentuate her insights into the difficulty of bridging the divide between Black and White, poor and well-off cultures in Chicago. She avowed that she learned to write poetry that was direct and straightforward from Carl Sandburg. She herself was not poor. Her father, who once aspired to be a doctor, spent most of his adult life as a janitor at a music school. Her mother was a teacher and a classical pianist. Gwendolyn married Henry Lowington Blakely, Jr., and they had two children. Her husband was in the insurance business.

The Lovers of the Poor

GWENDOLYN BROOKS

arrive. The Ladies from the Ladies' Betterment League

Arrive in the afternoon, the late light slanting

In diluted gold bars across the boulevard brag

Of proud, seamed faces with mercy and murder hinting

Here, there, interrupting, all deep and debonair,

The pink paint on the innocence of fear;

Walk in a gingerly manner up the hall.

Cutting with knives served by their softest care,

Served by their love, so barbarously fair.

Whose mothers taught: You'd better not be cruel!

You had better not throw stones upon the wrens!

Herein they kiss and coddle and assault

Anew and dearly in the innocence

With which they baffle nature. Who are full,

Sleek, tender-clad, fit, fiftyish, a-glow, all

Sweetly abortive, hinting at fat fruit,

Judge it high time that fiftyish fingers felt

Beneath the lovelier planes of enterprise.
To resurrect. To moisten with milky chill.
To be a random hitching-post or plush.
To be, for wet eyes, random and handy hem.
Their guild is giving money to the poor.
The worthy poor. The very very worthy
And beautiful poor. Perhaps just not too swarthy?
perhaps just not too dirty nor too dim
Nor—passionate. In truth, what they could wish
Is—something less than derelict or dull.
Not staunch enough to stab, though, gaze for gaze!
God shield them sharply from the beggar-bold!
The noxious needy ones whose battle's bald
Nonetheless for being voiceless, hits one down.
But it's all so bad! and entirely too much for them.
The stench; the urine, cabbage, and dead beans,
Dead porridges of assorted dusty grains,
The old smoke, *heavy* diapers, and, they're told,

Something called chitterlings. The darkness. Drawn

Darkness, or dirty light. The soil that stirs.

The soil that looks the soil of centuries.

And for that matter the *general* oldness. Old

Wood. Old marble. Old tile. Old old old.

Not homekind Oldness! Not Lake Forest, Glencoe.

Nothing is sturdy, nothing is majestic,

There is no quiet drama, no rubbed glaze, no

Unkillable infirmity of such

A tasteful turn as lately they have left,

Glencoe, Lake Forest, and to which their cars

Must presently restore them. When they're done

With dullards and distortions of this fistic

Patience of the poor and put-upon.

They've never seen such a make-do-ness as

Newspaper rugs before! In this, this "flat,"

Their hostess is gathering up the oozed, the rich

Rugs of the morning (tattered! the bespattered. . . .)

Readies to spread clean rugs for afternoon.

Here is a scene for you. The Ladies look,

In horror, behind a substantial citizeness

Whose trains clank out across her swollen heart.

Who, arms akimbo, almost fills a door.

All tumbling children, quilts dragged to the floor

And tortured thereover, potato peelings, soft-

Eyed kitten, hunched-up, haggard, to-be-hurt.

Their League is allotting largesse to the Lost.

But to put their clean, their pretty money, to put

Their money collected from delicate rose-fingers

Tipped with their hundred flawless rose-nails seems . . .

They own Spode, Lowestoft, candelabra,

Mantels, and hostess gowns, and sunburst clocks,

Turtle soup, Chippendale, red satin “hangings,”

Aubussons and Hattie Carnegie. They Winter

In Palm Beach; cross the Water in June; attend,

When suitable, the nice Art Institute;

Buy the right books in the best bindings; saunter
On Michigan, Easter mornings, in sun or wind.
Oh Squalor! This sick four-story hulk, this fibre
With fissures everywhere! Why, what are bringings
Of loathe-love largesse? What shall peril hungers
So old old, what shall flatter the desolate?
Tin can, blocked fire escape and chitterling
And swaggering seeking youth and the puzzled wreckage
Of the middle passage, and urine and stale shames
And, again, the porridges of the underslung
And children children children. Heavens! That
Was a rat, surely, off there, in the shadows? Long
And long-tailed? Gray? The Ladies from the Ladies'
Betterment League agree it will be better
To achieve the outer air that rights and steadies,
To hie to a house that does not holler, to ring
Bells elsetime, better presently to cater
To no more Possibilities, to get

Away. Perhaps the money can be posted.
Perhaps they too may choose another Slum!
Some serious sooty half-unhappy home!—
Where loathe-love likelier may be invested.
Keeping their scented bodies in the center
Of the hall as they walk down the hysterical hall,
They allow their lovely skirts to graze no wall,
Are off at what they manage of a canter,
And, resuming all the clues of what they were,
Try to avoid inhaling the laden air.

