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Poetry at 30 Paces; In Competition With the Pros, Young Versifiers Show Their Rhyme Has Come

by Lonnae O'Neal Parker

Saturday night near the back offices in the downtown Borders bookstore, Kethan Hubbard, 18, is talking to himself. His voice rises and falls rhythmically as he practices his art, pacing the stacks.

Profanity is a feeble mind trying to express itself forcefully.
If you have a feeble mind and you keep quiet,
No one will know the level of your ignorance.

Nearby, Joe Rodriguez, who is snapping pictures of Hubbard and acting as his handler, runs interference against all comers. Hubbard would love to talk, he explains firmly, but he's got to stay on point. An aisle over, other kids--poetry slam participants from local middle schools as well as schools in New York and San Francisco--are concentrating deeply, wearing their game faces.

Close to 800 people jam the space. Fidgeting in fold-up chairs or cross-legged, three deep, they stretch all the way from the books on World War II history to Theories of Ethnicity. They came to listen to spoken-word all-stars like the venerable lioness Nikki Giovanni and Pulitzer Prize winner Henry Taylor. To be stroked with rhythms and plied with rhymes. They came to hear it. And the poets came to "Bring In da Slam"--the third annual poetry slam and "rent party" to raise money for the Youth Poetry Slam League.

The event featured headliner poets including Quincy Troupe, Jeffrey McDaniel, Grace Cavalieri and DJ Renegade from the movie "Slam." The heavyweights were going up against kids who, out on the streets, might fall under the rubric of "at-risk youth." But inside the bookstore, where words have all power, they are packing particular heat. And though it's billed as a face-off, easy money says the kids will win it.

In a takeoff on the NBA slam-dunk competitions, judges Bill Ivey, chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts; Chicago Tribune columnist Clarence Page; and singer Ysaye Barnwell of the a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock brandish cards that score the performances from 1 to 10.

"This is competitive performance art," explains emcee Ray Suarez, host of National Public Radio's "Talk of the Nation." "This is gladiatorial, but instead of weapons, their words are sharp."

Suarez says the slams, which originated in Chicago in the late 1980s, are a way of opening "new channels of expression" to young people who might not otherwise have this exposure. Typically slammers have three minutes to perform poems that are then judged for resonance and attitude. It is a participatory sport in which audience members are encouraged to heckle, hooray and display all manner of bookstore unseemliness.

The league was started 1997 as an attempt to interject life into the WritersCorps program, which was designed to bring the arts to underserved populations. Initially in four D.C. schools, the poetry program is now offered in all Washington middle schools as well as middle and high schools in San Francisco and New York. It features local and national competitions. "The idea is to make it an interscholastic sport on par with football," says Slam League founder and coordinator Nancy Schwalb. "To get the kids celebrated for their intellectual abilities."

At Borders, they cram the staircase and look down from the upstairs cafe. It's an eclectic crowd -boho, buppie and a smattering of button-down. Heads sport locks, Afros and wispy receding hairlines. Fubu urban gear and Ann Taylor separates play footsie. Suarez looks for audience members to augment the three-judge panel. "If you are capricious, loving but mean-spirited, and semi-unfair," Suarez says, "we want you!"

"Bring on the laaambs! Bring on the laaambs!" somebody intones from the back. And "sacrificial" poets are brought out to bloody the water. A down-tempo "Samurai Song," written by Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky and performed by Borders CEO Bob DiRomualdo, is greeted with polite applause. Then 11-year-old Charles Davis from Washington's Stuart Hobson Middle School swaggers to the mike.

"Go, baby!" yells a woman in the crowd.

"Thank you, Mommy," says Davis, with a full measure of bravado as the crowd cheers his moxie. He begins his own deliberative verse.

Food you are a murderer.
Food I am not your toy.
Food get out of my life.

From all-star to child star, the competition seesaws.

Los Angeles professional poet and author Jeffrey McDaniel is an audience favorite with his wire-rimmed glasses and dead-on delivery.

I am a narcissist trapped in the third person.
I walk up to people on the street, show them a picture of myself as a child
And say have you seen this boy.
He's been missing for a long time . . .

Low scores for McDaniel from the judges bring hisses and catcalls.

Jason Gamio, a tall, doughy, baby-faced kid from Brooklyn sporting a buzz cut and an accent straight from Central Casting, takes the mike. There are poems of tourists, and ghettos and breathless hellos.

"Life is hard," says 13-year-old Reina Samuels, of Washington's Garnet-Patterson Middle School, another of the evening's sacrificial poets. "Then you write poetry."

Nikki Giovanni's words of anger and social protest helped define the black arts movement of the 1960s. For more than 30 years, she has written about gender, politics and family. And the Borders crowd is nursing a serious love jones for her. The spectators lean close in their seats.

"This poem is call 'Train Rides,' and it is in praise of black men," Giovanni says.

"Yeah!" comes the yell from somewhere near the books on religion, causing Suarez to quip, "Black man, please hold your applause to the end."

In exquisitely metered verse about seasons and mice and race and trains, Nikki Giovanni takes on.

. . . and you will sit near your fire and tell tales of growing up in segregated America and the tales will be so loving even the white people will feel short-changed by being privileged . . .

By the end of the night, with the student poets squarely in the lead, the audience seems to have grown thicker. Words hang in the air.

Natrice Spicer, 18, wears black DKNY tights under her short skirt, and her legs end in a set of chunky Wild Pair lace-up shoes. Her hair is a carefully pinned upsweep that officially makes her "ghetto fabulous." All night, the San Francisco teen, who hopes to attend Howard University, has been intense. Nodding, rocking, cheering others on.

The chance to express themselves is what the organizers say moves these kids. Drives them into notebook margins, and propels them to the mike.

"Not to steal your line, Ms. Giovanni, but I am 'Black and Fed Up,' and this poem recognizes that," Spicer says.

. . . No need to apologize for the things you've done--
oh no you're the endangered, the Golden Sun.
And when you get mad, I'm s'posed to lend my body to your anger oblige
You can't even pay rent, but I can cry
Oh no I can't see it,
You're looking for an invertebrate or something
And I can't be it . . .

Spicer brings the house down and tears spill from her dark Hershey eyes.

On the downtown Washington streets outside Borders, she's a girl some folks could look at all day, and never see at all. In this place, where youth has carried the night, the audience claps, ululates, gives her an ovation. When that dies down, it gives her another. The young poets will have to balance a world of stereotypes against this night of acclaim. They are just beginning to recognize the sounds of their own voices. They are just starting to make noise.

And the wild cheering in the staid bookstore goes on. Because, of course, this audience recognizes that.

Stanza room only: The Youth Poetry Slam League's benefit at Borders on Saturday night. A group of established poets including Nikki Giovanni, left, lost a slam poetry face-off to young poets, but ultimately everybody seemed to feel like a winner.

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