WRITING AWARDS 2016

Carnegie Mellon University
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Richard Purcell, Associate Professor of English, Carnegie Mellon University
Celebrating Excellence in Creative Writing and the Spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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College Poetry
Sushi at Yunioshi’s

Kevin Lee

First Place

You probably think you’ve seen me
sipping bubble teas, walking Pekingese
and other small breeds across these city streets
Kicking it with Mr. Miyagi in the back seat
of my Honda Accord SE, puffin poppy seeds
bumpin’ Far East, and always acting accordingly.
I’m that young Bruce Lee with the buck teeth
and Coke bottle frames,
that don’t know he don’t know how to sing.
But you know I know when that “Hotrine Bring”
I’m that Karaoke King with that four-inch thing.
I’m that chink in the back pew
trading Yu-Gi-Oh cards for Pikachu’s.
I’m that dude with the kimchi stains
on his Canada-Goose-Fu-Manchu,
dripping down to his Jimmy Choo shoes.
For some reason,
I’m not the person you know but the guy that you see.
But if you ever want to get to know the real me,
I’ll be sippin soju like it’s iced tea
on the corner of Mott Street
eating sushi with Mr. Yunioshi.
And I was born with ten toes
and I was born with ten fingers,
two eyes and two ears,
and one heart,
or so they say.

And I was born red in the heart
and I was born blue in the brain
like police sirens,
like a box of rocket popsicles,
like a true American.

And it betrayed my brown skin,
colored
like the monsoon mud,
like the dry cracked earth,
like July in Rajasthan,
like Cadbury Dairy Milk chocolate
bars from the Indian store,
like mehendi, like henna
on a new bride’s arm,
elbow-deep in commitment,
like my mother and her mother
and her mother
who learned to choke
before she learned to speak,
like the temples we’ve inscribed
our histories into,
like brown paper bags
so used
to expanding
for the deep breaths
of others.

And my heart shouted at that skin,
my brain chanted over its delicate
and carefully crafted
Sanskrit script—
U-S-A. U-S-A. U-S-A.

And so my parents named me
American. Or so they say.
Marvel at marble:
David was born in this heat
by God’s hands.
His body for battle is unshelled;
except for a coat of birds,
he is naked.

Leaping from his shoulder, a bird
lands a few hands
away, searching the naked
streets for a marble
of crumbs. Heated,
he shells

his head in a hole, sheltered.
I understand the bird’s
hatred of heat
and I call to him, bread in hand,
my laughter like marbles—
pure and naked.

I see a beggar with naked
hands, copper like coins. Her unshelled
breasts, round like marbles,
walk as she washes like a bird,
cupping water in her hands
to cool from the heat.

Color drains from her nude
lips and she turns pink as shells
as she sees me. I am perfect marble
to her, a powerful bird,
and in my hands
I clutch a water bottle heated
by her sun. I am heated,
angry at myself, the naked
truth: these are soft hands
and hers are rough as shells.
She does not know I laugh at the bird,
not her, and like a marble,

she rolls into herself. Heat marbleizes this:
her naked face, scared as a bird,
her hands shell-clamp a sweaty rag.
College Prose
Acceptance
Kelly Kim
First Place

“Hello there!”

I turned to face the woman beaming at me, and by her heavily contoured face, fluttering false eyelashes, and her black-and-red uniform, I could tell she worked at Sephora.

“Would you like to receive a makeover?” she asked.

She caught me by surprise; I was not expecting to be recruited to be her project as soon as I walked into the store. I managed a slight smile, to which she assumed my answer was a positive “yes.”

“Walk over there with me,” she ordered as she approached a brightly lit mirror and a table messily covered with an oblong of jet black mascara, a plate of flamboyant eye shadows—baby blue, tropical orange, neon pink, each in a basin just big enough for fingertips—and three lipsticks in “Redemption,” “Besame Mucho,” and “No Shame.”

I could not decipher what the true chromatic colors of these lipsticks were from their silly names, but I eased my nerves by thinking, Be open to new colors. You’re in a new city, new school, so why not a new self?

I watched as the woman, whose name I noticed from her metallic nametag was “Paula,” rubbed her finger in eye shadow. When she lifted her finger, the dense blue covering made my heart skip a beat of hesitancy.

“I’ve never worn blue on my face. I thought. New me, right?

Paula dabbed her finger on my eyelid, first starting with gentle, miniscule motions, gradually turning into swift, elongated motions across my entire eyelid. I kept my eyes closed during this, and was suddenly yet intensely preoccupied with my insecurity over my Asian features—my low nose bridge, shallow eyelid crease, short lashes, and full cheeks. Paula then whipped out a waterproof liquid eyeliner, drawing thick black strokes on my eyelid, attempting to make my eyes as big as her European ones. Unsatisfied with her result, she glued on a pair of false eyelashes that were more dramatic than
her pair. I sat uncomfortably and impatiently while the cheap glue stiffly dried on my eyes. Turning to a row of bottles of foundation and unable to decode the exact color of my skin, Paula brought over two shades in Porcelain 00 and Alabaster 0. I wondered if I was her first Asian customer; I would’ve never picked those colors up for myself—or any Asian person, really. Rather, the shades perfectly matched Paula’s own pale skin. As she swiped the foundation and blended the light colors onto my face, a sudden memory of my nine-year-old self staring into a mirror at the ugly yellowness of my skin with resentment flashed at me. When the memory dissipated, Paula had moved onto contouring my face, shading my cheeks and nose with brown powder to create an illusion of “high cheekbones” and a “tall and narrow nose.”

