



SANDBURG'S
37th Annual
Poetry Competition
Spring 2026



THE 37TH ANNUAL CARL SANDBURG COLLEGE POETRY COMPETITION

Our college's namesake, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and Galesburg native Carl Sandburg, once published thirty-eight "definitions" of poetry. While it is difficult to determine with certainty where this list was first published, it likely first appeared in the March 1923 issue of *The Atlantic*. This list of definitions was republished in his 1928 collection *Good Morning, America*. In this list, Sandburg writes that "Poetry is a theorem of a yellow-silk handkerchief knotted with riddles, sealed in a balloon tied to the tail of a kite flying in a white wind against a blue sky in spring." As we considered Sandburg's list to choose a theme for this year's Poetry Competition, we appreciated this particular definition's cheerful whimsy. Our booklet features this year's winning poems, which vary greatly in subject matter and tone, from writers of all ages across the Sandburg community. We are happy to host this annual competition that celebrates the very human act of writing poetry — kites, theorems, riddles, and all — and we are thrilled to present this year's winners.

~ Sharon Trotter-Martin & Meghan Angle
Poetry competition coordinators

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Elementary Division	3
When It Rains	4
ABC Poem about My Baby Brother	5
I Wish	6
My Class is a Zoo	7
No One's Life is Perfect	8
Junior Division	9
Caged Canary	10
Dear Grandma	11
War	12
Blooming with Time	13
I am from	14
Intermediate Division	15
Dear Earth	16
The Echo We Carry	18
Stories	20
The Woods	21
Shallow Ribs	22
Adult Division	23

Silent Scene	24
La Harpe, Illinois.....	26
Unity	27
Prairie.....	29
Goodbye...Or Something Like It.....	30
Prizes	31
Judges	32

ELEMENTARY DIVISION

First Place

When It Rains by Eva Godina

Second Place

ABC Poem about My Baby Brother by Raeley Lee

Third Place

I Wish by Louisa Kamerer

Honorable Mention

My Class is a Zoo by Sutton Boley

No One's Life is Perfect by Baylor Leffler

Elementary, First Place

When It Rains

By Eva Godina

Raindrops licking the air turning it wet
and salty,
Banging on rooftops and cars with fists
so mighty.
It mutes the silence of a tiny town,
And mutes the city's loud.

When it rains the earth, it thrives,
In places with a drought, it saves lives.
Now many people believe that there
are rain gods,
And even that could be true.

Ear splitting cracks fill the air.
Thunder roars to give a scare.
Some kids run around screaming and
laughing,
Others will hide, screaming and crying.
Windows share a gloomy view.
But when the sky shares some blue,
And birds fly, eagles too.
The world will share the sky with you.

And next time it rains, you'll wait and
wait,
For blue to come, and you'll put on
your boots and greet the sky.
And you will wait next time and the
next.
When it rains.

Elementary, Second Place

ABC Poem about My Baby Brother

By Raeley Lee

A baby is born,
Baby boy
Cuddles me
Drinks milk
Eats
Feed him
Gives him kisses
Has umbilical cord
Is cute
Just borned
Kiss his feet
Love him
My baby brother
New baby brother
Oh so cute
Pulls my hair
Quiet
Really really cute
Silly
Talks goo goo gaa gaa
Uses a paci
Very cute
Was little

Xtra special to me
You can hold him
Zzzz snores when he sleeps

Elementary, Third Place

I Wish

By Louisa Kamerer

I wish I had a dog,
But no is all I get.
I wish I had a little frog,
But she would have a fit.

I wish I had a phone,
But "NO" one more time.
I wish I had a drone.
Is that some sort of crime?

I wish I could move.
She doesn't agree.
I wish I could prove,
This isn't fair to me.

