

Poems by Clint Smith, born 1988 in New Orleans

Clint Smith is the author of *Counting Descent*, a collection of poetry published in 2016; *How the Word is Passed, A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, a narrative non-fiction book published in 2021; and *Above Ground*, a poetry collection published in 2023. He is a staff writer for *The Atlantic*.

Poems from *Counting Descent* 2016

Ode to the Only Black Kid in the Class

You, it seems,
are the manifestation
of several lifetimes
of toil. *Brown v. Board*
in the flesh. Most days
the classroom feels
like an antechamber.
You are deemed expert
on all things Morrison,
King, Malcolm, Rosa.
Hell, weren't you sitting
on that bus, too?
You are everybody's
best friend
until you are not.
Hip-hop lyricologist.
Presumed athlete.
Free & Reduced sideshow.
Exception & caricature.
Too black & too white

all at once. If you are successful
it is because of affirmative action.

If you fail it is because
you were destined to.
You are invisible until
they turn on the Friday
night lights. Here you are—
star before they render
you asteroid. Before they
watch you turn to dust.

My Jump Shot

My jump shot be

all elbow and no wrist.

My jump shot be

asking what a follow through is.

My jump shot be

hard to look at.

My jump shot be

Medusa.

My jump shot be

the leftovers you don't really want to eat.

My jump shot be

the fridge that don't work.

My jump shot be

the sour milk in your cereal.

My jump shot be

getting picked last by the other jump shots.

My jump shot be

old spaghetti.

My jump shot be

gluten-free.

My jump shot be

Michael Jordan when he was seven.

My jump shot be

spending too much time in the library.

My jump shot be

making everybody else feel better about their jump shot.

My jump shot be

asking why we didn't stick to soccer.

My jump shot be

code-switching.

My jump shot be

making people nervous just because it's a jump shot.

My jump shot be

the only jump shot in class.

My jump shot be

getting asked to speak on behalf of all the other jump shots.

My jump shot be

wondering why people think all jump shots are the same.

My jump shot be

explaining how jump shots come in all shapes and sizes.

My jump shot be

sounding like it's talking about snowflakes.

My jump shot be

a snowflake.

My jump shot be

a home.

My jump shot be

the only jump shot I've ever had.

Counterfactual

When I was twelve years old
on a field trip some place
I can't remember, my friends
and I bought Super Soakers,

turned the hotel parking lot
into a water-filled battlezone.

We hid behind cars
running through the darkness
that lay between the streetlights.

Boundless laughter
across the pavement.

Within ten minutes
my father came outside
grabbed me by the forearm
and led me inside to our room—
his too-tight grip unfamiliar.

Before I could object,
tell him how foolish
he had made me look
in front of my friends,
he derided me for being so naïve.

Told me I couldn't be out here
acting the same as these white boys—
can't be pretending to shoot guns
can't be running in the dark

*can't be hiding behind anything
other than your own teeth.*

I know now how scared
he must have been,
how easily I could have fallen
into the empty of the night.
That some man would mistake
that water for a good reason
to wash all of this away.

Meteor Shower

I read somewhere that meteor showers
are almost always named after

the constellations from which
they originate. It's funny, I think,

how even the universe is telling us
that we can never get too far

from the place that created us.
How there is always a streak of our past

trailing closely behind us
like a smattering of obstinate memories.

Even when we enter a new atmosphere,
become subsumed in flames, turn to dust,

lose ourselves in the wind, and scatter
the surface of all that rests beneath us,

we bring a part of where we are from
to every place we go.

For the Taxi Cabs that Pass Me in Harvard Square

When the first cab passes you,
wonder if you've been rendered
an autumn tree, derelict
monument amid the white noise
of Massachusetts Ave.

When the second cab passes you,
pull off your hood & hat
even though the ice is fresh.
you don't want to be mistaken
for a shadow, a threat.

When the third cab passes you,
pull out your Ivy League ID,
& wave it in your hand
like the curb was a desert island.

When the fourth cab passes you,
think of 5th grade. Mrs. Capperson holding
all the boys in for recess to tell us if we don't
get tattoos, grow out our hair, pierce our ears,
or sag our pants everything will be all right.

When the fifth cab passes you,
know everything is not all right.

When the sixth cab passes you,
imagine yourself a puddle
existing as both transparency
& filth. Something that won't be there
by the afternoon.

When the seventh cab passes you,
remember how Grandma said this is how
long it took for the Good Lord to build
the world.