When Paula finally left my face alone, I was left with an unfamiliar, nonplussed teenage girl staring into my eyes—her face so white, her eyes almond-shaped, and bone structure so European. I did not know who she was or why I had for 18 years dreamt of looking like her. I thought about how, as a little girl who played with Barbie dolls and watched Disney Princess movies, I would pray to my European God every night hoping to one day wake up with white skin; how I used to pinch my nose until I couldn’t stand the pain in false belief that I could somehow “push” my nose bridge higher together; how for months I wore color contacts to feel white. Now with this person staring back at me—our souls similar yet our physiques so divergent—I felt disgusted and excused myself from Paula. I walked to the back of the store and aggressively rubbed my face with cotton balls drenched in makeup remover until the balls were turned a heinous color of porcelain, brown, and blue, and my face was finally back to familiarity. I found a strange comfort in the unglamorous girl with the small nose, chubby cheeks, and round eyes looking back at me in the mirror.

After leaving Sephora and walking for six laborious blocks, I reached a quieter side of Pittsburgh, where only a few people were visible and no open shops were in sight. A block away from where I was standing, there was a group of blonde, blue-eyed girls chuckling together wearing their Kappa Delta hoodies. As I passed them, a few turned to look at me. They know I don’t belong here. I thought. They think I’m foreign.

As I walked further, my stomach grumbled uncontrollably at what it seemed like the smell of fresh bread. I followed the scent, and in my eyes appeared a diner. I walked in, rejoicing at the sight of food.

“Table for one, please,” I said to the waitress, named Amy.
Amy, a large, brunette woman, gave me a welcoming smile and grabbed a menu from the counter. As she was leading me to a table, I could sense awkward stares from other guests at the restaurant. Amy set the menu down on an empty four-person table near the back of the restaurant and left me alone to pick an entrée.

Chocolate Chip Pancakes, Potato Pancakes, Buttermilk Pancakes. I soon got bored of reading the many types of pancakes available, and lay the menu down. I noticed a stack of the most recent Sunday issue of the New York Times that was being sold for $2.50 each. I walked over and took one to the table. Skimming through the pages, I chose to read a book review on Elena Ferrante’s The Story of the Lost Child.

I made my way through the article, paragraphs shortening to sentences, sentences soon breaking down into singular words: Lost. Child. Italian. Rises. Beginnings. Successful. Anonymity. I felt an unexpected connection with each word and began to see myself in the third person: an adult, about to start college, reading a newspaper, and ready to order food. Then I saw my younger self: five years old, about to start elementary school, unable to speak English, having never read an English book, and terrified of speaking a word. I reminisced over how much I had grown over the span of thirteen years and searched my brain for more memories.

I thought about my beginnings in New Zealand, how, when I first moved to New Zealand, I lived in silence. Unfamiliar with the culture and language, I spent long afternoons tracing letters, watching Hi-5 or Sesame Street, and training my tongue to perform the lingual gymnastics required to speak fluently. Even at five years old, I knew that self-imposed reticence was akin to submission. I was determined to prove to my New Zealand peers that I could do what they could do—converse in their language.

While I was eventually able to speak and read English, a part of me still feared the language. When I relocated to the United States to start middle school, I didn’t believe I was as good at English as my American peers, because I was not born into the language, and I entered my boarding school with the same impression.

During my first day of high school, I was constantly asked, “Where are you from?” and greeted with a confused look when I replied, “New Jersey.” To which, they followed with, “Oh, but where are you really from,” or “you’re an international student though, right?” as if my skin would not allow me to be anything other than Korean.
“Well, I am American,” I would say with a noticeable defensiveness in my tone. I was unaware that I would accompany this statement with a speech on how my political views are Republican but I’m a Feminist, how my favorite director is Wes Anderson, how I love reading Virginia Woolf, and how I had lived in New Jersey for many years. But that wasn’t enough. Whatever I said was never enough. My peers would respond, “Wow, you’re different,” trying to compliment me on how I wasn’t like a stereotypical Asian student.

Recalling my past experiences and viewing them in retrospect, I realized that my entire life as an Asian living in non-Asian countries was about proving myself to other people: when my peers didn’t think I would be good at English, I vowed to prove them wrong by participating constantly in class discussions, writing for the school newspaper and magazine, and taking the AP English tests. When they told me that the reason why many Asians don’t join sports is because they spend all their time in the library studying, I signed myself up for both rowing and squash.

But, what were my efforts for? As the Editor-in-Chief for the school newspaper and the school magazine, a fourth-year member of Varsity crew and equipped with 5s on both of the AP English tests, I still didn’t feel like I conquered English or was “good enough” for my white peers. Even after I received both the school’s Journalism and Literary awards in front of the whole school, I was disappointed to find out that many classmates and teachers assumed I was going to major in STEM.

While I was proving my American-ness, I was struggling to prove my Asian-ness. I spent many weekends in my dorm room, hovering over SAT books because the Korean ajummas (“aunts”) told me “Asians need higher test scores than most college applicants.” I nibbled raw carrots and ate tofu when I really wanted to be popping French fries into my mouth and biting burgers, because the Asian culture lionized skinny 90-pound girls who had thigh gaps and 24-inch waists. I wasn’t sleeping because I was studying until 4 or 5 am to receive all As, only to beat my tired self down when I didn’t.

I realized how lonely living a life like this was. Feeling like an outsider to both American and Asian cultures, living a life that didn’t feel like my own, pretending to be a multitalented, organized girl who was perfect by both American and Asian standards, when really inside I was breaking down. I began to conceal true myself from others in an effort to shield myself from vulnerability and imperfection.
The decisions I had made many years ago had now led me to a restaurant in Pittsburgh, with a newspaper in one hand and a menu on the other, unsure if my attempts to hide my nervous feelings about starting college were working. I overheard a group of University of Pittsburgh students sitting at a table next to mine. And as any teenager can attest, nearby chatter always seems a little bit louder and a little bit clearer when one is thinking about something grudgingly. They were chattering about their latest boyfriends, complaining about their parents, laughing over embarrassing stories from the summer. It was then, as I was observing them converse excitedly among themselves, that I realized that my table was empty.

