

I Can't Breathe

"I (patrollers name), do swear, that I will as searcher for guns, swords, and other weapons among the slaves in my district, faithfully, and as privately as I can, discharge the trust reposed in me as the law directs, to the best of my power. So help me, God."- Slave Patrollers Oath, 1828.

Eager and wide-eyed, I marched through the building of my brand new school
Fuchsia beads bounced on the ends of my braids
Click-clacking against my backpack
Complimenting my magenta skirt,

Gifted to me by grandma
I thought of grandma today, and how proud she was of me for carrying on her dreams deferred

I feel the eyes of a tall man dressed in blue
A gleaming security badge asserts his dominance His words shoot at me like fire hoses
Drenching me with shame
"Your outfit is giving it all away".
I never knew my thirteen-year old body was there for the taking
An honors student sent to the office like a delinquent
Given a plain tee-shirt to cover up
My vibrant, pink colors vanish under the "school appropriate", *white* fabric

My joy of self expression made colorless
I shrink in the oversized tee
Drowning in the cotton
I can't breathe
I am too small
Suddenly the school feels all too big
Grandma would be so disheartened to know her gift went to waste

Dress coded.

In gym class, he runs past me
My rapist scores a goal, a smirk on his face He had won
I am helpless
My innocence, lost
But the fire of rage could not be put out
I would not be silenced
I won't let these walls swallow me whole
I must take back my power

I sit across from the SROs with my head held high
But suspicious blue eyes, graze over my body Freezing me over
Paralyzing me

Just like he did that night
As the white office walls closed in on me, I long for the warmth of my mother's chestnut skin
The questions begin
"Well what were you wearing?"
"Are you sure you got the right guy, he's an all star player?"
"Have you ever been suspended before?"
"Were you intoxicated?"
"Why did you wait so long to come forward?"
"Are you sure you said no?"
My head falls to my hands as a tear rolls down my cheek
I can't breathe
My fire is put out

Interrogated.

Walking through the metal detectors at school,
Each day feels like a prison
Whistles blown at us like dogs who need to be trained
Criminals who have never committed a crime
Crushed in spirit and soul by the weight of low expectations
My story was already written for me
How can I feel free here?

Like a caged bird who can't sing,
I long to be heard
To spread my wings and fly away from these gray walls
Classrooms with no teachers
History books that exclude *my* story
SROs lurk in the hallways
Policed at fifteen
Trapped in the system like I'm tethered to concrete
Being dragged down to the pipeline
The air is thick with apathy
I can't breathe
Years of frustration boil within me
Hot-headed
I lash out with my fists
"Assault"
I fall into their trap.

Arrested.