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Like Gwendolyn Brooks, Lisel Mueller, who began to learn English at the age of 15, was influenced by the poetry of Carl Sandburg. Lisel often attended Gwendolyn's readings. Lisel's obituary in The New York Times, written by Neil Genzlinger, quotes her as writing, "Sandburg's unadorned, muscular, straightforward diction lured me as the painted women under street lamps

lured the farm boys in a city named Chicago....” Lisel and her husband Paul raised their two daughters in Lake County. Jenny is a poet and a professor at McKendree University in Lebanon, Illinois. Lucy is a geriatric nurse here in Chicago.

Lisel was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1914. Her father, Fritz Neuman, was a professor. In 1933, he became a target of the Fascists who wanted all teachers to join the Nazis party. He left the country and eventually wound up at the Evansville College, now Evansville University, a professor of German and French. He managed to bring his family to Indiana in 1939. Lisel eventually graduated from Evansville where she met her husband. She also took a graduate degree from Indiana University. She and Paul came to Lake Forest to make their home. Here is a poem from her Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poems *Alive Together* (1996) that says it all:

Curriculum Vitae

1992

- 1) I was born in a Free City, near the North Sea.
- 2) In the year of my birth, money was shredded into

confetti. A loaf of bread cost a million marks. Of course I do not remember this.

- 3) Parents and grandparents hovered around me. The world I lived in had a soft voice and no claws.
- 4) A cornucopia filled with treats took me into a building with bells. A wide-bosomed teacher took me in.
- 5) At home the bookshelves connected heaven and earth.
- 6) On Sundays the city child waded through pinecones and primrose marshes, a short train ride away.
- 7) My country was struck by history more deadly than earthquakes or hurricanes.
- 8) My father was busy eluding the monsters. My mother told me the walls had ears. I learned the burden of secrets.
- 9) I moved into the too bright days, the too dark nights of adolescence.
- 10) Two parents, two daughters, we followed the sun and the moon across the ocean. My grandparents stayed behind in the darkness.
- 11) In the new language everyone spoke too fast. Eventually I caught up with them.
- 12) When I met you, the new language became the language of love.
- 13) The death of the mother hurt the daughter into poetry. The daughter became a mother of daughters.

- 14) Ordinary life: the plenty and thick of it. Knots tying threads to everywhere. The past pushed away, the future left unimagined for the sake of the glorious, difficult, passionate present.
- 15) Years and years of this.
- 16) The children no longer children. An old man's pain, an old man's loneliness.
- 17) And then my father too disappeared.
- 18) I tried to go home again. I stood at the door to my childhood, but it was closed to the public.
- 19) One day, on a crowded elevator, everyone's face was younger than mine.
- 20) So far, so good. The brilliant days and nights are breathless in their hurry. We follow, you and I.

I first spent time with Lisel in the 1980s when she consented to come to Edgar Lee Master's hometown of Lewiston, Illinois with a group of other poets from Chicago and around the State, a three-day event sponsored by the Illinois Arts Council. These writers went throughout the city reading at libraries, schools, and hospitals. Lisel loved to travel around the Midwest, as attested to by her poem titled "Highway Poems"

that is dedicated to her daughters. Some of the poems clearly reveal her sense of humor, this one especially:

Camping,, you learn people
by their shoes in the toilet stalls.
The brown loafers support
white legs and a silver trailer;
the navy tennis shoes go
with Pepsodent and a black wig;
the tiny saddle shoes match a voice
that talks about being three;
and I must be a pair
of yellow sneakers, blue-patched at the toes,
although, being filled with my life,
I don't believe it.

But Lisel never forgot her homeland, even while living in Lake Forest. Here is a poem that attests to that:

ANOTHER VERSION

Our trees are aspens, but people
mistake them for birches,
they think of us as characters
in a Russian novel, Kitty and Levin
living contentedly in the country.
Our friends from the city watch the birds
and rabbits feeding together
on top of the deep, white snow.
(We have Russian winters in Illinois,
but no sleigh bells, possums instead of wolves,

no trusted servants to do our work.)
As in a Russian play, an old man
lives in our house, he is my father,
he lets go of life in such slow motion,
year after year, that the grief
is stuck inside me, a poisoned apple
that won't go up or down.
But like the three sisters, we rarely speak
of what keeps us awake at night,
like them, we complain about things
that don't really matter and talk
of our pleasures and of the future;
we tell each other the willows
are early this year, hazy with green.

