

Truth in the Dark

The world is dark, it's full of lies,
But there a light begins to shine.
It shines with truth and glows through
The darkness and the gloom.

The shadow fades,
New lights are made,
The world lights up with peace.
The world is bright,
With no more night
For truth will never cease.

The Wandering Dog

Through the grass,
over the gate.
Through the trees,
away from the little brick house.

Out on the winding road,
now across the street.
Past the cars and through the dim parking lot.

His tail wags, his ears perk up.
Nose marks the spot.
A stinky, grimy trashcan full of treasures.

But then,
a man with a flashlight drifts through the shadows.
There he goes again....

Swiftly past the man with the flashlight,
Through the dim parking lot.
Past the cars, and across the street.
Out on the winding road.

Through the trees, towards the little brick house.
Over the fence,
Through the grass.

His tail wags, his ears perk up.
Into the little brick house,
where his family is waiting for him.

The Rainy Night

Droplets Dropping from the sky, this is called rain

Rain
Raining it is tonight

Light
Lightning, all through the night, what a fright, it is such a stormy night
It shines so bright
On my bed looking through the cracks of my blinds,

The boom feels like it's pushing me, like the wind would to a kite
The rain hits so hard, almost like a beat, though there is no song

The lightning is not so yellow this time, it is more of a white, although my sight may not
be so right
The blinds clunk together, because my window is open a bit
The wind comes in, breezing my face

All these lights, although the lightning doesn't last all night, outside is not quite bright,
but it's not quite dark

It may be light, but it's still the middle of the night

My grandma is asleep, but I am awake.

I can't sleep.
I'm not tired.
All that ruckus outside, so I take a peek.
The lightning is making pictures telling a story in the sky
I cover my head with my starry blanket and uncovered a truth about my life being like a
stormy night.

Grades 5 - 8: First Place

The little
Black girls
And the little
Black boys
Come in
Before the street lights
Came on
Because that's
When they shine
Too bright

"Little girl
I know you is
NOT
Walking out
my house
With your head
Looking like that
Your hair ain't straight
Like them little white girls"

"Boy
When a cop pulls you over
You keep your hands on the wheel
You understand me
These cops out here
Don't care what age you are"

Black girl
And
Black boy
You're not
Little anymore
But you still
Come inside
When the street lights come on
Because growing up
didn't make the world
safer

No One Is Coming To Save You

We spend our lives thinking
“Someone can pull me out”
“Someone can help me”
But if you rely on others
Where’s your independence?
Where’s the person you want to be?

If you wait for someone else
You get their life.
They set up the trucks full of the mold
Of the concrete, ready to take your life
Out of your hands.

It will feel strange
Then, it wont
Everything will be normal
You’ll think: this is my life
But your wrong

But you don’t realize it
The smell of the wet concrete poisons you
As you believe everything they say

I am a victim of this trap
Fallen a while ago
But the alarm went off this morning and I realized
This isn’t my life
I’m living the life of a monster
Casually slipping down the drain
Thinking “what a nice slide”

Thinking I can climb out whenever
But the walls are made steeper with your every breath
Like there are workers stacking piles of concrete before you
Yet you can’t see them

I had to uncover the truth of my personality
It was painful
But I let the words sink before the concrete dried
And it erased the mold that I’ve been tied to

Gifted

He's smart

Ugh, gifted kids

Don't explain the problem, I can do math

Think they're better

They do have their own classes, just for them

Course they do

Bet he doesn't study

And still has the best grades in the class?

You know how they are

Wasn't your brother one?

Yeah..?

Didn't he finish college at eighteen?

Nah, I bet it was seventeen, freaks

I—um, yeah.

...Smart... ...Gifted... ...Special... ...Genuis... ...Brains... ...Cheater...

'You're better than them...

...don't listen to that...

...you will do great things"

I will do great things

Switched into a new class, once again,
Third the size of any other,
'Smartest person around,' I'm only ten,
'I'm so proud, to be your mother,'

Growing up, slowly it fades,
Harder problems, get the same result,
Simply gone, from all that praise,
More mature, still can't take the insult,

Junior high, things start to change,
Still the same, except my grades,
Teacher says, that's really strange,
Parents don't applaud, their hope cascades,

And I'm sitting at my test, thinking really hard, I'm no longer the best, feeling remedial
Ask my teacher what happened, 'You didn't study,' but I've never studied before, I'm gifted
'Gifted doesn't mean perfect, you might work, learn, or even think faster, but nothing beats effort'

That's okay.

