

Letters About Literature 2017 – Level 2 Maryland State Winning Letter by Salihah Aakil

Dear Warsan Shire,

Thank you for being the powerful voice that I have yet to learn how to use. I can't tell you a deep intellectual story about how your poem changed me or made me realize something I never knew before because it didn't. However, your poem did something else for me ... it made me realize I don't stand along; that I'm not the only one who lives this way because I am the ugly daughter. Not in my own house. At home everyone is beautiful no matter how they look as long as they have a kind heart, but in society I am ugly. Me a black Muslim girl who grew up most of her life without a father. I'm not considered pretty, or even intelligent, simply based on the way I look, and for a long time now I've been choking on rose water. But with each stanza of your poem, I felt more and more like there were people out there who understand what I feel and that stand together in solidarity with me. Although your poem Ugly didn't change my life, it inspired this poem:

Your poem is ugly.
It knows strength intimately,
Carries visions in its belly.

On paper, my relatives refused to read it.
It was burnt journals and teardrops.
It reminded them of the war.

On its fifteenth line you tried to make it the victim, make it love itself. You made it hope for equality and while it smiled, said *Poems like you should never feel ashamed*.

You are its writer. Why did you not erase it the minute it showed up on your page?
Warn it that it was not welcome in this world because of its want for freedom?
What man wants to be stood up to and told of his faults?

Your poem's existence is a riot,
it's stanzas a civil war,
a refugee camp behind each letter,
a layout littered with ugly things.
But God, your poem
wears empowerment well.

Warsan, thank you for showing me that I'm not alone. When I started writing this letter I didn't know what to call it. I knew it wasn't fan mail or a hate letter. Through the process of writing I realized it's a thank you note. So thank you for teaching me that Ugly is a beautiful thing.

Sincerely,
No one