This column presents what we consider to be the most distinguished poetry books published in 2012. There are 13 titles, and they are about a wide range of topics, such as presidents, animal epitaphs, bees, math, and the ocean. This selection of notable poetry books includes themed collections, picturebooks featuring a single poem, an anthology, and two titles that parody the work of famous poets such as William Carlos Williams, Langston Hughes, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and Walt Whitman. These books can be shared to introduce and or supplement topics across a range of disciplines, including math, science, social studies, and English. It is our hope that teachers and children will enjoy reading these poetry books and that perhaps they will even be inspired to learn more about some of the poets whose work is referenced in these notable titles.

**UnBEElievables: Honeybee Poems and Paintings**

Written and illustrated by Douglas Florian


"Welcome, welcome to our hive! / Honeycomb home where we thrive! / Into light and sweetness dive! / Guards greet you when you arrive!" Thus begins this genre-blending picturebook with 14 poems about the honeybee. Each poem appears on facing pages—one page contains the poem and a paragraph with bee information. The opposite page showcases a colorful illustration made with gouache paint, colored pencils, and collage on primed paper bags. One example: “BROTHER! / Yo, BROTHER! / Bee-have in your hive! / Hey, DRONE! / Don’t MOAN! / Don’t GROAN! / And don’t JIVE!” The humorous illustration portrays hip-hop characters [drone bees] with the collage words, “YO” and “bro.” The informative paragraph explains that drone bees are all brothers and that their only job is to mate with a queen bee from another hive. Some of the other clever poems describe bee anatomy, worker bees, the life cycle of a bee, and honey. Humans often forget that bees have an important role in nature—the pollination process. Florian notes this significance and discusses the disappearance of thousands of honeybees in the final double-page spread. “Bees give us sweet honey. / They pollinate flowers. / The beeswax in candles / Keeps burning for hours. / But some hives have vanished, / Some bees disappeared. / (From mites or pollution / Or illness, it’s feared.) / Let’s hope that before long / The bees come back strong, / And hives will be humming, / Bees buzzing along.” (DD)

**In the Sea**

Written by David Elliott

Illustrated by Holly Meade


This oversized picturebook displays a large sea turtle swimming amongst some waves, inviting...
children to open, read, and discover more about the sea. The ocean blue is home to fascinating creatures—a dainty sea horse, a brutal shark, a vanishing octopus, an elegant orca, and so many others. The 21 poems vary in length from one word, “The Sardine / Tiny,” to a few sentences. Some poems stand alone, while others are more meaningful when read together. The woodblock prints and watercolor paintings make dramatic masterpieces. For example, an enormous golden moray eel with ebony spots uncoils across two large pages. With piercing eyes and needle sharp teeth, he goes after his prey. The poem says, “Ferocious. Cunning. / Belligerent. Brave. / A sword without its sheath, / a dragon in its cave.” Another double-page spread depicts a massive coral squid hiding amongst lavender seaweed. Lengthy tentacles protrude and bulging eyes search for food, “Few have seen him. / Few wish to. / Hide from this one! / (That’s what fish do).” This companion volume to On the Farm and In the Wild celebrates life beneath the waves. Teachers will definitely want to add this poetry book to their classroom libraries. (DD)

A Meal of the Stars: Poems Up and Down
Written by Dana Jensen
Illustrated by Tricia Tusa

Readers are sure to be fascinated by Jensen’s collection as soon as they glimpse the first of her 15 poems. Inspired by American poet and author Robert Creeley, each simple poem is comprised of one-word lines arranged vertically on a tall and slender page. Should it be read from top to bottom, or bottom to top? There is only one way to find out—start reading! Cleverly designed to enhance the pleasure of vertical reading, each poem features children who discover beauty and adventure as they explore both nature and everyday events. Brilliantly accompanied by Tusa’s rich and imaginative watercolor and ink illustrations, amiable characters watch raindrops fall, gaze down from Ferris wheels, observe rockets blasting across the cerulean, relax as father climbs the ladder rung by rung, zip a snowsuit all the way up, and watch a ladybug’s journey up the stem of a dandelion in bloom. Children ages 4–9 will find A Meal of the Stars simply delightful. They may find it difficult, however, to decide which is more enjoyable—the poems, the illustrations, or simply unearthing the precise direction the poem should be read. (AB)

Forgive Me, I Meant to Do It: False Apology Poems
Written by Gail Carson Levine
Illustrated by Matthew Cordell