You will do great things.

Teen: First Place

My car seats smell like smoke.
It's a scent so subtle; one that I've never noticed before.
But I guess you notice a lot of things when your mind wanders from the truth.

My car seats smell like smoke.
I never realized until my face had no choice but to be pressed against their cold surface.
I guess the owner before me must have been a smoker;
perhaps it was a last-ditch effort to cope with something from their past.
Some things just leave a mark that you can never fully erase.

My car seats smell like smoke.
I guess your other senses become heightened when your vision is blocked by your eyelids that
are shut so tight they ache.
Only then can you realize how loud your heartbeat is when it's trying to escape from your chest.

My car seats smell like smoke.
It's strong now that its presence has overtaken my mind;
but I didn't really give it a choice.
I want to hold my nose, but my arms aren't mine to move.

My car seats smell like smoke.
The air is becoming scarce now;
my desperate gasps met with nothing but regret.
I guess I finally let the smoke get to me;
or maybe it's someone else's exhale that's causing me to choke.

My car seats smell like smoke.
I guess I expected the scent to stay behind when the door finally opened.
But instead, it's in my hair, under my nails, and woven into my clothes.
Too strong for any perfume to cover;
even the expensive one my mom let me wear that night.

It's not the scent of smoke that consumed my car,
although my internal fire continues to burn with no hope of extinguishing.

I went home wearing a scent that was never meant to be mine.

Teen: Second Place

Untold truths
Became secrets in my life

Before my mind could even capture what death was
it had already affected me

It's kept me in a chokehold
Every night when I rest my eyes
I search to find her in my dreams
And it feels like I'm seeking a reality I've never had

My mother's addiction cost her life
Way before she could even be a mother

but it also cost me mine
Way before I could even be a child

But I can't be that upset
Would I rather find her lying on the bathroom floor
Or is it better I don't experience that kind of agony

sometimes I wish I could be the girl with a mom and dad
and not the one who *tries*
to understand what my peers go through

No one tells you how hard
it is to mourn the woman who gave birth to you
But also someone you truly never knew

So the truth of being a girl
and trying to survive without your mother
Is soul crushing

The truth hurts knowing that a substance can affect someone's life
Even when you're not the addict using it.

FAYETTEVILLE

A year ago last fall I told your mother what you did.
There are no photographs of us and this is a small kindness.
I will always remember but let the light forget.

A year ago last fall I told your mother what you did.
She said you had told her first. This is a large
kindness and I do not know what to think of it
except that people are mostly good. I think I
am afraid to trust humanity. I don't know if
it's sturdy enough to hold all of its cruelty
and all of its love at the same time. I am
afraid that a part of me is still on your side.
You hurt me, old friend, and I never once
cried. I just sat there like I had already
died. Like I was locked inside my mind.

I cannot tell you about being good or soft.
I cannot tell you about gentleness and I
don't know if I forgive you. But a year
ago last fall I told your mother what
you did and she said you had told her
first. That is not nothing. I couldn't
tell you what it is. I don't think you
would ask. Old friend, I think we
are tired of the asking. I think all
we are is we are both hurt and
we are both human.

Teen: Honorable Mention B

The Earth's True Form

A smile spreads across my face,
Gentle footfalls beat on the wakening dirt,
My skin senses the beginning of a new season
With the hum of anticipation and patience in the fresh air,
The crocus waits and feels
Until the perfect moment to bloom, and yet there is no time
In nature.

A smile spreads across my face
Hearing the drip of melting ice and once more feeling
The refreshing spray birthed from the waterfall and the pond,
Droplets as sincere as true love,
Their exquisite whispers fall straight to our hearts
And help us understand truth and clarity
In nature.

The smile slips off my face
When I return to the mundane everyday,
The busy schedule, the life where everything I do
Is based off of expectation
And routines that don't feel like nature at all,
Or like joy.

The smile won't return yet
Because there are skyscrapers and highways constricting the forests,
Oversized gas stations replacing serene woods.
My heart feels heavy when I think of
The innocence of a bird eating trash on the side of the road,
Or a sea turtle swimming too close to a fishing hook,
And the sad breath of spring masked with human-made stench.

Back outside, a smile tugs at the corners of my lips, tickling my cheeks,
An understanding almost out of my reach,
Something that I see in a dandelion seed floating by,
Something so small that carries so much life,
Something like love.

