

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Writing Awards

Monday, January 15, 2007



Carnegie Mellon

The Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Writing Awards

2007

2007 Writing Awards

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First Place Poem: Carnegie Mellon University

Joy & Pain

Zachary Harris

He is dressed in the immaculate white
of the eternally blessed - God's best friend
on Earth! - & in the loud, shapeless darkness
of the theater, he asks the audience to hear -
really hear - his music's saintly slow burn.
Front row center, where the stagelights

bleed into the air, I am also bleeding light,
like a candle, like snow - I am the only white
boy in the building, & my cheeks are burning
because my hips are not as agile as my friend's,
because I am the sore thumb - intruder - here.
He says he can see God moving in the dark

like good music does, turning the darkness
into handclaps, basslines, sequins and light,
& I'm leaning forward, really trying to hear
where God lives. Is he inside these white
spaces between notes? Will he be my friend
after all these years? I am getting heartburn

from these keyboard solos, but they burn
so good. I remember sitting in the darkness
of my tenth year, trying to make a friend
out of my clarinet. The notes were never light -
instead they got messed up, stuck in my white
room like flies, too heavy for even God to hear.

Now the singer is asking me - everyone - to hear
the magic, & untethers the slow-burning
wail we have been waiting for. Yes, I am white,
but my spine shivers too, those quiet dark
parts of my brain suddenly swelling with light -
God is sweeping across me and my friend,

He shimmers behind my eyes. My friend,
she stands up, palms out as if she could hear
through them, & in the pure brilliant light
of the funk, the edges of my soul begin to burn.
God moves through the theater, the darkness
as water, converting even this somber whiteness

into a friend. As the last of the music burns
off, I leave everything here, in the theater's dark -
the clarinet, the white notes - & call out to the light.

Yoko

Sally Mao

In the American schoolyard,
they chant their favorite rhymes again:

*My mom is Chinese,
my dad is Japanese,
look what they did to me!*

They wedge their eyes up and down
into paisleys, yins & yangs,
and suddenly you are reminded of preschool
in Hunan, China, where the only face you remember
is Sheng Yoko, a half-Japanese classmate. She was
lovely, homesick,

You had always secretly envied
the robin's egg beads on her hair-ties. The one time you shared
a bed with her at noontime nap, her hair smelled
like skim milk and sweet porridge, her pajamas
hand-washed, cleaner than yours. You stayed awake
wondering how it'd be to live in her house. Would it smell
like her? Or like apples and chives? Did she hear crickets
before her eyelids drooped at night?

Then or now,
no matter how lovely their snow-covered gardens, how colorful
their origami paper, their watersilk costumes, nobody in your family
liked the Japanese. You were untouched,
yet you wanted to touch everyone—you were unsullied
by history—you didn't know how it flawed people, cultures,
how it coats pure landscapes with frictionless red.
Your family told you to stay away from her,

but that didn't stop you from complimenting her hand-painted
pencil box, her pearl-toothed comb, smiling at her
in those narrow spaces between unuttered secrets
and compulsory glances, where memory
can easily be erased. You were not
her friend. In this playground you don't remember
ever smiling.

Yoko was a pretty girl
and though you did not know her,
you miss her so much.

Tante Anna

Erin Danehy

might have had a bold laugh, crinkling eyes or a secretive smile
hiding years of half-finished thoughts behind blue curlers.
But I only knew her through the story told at holidays

when there was “Plenty more in the kitchen.” In the days
when she said it, she prayed no one would ask for seconds,
to keep the empty kitchen hidden. It was one of those things—

like Opa’s scheme, selling baby mice to his Freunde for Pfenning;
little moments shared above my head between tall, loud relatives
as I wandered through old rooms built by Opa’s wide

grease-stained hands. He taught me about my Heimat second-hand,
with accordion, potato salad & car engines, not my mother
who learned German at college. I learned that word—

homeland—in third grade when we had to represent our culture
with dolls. Our teacher said no one is American
except the Indians. Everyone must be something else.

