

## Sampling of the English 602 students' personal statements

### **“Gwendolyn Brooks” by Johnny Penley**

It was the language that drew me in. Reading Gwendolyn Brooks, I was struck by the casual power of her words. Through the offhand, but not flippant, way she addresses her unrealized aborted pregnancies as “Sweets” in the powerful poem “the mother” and the precipitous dangling of the repeated “We” in “We Real Cool,” Brooks conveys the sense, like any master artist, that she is jazzing, jamming, just belting out art extemporaneously, with all the power of quality and precision maintained. Her urban, blue-collar voices have a gravity and power that reaches beyond the simplicity of their lives, or the horrible tedium of the lives that the dominant society placed upon them. “Art hurts,” Brooks writes in “The Chicago Picasso.” “Art urges voyages—and it is easier to stay at home.” This remark clarifies, to me, that Brooks’s work rejoices in the grandeur of art, while acknowledging the hardships that create it.

### **“Natasha Trethewey” by Mai Xiong**

Natasha Trethewey’s work *Native Guard* will be important to read as we try to move on from the sorrow of our past wars, conflicts, and losses. My parents were young during the Vietnam War and have told me stories about the Hmong people who have died without reason and with reason. Once, my father and a young boy were hiding from the shootings, but my father could not convince the boy to hide where he was hiding and the boy died. In these types of quiet but violent deaths, I have always felt that there is personal injustice in not having a grave marker. In Trethewey’s collection of poems, I admire her ability to write this kind of sorrow and anger without asking for pity. In the end, the collection is very hopeful because there is personal peace and public peace. *The Native Guard* is Trethewey’s monument for both her mother and nameless soldiers who died on their homelands.

### **“Richard Wright” by Margaret Curns**

I enjoy reading literature by Richard Wright because he was not intimidated by American racism. When reading *Native Son*, I felt for the first time that I was reading a work by an African American who was not nervous about racial tension but instead was passionate about describing the realistic relationship between races. While this novel is excruciatingly violent at many times, the violence served not to deter me but to illustrate the reality, which I have not experienced, of living under segregation. Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas offers me insight into his psyche, one created by an inequitable economic system. While no one can like Bigger—Wright purposefully created him to be unsympathetic—he offers me a conduit into racial relationships from a black perspective. *Native Son* is successful because it exposes the violence and hypocrisy of white Americans in the 1940s.

### **“Langston Hughes” by Philip Justen**

I was first introduced to Hughes in high school, and like many students I appreciated his accessible poetry that felt like music. Reading him more than a decade later, I was struck by the complexities imbedded in his work. *The Panther and the Lash* still resounds with the musicality of Harlem in the 1920s as presented in *The Weary Blues* and other early works, but also present is his new embrace of the necessity for conflict which underscores poems like “Black Panther.” Hughes’s simple language, use of dialect, and attention to rhythm and subject capture many facets of the black experience and articulate them to the world.