The Golden Shovel

Poet and educator Peter Kahn introduces an exciting new form to inspire young writers

Introduction by Peter Kahn

Poetic forms can constrict or liberate writers. What I’ve found in over twenty years of teaching young people is that forms that carry the weight of history (such as sonnets or sestinas) can sometimes be intimidating. They can risk shutting students down before they even start or make them try to stiffly imitate the masters, most of whom died long before the students were born. I’m not suggesting that students don’t try writing these forms, but I stumbled upon a 21st century form – ‘the Golden Shovel’ – that provides a useful entry-way to form which seems more accessible and less intimidating. It promotes creativity, while providing scaffolding through borrowing words from another writer. My Golden Shovel Anthology co-editor Ravi Shankar calls it the “21st century sonnet”. By drawing inspiration from other writers, students typically avoid the initial stage of writer’s block. The borrowed words act as a muse, calling forth poems that don’t have to be thought out in advance.

The Golden Shovel form was created by National Book Award winning American poet Terrance Hayes in 2010. ‘The Golden Shovel’ is a poem in his book Lighthead written to honor one of his literary heroes – the often underappreciated Gwendolyn Brooks. Hayes embeds the words of Brooks’ poem ‘We Real Cool’ down the right margin of his new work. The form challenges the reader to borrow, or ‘sample’, in order to create something brand new. Success using the Golden Shovel form can build the confidence and wherewithal for less confident writers to move on to more traditional forms.

I became so enamored with the form that I decided, along with my co-editors Ravi Shankar and Patricia Smith, to create The Golden Shovel Anthology: New Poems Honoring Gwendolyn Brooks. Many of the poems referenced here appear in the anthology.
What is a Golden Shovel?
A Golden Shovel is a poem created through a particular framework. The writer must borrow a line (or lines) from someone else’s writing, and use each of the words in that line as the end-words in their new poem. The rules for the form are best understood through seeing examples.

‘The Artist’ by Raymond Antrobus
The poem ‘The Artist’ (see below) by Raymond Antrobus is a Golden Shovel of a line in Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘Gay Chaps at the Bar’, which reads: “Each body has its art, its precious prescribed / Pose, that even in passion’s droll contortions, waltzes, / Or push of pain... is its and nothing else’s.”

Antrobus uses the first few words of Brooks’ poem as the end-words of each of his lines.

We hope you and your students enjoy discovering the Golden Shovel!

— Peter Kahn

If you wish to think more deeply about Gwendolyn Brooks and Terrance Hayes, distribute Worksheet 1.

Read and discuss with the class. This can lead into discussion of 20th century US literature and form. What do they think a Golden Shovel will be like? Why did Hayes use Brooks’ poem to create his own, rather than just writing freely himself? What is form?

If you’d like to focus on Brooks’ poem ‘We Real Cool’ a little more, you may wish to show this film of ‘We Real Cool’ created by Manual Cinema in association with Crescendo Literary for the Poetry Foundation. The film lasts around seven minutes. In the jazz section at the end, you may ask the students to write down some of their responses to the film and the poem, and discuss briefly at the end. Did they like the poem? What do they think the poem is trying to say?

If you don’t have time to do this, feel free to move onto Terrance Hayes’ form and get writing. You can read more about Gwendolyn Brooks on the Poetry Foundation website.

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Now move on to Worksheet 3.

Now the students will write their own poems – you can start this in class and ask them to finish their poem for homework, as they may wish to research poems to inspire their Golden Shovels. If they get stuck, the students can use the line they wrote down on Worksheet 2. Or, you can provide them with some suggested source poems.

**They will have three options:**
1. Write a ‘traditional’ Golden Shovel using a line from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem. Some tips also included.
2. Write a Golden Shovel using a line from a different poet.
3. Write a Golden Shovel using a phrase from a different medium – songs, novels, non-fiction, films... anything!

In the next lesson, share and edit. Remember that it’s important to credit the original poem – unless the students edit their poems so much that the original line disappears. If there’s time, encourage the students to write one of each Golden Shovel type as outlined.