Elementary, Honorable Mention

My Class is a Zoo

By Sutton Boley

My class is a zoo
They scream like cats in a cage

They roar like lions in a rage
They are crazy like monkeys

They chirp like birds
They are loud like an elephant stampede

But our zoo keeper, she keeps us calm
Like napping cats she lets us have fun

But we know when it is done
My class is a zoo

Elementary, Honorable Mention

No One's Life is Perfect

By Baylor Leffler

Roses are red, violets are blue.

When I look at you,

I wonder, "Why is she so perfect?"

I realize that no one's life would be like Beauty and the Beast.

We all know our lives are like carousels,

Spinning in circles trying to figure out what to do with anything.

But just know, no one's life is like a princess in a castle.

JUNIOR DIVISION

First Place

Caged Canary by Stella Bennett

Second Place

Dear Grandma by Vida Wilcox

Third Place

War by Ethan King

Honorable Mention

Blooming with Time by Nael Morales Medina

I am from by Addison Hawk

Junior Division, First Place

Caged Canary

By Stella Bennett

You might've seen that small yellow bird,
Up high in its own personal prison,
At your local pet store,
You might even see them passing by,
Through the solid glass window.
Forever unreachable.
The caged canary sings a song,
For no one to hear.
"I want to live!"
The yellow bird sang,
"I want to fly high, away from the world,"
"To escape from this cage, though it may come with age,"
"Freedom is all I'm asking."
Day by day, the caged canary goes from house to house,
Hoping that someone, even a mouse,
Would see them as an equal.
Not a trophy on the shelf,
For the bird wanted to be loved by one's self.
But the caged canary is foolish.
The caged canary is a prize to be won,
A decoration,
A declaration,
That the will forever be an object.
For if the caged bird were to ever escape their cage,
They'd just be trapped in another.
"I want to die,"
The caged canary sang one last time,

"I will never be free from my cage,"
"And now I know, even with age,"
"I was never meant to be worth the time or the freedom."

Junior, Second Place

Dear Grandma

By Vida Wilcox

Where silence and peace take over
Where warm hugs burn like a fire
Where the oven is left on 350°
And memories shared time and time again
I cannot express enough thankfulness
The stories ringing in my ear
I know that you are always here
"Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" is engraved in my soul forever
Loved when I was tiny, loved how I am now
I love how you feel like a cloud full of care
Holding me tight, letting me grow
But never too far for you to hold me close to your heart
Many days I remember talking in the country breeze outside
Visiting the pale sky with not a cloud in sight

Seeing the sun glistening down to reflect on the blue waters below
Looking upon the tranquil scene
Of wildflowers, tall grasses, and the weeping willow beaming in my memories
I hope you know how much you mean to me
In my heart you'll always be
Sweet as songs and stories
Loved as light in the dark
You will always be the one guiding my heart.

Junior, Third Place

War

By Ethan King

War is the sound of explosions on the ground,
The sound of tracks and sound of shouts.
War writes its name in ashes and iron,
Leaving blood-red stains and oil spills everywhere.

The sound of agony and pain fills the air,
As man fights against man, tearing through the air.
The sound of boots against the ground,
Leaving marks where life was once found.

Where flowers once bloomed and gardens once grew,
Became craters with smoke and fire everywhere.
Homes and towns lie in ruin,
as tanks and soldiers keep pushing.

Through wind, rain, snow, storm,

Valley, mountain, ocean and air,
These men fight, hoping to make it home,
Only to be torn apart by the sound of guns.

War doesn't halt with meetings and documents,
It leaves brutal stains in all men's hearts, never forgetting the march.
Although war might come to an end,
Tell me, good friend, but at what cost, what cost does it end?