Recently, some of you may have heard the Chicago Symphony Orchestra play Max Raimi's composition that he titled "Three Lisel Mueller Settings." His composition was commissioned by the Poetry Foundation. Raimi visited Lisel at the Admiral at the Lake on Foster Avenue. Until his death, her husband lived with her at this retirement community. I also tried to see her as much as I could when I was living out of town. And in the last five years in Chicago, I managed to visit her once a week and also give programs centered on her poetry to the Admiral residents. On November 23, 2019, I was invited to read one of her poems at a ceremony and luncheon given by Wolfgang Moessinger, the Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany. The Consul General

presented her with the Cross of the Order of Merit of the Federal Republic of Germany, the highest honor for an artist that is awarded by the country. The invitation read, "Lisel Mueller who always wrote her poems in English is unique in the sense that she translated her sadness about her lost home in Germany into powerful American poetry." My very last visit to see Lisel was a sad one. It was a sunny morning, and I expected to take her outside to a favorite spot of hers: the beautiful garden on the rear deck of the Admiral. When I went to her room, it was emptied of her belongings. She had died at 3:00 a.m. the morning of February 21.

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Kevin Stein, too, was a friend of Lisel's, and she always brightened when I read some of his poems to her. Kevin was Illinois' fourth Poet Laureate and served for 14 years in that role beginning in 2003 after Gwendolyn Brooks' death. The first Poet Laureate was Howard Austin, an accountant in Springfield and the second was Carl Sandburg from Galesburg. Kevin, like Gwen and Lisel, was born out of the State but just across the border. His hometown was Anderson, Indiana. He and his wife came to Illinois in the fall

of 1984 after he received his doctorate from Indiana University where he also received an MFA in creative writing. We hired him in the English Department at Bradley University where he taught literature and creative writing during his tenure. He recently retired and joined me as a Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus. I am honored to be among his closest friends and to have been his colleague for almost two decades.

Kevin and G. E. Murray, a professor at UIC, edited the collection *Illinois Voices*, published in 2001 and containing poems by Lisel, Gwen, and Angela Jackson, who has just been named the fifth Poet Laureate of Illinois. (The editors were generous enough to include a couple of poems that I had written.) I am, of course, using their title for my talk this evening. Kevin lives just outside the small town of Dunlap in Peoria County, and some of the subjects of his poems are taken from the stately trees in his back yard and even the corn field at his front door. In 2016, as he was completing his tenure as Poet Laureate, he was given Illinois' highest honor for professional achievement, the Order of Lincoln, presented by the Lincoln Academy of Illinois, presided over by the current governor.

While Stein was Poet Laureate, Governor Pat Quinn asked him to deliver a poem at a ceremony honoring Illinois' Gold Star Mothers' Day Ceremony. Governor Quinn suggested "In Flanders Fields." But Kevin believed that poem to be too deeply emotional for the occasion. Instead he wrote this:

To Illinois's Gold Star Mothers, Who Lost a Child in Service of Country

You know these names as more than polished stone,
more even than ink on white parchment.
You know the child awash with chocolate,
the lanky one whose knees no jeans could hold.

You know the face you've framed upon the wall,
those eyes as lush as June lilies, that hair
as wild as the river after spring rains.

You know the one who shouldered burdens
asked of him. You know *sacrifice* because
she gave you the word whole, in act and deed
of hour upon lonesome hour. You know these,

and shall not forget the way you learned by heart
what it means to birth and to give away. Mothers
know how mothers greet sun's yellow umbrella

unfolding from Kankakee to Cairo,
Watseka to Buffalo Grove to Rock Island –
arcing from there to Tokyo and Seoul,
Berlin to London, Kabul to Baghdad.

You know why sunrise portends sunset, realm
of the asked and the given. Your nation's born of
more than stone, more than ink on white parchment.

- Kevin Stein
Illinois Poet Laureate 2003-2017

I will conclude now with one more poem from Kevin Stein who tells me that he is honored by my including him in this talk. All three voices that you've heard tonight are worthy of our attention. Their many books of poetry speak to us as Illinoisans and to the country as a whole. We are lucky that they decided to reside in this State. Thank you for listening to these marvelous Illinois voices. Here are Kevin's words to complete our evening, as we turn to the television for entertainment:

On Being a Nielsen Family

We pocket five ones when we agree,
fingered cash our soul's ransom.
And a Family Viewership Record Book
for each TV, of which we've three.
We are the Postmodern Descartes,

pledging, "I watch, therefore I am."
We're the grand experiment that was
America, both scientist and the mouse
with a human ear stitched to its pink back,
checking the appropriate idiot-box boxes.

We're our own Peeping Tom, peering in.
On stage, we're culture's disguise,

the way a bickering couple makes nice
once the bell ding-dongs neighbors in
for cocktails and unsalted Cheese Nips.

Though it's Oprah, we circle BBC News.
Though Jerry Springer, we mark Charlie Rose.
No no no. Not South Park, not Cops,
not World's Funniest Animal Tricks,
but History Channel and Discovery,

NASA Live, Nightline, and Devotionals,
the Food Network's Thanksgiving Day
Vegan Special. We are watched watching,
watching ourselves watched. We are never
enough, and the lie is as we wish to be.