I didn’t feel anything at first, but something began to stir within me. I realized that I never understood why I was always constantly prove myself, why I never thought about the possibility of being an unique blend of American and Korean, why I was never content with my physical features, my grades, or my social skills. Why was I so afraid of being myself?

Right there, I vowed to myself that I would neither “reinvent” myself nor stress over my insecurities. I would enter college, study whatever I want, do the activities that I feel most passionate about, and embrace both my talents and flaws. There was no guarantee that I would make friends, be praised for being who I was or be successful, but I was for the first time willing to take a risk and be open to vulnerability, to others, to myself.

“Hi honey,” I heard a woman’s soothing voice say.

I looked up and the voices inside my head quieted and past memories faded. Amy, with a pen and notepad in her hands, looked back at me.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

I faced her with a genuine smile and a swiftly beating heart. “Yes,” I responded, excitedly.
What’s in a Name?
Quite a Lot

Hyunho Yoon
Second Place

For anyone wondering how to say my name, here are some ways I found to work in approximating the sound in the past:

- It’s like “ya know” with a slight H in the beginning.
- Like Keanu in Keanu Reeves, except the K is an H and the U is an O.
- The Hyun, rhymes with “bun,” is like the Hyun in “Hyundai,” the car company. Add an “O” at the end.
- Or just fuck it and call me Henry.

During freshman orientation we were asked to talk about moving to a new place and what we had brought with us. People mentioned their teddy bears, family albums, high school jerseys, posters of their favorite TV shows. I said I brought my name. Many Asians adopt a convenient English handle when they come over to this country; I decided against it. Since then, it has been an ordeal to teach a non-Korean how to say it. For a while I used to mentally flinch at an imminent introduction, when I would have to apologetically say my name as slowly as socially acceptable, then spend a minute of the recipient’s unexpected time on describing how it’s pronounced.

We go back and forth, me trying to mold their sounds, them trying to contort their tongue the correct way to have an utterance with a semblance of mine leave their lips.

“Hyunho.”
“Keno.”
“Hyuh-no.”
“Keh-no.”
“HYUH-n-o.”
“Yuh-no.”
“H-Yuh-no
“Huh-no.”
And we go on for a while until I smile and tell them it’s perfect, it’s how native Koreans say it. Even when I don’t mean it, I soon learned, it’s a nice way to get to talking with someone. A guy in a *Breaking Bad* hazmat suit at a Halloween party once parroted back “Shadow” with a beerish tang in his breath, which in truth was infinitely cooler than the costume I had put on for the occasion, and so I left it at that. I was happy about getting the spooky nickname for the night, and my new friend was happy that he could “speak Korean.” Even later on when I came up with the guidelines—“It’s like ‘ya know’ with a slight *H* in the beginning, etc.”—to save everyone else from needless exertion, it still required a few rounds of the back and forth for them to get it right and for us to break the conversational ice.

Spelling, or even writing it out on paper, rarely helps. The funny thing is, the confusion on how to read my Korean name comes from the fact that today’s American English comes from so many languages, and that there are many possible ways to say a particular combination of letters. A Hispanic Estrella would have different sounding double-*l*’s compared to a Giselle with French roots. The “ch” in the Anglo-Saxon Chad would have more in common with the “q” in a Chinese Li Qiang than the “ch” in an Italian Chiara. In Korean there would be no confusion about how to read one’s name, which would all be lightly but equally butchered as they are passed through the filter of our uniform, custom-fitted alphabet.

The other funny thing is, it’s gotten to the point that I have nothing else to complain about regarding my racial experience in Pittsburgh other than the fact that the people here can’t instinctively say my name. Today’s USA is still fighting out its lingering traces of racism, and this battle is as important as it has ever been. But I think it is important to note and celebrate the advancements that have been made in this field, as much as it is to point out what’s still wrong with the current situation. After all, what’s a battle worth if there is nothing being gained?

Continued news reports may lead some to believe that America is an intolerant place for racial minorities, but the fact that it’s constantly being talked about is part of what makes the United States one of the most, if not very well the most, diverse and inclusive country in the world. Backpacking in Europe, I had wine-infused college students loudly call out the “Chino” in their midst with squinting eyes, and nobody batted an eye. I’ve seen old ladies here lecture people on the bus for far less.

But as far as we’ve come in the path to racial equality, I agree that the struggle is not yet entirely over. Maybe it’s because of my majors in writing and psychology (I do research primarily on language acquisition in adults), but I sincerely believe that the next big step lies in the way we speak and
otherwise use language. Among those who have rid themselves of overt prejudice and racially motivated malice, which I believe are the majority of Americans today, many still have yet to shed their use of subtly biased language, and our cultural vocabulary is in need of improvement. It is not just out of political correctness; scientifically, the idea that language mirrors the mind is an incomplete depiction of how things work. The influence is bidirectional, in that language we as a culture use in turn affects the way we think. Outlawing discriminatory actions alone won’t suffice. To change peoples’ attitudes, the American public tongue needs to change.

I’ve had new friends, with the best of intentions, go out of their way to tell me how much they enjoy eating rice, as if some solidarity could be formed on the basis of those sticky grains. Of course, I would appreciate it more if they treated me like their other friends who go nuts for bacon cheeseburgers and Chipotle, but the fact is I do like rice as much as I like burgers (a lot), and I hardly think the Asian Americans who worked on the railroads and sugarcane fields a century past would have been offended if a white person went up to them and tried to be friendly, albeit relying on a racial crutch for lack of situational familiarity. So I seldom get annoyed when it happens.