Junior, Honorable Mention

Blooming with Time

By Nael Morales Medina

Childhood, walking through the plains
You smell around all types of plants
All around you are fantastic plants every single one is unique
Soft and rough all different kinds
Memories of a small purple flower
Grabbing one
Picking it up
Smelling it
Giving one to mom
Spring is all needed every flower blooms at a different time
So unique
A nice smell running in the air around them
Some of them take more time, or less
All types of places at heart
There will be one alone
Sometimes a giant group
At night they grow
Taking their time
On a sunny day full of butterflies
Always there while it is time
But each one changes and goes

Junior, Honorable Mention

I am from

By Addison Hawk

I am from home before lights on
I am from home when crickets sound
I am from don't hold a grudge hold forgiveness
I am from do the dishes or do the laundry
I am from having hope not loss
I am from drinking hose water
I am from always forgive never forget
I am from in or out not back and forth
I am from no phone at the dinner table
I am from people who teach good life lessons

Intermediate Division

First Place

Dear Earth by Apolonia McClure

Second Place

The Echo We Carry by Kaleia Pulse

Third Place

Stories by Lily Heitz

Honorable Mention

The Woods by Lillian Rogers

Shallow Ribs by Katelin Rohlfes

Dear Earth

By Apolonia McClure

You called me a wanderer; you named me a god,
Because I roam where the giants trod.
Said I was best of my family of dead;
Told me what's joy, and not what's dread.
I found a home, a place to stay.
I never knew worth until that day.
You gave me a name that brought me to life,
And eyes too clouded to see your knife.

You named me a god, though a god you are,
Since we watch ourselves dance with our distant star.
Name me god of the dead and prophesize
The day when you join me through your demise.
I learned of worth and the meaning of love,
While you boxed me in with giants above.
Blindfolded by peace, I ripped your box
Without knowing your heart was made of rocks.

So I had to wake from my blissful dream,
And listen to your nonsense scream:
"What in the world is wrong with you?"
I'm not from a world you know or knew!
You forced my life to end, but this life was never mine;
I had to dance for you because you trapped me in this shrine.
Your endless contradictions catch me like contagious plague;
I hate you, but for some reason, continue to beg—
I beg to our gods that you'll love and give.

I beg every day you'll survive and live.
You can't learn those ways if you mostly hear,
So the time has come to listen, my dear:

I am not your daughter, I am not your son.
I am not a useless speck; I am the one
Who breaks your boundaries of black and white
As your wretched wanderer of twilight.
You reek of importance and are Luna's shame.
Take form as what you self-proclaim:
Sister of beauty, soon her twin.
Keep fighting the wars you'll never win.
You are the cause of your doomed fate.
Your food's too hot, so you eat the plate,
Blaming the oven you made yourself be.
You'll drown as your boiling tears grow the sea.

You called me a wanderer; you named me a god,
Because I roam where the giants trod.
I watch from afar with my family of dead,
And witness you loading the gun at your head.
You gave me meaning and took it away;
I never knew loss until that day.
You gave me life, a moment to start,
And a broken chocolate ice cream heart.

With emotions you can only try to understand,
— Pluto

Intermediate, Second Place

The Echo We Carry

By Kaleia Pulse

Three years have folded
into quiet drawers of time
Yet your name still rises
like dust in sunlight

I've learned new streets
new songs, and new ways to grow.
But some memories
keep their original color

Late nights hum with
what-ifs and almosTs.
And my heart replays
old laughter like a favorite track.

It's strange how distance
can shrink a moment,
How yesterday
can live inside today.

I don't stand still—I've changed
a thousand small ways
But part of me still turns
when I hear your voice in a crowd

Not loud, Not desperate,
Just soft and steady,
Like a lighthouse
that never forgets the shore.
I miss the ordinary things most of all—
Shared glances, comfortable silence,
simple days.
Maybe first loves don't really leave;
They just become
a quiet echo we carry forward.