Oma learned English by baking, reading translated recipes
side by side, watching soap operas & writing checks. Opa knew
work was work, even though the men at the GM plant watched him

& said, “You’re German,” after Pearl Harbor was hit, twelve years
after he’d married in New York. They had the narrowed eyes
of my high school lab partner, but shared an uneasy laugh

like my third grade class, who saw the doll’s Apfelkuchen
& Bier & said those Nazis couldn’t have been all bad,
if they liked American things, like apple cake & beer.

I never wore an ethnic dress

Alayna Frankenberg

I never marched in a nationality parade
or drew a family tree, or said these are his
eyes, her mouth, it runs in the family.
I looked for myself in strangers, stood
in a grocery aisle surveying the slope
of a woman’s nose, the color of her hair.

I never felt hurt by a racist joke, never visited
a concentration camp or a burial mound
clutching my chest, the old oppressed
blood still beating on. I never got a letter
the way my sister got a letter, never analyzed
the handwriting, questioning the love
in the scribbled *love*.

I only ever whispered *I hate* to my parents
who weren’t there to hear me. I only ever
screamed *I love* to my family that is, cried
with my family that is, camped in the backyard,
built birthday cakes in the sand, watched
thunderstorms from the patio huddled
together with my family that is. And I learned
more each year, what that word means.
But I never wore an ethnic dress.

Distinguishing the Indistinguishable

Michael Szczerban

Prose from Carnegie Mellon University

Until I left home for college, I lived in Wilmington, Delaware, which is about 45 minutes by car from Philly. Although Wilmington has its share of fine restaurants and cultural offerings, it is not a large enough city to support the diversity of experiences that Philadelphia offers. I pride myself on a broad set of tastes and an eagerness to explore new things, so when I had money to spend I often traveled with friends to Philadelphia to explore its gastronomic offerings. I ate fried pork intestines, expensive French cuisine, sidewalk falafel, and sushi prepared by an Iron Chef—the good food of a fine upper-middle-class upbringing. None of those culinary explorations resulted in a reconsideration of myself or my culture. But even so, after watching a Philadelphia Phillies baseball game, my friends and I are left with two questions. The first is easy: Should we stop for a genuine Philly cheese steak sandwich before we return to Delaware? The answer is, of course, yes; we're all eaters. The second question, though, is tougher to answer: Which cheese steak place will we go to?

Our minds and characters are formed, in part, by coming up with answers to the questions that our world poses to us, regardless of whether the questions seem inconsequential or weighty. If character is the set of qualities—mental and moral—that define an individual, then each of the opinions we make and decisions we form says something about who we are, or who we want to be. I think, and therefore I am, according to Descartes. I would go one step further: What I think helps define who I am.

The mitigation of uncertainty in our lives is one process by which we refine who we are. Each decision is an opportunity to become more of one thing, or less of another. Many times, we present ourselves with clear-cut options. If it's cold outside, I can decide to stay in, to wear a coat, or not to wear a coat. If I decide to venture out without something to keep me warm, I will be cold and I might get sick. I am more interested in the decisions in which the options are less clear-cut, the situations where we must choose one alternative over another even though they both seem to be the same. It is in murky situations that our characters become the most clear. For this reason, I find it difficult to ignore even the simplest questions. Not only is making decisions and forming opinions a way of organizing our world, but it is a way of organizing our selves.

Back to the cheese steaks. After the baseball game, we head for the intersection of Ninth Street and Passyunk Avenue in South Philly. The choice is, as it has been since 1966, between Pat's King of Steaks and Geno's Steaks, the most authentic cheese steak eateries in the city. Pat's, which opened in 1930 and claims to have invented the steak sandwich, sits on a triangle of poorly-lit sidewalk. Its façade is aging, white but dirty, and in need of repair. Geno's sits across the intersection, its own bright neon exterior inviting the same sort of comparison to Pat's that Las Vegas invites to Atlantic City. At the same time, though, the newer and nicer digs of Geno's give the impression that its owners

are trying too hard to overcome the historical weight of the landmark across the street.

