

“We Real Cool” Poems

The history of poetry is really just one big, long conversation. One poet writes a poem, and then ten minutes, or ten years, or ten centuries later, another poet reads that poem and is inspired to write back to it. When Terrance Hayes, a poet who lives in Pittsburgh, PA, read “We Real Cool” by the late poet Gwendolyn Brooks, he was inspired to write his own poem in response. Using each word of Brooks’s poem as the last word in each line of his own new poem, Hayes created a new poetic form we call “The Golden Shovel.”

Here is “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks

We Real Cool

THE POOL PLAYERS.

SEVEN AT THE GOLDEN SHOVEL.

We real cool. We

Left school. We

Lurk late. We

Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We

Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We

Die soon.

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“We Real Cool” Poems

And here is Terrance Hayes’s answering poem, “The Golden Shovel.”

The Golden Shovel

after Gwendolyn Brooks

I. 1981

When I am so small Da’s sock covers my arm, we
cruise at twilight until we find the place the real

men lean, bloodshot and translucent with cool.
His smile is a gold-plated incantation as we

drift by women on bar stools, with nothing left
in them but approachlessness. This is a school

I do not know yet. But the cue sticks mean we
are rubbed by light, smooth as wood, the lurk

of smoke thinned to song. We won’t be out late.
Standing in the middle of the street last night we

watched the moonlit lawns and a neighbor strike
his son in the face. A shadow knocked straight

Da promised to leave me everything: the shovel we
used to bury the dog, the words he loved to sing

his rusted pistol, his squeaky Bible, his sin.
The boy’s sneakers were light on the road. We

watched him run to us looking wounded and thin.
He’d been caught lying or drinking his father’s gin.

He’d been defending his ma, trying to be a man. We
stood in the road, and my father talked about jazz,

how sometimes a tune is born of outrage. By June
the boy would be locked upstate. That night we

got down on our knees in my room. If I should die
before I wake. Da said to me, it will be too soon.

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The Golden Shovel

after Gwendolyn Brooks

II. 1991

Into the tented city we go, we-
akened by the fire’s ethereal

afterglow. Born lost and cool-
er than heartache. What we

know is what we know. The left
hand severed and school-

ed by cleverness. A plate of we-
ekdays cooking. The hour lurk-

ing in the afterglow. A late-
night chant. Into the city we

go. Close your eyes and strike
a blow. Light can be straight-

ened by its shadow. What we
break is what we hold. A sing-

ular blue note. An outcry sin-
ged exiting the throat. We

push until we thin, thin-
king we won’t creep back again.

While God licks his kin, we
sing until our blood is jazz,

we swing from June to June.
We sweat to keep from we-

eping. Groomed on a die-
t of hunger, we end too soon. the boy would be locked upstate.
That night we

got down on our knees in my room. If I should die
before I wake. Da said to me, it will be too soon.

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“We Real Cool” Poems

Now, write a poem about your own “we” – a group to which you belong. Maybe some people don’t appreciate or value your group. Maybe your group gets criticized a lot. Or maybe your group is known and loved by many people. Whatever your group is, help a reader see what makes it special to you.

Here’s the tricky part: End each line of your new poem with a word from “We Real Cool.” Start with the title and use each word in order.

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