Intermediate, Third Place

Stories

By Lily Heitz

Some people
Are so good
At telling
Stories
They make you miss
People
Who you've never met

I never knew
Her face
But I know
About her coat
Her butter
Her love for tomatoes

I never felt
His fur
But know he was
Alive
And full of joy
And loved the
Snow

I know all these
Stories

And feel
Like they're
Right next to
Me

Intermediate, Honorable Mention

The Woods

By Lillian Rogers

Sun spotting through the trees
A little girl with eyes of smoke
golden hair that's perfectly
complemented by the greens
and browns that surround her
She belongs there
The bugs that live in the ground
birds that swoop from above
have taught her all she's ever needed to know

She runs barefoot,
knowing exactly how to place
her foot so she's unhurt
by the branches that scatter the ground
She knows the difference
in what plants sting
And which ones leave
a hint of color on her skin
This is where she wants to be
This is her peace

Intermediate, Honorable Mention

Shallow Ribs

By Katelin Rohlfes

I miss my mom in a
I want to tell her everything she's missed
way. In a dial her number and tell her how
the new apartments coming along. Asking her
to repeat the recipe of my favorite dinner, just one more
time
Promising I'll write it down this time, but not actually,
because its much easier to call her.
Reminding her how much I miss her cooking.
I miss her in a "Can I come home for dinner?"
Chaotic, kinda way. In a me and my boyfriend just got in
our first major fight, finals are coming up, and I burnt
dinner
What should I do? And I just really need to be mama's baby
For five minutes.

What I would give for five minutes.
I am eighteen and you've been gone almost
Five years, not five minutes. She doesn't know
the name of my boyfriend and she hasn't heard how
in love I am. She doesn't know the color of the dreadful
curtains in my downtown apartment. She doesn't
know that I am becoming everything she dreamed I would
be
While feeling like I'm failing every time I turn around
And there is no pep talk or soup waiting for me on the

stove
No I love you, no you are "my miracle baby" whispered to
me
As I cry.

I am loved and seen by many, but none of them are
mine in the way she was mine
my mother, my facial features, my DNA

ADULT DIVISION

First Place

Silent Scene by Gary Armstrong

Second Place

La Harpe, Illinois by Tricia Owsley

Third Place

Unity by Kristy Ordoña

Honorable Mention

Prairie by Darrin Ross

Goodbye...Or Something Like It by Christopher Bell

Adult, First Place

Silent Scene

By Gary Armstrong

beyond a frosty window grille
an orphan, just shy of eight,
stared statue still

at winter's wizardry in ballet mode,
fall's flitter having yielded
to that of the cold,

a show as was nature's nature to put on
performed by wind and water
whose role it was to don

frocks of frigid chill,
and if wind, to loosen the lingering leaf
yet clinging closely to stem until

pirouetting away
from treetop tower
to frozen sod, perhaps to stay,

but if water, for variety's sake,
to spend some time as a spike of ice
or cascade to earth as a crystalline flake

if only to dance a pas de deux
with another fleck of floating freeze
or singly swirl as some would do,

continuing on to inevitable end,
when a shivery stillness
began to descend
upon a silent scene and boy,
just shy of eight,
adopting its joy

Adult, Second Place

La Harpe, Illinois

By Tricia Owsley

I am from a small Illinois town nestled in the tiny break
between the fields of corn
And where some farmer dies every year suffocated in his
own grain.
Where we have pancake and sausage breakfasts to fund the
fire department
And ham and bean suppers to raise money for the
ambulance.
Where you will almost certainly see people you know at the
Post Office
And you'll have to drive 30 miles to even get to a fast food
restaurant.
Where you will need luck and perseverance to find a dream
And some sort of body armor to keep that dream from
leaving.
Where neighbors used to take care of each other
And no one is really sure anymore if that is still true.
Where the local newspaper comes out once a week
And we anxiously scan the obituaries just in case we missed
something.
Where all of my great-great-grandparents are buried within
10 miles of each other
And we really didn't know you could leave without going to
prison.

Adult, Third Place

Unity

By Kristy Ordoña

Unity is missing.
PLEASE come back.
Our hearts ache for your return...
The states divided,
oh, how they miss being UNITED.

"Shut up, piggy."
Ouch.
"Those people are garbage."
What?
"Those countries are s***holes."
Who said that?

"I'm glad he's dead, the world is better off without him."

The "leader" speaks....many cringe
but nothing changes.