I’ve had others politely ask, “Are you from Pittsburgh?” in lieu of “What country are you from?” But based on the type of people who mostly ask the former question, I can tell it is the latter that they are curious of. Of course, more times than not, if you ask a Carnegie Mellon student with a foreign sounding name, he or she will not be from the United States; nor am I, so I can’t say that they’re unjustified. And besides, I work with elderly patients at the local hospital—some of whom affectionately remember the “oriental gentleman” they had a nice conversation with—so I learned not to get offended even by the more direct variation of the question.

Then there are the several enthusiastic bus drivers who yell out “Nihao!” when a large group of my Korean friends get on. I don’t know what they expect to do if we really spoke the language and replied something back to them in Mandarin, but I know they’re being nice. I resist the urge to jokingly reply “Guten tag” when they’re Caucasian, or “Hola” if they’re darker skinned. I just smile and nod my head in a respectful half-bow, as I would to a bus driver in Seoul.

But the thing is, although I don’t take any offense, at the end of the day I do feel somewhat left out. And I’m sure the people who have spoken to me in such a way involuntarily perceive themselves, at some level, with an element of detachment from me.
Language therefore really is key to complete racial equality; but we must remember, as much as it is a cultural and political medium, it is also a personal tool that is shaped by nothing more than habit. It’s a hard and onerous process to change the way we speak. I myself am guilty of momentarily adopting an English name when interacting with people if it really isn’t worth the time and effort to teach them my real one. The busy hands at Conflict Kitchen have only known me as Henry, as have countless baristas and the popular store clerks in the Strip District.

There’s no easy way out of this. Once a person passes his or her critical period in the first few years of their life, they never are able to learn language as well as when they were a baby. But it is still possible to teach adults new languages though, even nonsensical computer-generated ones with randomly chosen sounds, and experimental findings show that few things are as important in late language acquisition as repeated exposure and rehearsal. This just means that we have to plow through, consciously making the effort to not use skewed language, in a way that will get others to adopt that manner of speaking as well. People shouldn’t be ashamed to add to the diversity of our vocabulary—even if it is just a single, unfamiliar name—while the rest of us should take care to take it in with an inclusive attitude, as something different, but not separate.

Even more hopeful is that for us as a society, instead of individual people, I believe the critical period to change is now. We have largely passed the violent stage of the struggle that has been the Civil Rights Movement in the sixties, which gave birth to this cause; we have been made abundantly aware of the dangers of racial prejudice, and we are open to further solutions to improve the ways things are. It is our generation’s job to adopt a more inclusive way of communicating and pass it on to the next, who will have their own fight to battle in this arena. Failure to change now will only lock us into our current ways, and make change difficult for us in the future.

When given the full list of ways to pronounce my name, nobody has yet to go with the option to call me Henry. The willingness is there, and the people are ready. We only have to take this eagerness for change, and act.
There is no feeling quite like that moment when your friend makes a cringe-worthy joke about another race. This is an age old dilemma on which plenty of Youtubers and activists have counseled. Some even offer a turn of phrase you could use to show your disapproval without seeming “uncool.” I can attest that I have found a few quips that I find useful in this situation in the English speaking world. But of course, the United States of America is not the only country with a race problem. I recently had the opportunity of a lifetime to stay in Italy for a month. Despite being an incredible growing experience, culture shock does not even begin to describe my interaction with the racial climate of Italy. It is one thing to be in uncomfortable situations in America where you have the ability to say something. But what can a person do when their vocabulary is so limited, such as my Italian vocabulary?

Il Cinese

For most of my trip, I stayed in a little town called Melilli with my nonna (grandmother). Most of my family lives here so I spent a lot of time going from house to house for lunch with different relatives. Almost every other day I would eat with my cousin, Elina, and her three young girls. One of them was sixteen years old and the others were twins at the age of twelve. As I struggled to follow the conversation at the table, I pick up on my nonna telling my zia (aunt) that we needed to buy a shower curtain for the bathroom. My zia offered her a ride to the store as she often did. To this, my nonna replied, “La compreremo dal cinese” (We will buy it from the Chinese). My ears perked up at this and I asked my nonna to clarify in English. Apparently, there was a store in Melilli that sold just about everything you can imagine imported from China and as cheap as could be. Furthermore, the store was run by what I suspect to be the only Asian family in Melilli. I don’t think this is a bold claim, as this was the kind of town where everyone knows each other and, within one month, one begins to feel like they have met everyone.

At the very mention of this family, the twins put their hands to their temples and stretched their eyes so that they were squinting. Without so much as a disappointed glance from the adults at the table, the girls laughed at each other. I, on the other hand, was stunned out of words—Italian and English.
On occasion, I left the tiny town of Melilli to visit the tiny city of Siracusa (Syracuse). These days were some of my favorites. Siracusa is just touristy enough that a person can get around without knowing a lick of Italian and it is just authentic enough that if I wanted to practice Italian, I could.

Through my family, I had made a couple of friends that lived in the city—two thrill-seeking boys about my age, Matia and Andrea. They spoke to me in English most of the time and took me on a few adventures in the little time I had. These guys were all about the adrenaline rush, and I don’t mean the mild kind that you get from riding a rollercoaster. The first time I hung out with them, they took me cliff-diving. This time, they took me rollerblading around Syracuse (I rode a scooter).

As I struggled to keep up, the boys commented on the various people on the street. Anyone walking down a street in Italy is an object for commentary. This was a practice that I became numb to after a while. Matia even said at one point, “In Italy, we judge people on their appearance.” But by this time, I had gotten used to hearing my nonna talk about people as we passed them.

