April is National Poetry Month, a celebration KidsPost has long marked by showcasing the winners of our poetry contest. But this year, with Amanda Gorman inspiring millions of people with her Inauguration Day poem, we decided to produce something extra special. We have our contest winners — whose “Poetry of the Pandemic” reveals the frustration and sadness as well as the hope and small joys kids have experienced in the past year. But we also have three National Youth Poet Laureate finalists who helped judge the contest share one of their recent poems. And finally, book recommendations and fun poetry-related activities. Our hope is that kids' interest in reading and writing poetry lasts not just a month, but a lifetime.

Christina Barron

A year like no other captured in verse
Meet young laureates in the making

Nearly 600 kids from 23 states and the District of Columbia shared their "Poetry of the Pandemic" with KidsPost. It was an extremely challenging assignment to narrow them down to 10. "I was awestruck by these young writers' creativity, tenderness and resilience in the face of the pandemic," said Alexandra Heyn, one of three Youth Poets Laureate who helped judge the contest. "I loved seeing the young poets explore the nature and relationships around them, and look through portals, windows and screens to something beyond their day-to-day realities," added judge Serena Yang.

These 10 poets will receive a prize package of books (including one by Nikki Grimes, Linda Sue Park or Dwayne Reed), a KidsPost T-shirt and other goodies.

Judge Alexa Young encouraged all kids to keep writing and to remember there's no mold for a poet: "You are what a poet looks like."

Finding My Place
By Sydney Joon, 13, Falls Church

I'm going back to school today
After a year behind my door
Ready to embrace the world
A thousand questions blow like the wind
As I open up to take it in
Excitement building on itself
Waiting for the perfect moment
bursting — releasing streams of energy
Shooting from my core, begging to be heard
Riding waves of questions, the wind of my fear creates
A vicious storm, blackened skies
On which to pontificate
Each weighed blow of second thoughts pulls me under.
Anchored to existential thoughts of my place, in this place.
And are they smiling behind their mask, I wonder.

A Day in the Year
Judy-Culjak, 13
Makawao, Hawaii
My eyes are open
the sun is now rising
The perpetual quiet.
... tranquilizing
I get dressed and washed for almost no one
A full day is ahead
another slow one
Logged in to room
I study my reflection
My camera is off
to hide my complexion
I cover my eyes
with my new blue-light glasses
And slowly and grudgingly attend all my classes
Tomorrow's the same
our lives on repeat
The sun's at last set
another day is complete
My pilot stays lit
but no gas is provided
Stay hopeful, stay sanguine 'til this all has subsided

Alone
Olivia Goddard, 13
Arlington
Logging on,
The blue light pierces my eyes.
Silence.
I don't know who my classmates are.
They are reduced to mere initials on a screen.
I can't remember their names and I've never seen their faces. I rarely hear their voices.
There are barriers.
Cutting off connections and driving people.
Like a person, each person trapped in their own cell. Desperate to get out.
To escape.
But we are stuck here, faceless, silent. Alone.

Hope From the Ashes
Yusra Qureshi, 8
Manassas Park
What were you doing in the pandemic?
Were you firm like trees or did you panic?
A disease that spreads person to person,
And the cases get worse and worse and,
The world feels smaller and smaller but,
We cannot be discouraged, no not us!
Because scientists created vaccines,
That'll sweep this terrible virus clean,
That'll save our loved ones and bring us peace,
To wake us up from this nightmarish dream.
But something new rises from the ashes,
Something special, even something splendid,
A taste of hope that this'll be ended,
A fresh flavor to savor forever.

Persevere
By Wesley Sudderth, 11
Mount Crested Butte, Colorado
The virus is crawling
through the human files
looking through
our lives
spreading violently
But still, we shine
light in the sea of sadness
We give, we receive
Giving light
to those in
Darkness
Bringing light
to The world
We, as humans,
Persevere
Covictionary
By Zuzu Lang, 10
Warrenton
New words swim
Around my Head.
I test them out
In my Mouth.
Opening and Closing.
QUARANTINE
(is-o-uh-nuh-teen)
Noun
A strict ISOLATION Imposed to PREVENT The spread of DISEASE.

Light in the dark
Fiona Moats, 7
Alexandria
When the world hit the bell that dinged at danger
and the people faced massive destruction,
we knew that good things end
but so do the bad.

If you close your eyes, you can see a gap in the dark, and you
know that light is never really gone as long as you believe.

And we all have our voices and I still have
pancakes with my family on Saturday mornings.

Perseverance
Amelia Muñoz, 8
Vienna
Perseverance came on the scene
Giving us hope before a vaccine
The rover fill the way
Through the pandemic
So that sorrow wouldn’t stay

Thanks to the NASA team
And their perseverance
I watched the rover land like a dream
Shining their people could reach for the stars
That’s the story of COVID and Mars.