The space between Pat's and Geno's on Passyunk is the sort of intimate distance that travel guides and visitor bureaus romanticize. The street-corner rivalry is good for both businesses; both sell the same delicious cheese steak sandwiches, but by claiming that one is intrinsically better than the other, customers at one establishment are by proximity enticed to compare and contrast one with the other. I'm not the only one who wants to decide which cheese steak is the best.

I have, over the years, acquired a statistically significant sample of cheese steak sandwiches from each vendor. The fact is that apart from side dishes, manners of service (gruff versus less gruff), and building upkeep, Pat's and Geno's serve fare of essentially the same quality—their cheese steaks are virtually identical. And yet, because I live near Philadelphia and I love to eat, I'm often asked to defend Pat's or Geno's as the best Philly cheese steak. Therein lies the dilemma.

How do we distinguish among alternatives that are indistinguishable? How do we choose among cheese steaks that taste the same but come from different vendors? Whether we're talking about cheese steaks, politics, or anything else, I think that we broaden our inquiries and look past what we intend to judge to the set of factors that surround our decisions. In other words, we look past the identical cheese steaks to the differences in the establishments that serve them. We form opinions on one thing based on our attitudes toward others.

If my mother were forced to order and consume sandwiches from Pat's and Geno's, I'm sure she would claim to prefer Geno's. She'd find the qualities too similar to distinguish, but Pat's would just be too skeezy-looking for her. There's a reasonable rationale behind such a position, I think; a place that keeps itself cleaner and in better shape is more likely not to have roaches scurrying across the kitchen tile. There is a tenable connection between restaurant cleanliness and quality.

That said, it's possible to judge the best cheese steak in Philly by factors that are fully irrelevant to taste and quality. As we already do with so many other things, people can choose the best steak sandwich based on their politics. Pat's keeps its serving windows clear; Geno's serving windows are emblazoned with large stickers that state the business's support for Daniel Faulkner, a young white police officer who was killed in December 9, 1981. The man who sits on Pennsylvania's death row, having been convicted of Faulkner's murder, is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

The incident occurred on Locust near Twelfth Street, about a mile north of Geno's. Despite Mumia's conviction, the facts of the case remain in question. Mumia's younger brother, William Cook, had been pulled over by Office Faulkner in a routine traffic stop. Faulkner radioed for assistance; no one knows why. Before other officers arrived at the scene, Faulkner took a blow to the face

from Cook, but recovered and beat him with a flashlight. Mumia then appeared on the scene. The prosecution claimed in the 1982 trial that after trading gun shots, Mumia killed Faulkner with four final bullets, including one at close range to the officer's face. At the trial, and in the tangle of appeals to overturn his conviction, Mumia has claimed that he was framed by a corrupt police force and that the state's collection and processing of evidence was both inadequate and improperly performed.

It's now 2006, and Mumia Abu-Jamal is a name that one is just as likely to hear alongside other victims of The System—Rodney King, Amadou Diallo, Jonny Gammage, all black men victimized by the state—as alongside his many celebrity supporters. The rock band Rage Against the Machine and the actress Susan Sarandon have worked to publicize Mumia's message. His case has received international attention, in part because in 1999, another man confessed to the murder of Daniel Faulkner, and in part because Mumia has become a touchstone for many social issues, including the death penalty and police aggression. Mumia has not been executed by the state of Pennsylvania, and neither has he stopped protesting his incarceration. The mere fact that a business has seen fit to advertise its position on Daniel Faulkner's death nearly twenty-five years later shows that the event still has relevance.

