

2018 Scholastic Art & Writing Awards
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Disorganized Religion

I. The Opposite of Withering

Today, the air is full with flowers
and I remember why I came —
to this world, I mean,
and to my senses,

(Every morning, and not even once).

I spent the whole afternoon in pieces
of lives that do not belong to me, walking
up and down streets so many have called home.

This is not to say that I have not been here before,
or that I will never return.

There are infinite lives I will never know,
and many I have only now forgotten.

Still, so many lives to learn.

Say what you will about loneliness, about ecstasy,
about thrill:

I would not want to have arrived in any other way.
I came for the flowers and this messy spring air.

Today, soft pink petals are as close to God
as anything I've known, preaching from trees
and picket-fences,
from sidewalk cracks, beneath my feet, and
holding hands with the wind.

Never a race, but together racing toward this spring
which I have loved and lost so many times.

Sometimes, I am walking (barefoot
in the early spring)
and I am struck — stunningly,
gracefully, & gratefully
by the clumsy lightweightness of my everyday okay.

Sometimes, I look to the sky
and forget who (of

the many I's) I am today,
was yesterday,
will be ten thousand years from now.

And I let myself be beautiful. I sweet-talk the fabric
which separates me from these leaves of grass
and take it off. One day,

my body will fall apart.

These flowers and their bending stems have told me so,
many times over.

It is the final, most resounding whisper.

I never asked for greatness.

II. November 24, Boulder, Colorado

I wandered downstairs this morning —
smiling gladly, heavy with sleep —
to find my dog sitting by the window.

He's not far from three years old now,
but he still looks at the world with wide puppy eyes,
as if all the light spilling into the room
has come only to visit him.

He wags his tail lazily and gazes up at me,
as if to say, *"Look at this! The wind,
that tree, that tiny bird...*

*All the most wonderful things
that I have ever seen!"*

In all my life of doing,
I have never been nearly as wise as my dog.
I stand with him for a moment
and love the world
before turning to begin the day (as if
it has not already begun,
and so perfectly).

And I think, How we all sacrifice living
in order to control what we call life.

Still, my face is wound tightly with wonder.
Still, my hands will not rest.

III. Confession

Forgive me,
for I know nothing about believing.
I don't know how to say that I believe in anything I can't memorize
without sounding like a blog post
or a teenage girl who tries way too hard to write something deeper
than the holes she dug in her backyard when she was six years old
and desperate to find more than dirt.

Sometimes I think these words pretend to know more than my hands do
about meaning, as if my hands weren't the ones who did all that holy digging.
Thank God
for fingernails and open palms.
Thank God
for believing we could learn more about people
from their hands than from their mouths.
I don't know anything about reading palms,
but I know I'm a much better liar when I keep my hands still.
The dirt beneath my fingernails
is the same soil that teaches plants to grow,
so I know I've been looking for life in all the wrong places.

I talk big, like I trust some great-big Whatever's There
when I don't even trust myself to be real —my poems try to act all profound,
but my hands are still shaking.
I don't ask to be any purer than I am now.
I don't think there's any part of me that needs to be washed away.
I am clean as a whistle,
even when the world plugs its ears.

And it's been a lifetime since my last confession,
so I'm just here to tell you that I'm trying to listen to all of life's noise
without letting my head get in the way.
I've heard that hunters used to put their ears to the ground,
listening for buffalo's' distant vibrations.
If I could hear God and understand,
I think I'd think myself too far above the ground to stop and listen like that.

I don't have any idea who I'm confessing to or why
so I will keep leaving these fingerprints everywhere I go

but never expect them to last, still holding tight to the roots of my turbulent faith. So thank you so much for your time.

Thank you for all this time.

IV. November 17, Salt Lake City, Utah

There is something strange about this year's snow.
It isn't just that it arrived late,
though this mid-November's waiting has my fingers trembling for cold.

No — it's something different,
something my impatient fingertips can't even think to reach.

This is not another starving winter.

Last night, I watched out my bedroom window
as flickering street-lamps transformed the falling snow
into one thousand shooting stars.

Last winter,
I wished only for this moment.

Here, in this moment, I am shivering — and smiling
oh! so widely
that my startled breath comes out as laughter
in the crystal air.

Today, the skies are blue. In the grateful sun,
the world glistens: brand-new. As it freezes,
life does not hide beneath the snow, like a prisoner.
Quiescence is no bomb shelter.

This is not a starving winter,
and life knows its tranquil place.
A blank canvas aches for this, and so we come running,
tripping over our clumsy feet
through the awakening snow.

Now we laugh (oh!
so loudly)
in a world frosted with one million stars.

V. Big, Small, and God

I am small and new.
When I pray,
I'm praying to the possibility of whatever's there,

because I know that religion isn't always
a churchgoing family in their Sunday best
or an annual Passover Seder
or a kneeling, barefoot prayer
but sometimes it is —
and sometimes it's a dance, or a song,
or a search-bar kind of faith spelled out "is there a god"
or a heartbeat, a pulse,

and a girl with a Jewish mother
and an agnostic, Christian-raised father,
and an unsure sister
and a carefree dog
and a whole lot of questions without answers.

I know more than anything else
that life has never been about getting an A
without ever showing up to class.
I don't want to work this hard just to say that I passed
without ever even trying to study.
I've had my fair share of bad report cards
and let me tell you
I don't have any intention of ever dropping out.

I know that for all this "Are we there yet?"
there is a hell of a lot to see out the car window.

And right now, it looks a lot like heaven.