Happiness
By Aliya Ramirez-Skolnik, 12
Chevy Chase
Good morning January, I breathed in clear, crisp, winter air.
Hello February. I watched a meteor shower.
11:11, make a wish, March. I walked outside and saw the growing, green grass.
Good afternoon, April. I watched raindrops race down my window.
Today is a sunny day, May. I went outside.
Good afternoon, June. It was hot out, so I ate ice cream.
It’s 3 o’clock, July. I saw a butterfly.
Hey, August. I looked at the stars.
How are you, September? I gazed at a lake as birds flew above my head.
Good evening, October. I watched the autumn leaves fall.
What’s up, November? I watched a spider crawl.
Goodnight December. I watched the sun set.

Homeschool at Grandma and Grandad’s
By Samantha Iadarola, 9
Silver Spring
Working at the kitchen table
While we learn about fairytales and fables.

There’s a yellow school bus
That Grandma has at home.

We go down the basement to eat our lunch
There we search and munch and munch.

Grandma’s cooks and I sit down on the floor,
“Have you read good Job?” she said.
Alexandra Huynh, Alora Young and Serena Yang started writing poetry in elementary school and are finalists for the 2021 National Youth Poet Laureate, who will be announced in May. They each shared a recent poem they have written. Go to wapo.st/kidspost_spokenwordpoetry to hear them read their poems.

It does not matter any longer where you live from news reports on the fires in California and the floods in Vietnam.

I. THEY WAITED FOR THE ANSWERS THEY DIDN’T WANT TO HEAR BUT KNEW WERE REALITY
from my living room i watch as tiny yellow men march into the worst darkness & pretend not to hear when they have names

witness an unprecedented use of the word unprecedented
—the state of California has swallowed Connecticut like fever

hearing behind a numbered caption the shape of neglect —
there are silverbacks in the forest now; the forest is a city with wrinkles for veins & a steady churn of smog

vehicles spill onto highways to smudge the color of death, but
even the lucky ones wake up to smudged sun & sepia

classic Western: villainize nature define your honor reduce the brown people to accessory

this is the work of a century’s suppression of a creature that feeds on its own dead when there is nothing left to breathe, you produce the opposite of oxygen

don’t need a crystal ball return the trees to their cradles burn the land clean of history seethe warning blaze insurrection do not slow, do not slow

let them see the inferno they created.

II. LOCAL RESIDENTS NOW LIVE IN A WAY THAT IS PREPARED FOR NATURAL DISASTER
in the country my mother loves in its naked heart coastlines unravel into starving hands drawing anything into wet embrace include the slippers: whose tattered pockets kept our feet from catching wind & the plastic: collected to prove we are not cruel include the cartoon toys, the buntings, the dining tables, the books, the silk, the rice, the fields they grow, line-on-line, the photos & the children: who have been found mothers in this soft earth they say it sounds like a bomb when the mountains that is not actually a mountain explodes & it weeps burials for the well-dressed bodies who watch water rise to feel their conscience who mutter Buddha’s name until synonymous with mosquito hum who hold real hands in the dark of electricity white millions of hummingbirds crash into glass-metal red & a herd of baby elephant owings at the unlike wrack, of course, the meteorologists will call rainfall & the parents will call temporary, will call home.

III. THEIR ONLY DESIRE WAS TO BE TOGETHER IN THE HOME THEY LOVED the structures are empty now, either because the people died or engulfed by flames near the news is anything but honor of destruction do not slow, do not slow

let them see the inferno they created.

11. LOCAL RESIDENTS NOW LIVE IN A WAY THAT IS PREPARED FOR NATURAL DISASTER in the country my mother lives in its naked heart
Advice poem

To every body
Is American
That is young
and multi-lingual
I say before you
Some advice:
From 21 black women, who have survived
Don’t let anyone tell you what you can and can’t be
More often than not, foundations set you free
Love yourself, love redemptively
Forget the narratives, do what makes you happy
Don’t be afraid you say your voice
When god hands you a gift, take it.
Do not be conquered by self-doubt
Too many people don’t want you to make it
Find confidence inside yourself
Don’t you dare let fear shake it.
Stay true to who you are
Get yourself an education
Don’t depend on anybody else to lift you above your station
In this world, you must observe, because some set out
Be calm, and be a child, change comes so fast
It will alarm you
You have all you need to make it god has given you your tools
Don’t change to be the crowd
Don’t ever become cruel
You are everything you’re meant to be
I promise. You’re enough.
Don’t let creepy old men steal your joy
Being a young black girl is tough
But through all the trials that you’ll find, all the aching
Know that just because you’re down today
Doesn’t mean you’ll be down tomorrow.