It is also an issue that I feel obliged to have an opinion on. A man's life is at stake and in general citizens ought to have an opinion on whom their governments execute and why. There is also an obligation to myself: Whether the issue is as small as favorite cheese steak or as large as a murder appeal, examining my opinions is the only way I'll learn anything about who I am. In this sense, the conundrum of Mumia's conviction is similar to the question concerning the food at Pat's and Geno's, although what I think about Mumia is more far-reaching.

The data I have about the cheese steaks is no more conclusive than the information I have about Mumia's case. On the facts alone, I cannot issue a judgment, and yet to form an opinion one way or the other, I must. I was born after the killing occurred, I have never accessed the court records, and in the decades that have passed since the incident, new information has been uncovered—both in Mumia's favor and against him—by the scrutiny of those who have examined the case. There is no way for me to know factually that Mumia is guilty or innocent, but if the courts are able to issue judgments, then so should I be able to. I want to have an opinion on something that my peers also have an opinion on. To abandon my thoughts because they exist in an unclear context is akin to outsourcing the most interesting parts of myself.

So I must look past the facts of the case into the world surrounding it. I do not have access to the national security briefs the President receives daily, but my opinions on foreign policy are legitimate. There is no way to know everything about the many things we need to judge; we must make the best judgments we can based on limited information. Such are the uncertainties of our world. Often, there is too little evidence for us to base a firm decision on, or there is too much to digest in a reasonable period of time.

Such uncertainty leads us to abandon specifics—being too few or too many—in favor of generalizations. If we cannot pin down minute accuracies, then our second-best efforts are to generalize about facts; and when we cannot generalize about facts, we operate on our beliefs, which may or may not have a basis in reality. We lose subtlety and closeness to our subject matter. We lose the ability to make fine distinctions. We lose urgency. I choose among eateries while comparing the decision to that of a high-profile criminal case, and while a certain sense of perspective is lost, another perspective is gained.

Like fowl, which must swallow gravel along with their food to aid in digestion, people sometimes swallow lies in order to achieve some kind of truth. Some specifics contested in the Faulkner murder case are related to the police's collection of evidence; forensic examiners never tested Mumia's hands for gunpowder residues or his gun to see if it had been recently fired. Those who believe that Mumia is guilty of the murder—for whatever reason—will accept this injustice as a trade for the greater justice of putting a murderer behind bars. Similarly, those who believe civil procedure to be the glue that binds our legal system may support Mumia's acquittal, despite the considerable evidence and testimony against him. Each of these positions, and the myriad others related to Faulkner and Mumia, are based on irrelevant factors. The people who maintain such positions substitute what they want to believe for a missing or contradictory set of facts.

So where do I stand on the issue of Mumia? He is already a touchstone for many other issues that I feel strongly about, but making decisions about capital punishment, police corruption, race relations, and due process is not the same as making a decision about the man. It is easy to say that if Mumia committed the crime, he should receive the punishment; if he did not, then he never should have been in jail. In this case, though, there is no possible way for me to know if Mumia is guilty; the facts for and against seem equally piled up, and each pile is riddled with inconsistency. I doubt that Mumia committed the murder, but I cannot say whether my doubt is reasonable or not.

I would love to say the question is unanswerable and to think about something else. Mumia is in jail, for either the right reasons or the wrong reasons. But what if I had been on the jury? Our society has seen fit to designate people as the deciders of tough decisions. If they do it, I can too. The facts only get me so far, but I feel compelled to take a side. Otherwise, I don't know who I would be.

In order to make a decision about Mumia, I must broaden my inquiry and consider what I'm willing to trade in each domain to satisfy my convictions in another. When I look past the facts of the case—at least, past everything except the fact that the case is still appealed, I see my political and philosophical beliefs.