We reached a point where I needed a break. My legs were tired and cobblestone roads are not the easiest surfaces to ride a scooter on. We stopped on the sidewalk across from some vendors selling bags, hats, and sunglasses. Street vendors in Italy were almost always either black or Middle Eastern; these vendors were black. Matia turned to me and asked, “Giulianna, are you racist?” I was startled by this inquiry. My mind was flustered. To me, this seemingly simple question was quite complicated. I thought, Of course, I am not a racist. But, everyone experiences slightly racist tendencies sometimes. The important thing is that we are conscious of our bias—whether they are innate or socially conditioned—and we fight against them. This is what went through my head, but what came out of my mouth was, “I hope not.”

Matia looked at me and said, “I am racist. But, only since living in America.”

What it was about his experience in America that made him identify as a racist, I will never know, because immediately after saying this he rolled away across the crosswalk and I was left with Andrea, who looked at me as if to say “we better keep up.” It is a very sad thing when you realize that your relationship with someone can be nothing more than a short-term friendship.
If this were a fictional story, I would have written that I eventually caught up to him and confronted him about his statement. I would have written that I explained to him the poverty cycle and the systematic oppression of black people. I explained the incredible history of civil rights and Beyoncé. Furthermore, I would have written that I did all this in perfect grammatical Italian. Unfortunately, I am recounting the true events of my experience in Italy and this is what actually happened; we eventually stopped again on a street corner where I was to meet my zia to pick me up and leave. I hugged both of the boys goodbye. I wouldn’t see them again for the rest of my stay in Italy.

*Le Quattro Genti*

My *nonna* and *zia* once told me about some of the things that they were taught in school as children. My *nonna* remembered being taught that, in the whole world, there are only four races; black, white, Asian, and Native Americans. Native Americans were referred to as “reds.” Getting my *nonna* to explain herself fully was never an easy task. It is not that her English was terrible, but that she never thought things through before she let them come out of her mouth. I said to her, “Wow, I’m sure education has come a long way since then.” She seemed confused at my comment. “You know that this is wrong now,” I said, hopeful.

My hope that my *nonna* had had any realization about the fallibility of this statement was dashed when she broke out into a tangent about how no one can “say what is true anymore.” I am not entirely sure what her point was. It was difficult to follow and some of it was in Italian. But, the most horrifying part of our conversation was when she said this, “The black people don’t want to be called n******, but that’s what they are.”

Even typing it out using asterisks leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. I would sometimes give my nonna a pass when she said something less than tasteful. But, there was no way I was going to let this go and my reply had to be as clear to her as I could make it. I had to use her language. “*Nonna! Non puoi usare questa parola*” (Grandmother! You cannot use that word).
High School Poetry
Wife
Hannah Geisler
First Place
(after Jamaica Kincaid)

wear
red/
dresses
and yellow latex gloves.
choke /yourself
with a noose of delicately brilliant
pearls and finger the scars
like a chocolate/ diamond necklace.
never wear ripped stockings
never wear fringe or lace
you slut
be humble
and meek
seen/not/heard
and when you do speak, share gossip/beef stew recipes
tell me/ about grandma’s country/fair cobbler
does molasses / stain cotton?
curl your hair everyday
and then tie it away from your face
never let him see/ you sweat.
get excited over aprons/ watch infomercials
and then call your girlfriends
to brag about your latest gadgets.

never stop/ working
never set down the sponge
lotion your hands
twice a day to help with the bleeding
get down on your knees/ polish the china/ dinner at 5’ o’clock
buy lingerie
sexy
black
lingerie
and surprise him after work wear it
that night/ and every night after that / and any other time

that he tells you.
Questions for a Black Mother

Suhail Gharaibeh-Gonzalez

for Aiyana Mo’Nay Stanley-Jones

mommy mommy what’s a police state?

A SWAT team launches a flash-bang grenade through a window.
It shatters out a song
and the orchestra of cop-blue night feeds in through the broken glass.

See, we’re in the colored section, twenty-ten—
boarded-up windows.
Graffiti pops on the side of abandoned buildings.
No playgrounds here—
weeds grow tall instead.

mommy mommy what’s apartheid?

The grenade has burnt up the edge of a Disney Princess blanket.
They kick down the door
and plunge into the house.

An officer’s gun cocks back. bang.

A bullet slices through the air, and it makes home
in a seven-year-old’s head. She’s asleep on the couch,
next to her grandmother. It obliterates fresh knowledge—
how to spell “cat” and how two plus two equals four.
The SWAT team kicked down the door
and the little black girl was sleeping,
she was playing dead anyway,
she wasn’t alive anyway,
she wasn’t human anyway anyway anyway—
black bodies plastered on tv screens.
Cracked backs, gunshots,
turning clocks and every minute the pool of blood soaks deeper,
autopsies, genocide by proxy,
and these very urban soldiers
appear smiling on the eleven o’clock news.
Their badges shine.

mommy mommy what’s desensitization?

Fluorescent lights spin.
Red carnations bloom on the little girl’s pillow.
Her grandmother holds her and weeps.

January twenty-fifteen. The officer who fired the gun is acquitted of all
charges.
Tears flood all of Detroit.

The news spews distortion:
Aiyana’s grandmother reached for the gun!

Did you mistake her hand flying out to stop the bullet?
Maybe she was reaching for survival,
for humanity,
for protection.

