

Published April 18th, 2018

River of Words - young Orinda poet honored

By *Sophie Braccini*



Sarah Inouye Photo Sophie Braccini

There is something delicate about Sarah Inouye, something of a rosebud about to bloom, shyly sensing, but not yet completely acknowledging her own power. Inouye, who is 15, just won in her age category the River of Words international contest as a poet. ROW is an environmental art and poetry contest for children ages K-12 that was cofounded in 1995 by writer and activist Pamela Michael and then-U.S. Poet Laureate (and Saint Mary's College alumnus) Robert Hass.

The ceremony for the winners, including Inouye, will take place at the college from 1 to 4 p.m. Sunday, April 29 at the Saint Mary's College Soda Activity Center.

This year ROW received entries from 13 different states, and from Canada, China, India, Germany, Bulgaria, Taiwan and South Korea. The program that first resided in Berkeley has now merged with SMC's Kalmanovitz School of Education, within the Center for Environmental Literacy.

Inouye is a student at the Oakland School of the Arts where she transferred after attending middle school at Orinda Intermediate School. She remembers how her love of writing started to flourish in middle school. Her core teacher in seventh grade, Eric Page, encouraged reading and writing and was a big influence. Then she joined Elizabeth Perlman's Intuitive Writing Project and

started a journey of self-discovery through writing. Perlman mentioned the Oakland school to her, and Inouye decided to sign up for a curriculum where three hours in the afternoon are entirely dedicated to one's art of choice. For Inouye, it was clear that this art would be writing.

At OSA Inouye discovered poetry. Her talent and attraction until then had been taking her to writing fictional stories. At age 12, she had three of her stories published in Perlman's yearly collection. The precocious yet careful student tiptoed into the world of poetry at OSA. She is quick to indicate that she first listened to her talented classmates and started reading a lot of poetry. Inouye says that Vietnamese poet Ocean Vuong has been an inspiration for her. She is also very much attracted to spoken poetry and listens to the YouTube channel Button Poetry.

OSA provides students with information about all possible avenues to challenge themselves and get their name out there. The young woman was attracted to the River of Words challenge because she says that she gravitates toward the natural world for her inspiration, and she cares about being a good steward of our world. She was happily surprised to discover that ROW's headquarters is located next door, on the Saint Mary's College campus.

The poem she wrote for ROW is an evocative interlacement stitching the relationship between the body and the natural world. She shows with a few stanzas the intimate link between beings and their environment. Inouye says that the prompt given by ROW was such an inspiration that she wrote the poem very quickly and did not rework it at length. She explains that the critical work she has learned at OSA has given her tools to challenge her own writing and track usual clichés, but it was not necessary this time; the poem came out of her in its final form.

Maureen Esty who coordinated the program at SMC was delighted to see that one of the winners was a local teen. She adds that she would like to reach out more to local schools and encourage Lamorinda students to participate in the ROW contest. The international competition was born in the East Bay; it is the largest international youth poetry and art contest in the world. It encourages students to explore the watersheds where they live.

On April 29, Inouye will read her poem and other students will present their art. The public is invited to come. For more information, visit www.stmarys-ca.edu/row.

'Atlas' - by Sarah Inouye

the place where the spine meets the skull
is called the atlas
did you know that the earth's map
is a place within the hollows of your body?
you need to protect this planet's form
as she protects yours with hers

water resurrects itself
from the underbelly of my tongue
you can be a spitfire girl
with the swell of every ocean between your teeth
you can possess every kind of ferocity and peace
this world has to offer

a tunnel of cypress trees
teaches me to speak their language
they commune in undaunted honesty
and when my voice reaches them
a single truth escapes
i am the love of my life

how could you not fall
for a body that is so similar
to that of this planet?
how could you not want to heal
a planet that is so similar
to that of your body?

Reach the reporter at: sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

Copyright © Lamorinda Weekly, Moraga CA