No More Elegies Today

Today I will
write a poem
about a little girl jumping rope.
It will not be a metaphor
for dodging bullets.
It will not be an allegory for skipping past despair.
But rather about the
back & forth bob of her head
as she waits for the right moment
to insert herself
into the blinking flashes
of bound hemp.
But rather about her friends
on either end of the rope who turn
their wrists into small
flashing windmills cultivating
an energy of their own.
But rather the way her feet barely touch the ground,
how the rope skipping across
the concrete sounds
like the entire world is giving
her a round of applause.

Poems from *Above Ground* 2023

In the dedication:

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a ladybug?

—My son

When I grow up I want to be the sun.

— My daughter

All at Once

The redwoods are on fire in California. A flood submerges a neighborhood that sat quiet on the coast for three centuries. A child takes their first steps and tumbles into a father's arms. Two people in New Orleans fall in love under an oak tree whose branches bend like sorrow. A forest of seeds are planted in new soil. A glacier melts into the ocean and the sea climbs closer to the land. A man comes home from war and holds his son for the first time. A man is killed by a drone that thinks his jug of water is a bomb. Your best friend relapses and isn't picking up the phone. Your son's teacher calls to say he stood up for another boy in class. A country below the equator ends a twenty-year civil war. A soldier across the Atlantic fires the shot that begins another. The scientists find a vaccine that will save millions of people's lives. Your mother's cancer has returned and doctors say there is nothing else they can do. There is a funeral procession in the morning and a wedding in the afternoon. The river that gives us water to drink is the same one that might wash us away.

When People Say “We Have Made It Through Worse Before”

all I hear is the wind slapping against the gravestones of those who did not make it, those who did not survive to see the confetti fall from the sky, those who

did not live to watch the parade roll down the street. I have grown accustomed to a lifetime of aphorisms meant to assuage my fears, pithy sayings meant to

convey that everything ends up fine in the end. There is no solace in rearranging language to make a different word tell the same lie. Sometimes the moral arc of the universe

does not bend in a direction that will comfort us. Sometimes it bends in ways we don't expect & there are people who fall off in the process. Please, dear reader,

do not say I am hopeless, I believe there is a better future to fight for, I simply accept the possibility that I may not live to see it. I have grown weary of telling myself lies

that I might one day begin to believe. We are not all left standing after the war has ended. Some of us have become ghosts by the time the dust has settled.

Roots

Your great-grandfather was born in 1930 Mississippi.
You were born five months ago in Washington D.C.
Your life is only possible because of his ability
to have walked through this country on fire
without turning into ash.

You come from his deep voice,
you come from his thick bones,
you come from the curl of his L's
when he says hello.

The first time I handed you to him, I watched
as you settled on his lap. I saw the way your brows
furrowed just like his, how your eyes carry the same
pools of wonder, how when both of you smile it begins

on the left side of the mouth and then blooms
into chrysanthemums at each edge.

By Chance

If the doctors said you were impossible and
you arrived anyway does it mean they were

wrong or does it mean you defied science?

What is the difference between science

and a miracle other than discovering new
language for something we don't understand?

The day we brought you home I stayed up all
night and watched you sleep in your bassinet because

I was afraid if I closed my eyes you'd vanish.

Once, a long time ago, your grandmother escaped a war

and your great-grandfather fought in one—you come from
good fortune—you come from history that is arbitrary

and cloaked in luck—you come from a land
mine that was two feet to the left—

you come from children who shared their bread when they didn't have
to. You come from the parachute that didn't open and then did.

Yesterday Afternoon I Took You to the Park

and you love the way the flowers blossom and how the taller
they grow the more wildly they dance, how the stems become
pairs of limber hips, how the petals become a mop of hair,
and when the clouds blow over and the sun sweeps across
a bed of azaleas they glimmer like an orange ocean. And I love
how the gleam on the petals draws you in, how when you tumble
down the slide you run toward the bed of flowers and lean
over to smell them, and how you look at me and say *wow!* after

the sweet smell of spring tickles your nostrils, how you proceed to repeat that action for the next twenty flowers, how when the wind blows and you watch the stems dance you wobble your hips to be like the flowers, how you swing your body so hard you fall over and begin to cry, how then you get up and laugh and do it all over again.

When Standing in a Cabin at the Whitney Plantation

I close my eyes and consider for a moment what it would mean to fall asleep in my home, to wake up, and to find my children gone. To not know where they were. To not know who had taken them. To not know if I would see them again. I open my eyes and watch flecks of sun trickle in through an unsteady roof above me and listen to the sound of wooden planks made from cypress trees groaning underfoot. I consider that this was the omnipresent peril that millions of enslaved people lived under. I consider how it wasn't so long ago. How the threat of being separated from those you love hung over every second of their lives. I shudder tracing the contours of possibility. I lose my breath imagining just how quickly a body can disappear.

