Poetry is a matter of life, not just a matter of language.  

—Lucille Clifton

Poetry is life distilled.  

—Gwendolyn Brooks

Poetry breathes life into language, and language breathes life into poetry. But neither language nor its potential life matters without readers and writers to construct meanings. Poetry lives in the lives of people who curl over words, lean into readings, sweat over sounds, and vanish into visions. And English teachers stand in (and curl over, and lean into, and sweat over, and vanish into) spaces of praxis with respect to our students and their relationships with poetry.

One spring, when teaching eleventh-grade English, I (Julie) announced that our upcoming unit was . . . Poetry! My excitement was evident, and should have been infectious. I knew these students well, having had some of them as ninth graders and having worked with them daily from September through April. They understood, I was pretty sure, that I cared about them and was committed to crafting lessons that were relevant, engaging, and fun. So their reaction to my announcement (Poetry!) surprised me: they were dejected, dismissive, and glum. They slumped into their chairs, plopped faces into open palms, and groaned dramatically. The energy drained from the room—and from me. Fortunately, the bell rang, and, since it was Friday, I had time to think about how to respond.

The dilemma I faced boiled down to this: How could I teach poetry in a way that honored the discipline and, at the same time, fostered a disposition to appreciate—even love—at least one poem? How could I plant seeds that might be cultivated into an as yet unimaginable jungle of fruit and foliage (see Hopkins)? My attempt to resolve the issue (see Gorlewski) is less important than the enduring nature of the issue itself: How can teachers ensure that poetry lives in, through, and with all the young people who will populate and lead our future generations? As literacies evolve, how can poetry illuminate, extend, amplify, and intensify our attempts to understand what it means to be human, to exist and coexist in our world today?

In this issue, authors, with their learners, seek to forge and reveal connections between and among language, life, youth, and poetry. They explore the interrelated roles that contemporary poets, canonical poets, and student poets can play in creating classroom cultures that celebrate the possibilities of poetry—today and forever.

Works Cited