The news spews the logistics of these ballistics,
offering explanations for murder, but it’s simple:
since slave ships first docked here,
the wombs of black women have been
graveyards for their future children,
fate sealed by the effigy of his race
because black children are always black before innocent—
but officer Joseph Weekley’s mother smiled and beamed when he joined the
police
academy, saying
“he has so much
promise.”
Microaggression

Irina Bucur

Third Place

1. Honey, can you translate for your mother?

2. I’m not sure she understands.


4. It would be a good thing to learn those words in English.

5. Do they not use birth control in your culture?

6. You’re from Russia, or wherever?

7. Same thing.

8. It must have been tough for your parents.

9. Are you Communist?

10. But you’re legal, right?

11. No offense.

12. You know, we’re in America. Things are done differently here.
High School Prose
Black Tigers
Taylor Thomas
First Place

When I was seven, my friend and I invented a game. We called it “Tigers,” an activity that mostly involved a lot of crawling around and fake growling. “Ah! A black tiger! I don’t like black tigers!” my friend shouted, as I backed him into the corner of our classroom, growling and swiping with imaginary claws. I don’t remember getting angry or upset with him, but what I do remember is my teacher holding me tight for a long time afterwards, as if trying to protect me from something, and telling me that it would never happen again. I’m not sure how severely my friend was punished, if at all, but I don’t think that we played “Tigers” again after that. We were quite young at the time, but already we had established that there was a difference between the two of us: My friend was a tiger. I was a black tiger.

I didn’t see the significance of this event until much later, when I heard someone claiming to be colorblind. Not the kind that makes it hard to tell red from green, but the kind that supposedly stops one from seeing race. It’s silly to pretend that true “colorblindness” can ever truly be achieved. To ask someone to enter a room without noticing the differences between the people around them is completely unreasonable. Back in prehistoric times, when we were constantly threatened by the natural world around us, noticing environmental differences is what kept us alive. Today, we continue to notice differences—whether consciously or unconsciously—not necessarily for survival, but rather so that we can assess and safely navigate through different social situations. We all do it, so why all of the fuss when it comes to race?

The colorblind perspective attempts to simplify a very complicated topic, and often comes from people who don’t have to think about color. Because skin color has never been an issue for them, they decide it’s not a real issue for anyone. They can simply bury their heads in the sand like ostriches and hope that maybe if we stop talking about the problem, it will go away. But this is not the case. My childhood friend saw the difference between our skin colors. But then he went a step further and declared that he didn’t like “tigers” like me. So the problem isn’t acknowledging differences; the problem is valuing or treating people differently because of those differences. Those who label
themselves as colorblind are attempting to not see color, but in reality, it is what allows them to avoid seeing injustices.
I can’t really blame these ostriches for burying their heads in the sand. Talking about race is difficult for all parties involved. But I have also seen the alternative—complete and utter silence on both ends—and it isn’t much better. I have attended a predominately white school for most of my life. And although silence around racial issues is not uncommon I will admit that I have been lucky. Many black kids (especially black girls) struggle socially when they attend predominantly white private schools. Fortunately, I have been able to thrive socially at my school, aside from a few bumps on the road here and there.

There was a time during my sophomore year when racial tensions were particularly high, and a few of my black sisters and I decided that we needed a day for us. Dressed in black, hair picks in our afros, we entered school the next day, a single unit, together in solidarity. It wasn’t long before we were called into a meeting with our dean and the faculty advisor of our Black Student Union (BSU) on the grounds that several white classmates had felt “threatened” by our wearing black. The blatant racial stereotyping that had brought us into this meeting was only a small part of the problem.

We tried to explain what had brought us to this point, why we were dressed in black, and “scaring” the other students: the racially charged arguments in the school hallways, the white students’ determination to ignore our concerns about their behavior, the angry Tweets when the in-school conflicts continued online. But the dean and BSU faculty advisor (who is black) were not convinced that our protest had merit, even when we described in detail the kinds of things we faced as black students amongst mostly white peers: the students’ use of racial slurs in casual conversation; the boys who decided that white girls would always be better than black girls; the insistence by both staff and students that our issues weren’t valid.

Once we had finished our stories, I clearly remember the BSU advisor making the following assertion: If we had not called attention to ourselves, none of this would have happened. And although this statement angered me to no end, to some extent, she was right. If we hadn’t formed a black student union, this would not have happened. If we hadn’t forced our classmates to give a damn about race, this would not have happened. If we hadn’t dressed in black, none of this would have happened.

But we did dress in black that day, and we did talk about race, and we did start a black student union, and I’m glad we did. If we hadn’t done those things, ostriches could stay ostriches, and our school’s problems concerning
race would never even get close to being resolved. Where our advisor was oh-so-very-wrong, however, was in believing that without our actions, the racial tension in our school would simply disappear. Perhaps, in the eyes of someone who does not come face to face with the injustices a black student can face, this is the case. But the absence of action does not eliminate conflict. It only masks it.

I don’t blame the administration (at least not anymore), because I know that their job is to keep the peace. But the kind of attitude that our BSU advisor had—that we should avoid calling attention to ourselves—is a dangerous one. This attitude brings the peace that the administration wants so badly, but this kind of peace, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., would describe it, is a “negative peace.” It is a peace that allows white students to keep their heads in the sand and to condemn those of us who dare threaten the security of their willful ignorance. It is a peace that allows those in charge to only do what is necessary to calm rough waters without targeting the source of the problem. It is a peace that silences the voices of those who want to educate their peers but are afraid of creating conflict. It is a peace that values white feelings over the importance of black voices.

The shocking truth is that I am—whether people like it or not—a black tiger. No amount of willful ignorance or head-burying sand can change that. When it comes to the fight for social justice, accepting this is only the first step, and it is the only easy one. After that, the hard part is acknowledging that because we aren’t colorblind and because we do see race, sometimes people are going to be treated differently and unfairly because of how they look. Confronting this unfair treatment is at the heart of the fight for social justice. To deny that differences and injustices exist is bad; to blame these injustices on those who speak out against them is even worse. Colorblindness seeks to keep the voices of the oppressed quiet, and increase the volume of those who are comfortable with the racial status quo.

