There, I began writing my own poetry. I most certainly wrote as a reaction to leaving home. My poetry was a way for me to confront the isolation I felt as an African girl who was out of place, and it was a way to remember my country and its majesty. A lot of my early poems confronted themes like stereotypes associated with the continent of Africa, the very same stereotypes my new American classmates would bombard me with when they discovered that I came from a West African country.

The subjects of home and diaspora still haunt much of my work, and ultimately keep me writing. The act of leaving home, and the feelings of displacement and nostalgia that accompany this leaving, are forces that never completely leave you.

An Honor and a Duty
I kept writing. In my sophomore year, I enrolled at Interlochen Arts Academy, a boarding school in Michigan. I became more confident and started submitting my work to literary journals and competitions. Then, last year, I had the extreme honor of being chosen as one of the five National Student Poets, who are selected from the pool of National Medalists in Poetry in the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. Each year, from this pool of gold and silver medal winners, 35 semifinalists are selected based on creativity, dedication to craft, and promise. Their work is then submitted to a distinguished jury for the final selection of five National Student Poets.

The 2013 class of National Student Poets (myself included), representing five different regions of the United States, was received in the White House by First Lady Michelle Obama, who presented the awards. Each of us was responsible for creating and taking on our own yearlong community service projects in which we interacted with specific communities within our respective regions via poetry workshops and other activities. Each service project aimed to celebrate young poets, encourage a wide community of people to
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explore and engage with poetry, and showcase the role of libraries and community spaces as sources of creativity.

My service project was sparked by my desire to celebrate and shed light upon my grandmother’s legacy. My grandmother loved poetry, and she memorized many poems throughout her lifetime. She recited the poetry of Langston Hughes and Paul Laurence Dunbar throughout her home, and her children carried the cadence and story of African-American voices upon their backs. Born in North Carolina, my grandmother also knew the ugliness of racism in the American South quite intimately, but in the dialect and narrative of poets like Dunbar and Hughes, she found a sense of solace and home.

At age 75, my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. While her memory was fading fast, she never let go of the poems she carried with her. Even on her deathbed, my grandmother, Sallie McBride, could recite whole poems by heart. As a result, I saw the potency and power that poetry had in her life. I knew I wanted to honor that.

**Finding a Way Home**

When I was given the opportunity to become a poetry ambassador for a year, I knew right away that I wanted to work with Alzheimer’s patients via poetry. I contacted a local nursing home near my school that specialized in Alzheimer’s and dementia care, and each month, beginning in February 2014, I visited the nursing home and conducted poetry workshops with the residents.

During one of the workshops, the residents participated in a collaborative poem exercise in which I asked them specific questions about their first homes, and they responded with sensory descriptions. As they remembered the details of old memories, I wrote down their thoughts on a white board, which in the end grew into a powerful “Where I’m From” poem. Through this exercise, the Alzheimer’s patients were engaged not only in language, but in the act of remembering. Through this exercise and the obstacles they faced when attempting to recount details about their early lives, the residents were forced to come to terms with the limits of memory, and in turn they began to consider the role memory has played in their lives. Through poetry, the residents were able to have a conversation about memory and their fear of forgetting.

While the Alzheimer’s project took up most of my time and attention throughout the year, it was also important for me to do something with my Ivoirien history and heritage. I reached out to a high school teacher at the International Community School of Abidjan, a school I had attended when I lived in Côte d’Ivoire, and asked her if I could lead a virtual poetry workshop via Skype with some of her students. Together we created a lesson plan, and in early June I led a workshop that dealt with the subject of home and memory, two important forces in much of my poetry.
The students hailed from all over the world, and I used Spoken Word Poetry—a form of poetry, usually intended for onstage performance, that emphasizes oral, repetitive, and narrative qualities—as a vehicle for this dialogue on home.

Spoken Word is often about laying claim to an experience and telling a story from a reflective point of view, so the form truly lent itself to the theme of home and leaving home. During the workshop, I had the students listen to a Spoken Word piece. After some discussion, I asked them to write their own poems about a place they had left, while including Spoken Word elements throughout their piece. The results were astounding. It was amazing to see how easily they were able to access their poetic voices, and it was also a sentimental experience for me: I remembered sitting in the very classroom I saw on the computer screen. In a way, I went back home for a brief moment, and all the images and memories of Côte d’Ivoire that I had written into my poems seemed to come together. “Home” was no longer this theme I was grasping for, but rather something tangible, something I could almost see, almost hold.

My year of service was nothing short of magical. Through the physical and figurative act of losing myself in the service of others, I witnessed the incredible powers that poetry holds, and I have learned a great deal about myself throughout this journey. Before this experience, I saw poetry as something that existed on the page, something that only had power within the confines of books and magazines. Through my year of service, I saw poetry’s role within physical spaces, within communities of people, young and old. I cannot say it enough, but I thank all the individuals who made that year possible for me. I wouldn’t change a thing.


How to Learn from the Sunset by Sojourner Ahébée

Keeping the lights on at night is a child’s plea but we’re never taught to be alone so by default we’re lonely. I’ll sleep by my phone tonight even when you’re there and when you’re not I like the sound of the radio—people’s voices. I guess that’s why I’ve always been scared of Quaker meeting rooms and the thought of being bullied into silence. I ask you what it means when the sun goes down. You tell me that I mustn’t think of it as down but rather the sun is diving into darkness to become forgotten for some hours and it’s God’s cue for papaya on the tongue and stories. But I say it’s just time to turn the lights on inside. I hate the way a house tends to speak when everyone is gone. It wants to tell you all the secrets you’ve been hiding behind these cracking walls; all the nights you kept the lights on, all the nights you slept without a father in the house, all the nights you couldn’t hear the ocean. All the nights. When I have a daughter I’ll tell her to sleep in the dark when she’s afraid and to listen to the silence, listen to the way the sun went down, and I’ll tell her it’s okay to be alone.