If you’d like to take your Golden Shovels even further, you might be inspired by Peter Kahn’s commendation in the National Poetry Competition and encourage your students to enter the National Poetry Competition if they are aged 17+, and the Foyle Young Poets of the Year Award if they are aged 17 or younger. There are life-changing prizes up for grabs.

You can find out more about these competitions at poetrysociety.org.uk/npc and poetrysociety.org.uk/young-poets

You can also enter the free Young Poets Network Challenge on Golden Shovels until 31 March 2019.
The Golden Shovel: a history

Who was Gwendolyn Brooks?
Gwendolyn Brooks was born in Kansas, USA, in 1917 but lived most of her life in Chicago, where she died in 2000. She is often considered one of the most influential American poets of the 20th century, and was the first Black writer to win the Pulitzer Prize. Her writing is often political, particularly dealing with the struggle for civil rights. She was widely published during her lifetime; her poetry collections include *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), *Annie Allen* (1949), *In the Mecca* (1968) and *Children Coming Home* (1991).

‘The Golden Shovel’ is the name of a pool hall where Brooks’ most famous poem ‘We Real Cool’ is set. Though she always liked the poem, she did say, “I would prefer it if the textbook compilers and the anthologists would assume that I’d written a few other poems.” She also says of the poem, “I wrote it because I was passing by a pool hall in my community one afternoon in school time. And I saw therein a whole bunch of boys – I say here in this poem seven – and they were shooting pool. But instead of asking myself, why aren’t they in school, I asked myself, I wonder how they feel about themselves.”

Terrance Hayes and the Golden Shovel form
Terrance Hayes is an acclaimed contemporary American poet, born in South Carolina in 1971. He is known for creating new poetic forms, including the Golden Shovel. In his foreword to *The Golden Shovel Anthology*, Hayes explains how the form came about:

Terrance Hayes writes
When my son was five and my daughter, eight, I decided they should each memorize a poem. I gave my daughter a copy of ‘Luck’ by Langston Hughes and my son a copy of ‘We Real Cool’ by Gwendolyn Brooks and had them write the poems out and then recite them to me every day until they had them memorized...

We were a dynamic doo-wop duo, my five-year-old and I, practicing Brooks’ exquisite twenty-four words at various speeds and volumes. One night, even as I began digging for my own words, Brooks kept playing in my head. I decided to string the whole poem down the page and write into it. It was no more than an exercise. Brooks’ poem – her insistent ‘we’ – returned me to the pool halls I visited with my father in the seventies. He would have still been in his mid-twenties those years. A gold tooth, a pool stick with a green jewel in the handle, a pack of menthol cigarettes. I never saw him drink; I never saw him saddle up to a woman who wasn’t my mother. Over the next nights I wrote several more poems using ‘We Real Cool’ as the scaffolding, but only two made it into *Lighthead*, my fourth book. One is a kind of narrative response to Brooks, the other a kind of lyric experiment.
The Golden Shovel
by Terrance Hayes 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.

II. 1991

Into the tented city we go, weakened by the fire’s ethereal afterglow. Born lost and cooler than heartache. What we know is what we know. The left hand severed and school-ed by cleverness. A plate of weekdays cooking. The hour lurk-ing in the afterglow. A latenight chant. Into the city we go. Close your eyes and strike a blow. Light can be straight-en ed by its shadow. What we break is what we hold. A sing-ular blue note. An outcry sing-ed exiting the throat. We push until we thin, think-ing 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.
In class, read and discuss your thoughts on Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem 'We Real Cool' and Terrance Hayes' poem 'The Golden Shovel'.

Copy out one line that has made an impression on you below:

With his poem 'The Golden Shovel' Terrance Hayes created a new form called a 'Golden Shovel'. What is a poetic form?

Do you think anyone can create a poetic form? Why/why not?

Plagiarism is 'the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own'. Is the 'Golden Shovel' a form of plagiarism? Why is it important to credit the original poet?

What are the rules for a Golden Shovel? Write down what a Golden Shovel is in your own words below:

Pleasure is the practice of taking someone else’s work or ideas and passing them off as one’s own. Is the 'Golden Shovel' a form of plagiarism? Why is it important to credit the original poet?
Find a striking line from a Gwendolyn Brooks poem to use (or, like Terrance Hayes, use an entire poem) to embed down the right margin of a new poem you write. You may play with the end word by hyphenating it or embedding it within a larger word, as Terrance Hayes does in the second part of his poem.