I oppose the death penalty. I see it as a naïve and brutal method of punishment. I feel guilty for my race—white—in being an accomplice, unwitting or not, to the systematic discrimination of whites against minorities. I believe that

systems of law are not always systems of justice. But not all of the things that I see when I look past the facts of the case are as high-minded or easy to defend. I fell in with a very liberal crowd in college. I think that most police officers are idiots with mustaches and guns. I like the music produced by bands that support Mumia. It's easier for me to believe in the innocence of people I don't know over their guilt. I'm scared that if I believe that Mumia is guilty, I will feel his blood on my hands when he is executed.

My opinion that Mumia's conviction ought to be overturned has very little to do with the facts of the case. It has everything to do with the person I am. And the person that I am, having come to one conclusion, looks for the next set of loose ends. I began by talking about cheese steaks. It seems inappropriate to return to the topic now, even through the filter of Mumia, except to illustrate one final point—that in some cases, the best decision really can be not to decide.

Pat's does not make any political statement about Mumia on its windows, but as statisticians and lawyers will remind us, the absence of evidence is not evidence of an absence. Just because the Olivieri family, which owns Pat's, posts no signs on their windows does not mean they agree with me. And, although I disagree with the owners of Geno's, I do respect them for honoring the memory of a police officer who died young. But politics are politics, and people are people, and cheese steaks are cheese steaks. The taste samples I've taken are biased, because they're based on my taste buds. Opinions are different than personal tastes, and it would be a grave mistake for me to confuse the two. My advice is to taste both cheese steaks and see which one you prefer. Or don't. Picking that judgment apart is not worth your time. But the reasons why we think what we think about the death of Daniel Faulkner and the incarceration of Mumia Abu-Jamal—they are something we all should chew on.

Sorry

Ashley Birt

My older sister is sorry, although you'd never get that just from meeting her. She isn't sad and pathetic sorry, or *I didn't mean to break your window with my baseball* sorry. She's knock you over with her bike and help you up sorry, sit alone in a church because she feels guilty for something that happened ten years ago sorry. She's *I'd help you move into your new apartment, but I have better things to do* sorry, puke on your shoes while drunk sorry, shouldn't have shown those naked baby pictures to your boyfriend sorry. She's not bake you a bundt cake sorry, not roses say it best sorry. She's steal money from Mom's purse and replace it sorry, *It hurt me more than it hurt you when I hit you* sorry. She's break your Barbies because they're stupid, run away when Mom and Dad find out, get dragged back by the ear sorry. She's hold your hair back while you're vomiting sorry, *I shouldn't have made you eat worms* sorry, *do me a favor and don't die from this* sorry.

She's never wear a dress because she hates them even though it would make Mom happy sorry. She's won't play house with you because the boys are more fun, although she still loves you sorry. She's *hand me that teakettle, we can play now since I knocked out Joseph's teeth by accident* sorry.

She's *it's not my fault Mom and Dad like me better* sorry, *you were an accident and that wasn't my fault* sorry, *I don't control the universe* sorry. *The world expects me to be normal, but I don't know what that is* sorry, *I didn't mean to embarrass you in front of your friends, it's their fault they mistook me for a boy* sorry. *Mom only smiles at you because you keep your hair long and I won't grow mine, but that's because it's my expression of individuality, and if no one else understands it, then they can go to hell, and so can you for not defending me when they tried to lock me the my locker, sometimes I need help, too* sorry, *but I guess you're still too little to know right from wrong*.

She's *I didn't mean to look at your friend like that* sorry, *I promise I didn't mean anything by it, although would it be awful if I said she's kind of hot* sorry. She's *I don't know how to get in touch with my feminine side, Mom, but I'll try for you* sorry. She's short skirt, wobble in heels, fall on her face and hate herself sorry, the whole school just saw her underwear sorry, you want to crawl in a hole and die sorry. She's won't help you with your math homework because Joseph and his two fake teeth asked her out today sorry. She's celebrate getting her license by picking you and your best friend up and taking you out for ice cream sorry, guilty for blowing off Joseph because he's boring and can't handle not wearing the pants in the relationship even though he likes her sorry, make out with your friend in the back seat while you're supposedly in the bathroom and attempt to explain sorry. *We were just playing, I mean it's really nothing, she made me do it* sorry, *I didn't mean to hurt Joseph, it's not him, it's me* sorry, *for the love of God please don't tell Mom and Dad, they'll kill us both*.

