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**Gwendolyn Brooks:
“A Surprised Queenhood in the New Black Sun”**

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April is National Poetry Month and, as has become our custom, we focus on the life and work of a particular poet. Although individual poems can be moving and meaningful without knowing anything about the author, learning about a poet’s life and background can make the entirety of their work deeply resonate. Our focus last year was Elizabeth Bishop. And in the future, I look forward to sharing with you about the life and poetry of other major poets including Mary Oliver, Langston Hughes, Walt Whitman, Adrienne Rich, Denise Levertov, Czesław Miłosz, Audre Lorde, and many more. For this year, our focus is Gwendolyn Brooks.

I will confess up front that prior to researching this sermon, I did not know much about either Brooks or her poetry. I knew much more about the generation of poets who inspired and mentored her, including Langston Hughes (1901-1967) and Richard Wright (1908-1960)—as well as the generation of poets she inspired and mentored, such as Sonia Sanchez (1934-) and Nikki Giovanni (1943-). But when I discovered that **Gwendolyn Brooks was the first black person to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize I was curious to learn more about her.**

Consider, for instance, two points of reference regarding what it meant for an African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in 1950, four years *before* the Supreme Court ruled in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* that racially segregated educational facilities were inherently unequal. And it would be yet another year before,

Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955, helping launch the Montgomery Bus Boycott. From our perspective in the year 2019, I don't want us to miss how remarkable it is that Gwendolyn Brooks won the Pulitzer Prize in 1950.

At the same time I am highlighting Brooks's singular achievement, I realize I'm getting ahead of myself. So allow me to turn back the clock to reflect on how she arrived at that auspicious moment. I'll be drawing primarily from an excellent new biography, [A Surprised Queenhood in the New Black Sun: The Life & Legacy of Gwendolyn Brooks](#) by Angela Jackson (Beacon Press, 2017).

Gwendolyn Brooks was born in 1917. Her paternal grandfather had been enslaved, but he escaped during the Civil War to fight on the side of the Union. Gwendolyn's father, in turn, dreamed of using that freedom to become a doctor. And although he was able to study medicine for a year and a half at Fisk (an historically black university in Nashville, Tennessee), the demands of supporting a family led him to a career as a janitor ([Alexander](#) xiii). Brooks's mother was a schoolteacher who became a fulltime homemaker after they started having children.

Despite adversities, both parents supported their daughter's potential from a young age. In 1928, when Gwendolyn Brooks was eleven years old, she published four poems in the neighborhood newspaper. Two years later in 1930, at age thirteen, she landed her first poem in a national magazine (Jackson 2).

That poem was titled "Eventide":

When the sun sinks behind the mountains,
And the sky is besprinkled with color,
And the neighboring brook is peacefully still,
With a gentle, silent ripple now and then;
When the flowers send forth sweet odors,
And the grass is commonly green,
When the air is tranquilly sweet,
And children flock to their mothers' sides,

Then worry flees and comfort presides
For all know it is welcoming evening.

If you know that Brooks was raised in an extremely urban environment on the South Side of Chicago, this poem becomes even more impressive. It shows both the power of her imagination as well as the variety of different environments she encountered through her extensive reading regimen (2-3).

I don't, however, want to give the impression that she wrote a handful of poems, most of which were published. Rather, her success as a poet was connected to her commitment to writing poetry. **"She wrote a poem a day from the time she was eleven. Sometimes two or three"** (3). Witnessing her commitment, her parents did what they could to be supportive. Her mother took on more household chores than she might have otherwise to give Gwendolyn more time to write. And her father gave her a writing desk that she treasured (3-4).

From that desk, she set her sights on publishing in the *Chicago Defender*, the most popular newspaper at the time focused on African-American life. Her first poem to appear on those pages was titled "To the Hinderer," and is often interpreted as about the early racism she encountered:

Oh, who shall force the brave and brilliant down?
There's no descent for him who treads the stars.
What else shall he care for mortal hate or frown?
He shall not care. His bright soul knows no bars.

Take his weak frame and twist it to your will.
Strive to discourage and to make his fall;
Oh, make him suffer! Cause his tears! But still
Shall not his spirit rise and vanquish all?

What things the Power buried in the skies
Of man's attempt to bruise and hinder man?
What pity has that Force for our poor cries
When crude destruction is our foremost plan.

And while it is impressive that she published that poem in 1934 at age seventeen in a national newspaper, it is even more impressive that **over the next four years, she**

published seventy-five more poems in the *Chicago Defender* (9).

Gwendolyn was often so single-mindedly focused on her craft that her parents would grow concerned. And her mother would sometimes tell the story of the time she tried to get Gwendolyn to take a break by telling her, “There’s a big fire down the street.” Her mother assumed that Gwendolyn, like other young people would leap up from her desk to see the spectacle of the fire. Instead, **Gwendolyn just said, “Yes,” and kept writing** (12).

Another interesting story, not too many years later, is how at age twenty-one, she met her future husband at a NAACP Youth Council. She had heard that a young man her same age, who also attended the NAACP Youth Council, was also a poet. She mentioned her interest in him to a mutual friend, who immediately yelled across the room, “Hey, boy, this girl wants to meet you” (23)!

That bold matchmaking worked. And after dating for a year, Henry and Gwendolyn were married. Their son was born another year later in 1940 (25). And a few years later they had a daughter as well (27). Brooks had always wanted children, although it was a recurring struggle to balance motherhood with her commitment to writing.