Joining the Black Student Union at my school has been a liberating experience for me because I did not have to pretend to be colorblind, and neither did the other club members. For the first time, I was surrounded by peers who supported me and who told me that it is okay to talk about being black in school and in America. Of course, as our BSU advisor had already pointed out for us, when we have these conversations we are going to call attention to ourselves. We are going to make waves. But I would rather be at the center of attention, at the heart of the battle, than be a spectator to a negative peace.
Making Sense of What Killed Me

Ciara Bailey
Second Place

When I was four years old, I learned that I was bad. Not because I would sneakily throw away my vegetables after dinner; not because I would resist my totally unfair bedtime of 8:30; not even because of the time that I broke Mama’s souvenir magnets on the refrigerator (and pinky promised her that I really didn’t do it). I learned that I was bad because I was black.

It started in preschool. Like any adventurous four year-old, outdoor playtime was the highlight of my day. I had my best friend by my side as we played countless games, tapping into our vast imaginations. I didn’t know she was white. I didn’t even fully understand that I was black. At four years old, I didn’t quite grasp the concept of race. All I knew was that with her, I could be myself. But everything changed when she suddenly stopped playing with me. I asked, “What’s wrong? Can we still play together?” Expecting her to say yes and proceed to invite me over to the monkey bars, I extended my hand to her.

But instead, she told me, “You can’t play with me because you’re not white.”

Puzzled, I glanced at the callused, white-ish palms of my hands and replied, “But I am white! See?” I’m trying to recall what happened after this, but I can’t remember. I just know that I never spoke to her again.

Even twelve years later, this experience weighs heavily on my heart. Sometimes I wonder if that conversation impacted her as much as it did me. On that day, I learned that I was bad because I was black. I doubt she even remembers those simple yet hateful words that I can never forget. I hate racism because at four years old, I felt unwanted.
As an eight year-old, I learned that dark skin is bad. I remember in third grade, there was a boy in my class with very dark skin. He was always the go-to person to make fun of—sometimes jokingly and sometimes not. One day at lunch I was sitting with a large group of people and among them was this dark-skinned boy. Per usual, people were bothering and laughing at him. I couldn’t stand to see this go on any longer, so I told them to leave him alone.

“Who cares how dark his skin is? Back off!” I was pretty brave, I think.

Someone responded, “Ciara, you have ugly dark skin, too. And you know it.”

Of course, I cried. I also told myself that I would never stand up for this boy again because I didn’t want to be made fun of next. For the rest of the year I was careful to keep quiet when he was being picked on for having dark skin. Sometimes I mouthed the words “I’m sorry” when he was being bullied, but I don’t think that was enough. I regret not standing up for him. He and I live in the same neighborhood and occasionally I see him in passing. Each time I see him, I wonder if I should apologize for what happened almost ten years ago. I wish I could. Maybe someday I will. I hope that the racially-motivated bullying he experienced hasn’t affected him, but I’m sure it has. I just want him to know that he isn’t bad because of his dark skin. I hate racism because it scared me into being a bystander of bullying.

Sixth grade was the year that racism really got a hold of my spirit. I hated how I looked. At twelve years old, I was suicidal. Looking in the mirror with tears streaming down my hot, red face, I grabbed a pen and paper and wrote down all the reasons I hated myself. “Wide nose. Big lips. Bad, puffy, afro hair. Dark skin.” Now, I realize that this list was just a compilation of typical black physical features. I wanted to kill myself because of internalized racism, Euro-centric beauty standards, and colorism. This experience is so painful to talk about. I rediscovered this list in my cluttered room about a month ago. I cried for the old me. I was in so much pain at such a young age. I wish I never hated myself because of my chocolate skin, my big and beautiful hair, and every other part of me that is a big middle-finger to European beauty standards. Years of therapy might help me undo toxic thoughts and self-hatred. Hundreds of milligrams of medications may help stabilize my mood. But there is no permanent fix for the pain and trauma that racism causes me and so many others. And still, every now and then I start to dislike my dark skin or my wide nose. I hate racism because this is a battle that I will have to fight forever.

In tenth grade, I found a solid group of supportive and like-minded friends. Most of them are black girls who have some of the same stories and
experiences as I do. Finally, in my predominately white school, I feel comfortable in my skin. Every once in a while, I come to school with my hair in an afro. In my heart, I am no longer ashamed of my dark skin. In fact, I feel most alive when I am outside on a hot day as my skin welcomes the sun’s warm and loving rays. Now, that’s not to say that colorism doesn’t creep into the corner of my mind and make me want to hide sometimes. But it means that I have grown so much and I am proud of how far I’ve come. I am glad that I don’t constantly feel the need to conceal my blackness anymore. But recently, I’ve encountered a new obstacle.

I have dealt with countless personal racist experiences from microaggressions to blatant anti-blackness. But over the past three or four years, I have become more socially conscious. So, I, along with anyone who pays even the slightest bit of attention to the news or checks their Twitter feed, have noticed how racism affects my people as a whole. Every 28 hours, the police murder someone who looks like me. The dark skin that I have learned to love is seen as a threat, especially to law enforcement officers. Every day, I worry that I or someone I love will become another hashtag. It hurts to know that it is not unrealistic to imagine such a nightmare. As a black person, it is difficult to live a carefree and confident life while operating under racially oppressive systems. As a black person in America, living in fear is the default. It has to be, because race is a matter of life and death. I hate racism because I am sick and tired of being scared.