She's *I hate to make you keep secrets* sorry, *I hate to ask this, but can you teach me to be girly*, never understand why she prefers boy's clothing but realizes that people ask you about it sorry. She's wrap you up in blankets, feed you chicken soup, sing you to sleep when you're sick, still feels bad about making you eat worms when you were six sorry.

She's *I don't think I'll ever be a proper girl, ever want to be a proper girl, does that bother you* sorry. She's the man at the corner store called her sir and she didn't correct him, which made her feel good, but that's not something to be proud of sorry. She's *give me the sponge* sorry, *they should've written 'dyke' on my locker, not yours, although I suppose what they wrote on mine was worse* sorry, *I'll understand if you won't love me after this, I wouldn't love me, I know Mom and Dad won't* sorry.

She's not send you chocolates for forgetting your birthday sorry or feel guilty for not saying goodbye to her girlfriend before leaving for summer camp sorry, but *oops, did I knock out your teeth again, Joseph* sorry, *you shouldn't have tried to get laid by my sister, I don't care if I wouldn't sleep with you* sorry. She's take karate to kick someone's ass for calling her queer, take karate to kick someone's ass for bothering you because she's queer sorry. She's pay you twenty bucks not to tell Dad she took you to a gay club sorry, pay you twenty more because the DJ called her by her drag name and thought you were her date. She's *you shouldn't have to keep this many secrets* sorry, *don't tell me go to hell for missing your graduation, I had a lot on my mind, I feel awful enough as it is* sorry. She's bury her head in the sand like a loser sorry, feel bad for being jealous since Mom likes you better now sorry, can't get into college and feels stupid for it sorry.

She's *I hate to ask, but call me Michael, not Michelle, my new girlfriend calls me Michael* sorry, disappear for days and come home drunk and miserable sorry, *I can't believe I ever let people kick my ass behind the bleachers, tell me no one touched you* sorry. She's *I told Dad I was Daddy's little boy, not girl, and he ran me out of the house with a kitchen knife, I don't want to bother you but I need a place to stay* sorry.

She is didn't mean to make you feel awkward sorry, *I always embarrassed you* sorry, *I'll be a better person* sorry.

She's afraid to ask but needs you to walk her home for fear of someone trying to kill her sorry, wishes you didn't know all her secrets sorry, wishes she could protect you like you protect her sorry, wishes you loved her like she loves you sorry.

I wish could I say how deep my love runs sorry, how grateful I am and thankful for my older sister, but that would involve admitting to you and to myself that my older sister is now my older brother sorry. I'm able to accept it, able to embrace it, but simply unable to ever say it sorry. I'm the one who's truly sorry.