No consequence
for words
as weapons
pierce the souls
of our people.

Unity, not now.

Unity is not hate.
Nor disdain.

Not burning down houses.

Nor being indifferent to hunger.
Unity is not the division of colors, religions, genders, or loves.

Unity is not them vs. us.

Unity with her manners and compassion
is a duck of a different feather.

Unity does not cage humans like animals
while hiding behind masks without souls.

Unity floats above us, wondering
when the hot air will dissipate
and when will

U remember
No one
In charge
Tolerates evil
Except the
Devil.

Adult, Honorable Mention

Prairie

By Darrin Ross

The prairie now is a litany of things:
rancid waters of a man-made pond
 that taint the hues of a sunset rippled in water;
farm lights embrace in the sheer expanse of horizon;
a row of trees envelope their pitiful stream from the fields
 like tender mothers;
a minnow belly-up, full of nitrogen;
a mallard throttled by trash
 hacks its flu into the sky;
stone's throw villages full of cancer where
colorful crosses march along train tracks and
 where the grass still consumes its conquerors.
Yet we still stake a claim on it—
A tree or two; grain bins and a stately white home, steady in
the wind that fights against such assertion.
Our prairie state holds two crops and history by the throat
and injects poison into the dirt.

Nevertheless,
proudly,
helplessly, or
fleetingly:
It is home.

Adult, Honorable Mention

Goodbye...Or Something Like It

By Christopher Bell

Please pardon the tortured syntax and erratic vernacular
Of the helpless romantic hurling superlatives
Against a blank wall of indifference.

What he wants he cannot have
She was a strawberry memory at high noon
The smile on his face no one understood
Heartsick for the cool breeze in the august evening air

He said YES to a forever endeavor with only her
But their past collided with the present rendering their future
moot
The deliberate missives of infidelity strewn about Like so
much unexploded ordnance
She said NO...I CAN'T...I WILL NOT

And walked into the cobalt blue serenity of her decision
And said goodbye

PRIZES

Elementary

Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright!: An Animal Poem for Each Day of the Year by Fiona Waters

Junior

Imperfect II: poems about perspective: an anthology for middle schoolers by Tabatha Yeatts, Laura Mucha, Buffy Silverman

Intermediate

The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth-Century American Poetry
by Rita Dove

Adult

The Best American Poetry 2025 by David Lehman, Terence Winch

JUDGES

Meghan Angle and Sharon Trotter-Martin would like to extend a heartfelt thank you to the following individuals for judging this year's competition. Your expertise and love of poetry shine, and we can't express enough how much of a joy it is to work with you. From the bottom of our hearts to yours, we appreciate you.

Sonrisa Nolan

Sonrisa "Sunny" Nolan is an assistant professor at Carl Sandburg College. She has been teaching speech and English for 26 years. She enjoys poetry because of the way it allows writers to express themselves through sound, rhythm, and words without being confined to more traditional prose-writing techniques. She admires the link between the spoken and written word captured uniquely by poetry in its various forms.

Kylie Price

Kylie Price is a professor of English at Carl Sandburg College. In her writing courses, she emphasizes three components: the development of critical thinking, the importance of revision, and the power of writing communities.

Marla Turgeon

Marla Turgeon is the instructional librarian at Carl Sandburg College. She has been a community college librarian for 23 years. She enjoys poetry because it moves along quickly and leaves room for personal interpretation.

Jenny Wright

Jenny Wright is an associate professor of English and the Humanities & Fine Arts chairperson at Carl Sandburg College. She is passionate about helping her students become more critical readers and writers in her various composition and literature courses.

“Poetry is a theorem of a yellow-silk handkerchief knotted with riddles, sealed in a balloon tied to the tail of a kite flying in a white wind against a blue sky in spring.”

**Carl Sandburg,
from “Ten Definitions of Poetry”**



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Where dreams come to life and lives come to change.

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Our mission is to provide all students with opportunities for success.