A smile spreads across my face
Because being in nature reminds me of all the best things,
A spring hike reminds me of the sandy dunes in winter
And lunch outside on a warm day
Simply from the way my heart feels,
And when I recall all my favorite memories,
The best ones are at the lake, on a hike, riding a bike,
Experiencing joy and hope and faith,
Truth in the soil, truth in the breeze,
Truth in nature,
The earth's true form.

He drains it from grandmothers
who hum lullabies threaded with warning.
From fathers who fold their fear
into Sunday suits
and button it up tight at the throat.
He sips from the quiet of women
who have mastered the art
of swallowing storms.
Women who bury their anger
in the garden
and call it patience.

And still—
you call him order.
But order built on blood
is only a prettier name for appetite.
He sharpens his knife
on denial.
Polishes it with nostalgia.
Wraps it in flags
and says,
“This is the way it’s always been.”

As if always
means right.
As if repetition
is innocence.

He believes truth can be smothered.
Pressed beneath textbooks
with missing pages.
Tucked behind statues
that point nowhere.
Hidden in attics
with the rest of the inconvenient things.
But truth is not a child
that stays where you put it.

Truth scratches.

Adult: First Place

aunT RUTH

aunT RUTH
blinks milky clear with cataracts
so her sight subtracts
the sharp corners of certainty
from the tabernacle of *I see*

because you see,
aunT RUTH
had many eyes
before the cataracts
taught her the true wise —
that beyond the doctrine of daylight
lies a creamy, cloud reality

and you know, she said to me, “baby —
I wish you could just *hear*
what I can see
it’s this colorful euphony
and no, my sights aren’t all in harmony
but they’re arm-in-arm, and me?
I’m two-steppin’ along
to the beat — it’s like —”
she sings, palm on knee...

“cataracts
take you back
to the clubhouse pacts,
schoolhouse facts,
thriftstore racks,
they take you back to all the yous
you used to be —
to the sales tax
that kept you from those
dime-store snacks
to the light smacks
that came like poison ivy
on a soft breeze”

“no,” aunT RUTH sang to me
“a cataract
never redacts
and the soul reacts — it contracts
with *I burn* — but then — *I see*
because, baby, one moment’s eyes
ain’t what God meant
when He said, ‘child, don’t you see?’”

the shower

the water is scalding and the steam is oppressive
the scents of coconut and shea butter struggle to overpower my insecurities

scrub scrub scrub

sometimes i think if i scrub hard enough, long enough
my self-doubt and shortcomings might slough off with the dead skin
but if that were to happen, i worry all of me might slip down the drain

scrub scrub scrub

this is my routine, the one that is supposed to make me feel whole
creams, washes and oils, each sold as a solution to problems i never knew i had
when one slips from my wet grasp and crashes down, its impact bruises my foot

i wait to step out until the water has run completely cold

~

the air is clear but the mirror is still fogged over
seeing it, an unfamiliar feeling comes over me, maybe a morbid curiosity
like flipping a book over to see the bug you've squished, making yourself gag

i use my towel to clear the steam from the glass and reveal myself

scrub scrub scrub

i stand, looking at my reflection in the dim half-light, and take it in
my skin is bright-red, my hair's dripping but somehow still frizzy

but for a second, i think i see something in my own eyes

scrub scrub scrub

leaning closer, i am struck by a feeling of recognition and a sense of clarity:

in this moment, bare and beet-red, i think i am beautiful

Legacy

Let us give thanks to our forefathers for their golden sacrifice.
who pays the hallowed Road for our civil rights.

their overseers in the fields drove them roughshod but could not Shake
our ancestors in debatable faith in God.

While others saw in Western Hills Gold, the men and women,
Our ancestors possessed a bounty of gold within their souls.

Listen closely and you will hear their voices of pride and defiance;
As they walk through the pages of History with strong stride and proud stance.

We joined them in heart and spirit as they marched arm and arm; despite threats, violence
and harm. May the bell of Freedom continue to ring, and We as our ancestors do continue
to sing, continue to march on until Victory is won.

To those who have gone on before and to those who will come after
from plantations to cities, shanties to colleges and universities.

Through Blood Sweat and Tears, their belief in God tamed their fears.
Guided to Freedom by the Stars, urged ever onward by their scars.

Forbidden to read and write they became authors literary Prize winners and play rights from
slave sharecroppers to senators in a 44th President of the United States these people oppressed
said for the Legacy in a precedent.

Even beatings, burnings, lynching, dogs and hoses cannot keep our ancestors from keeping their
eyes on the prize and smelling the Roses. Through the present and towards the future their
dreams and our dreams will always endure.