This anthology was inspired by William Carlos Williams’s famous poem “This Is Just to Say” in which the poet apologizes, but not really, for eating some plums in the family icebox. Levine follows this same pattern to create 46 deliciously funny poems. The book opens with a couple of false apologies and then an introduction: “Instead of at the beginning / I slipped / this introduction / in here / where / my editor excruciatingly loudly / screeched / it does not belong / Forgive me / I also shredded / her red pencil and stirred / the splinters into her tea” (p. 18). Characters from traditional tales such as The Princess and the Pea, Cinderella, and Little Red Riding Hood are found throughout. One example is, “I have shortened / my nose / with your saw / because / honestly / telling lies / is so much fun / Forgive me / I don’t care / about becoming / a real
boy” (p. 46). Other poems portray nursery rhymes, sibling rivalry, and a visit to the dentist. One devilish poem says, “I pushed / your boat / out of the gentle / stream / where / you were merrily / singing / and rowing / Forgive me / life / is but / a nightmare” (p. 74). Cordell’s pen and ink drawings add even more mischievous playfulness and humor. This is a collection worth sharing in every classroom. Teachers will enjoy reading aloud the poems and inviting students to write their own. (DD)

Step Gently Out
Written by Helen Frost
Photo-illustrated by Rick Lieder

The extraordinary photographs and the accompanying lyrical poem may lead readers to go outside and observe. “Step gently out, / be still, / and watch.” Many tiny insects share our world—an ant climbing up a flower to look around, a honeybee flying past, and a cricket leaping and landing. Each close-up photograph shares surprising details such as feathers on a moth’s antennae and lacy wings on a damselfly. The single poem continues with large font, “the / creatures / shine with / stardust, / they’re / splashed / with / morning / dew.” In the accompanying photographs, the blurred colorful backgrounds make the insects burst from the pages. Children will notice a teal katydid crawling over a leaf and an intricate web stretched from one branch to another with an orb-weaver spider. The final two-page spread shares thumbprint photos of each featured insect with additional information. The endpapers begin with daybreak and close with the setting sun. This exquisite picturebook will be read over and over by children and adults because of its simplicity and beauty. (DD)

National Geographic Book of Animal Poetry: 200 Poems with Photographs that Squeak, Soar, and Roar!
Edited by J. Patrick Lewis

The title of this gorgeous volume promises “poems with photographs that squeak, soar, and roar,” and the book delivers, starting with the amazing image of a grasshopper seeming to leap out of the book (p. 2). Stunning animal photography fills each page, with crisp close-ups featuring eye-popping detail, delicate depictions of beauty, moving social bonds, and marvelous panoramas. Included are haiku, shape poems, limericks, free verse, rhyming couplets, and others by modern poets (e.g., Arnold Adoff, Jack Prelutsky, Joyce Sidman) and classic poets (e.g., Emily Dickinson, Robert Frost, Ogden Nash). There are engaging puns, descriptive poems, poetic riddles, and reflective poems asking readers to consider what animals can teach humans. The poems are fabulously silly, darkly humorous, deeply serious, and educational—sometimes concurrently, as in a favorite of mine by Guyanese poet John Agard, who drew on a Caribbean proverb to warn: “Don’t Call Alligator Long-Mouth Till You Cross River” (p. 100). Organizing the poems by seven animal themes (big, little, winged, water, strange, noisy, and quiet), with additional “Welcome to the World” and “Final Thought” sections, Lewis reminds readers that the book is for reading out loud, but “not . . . reading straight through.” It is designed for return visits seeking new discoveries of poems and “words that are not so much a description as a revelation” (p. 7). Useful features include a table of contents; section icons in each top right-hand page corner; title, poet, first line, and subject indexes; text and photo credits; and information on poetic formats and additional resources. (KM)
In this charming collection, Coombs and So whisk readers on an enchanted journey from the “stillness of the nut-brown land” into the teeming ocean and back. On the way, we meet seagulls compared to beagles, but imbued with a soaring dignity denied their flightless brethren. We meet sand that as rocks “stood proud as castles / altars, and thrones” and now “grumble, / humbled and grave, / at the touch of our breaker / and maker, the wave.” We wade through vibrant tide pools and experience waves that shimmer, ripple, swell, swirl, roll, and roar. Underwater, metaphors offer subtle humor as “The prim bell jar/with ruffled rim” denotes jellyfish. An octopus is a “‘famous author’ / who ‘autographs the water/with a single word—/good-bye.’” A captivating union of word and image permeates this book as richly layered illustrations extend the linguistic depth. So’s watercolors perfectly capture the airy feel and exquisite beauty of a long-tentacled jellyfish while Coombs describes: “Deep water shimmers. / A wind-shape passes, / kimono trailing.” A vertical two-page spread offers space for “Blue Whale” to be depicted “as grand as a planet” and for the watery depth of “Shipwreck’[s]” sentimental epitaph: “Here lie the bones / of twenty trees, / lost far from home / under gallons of seas.” In the humorous “Old Driftwood,” a “gnarled sailor” sits high on the beach, “telling of mermaids/and whales thi-i-i-s big/to all the attentive.astonished twigs.” In “Tideline,” haunting greys and a setting sun frame the ocean, who sighs as she ebbs, “‘Don’t forget me— / I was here, / wasss here/ wassss here....’” Neither will readers soon forget the ethereal beauty and magical journey of this book. (KM)