In 1945, she published her first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville*, based on the lives she observed in her neighborhood. She used to say that, **“If you wanted a poem, you only had to look out of a window”** (Alexander xvii). As an example, the first poem in that first collection was titled “The Old-Marrieds”:

But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say
Though the pretty-coated bird had piped so lightly all day.
And he had seen the lovers in the little side-streets,
And she had heard the morning stories clogged with sweets.
It was quite a time for loving. It was midnight. It was May.
But in the crowding darkness not a word did they say.

Notice that the first word of this book of poems is “But.” It starts in the middle of things, reflecting the partial views of lives Brooks was able to glimpse on various occasions (37-38).

Five years later, in 1950, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her second book

of poetry, *Annie Allen*. With her usual blend of pragmatism and candor, she said regarding the way she heard the news, “My husband and I were having financial problems. And the lights were out.... A columnist from the *Sun-Times* called... ‘Do you know that you’ve won the Pulitzer Prize?’ I felt at once different and the same” (67).

Becoming the “first black person to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize in any genre” meant that suddenly she was not only reading the poetry of T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), but that he—and many other famous poets—were reading her poetry! In the wake of this achievement, the *Chicago Defender* listed her in a group of outstanding African Americans along with:

- Ralph Bunche, Nobel Peace Prize winner
- Jackie Robinson, the first African American to play in Major League Baseball
- Althea Gibson, who broke the color barrier in tennis
- Thurgood Marshall, not yet on the Supreme Court, but already famous for being the lawyer who successfully argued *Brown v. the Board of Education*. (68)

Amidst this success, it is notable that when accepting her prize, she chose not to give a speech. Instead, recognizing what got her on stage in the first place, she read a selection of her poems. As her aunt once told her, “**poets poet.**” I should add that Brooks was known to be a superb reader of her poetry, and I would recommend listening to her readings, a number of which are available free online (69).

Not long after winning the Pulitzer Prize, Brooks published an essay addressing what it meant from her perspective to write as an African-American woman in the United States. In ways that presage the #BlackLivesMatter movement, she said:

Every [black] poet has “something to say.” Simply because [they are] [black]; [they] cannot escape having important things to say. [Their] mere body, for that matter, is an eloquence. [Their] quiet walk down the street is a speech to the people. Is a rebuke, is a plea, is a school.

But no real artist is going to be content offering raw materials. The [black] poet’s most urgent duty, at present, is to polish [their] technique, [their] way of presenting [their] truths and beauties that these may be

more insinuating, and therefore, overwhelming. (70)

And in her next major book of poetry, published in 1960, we see Brooks using her platform to continue to reflect and refract aspects of black life in America.

One powerful example in that third book of poetry is titled “The Last Quatrain of the Ballad of Emmett Till”:

After the Murder

After the Burial

Emmett’s mother is a pretty-face thing;

the tint of pulled taffy.

She sits in a red room,

drinking black coffee.

She kisses her killed boy.

And she is sorry.

Chaos in windy grays

through a red prairie. (Selected Poems 81)

Brooks also wrote poems in the coming years about Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, and other such activist and political subjects (Alexander 89-90).

I should add that in 1967, she reached what became a turning point. She was attending a writer’s conference at Fisk University—the historically black institution where her father years earlier had all-too-briefly studied medicine—and the upcoming generation of black artists inspired her to even more fully embrace the African-American aspects of her identity (xxii).

She left Harper and Row, her longtime mainstream publisher. And for the rest of her life only published with black-owned presses. She began wearing her hair in an afro. And her previously dense poetic style became more loose and natural as well (xxii).

In 1972, looking back at the early years of this shift, she wrote:

I—who have “gone the gamut” from an almost angry rejection of my dark skin by some of my brainwashed brothers and sisters to a surprised queenhood in the new black sun—am qualified to enter at least the

kindergarten of new consciousness now. New consciousness and trudge
—toward—progress. (Jackson 116)

And she did continue to grow and develop throughout her life.

In 1968, she succeeded Carl Sandburg as the poet laureate of Illinois. And she wrote a poem titled “Aurora” on the occasion of the inauguration of a new governor of that state:

We who are weak and wonderful
wicked, bewildered, wistful and wild
are saying direct good morning
through the fever

 It is the giant-hour,
Nothing less than gianthood will do;
nothing less than mover, prover,
shover, cover, lever, diver
for giant tacklings, overturning new
organic staring,
that will involve that will involve us
all.

 We say direct good-morning
through the diver,
across the brooding obliques, the
somersaults, ashes
across
the importances stylishly killed:
across
the edited bias,
the waffling of woman,
the structured rejection of blackness.

 Ready for ways,
windows,
remodeling spirals; closing the hot

clichés

Unwinding the witchcraft.

Opening to sun. (119-120)

She also was insistent that being poet laureate should mean more than writing honorary poems. And she notably used that position to encourage young, aspiring poets—including establishing poetry contests with cash awards (121).

She later brought that same activist spirit to her role as U.S. Poet Laureate from 1985-1986, known in her time as the Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress (162). And among many other awards and honors, I should be sure to mention that a decade later in 1995, she received the National Medal of the Arts from President Clinton (179).

Five years after that on December 4, 2000, Gwendolyn Brooks died from cancer at the age of 83. But she was traveling and giving readings until a month before her death. And even at the end in her hospital bed, when she died, she was holding a pen in her hand—ready to keep writing until the last (182-183).