**Recommended steps**
1. Choose a striking line! Try to find a line where the first word is ‘strong’: i.e. a noun or a verb (such as ‘marbles’ or ‘lurk’) as opposed to a preposition, conjunction, adjective, adverb etc. (such as ‘and’, ‘the’, ‘I’ or ‘a.’)
2. Write those words vertically down the right margin of your page.
3. Now fill in the poem. See where your imagination/creativity takes you. It’s up to you whether to take inspiration from the topic or theme of the poem you borrow from.
4. When editing your poem later, you might like to try for equal line lengths so that your poem is symmetrical and pleasing to the eye.

**Examples**
You’ve already read Terrance Hayes’ original Golden Shovel. Now, read Golden Shovel poems by contemporary poets Raymond Antrobus, Langston Kerman and Adam Levin (see on), and their discussion of their respective writing processes.

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This Feels Permanent
by Langston Kerman

I am hurting the way trees hurt. The screams hollowed in some fallen philosophy. Grasses taunt like skeletons. It’s been months since you first started forgetting.

This must be the way trees think of their lumberjack. Yes he is their murderer. Yes he unwound their rings in a plaid blaze. Yes he is mostly saw and jagged and spit and unmoved by bistro tables and hardcovers. Still he is consenting. I miss you like the dying miss the knife. Please – be anything to cut through this silence melting into brown.

Langston Kerman writes

The poem came out of a breakup that was happening at the time, and my frustration in desiring someone who was so apparently bad for me. Brooks’ line ‘The grasses forgetting their blaze and consenting to brown’ feels like this masterful articulation of the inevitable. She says so much about the ending of things without ever using official ‘ending’ language, in a very similar way to a person not yet ready to let go of their fallen relationship. It was as if Brooks was able to weaponize her own concision, and cut to a truth that never needed to be explained. In that way, it felt like the perfect tool for articulating a feeling that I, in the wake of the relationship, never wanted to explain further.

Too often poetry is perceived as this strange mutation that only a select population will ever make sense of. Instead, the Golden Shovel, both as a form and as an anthology, eases that process and shows that poetry can be both a simple welcoming and a challenging reshaping. If nothing else, this book will stand as wonderful evidence for any student who might claim they ‘could never do what the poets in the books do,’ and instead prove that the poets of the books are doing the same thing as themselves.
We were gonna go through with it, and then we lost it
by Adam Levin

after Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘The Mother’

You are one of three people who know. I
didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up – if people knew
that’s when shit goes wrong. But it did, so now you
know. Man, I love this girl so much. I do. Even though
she puts me through so much shit, man. Sometimes, faintly,

I hear the second heartbeat again. (Remember you don’t know this, and
if you tell anyone, we’re never speaking anymore. Ever.) I
wait until she’s asleep and pull out the paper with baby names we loved,
and read over them and they run together and I
start crying. You would’ve been a godfather. You would’ve loved

being someone’s godfather. Imagine something so much smaller than you
so large once it’s in your arms. Then it’s gone. But the love never is. At all.

Adam Levin writes

I chose the line I did, from Ms.
Brooks’ poem ‘The Mother,’ because
the first line (‘Abortions will not let
you forget’) reminded me of
something that someone close to me
experienced, which was something I’d
wanted to write about for a very long
time. The line I chose to run along the ends of those in
the poem (‘Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and
I loved, I loved you / All’) struck an emotional chord
with me that I hadn’t experienced when I’d tried to
write Golden Shovel poems before, and I took that to
mean it was the line I had to use. In actually sitting
down to write it, I tried to present the poem as
uninterrupted conversation, as opposed to a poem,
because I’d tried and failed at writing in the form
before, so I wanted to take a fresh approach to it. I’m
really happy it ended up working the way it did.
I see the Golden Shovel form as a puzzle, and it adds
an extra wrinkle to writing that might challenge a
student of poetry in a different way than a traditional
form like a haiku might challenge them. It also lends
itself to finding different ways to bend, break, and
mend words, and teaches how to use enjambment and
line breaks with intention. I’ve marveled at poets who
can utilize the Golden Shovel effectively in the same
way I marvel at poets who have mastered other
difficult forms like sestinas or pantoums.