Black and White Playground

Dana Horton

Poetry from Pittsburgh's High Schools

The exterior of Alexis's car is leopard print and matches her pants. Her hair is as pink as a baby's tongue and hits her face whenever she tries to dance to the music. She buckles her seatbelt and changes the song to "Golddigger" by Kanye West. Her skin is the color of wet wood and matches her Chanel sunglasses. Alexis starts to drive. She smiles and pulls a picture out of the glove department. "That's him. That's my boo. Brandon. 19. Goes to CCAC. His dad's a lawyer and his mom's a pharmacist. We met at Club Zoo a few months." Brandon has hair the color com and sea green eyes. I look from the picture to my cousin and shake my head. I never could picture Alexis dating a white boy. "Where does he live?" "Upper St. Clair." The street signs change from blue to green and we're in the suburbs of Pittsburgh now. The grass is greener and the houses are bigger. Some houses take up half the block. Alexis has been driving alone for the last few months, every single Saturday. I know where she's going now and I wonder why she always has to go visit him and why he never comes out to Homewood and visit her. "Be nice, okay?" Alexis giggles as she turns the radio on. "Don't do anything to embarrass me. And don't say anything bad about where we're going. I promise this won't be long." "We're going to his house?" Alexis shakes her head and turns the music down. "Nope." "Then where –" "Stop asking questions. You'll see." She parks the car in front of a playground. The chains on the swings are twisted and look as if they haven't been touched in years. There isn't grass. There's tan woodchips and a small dirt pile by the merry-go-round. A red broken condom is lying beside the jungle gym. There are no houses and the playground is like an island in the middle of a small town. "Here?" I say to her before I get out of the car. Alexis nods. "Yes. His parents don't think we should be together. Black girl, white dude. Doesn't work." "Why can't he come to our neighborhood? Your mom wouldn't care." "But everyone else would. I can't walk down the street with him. No way." Alexis gets out of the

car and fixes her clothes. She puts on grape lip gloss before she walks into the playground. Brandon comes from behind a bush and smiles. They hug and sit down together on the merry-go-round. It's just them. On their own little island. Their black and white playground.

First Place Poem: Pittsburgh's High Schools

Giving up the Ghost

Emily Nagin

The man down the street kept cats
with hollow bones and fur like feathers.
They were white and delicate as tea-cups.
The night he died, the cats scattered
into the darkness. They wove through our gardens,
their noses freckled with blood.
They howled like dogs, ripped tracks
in our birch trees and climbed our walls.
One lighted on my window ledge
like a tiny ghost. Her eyes, two bright saucers,
said she blamed me, blamed us all,
for forgetting him. For knowing,
inside ourselves, that a man like him
could not last in a neighborhood like ours,
and for doing nothing to change this.

After the police come screaming
down the streets, they will snap photos
of blood splatters, will say *knife, junkie, hustler*.
They'll say *It's simple*. They'll say *Case Closed*.
And they'll roll back the tape
and pound a green sign into the yard
His cats will turn into china cups,
they'll crumble and vanish.

But before all this, there is still time
to remember, to try to understand.
And even at this, we will fail.
Instead, we'll gather and gawk
at this harmless house, at the sun
flashing off the windows.
At the cat behind the police tape
opening her eyes slowly,
batting a paw at nothing.

Listen and Blink

Avi Diamond

I understand
the swish of your jeans
when you walk
and what you tell me
about yourself
I have heard before
but with different words.
I listen and blink.
What I don't understand
is when
others see skin
like Hershey's chocolate bars.
melting and dark
dark and warm
You're so good to me;
it's hard to deal with.

On Halloween,
there always seemed to be
a shortage of candy
when you opened your hands.
A woman shoved you out of the way
shouting, "Stay away from my daughter!"
You held your umbrella
over my head
and we cracked open fortune cookies.
I read you my fortune.
It said,
"Anything worth doing can be done."
You listened and blinked.
Others see skin
like Hershey's chocolate bars.
warm and dark
dark and melting
You're so good to me;
it's hard to deal with.

There were gravestones
made of gum drops,
moons made of molasses
and all they could stare at
was you.

Mothers are not afraid of me
but I am more dangerous.
African drum in my chest,
I pound you quietly with my fist
and I'm aching to dance.
But I don't know how.

Racism at School

Justin Platek

I. Entering: Outside

Intimidated white kids
walk fast down the crumbly
street to school,
staring at their blue-fade shoes
and sprinkles of tiny pebbles.
Clusters of black kids
line the street,
making their walk a parade,
bleating comments out of the sides of their mouths
and making threats with tight fists.
The white kids just walk,
bloody and bruised from verbal assaults
on their self-conscious skin.