I am in eleventh grade now. And in so many ways, I have healed since preschool. But it is a difficult and never-ending journey, at least for me. Even still, I subconsciously carry the heavy burden of these negative experiences in my everyday life. Sometimes, when I go to a party, I wonder, “Will they not want to talk to me because I’m black?” Sometimes I edit my Instagram selfies to make my skin look lighter. Sometimes, I fall back into the pattern of hating my black features. Logically, I know that I’m not bad because I’m black, but I’m still working to undo sixteen years of internalized racism and colorism.

This is me trying to make sense of what killed me. But, in many ways, I am alive again. I am alive because I have grown into a strong Black girl who has learned to question everything she is told. I am alive because my struggles have pushed me to boldly redefine who I am. I am alive because my progress encourages and uplifts me in times of hopelessness and despair. I know that my painful journey can help people just like me. I use my story to comfort others. My race does define me. My experiences do define me. I find strength and comfort in knowing that my ancestors’ spirits are with me everywhere I
go. No one can take that away from me. My identity is a prize and my story is the most valuable thing I own. Thanks to what killed me, I am alive.
Proud to be Different
Azizjon Yuldoshev
Third Place

Like it was yesterday, I remember seeing my mother walk out of the president of the school’s office. I sprinted out of my brightly painted 1st grade classroom in my blue turtleneck (that was a tad too tight) and my khaki pants covered in grass stains to see my mom slowly walking out of the first door to the left in the hallway of my school. With tears streaming down her face, she picked me up and smiled at me and then said, “It will all be okay.” As I heard the thunder in the background, she wiped off her tears, and that was the last time I ever stepped foot in that building. As a six-year-old, I did not understand why I was kicked out of Jewish school for being different, but as I got older I understood that it was not important why I wasn’t accepted. The important part of that experience for me was to understand that sometimes people are still holding onto the past, but change is good and being different is not be something to be ashamed about.

In the meeting, the president of the school informed my mom that they heard me tell another student that I was Muslim, and that I didn’t go to Sabbath. My mom confirmed that I was not Jewish, and the president told my mom that I was no longer welcomed in the school, as they were worried I would broadcast my Islamic views. Thinking about it now, the idea of a six-year-old threatening the religious values of a Jewish school seems utterly preposterous.

A couple nights ago, ISIS claimed that all of the attacks in Paris were a collaborative effort, planned thoroughly by the extremist group. This demonic group slaughtered hundreds of innocent unsuspecting people with no remorse for their actions. I felt extreme sorrow for the lives lost in not only Paris, but in Iraq and Lebanon as well. However, while using the social media network Twitter, I was shocked to see “#Muslims” trending 3rd worldwide after “#PrayforParis” and “#ISIS.” I knew instantly that these tweets there were going to be insensitive remarks directed at all Muslims, following those nefarious attacks from an extremely radical Muslim group, from people who believed that all Muslims, as a whole, were responsible for the terrorist attack by ISIS. I felt pain, anger, frustration, and
confusion while reading and scrolling through thousands of these tweets. Twitter users described Muslims as violent and dangerous; to be exact, there were 255,000 tweets demeaning Muslims and completely belittling the principles of Islam. In reality, however, ISIS is only a very small amount of the whole Muslim population. Most of the people who made “#Muslim” trend are undoubtedly unaware that ISIS believes in a much more radical state of Islam, completely different from the beliefs of the majority of Muslims. Neither Sunnis nor Shiites, both different Muslim groups, believe in a religion as radical and cruel as ISIS. Although I knew this, I understood that those tweeting and insulting Islam probably did not understand these differing beliefs.

After 1st grade, I attended the Carlow Campus School of Carlow University. This was a Catholic school run by the Sisters of Mercy. For the next 6 years of my life I bonded and made connections with people who were from a different side of the hemisphere and believed in a different God. Looking back, I am so grateful for having parents who wanted me to feel different and wanted me to make relationships with people who came from a different kind of background. They knew that I would live in a generation that accepts diversity, and to succeed in life I would have to be able to make relationships with people whom I did not share similar backgrounds. At the Carlow Campus School I learned that being different was completely acceptable, and I learned how to make relationships with people from a different culture. Carlow taught me that some people have already learned to be accepting of a diverse culture, and those that have not will slowly learn to accept everyone for all of their differences.

After a long night of scrolling through what I thought to be an endless amount of hurtful and demeaning tweets, I decided to go to sleep in hopes that when I awoke Twitter would be a hate-free community that was accepting of all religions. I woke up to have my hopes and faith in the Twitter community fulfilled. The new number one trending topic on Twitter was “#MuslimsAreNotTerrorists.” This boosted my spirits, and showed me and all Twitter users worldwide that there a lot of people just like me, trying to spread awareness about Islam. Every single tweet I read with the hashtag “#MuslimsAreNotTerrorists” were from users attempting to teach the Twitter community about Islam and the vast differences between radical Muslims and regular Muslims. This experience showed me that even on such a large scale, with 255,000 people tweeting hateful things about Muslims, there are always people who care enough to try to stop racism and educate people. These individuals can prevent people from acting upon their own ignorance, and allow them to understand issues before discriminating further. The
users who claimed that all Muslims are terrorists due to ISIS would also have to claim that all Jews are unaccepting and narrow-minded just because of the actions of the president of the school. I always understood that one school president did not represent all of the Jewish population, but for a long time he was the only vivid representation that was left in my mind of Jews. I now know that I was wrong.

I too reached out and spread awareness about Islam, similar to how Carlow taught me about Catholicism. Twitter can provide a diverse environment, allowing for the education of uninformed individuals. The Twitter community was taught that being different is acceptable. Gradually the “#Muslims” trends went away last night, and they were over taken by “#MuslimsAreNotTerrorists” today. Change and difference are inevitable in everyone, but to quote philosopher Edmund Burke, “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”