Did you know that penguins live on the dry coasts of Chile and Peru, that there are flies born in oil, or that there are monkeys living in extremely cold places? If not, then this may be a book you should read. “Extreme environments such as deserts, glaciers, salt lakes, and pools of oil may not seem appealing, yet in these places, there is often less competition and more safety from predators. So over time, a variety of animals have adapted to these challenging conditions. This collection of poems celebrates some of these great adapters and the risky places where they live.” There are poems about various animals including spadefoot toads, ice worms, camels, blind cave fish, urban foxes, and snow monkeys. The poem about snow monkeys is titled “Think Heat” and it reads, “Hear ‘monkeys,’ think heat, think swinging in trees. / Who imagines them huddled in minus degrees, / heads white with snow from the latest storm, / on their isolated island, trying to keep warm, / submerged in a hot spring, taking a bath? / How did they get there? What was their path? / Why did they stay? Did they feel they were trapped? / Who first got the message: / We have to adapt?” Ed Young’s collage illustrations have a three-dimensional effect and add to the sense of wonder about these amazing animals. The book concludes with additional information about each of the animals profiled in the poems. (JM)
**I, Too, Am America**  
*Written by Langston Hughes  
Illustrated by Bryan Collier  

Using the eloquent verses of one of Langston Hughes’s most powerful works as his backdrop, multiple award-winning illustrator Bryan Collier has created a brilliant work worthy of generations to come. Through exquisite double-page collages, *I, Too, Am America* pays homage to Pullman porters, African American men who worked on luxury trains until the 1960s. Symbolically using the American flag and the colors red, white, and blue as backdrops, Collier reveals how these remarkable men obtained knowledge from the newspapers, magazines, books, and albums passengers left behind, and shared this wisdom with people of color all over the country. These men served as inspirations to their contemporaries and paved pathways for current and future generations. The influence of the Pullman porters is apparent as the book closes with an illustration of an African American boy riding a train much like the ones once reserved for wealthy White passengers only, taking a glimpse into his future and the future of African Americans. While focusing on the significance of Pullman porters, *I, Too, Am America* holistically celebrates the plights overcome by African Americans in our country. Back matter includes thought-provoking notes, a brief history of the Pullman porters, and a glimpse into Collier’s motivation for creating this brilliant work. (AB)

**The President’s Stuck in the Bathtub: Poems about the Presidents**  
*Written by Susan Katz  
Illustrated by Robert Neubecker  

This book features poems about presidents beginning with George Washington (“Where Didn’t George Washington Sleep?”) and ending with Barack Obama (“Yo Mama”). Katz’s book blurs the genres of poetry and nonfiction by featuring poems filled with historical, interesting tidbits accompanied by a few sentences that provide factual information. The poem about Andrew Jackson titled “Spelling Be” reads, “Andrew Jackson, some people claim, / was barely able to spell his own name. / He was never the champ of a spelling bee, / never the one to spell “Miss-iss-ipp-i.” / Yet he kept the Congress under his thumb. / He couldn’t spel rite, but he wasn’t dum” (p. 14). The factual piece accompanying this poem reads, “Andrew Jackson was one of our strongest presidents, using his forceful personality to expand the powers of the presidency. Though he couldn’t master the spelling of even a simple word such as *bugs* (which he spelled “buggs”), this problem didn’t disturb him. In fact, he’s reported to have claimed that a person who could spell a word only one way lacked imagination” (p. 14). Readers will also learn that John Quincy Adams enjoyed skinny-dipping in the Potomac River, that Franklin Pierce “was the first president to decorate a Christmas tree in the White House” (p. 21), and that Rutherford B. Hayes “had the first telephone installed in the White House” (p. 27). The poem “Yo Mama” reads, “When Barack Obama launched his campaign, / his opposition made fun of his name. / From the Scotia Sea to Mount Fujiyama, / people came up with a whole panorama / of name after name that was not Obama. / He jested that some even called him Yo Mama. / But when voting was over, Obama had won; / he wasn’t defeated by wisecrack or pun. / Not a single
snicker could anyone vent / at Obama’s new name, Mr. President” (p. 58). The cartoon-like illustrations complement the humorous poems. (JM)

**Last Laughs: Animal Epitaphs**

*Written by J. Patrick Lewis & Jane Yolen*  
*Illustrated by Jeffery Stewart Timmins*  