Folktales

(a poem, a story circulatated among a people by word of mouth, often considered to be false or based on superstition.

i. correction

Remember the things you are, the things you have, that mean history or poem, the hour or a room, careful how you hold your tongue, or time collapses into just the space between four walls, or you hear a poem once and it becomes your ancestor.

ii. modern day swearing

My Chinese teacher keeps asking me where I’m from, and I remember.

If someone else has a poor memory, you’ll survive her, but tongues are less bloodless.

But only the teeth, or the throat, or our stomachs.

In this world, you must observe, because some set out
Forget the naysayers, do what makes you happy
Love yourself, love recklessly

Every version of this story, my people have a poor memory.

Of every Chinese city her ever been to.

And you may have a perfect memory

That is how he really met my mother,

And what is memory but a second chance?

And this is how he really met my mother,

My mother’s childhood home in Shanghai,

The dirt floor of yeye’s old house growing damp

Leaves will not fall from trees, twigs and water never forgets anything it touches.

Be calm, and be a child, change comes so fast
It will alarm you
You have all you need to make it god has given you your tools
Don’t change to be the crowd
Don’t ever become cruel
You are everything you’re meant to be
I promise. You’re enough.
Don’t let creepy old men steal your joy
Being a young black girl is tough
But through all the trials that you’ll find, all the aching
Know that just because you’re down today
Doesn’t mean you’ll be down tomorrow.

i. The Truth

Chang Jiang means the eastern sea, just outside my mother’s childhood home in Shanghai.

And in the west it floods tainan every summer,

The dirt floor of your old house growing damp

Beneath my dad’s feet, the water near my childhood home in Shanghai,

The dirt floor of yeye’s old house growing damp beneath my feet, the ground soft enough

To hold the memory of his body for just a moment.

The dirt floor of your old house growing damp beneath my feet, the ground soft enough

To hold the memory of his body for just a moment.

The dirt floor of yeye’s old house growing damp beneath my dad’s feet, the ground soft enough

To hold the memory of his body for just a moment.

The dirt floor of yeye’s old house growing damp beneath my dad’s feet, the ground soft enough

To hold the memory of his body for just a moment.
Exploring the world through their words

by Andy McGann-Nolan

Here are three authors that look forward as well as to the past for inspiration. These writers use poetry not in terms of perfect rhymes but as a boundless form of expression and communication. In different ways, they’re inviting you to explore the world through your own words, sounds and images.

Legacy: Women Poets of the Harlem Renaissance

By Nikki Grimes. Ages 10 and older.

Poems honor little-known women of the Harlem Renaissance. Nikki Grimes has chosen 30 poems from the first half of the last century to share with readers of the 21st. Inspired by their themes of love, loss, and home, these poems and, using a style called the Golden Shovel, make 19 poems of her own. The topics include nature, family ties and social injustice, but all of the poems, old and new, ring out with a love of language and expression. In “Legacy,” they are set alongside the original poem and a new poem that carries on its theme. The result is a book that lifts a sail — and crafts a poem that resonates with the reader.

Simón R. Rhymer!

By Drayvan Reed. Ages 8 to 12.

The first day of fifth grade starts tomorrow, and Simon dreads it — not happy about it. His older kid will tease him about his small size, and he would rather work on his rhymes. His goal is to become famous like fellow Chicago native Chance the Rapper. Drayvan Reed, the elementary-school teacher who wrote “Simón R. Rhymer!” gained some fame of his own when his song, “Welcome to 4th Grade,” went viral in 2016. The novel follows Simon as he starts fifth grade and grapples with anxiety about a growing neighborhood area. Simon’s narrative is strong, often dropping in his rhyming observations about life, but it takes a little time for him to get comfortable sharing them with his friends, classmates and the wider community.

The One Thing You’ll Save

By Cindy Sue Park. Ages 9 to 12.

In this book of verse inspired by a serious question and an ancient Korean poetry form, elementary-school teacher and poet Park makes the point that kids would save from their homes if there were a fire. The student-teacher relationship builds as students learn about the poetry form, and the teacher also makes sure everybody knows that if a real fire does occur, “you should get out faster.” The clear answers include a snack, a basketball and an old sweater that had been knitted by a student’s two grandmothers. The book could be a springboard for more conversation that all students have in their heads and with each other, full of second thoughts, interruptions, helpful suggestions and a little teasing. The book makes you think about what is valuable, including poetry from other places and times. "It’s a work in progress," Park notes. "Using old Korean music in new ways to show poetry continually resurfaces itself, and the world turns to poetry because it’s so valuable."