Credit: Peter Kahn, Ravi Shankar, and Patricia Smith, eds.
Foreword by Terrance Hayes from The Golden Shovel Anthology.
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This is an opportunity to pore over the work of one of your favourite poets (or to explore poets you’ve not encountered) fishing for striking lines. You could even, as in the Adam Levin poem below, take a line from a Golden Shovel poem. Some good websites for finding poems for free are: poems.poetrysociety.org.uk poetryfoundation.org/poems poets.org

Worksheet 3

Challenge 2
Write a Golden Shovel poem borrowing from a poem by another writer

Fear
by Adam Levin

after Kyle Dargan’s Golden Shovel poem inspired by Gwendolyn Brooks’ ‘The Children of the Poor’

When I was a kid, I wasn’t afraid of were-wolves – but Hannibal ‘The Cannibal’ Lecter always shook me from the sheets onto the floor of my bedroom. One night, my father shamed me for my choice of fear, told me I should be scared of dictators and their mine-fields instead. And suddenly, the world was somehow less and more scary than before. In 2017, I miss my old nightmares, and their simple beauty
Now, my biggest fear is ‘when’ something scary will happen instead of ‘what’.
This expands your options to other forms of literature (since Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize for Literature, song lyrics clearly apply). Keep your ears and eyes open as you listen or read favorites, or as you hear or read fresh material.

Peter Kahn on ‘Till It’s Gone’

During my senior year of college, we used to put white message boards on our dorm room doors so that people could leave messages. Long before Twitter, people would often put up quotes on those white boards. For my last day as an undergraduate student at Tufts University, I wrote, “Don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone.” As a result, Joni Mitchell’s song and, in particular, that verse has had nostalgic resonance with me.

I was a social worker in Chicago in the early 1990s and one of the young people on my caseload at Neon Street Center for Youth – Steve, then age sixteen – ended up killing someone and being convicted of first-degree murder. After visiting Steve and hearing his side of the story, I was convinced that it should have been involuntary manslaughter. The way his case was handled taught me a lot about the (in)justice system in the United States, which is biased against those without means, especially if they are African-American. Steve was essentially ‘guilty until proven innocent’, instead of the other way around and was given an overworked, overwhelmed public defender who simply was outplayed and outresourced by the district attorney.

I took the liberty of using Joni Mitchell’s song lyric in this Golden Shovel. The words “don’t” and “gone” somehow evoked Steve’s story, which is one I’ve been grappling with ever since his arrest.

This poem was commended in The Poetry Society’s 2017 National Poetry Competition. Find it online at poems.poetrysociety.org.uk/poems/till-its-gone.

The National Poetry Competition

The National Poetry Competition opens for submissions every summer and has a deadline of 31 October each year. One of the most prestigious competitions for unpublished poetry written in English, there are ten cash prizes on offer and a chance to have your work published by The Poetry Society. For many poets, the competition has proved an important stepping stone in their journeys as writers: poets to make their name through the competition include Tony Harrison, Ruth Padel and Carol Ann Duffy. You’ll need to be 17 or over at the time of entering.

For more information, visit poetrysociety.org.uk/npc
Till It’s Gone
by Peter Kahn

a Golden Shovel after Joni Mitchell

When I tell you about Steve, don’t think just because he killed someone, it means he’s a dog to put down. There’s always two sides and while it may well seem that his story reeks of bug-eyed maggots, to judge him without the bullet’s story is to go down a light-less dead-end street that isn’t a street after all. When I ask you to listen for the clink of ricochet, don’t forget to hear the surprise in his voice. Know he aimed high at stars, not people, to escape what would be an L platform of snarling fists. You’ve no idea what blood and teeth taste like. Got no idea what it’s like when your mom shoots up till you’re sleeping in shit, ripped away by DCFS. It’s like you’re riding a razor. All sense of up, gone.