*Last Laughs* contains 31 poems full of word play about a number of animals that meet their demise. The dark, macabre illustrations provide clues about or depict what happened to each animal. For example, one poem features a speeding car right behind an oblivious chicken. The accompanying poem, “Chicken Crosses Over,” says, “She never found the answer / to the age-old question, / why did the chicken cross the ro—?” (p. 6). For a Frog: Not a Hoppy Ending” reads, “In his pond, / he peacefully soaked, / then, ever so quietly / croaked.” Another poem titled “Woodpecker’s Last Hole” reads, “One peck too many / severed a limb, / and that was the end / of impeccable him.” Readers who enjoy this title might also enjoy *Once upon a Tomb: Gravely Humorous Verses* by J. Patrick Lewis. (JM)

**Edgar Allan Poe’s Pie: Math Puzzlers in Classic Poems**

*Written by J. Patrick Lewis*  
*Illustrated by Michael Slack*  

Lewis’s math-puzzlers offer delightfully absurd parodies inspired by famous poems. From an underwear-wearing, horseback-riding poet-cowboy to a child-eating hippo-po-tah-tum, there is humor and horror in this engagingly interactive volume. Some poems adhere relatively closely to their inspirations’ format, syntax, rhythm, and rhyme patterns, while others are more loosely connected. “Edgar Allan Poe’s Apple Pie” clearly evokes “The Raven”: “Once upon a midnight rotten / Cold, and rainy, I’d forgotten / All about the apple pie / Still cooling from the hour before.” It closes asking how many cuts result in ten pieces, to which “The stranger bellowed, ‘Never four!’” (p. 8). The poem-parody link reaches beyond poetic form for some. By titling his “April Rain Song”-inspired poem “Langston Hughes’s Train Trip,” Lewis links thematically to an historic trip Hughes took in 1920, during which he penned “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” In “Emily Dickinson’s Telephone Book,” Lewis lightheartedly asks which two consecutive phonebook page numbers’ sum is 113. Illustrator Slack extends the humor with a worried-looking dog and chewed-up phonebook, but paints the narrator on her back in bed, only underskirt and boots showing, a red flower on her midsection—a visual metaphor eliciting more serious tones of “My Life Closed Twice before Its Close.” Math-puzzler math involves basic operations, multi-step calculations, fractions, percentages, and remainders. Solutions are included on Slack’s brightly painted two-page collage spreads. Classes can discuss alternative solution pathways as a natural extension. Lewis includes biographical information about each deceased poet, which might inspire readers to compare his lively poems with their originals. (KM)

**Walking on Earth & Touching the Sky: Poetry and Prose by Lakota Youth at Red Cloud Indian School**

*Edited by Timothy P. McLaughlin*  
*Illustrated by S. D. Nelson*  

*Walking on Earth & Touching the Sky* is a collection of poetry and prose written by Lakota youth at Red Cloud Indian School. The poems explore themes such as cultural identity, personal identity, and the challenges faced by Native American youth. The illustrations by S. D. Nelson complement the text, providing visual representations of the stories. (KM)
This outstanding volume shares 109 writings by 61 Lakota fifth- through eighth-grade students that offer contemplative, often haunting, insights into topics arranged by seven themes—natural world; misery; Native thoughts; silence; spirit; family, youth, and dreams; and language. Award-winning Lakota author and illustrator Nelson, member of the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe, extends the experience through reflective notes—artistic, historical, and cultural—with each of his exquisite illustrations (11 acrylic paintings; 2 colored-pencil-and-ink ledger drawings). McLaughlin, a cultural outsider, edited this book of his students’ work with community support. He “aspires to honor these Lakota youth and their important words” (p. 13) and discusses the “long process of building mutual respect” (p. 77) at the start of his now-15-year career teaching in Native communities. A brief historical overview situates Oglala Lakota Chief Red Cloud and the school he invited the Jesuits to open in 1888. Now the Red Cloud Indian School, its mission has shifted from assimilation to the “education of the mind and spirit that promotes both Lakota and Catholic values” (p. 12).

In this setting, the authors wrote about natural elements central to the Lakota—earth, water, air, fire—and about pride, courage, fear, buffalo, death, love, faith, freedom, silence, and many other things. Sicangu Lakota author and teacher Marshall describes the writing as emotionally complex, “but most of all honest” (p. 8), adding that “we should listen” (p. 9). Opening the section “Misery,” McLaughlin extends: “The lamentable suffering encountered by many Lakota youth strengthens their inner character and gives them a precocious inner authority to make statements worthy of full consideration” (p. 27). Indeed. This is a book that must be read—silently, aloud, often—and truly heard. To that end, in closing, I share a favorite among many in this amazing book: “What the Roses Are Saying” by Dena Colhoff: “What the roses are saying cannot be heard through voice/but through beauty as you watch the rain slip/from their petals and hang from their edges” (p. 20). (KM)

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