II. Class

Erykah, Tonique and Desmond
are the only black kids in Mr. Price's
third period PSP English.
"Man, why we gotta be in the white class?"
Desmond says from their secluded corner
in the back of the classroom.
Other than the acidic words
they occasionally whisper loudly amongst themselves,
they are good kids, smart
with good grades and smiles to prove it.
Desmond runs on the varsity track team
instead of hustling weight on the dark streets;
Tonique sings in the Lighthouse Baptist Church's choir
instead of making babies like her sister Ronnie;
Erykah writes poetry after her mom uses coke at the dinner table
instead of taking some for herself;

the easy way out.

They are some of the best kids
in the room,
but all Mr. Price sees are three blacks
in an otherwise white class

that sit unattached to each other,
laugh out loud during lectures and
spill some slang onto their term papers.
Instead of getting to know who they are,
he hatefully describes them and their behaviors
as *monkeyish*
in the closed confines of his mind and
during the privacy of lunch in the teacher's lounge.
Some sniff and snicker,
but no one says a thing.

III. Gym

There is a red Mason-Dixon Line that slices
the slippery hardwood in half,
the white kids on the left, the black kids on the right.
The coaches don't set it up this way,
society does.
Charlie is the only one who dares
to cross the line, but he pays for it.
The other white people don't like him,
he is a wannabe and a traitor,
a snag on an expensive cream sweater.
They spit slurs on his face
and place sloppily handwritten threats
on wrinkled sheets in his locker.
Nobody on the right side of the line cares
as he crosses to play basketball or ping-pong
with them
except for the small group
whose noses sit above the horizon,
and the one whose
arms stretch high, attached to closed fists
when Charlie walks by.

IV. Lunch

There are three multiethnic tables
in the cafeteria,
two are all female,
one has four people
and none at all are cool.

V. Study Hall

Two teachers monitor the study hall
of fifty-seven tired students.
They glare at all the computer screens
keeping constant watch,
but paying long, close attention to the black kids'
expecting to see email accounts and music sites
instead of school work.
They quickly encircle the room on their mission,
almost running,
their prim skirts rustle wrinkled
and their not so high heels make more noise
than anybody's mouth
as they trip over network cords
in their frantic frenzy
when the room erupts in laughter
in collective, uncolored amusement.

VI. Leaving: Outside

The clusters watch the parade
hesitantly march past,
fingers numb from the ignorant position of hands.
Violence is rare just outside,
but victims here are plentiful.
In fact,
there hasn't been a day
where everybody whose feet
rest upon the sidewalk
or whose rears sit against the cold
stone wall
has
survived.

Honorable Mention Poem: Pittsburgh's High Schools

The Word

Donzell Delaney

I thought I'd never see the day
That someone would call me a nigger
It hit me in a way
Like a gun shot
And she pulled the trigger

I laughed at the little girl
With an eternal burning inside me
The word tore me limb from limb
Until I was nothing at all

I pulled myself together
And went to play ball
Then I felt the word
Tattooed across my back

The word
The pain of

The Word

Chain Link Fence

Duncan Richer

Ay yo white boy,
what exactly do you think you're doing here?
Can't you see this is my court?
My people?
Who are you?

Behind a chain link fence
and graffiti tags
there is another chain link fence of black arms
like the burnt branches of African Acacia Trees.
A row of grey beards watch street ball
like soccer moms with jazz
talking about how they shoulda made it pro
fo sho.

Are white boys deaf?
Ain't you hear?
I don't want you here.

Behind a chain link fence
there is a boy, a man
holding a basketball like it is Africa –
firm, loving, proud.
Air Jordans and
an afro that hangs like a heliocentric satellite.

Momma's boy,
Ima smack you so hard your momma ain't gonna
know who you is no more.
Ain't you got somewhere to be?

Behind a chain link fence
hop scotch girls with braided hair like Celtic knots
slap their feet on hard black pavement.
Policeman, policeman do your duty!
Here comes Aisha, she's a cutie!
She can jump!
She can twist!
But I bet she can't do this.

An obese black man
with straight teeth and a crooked Pirates cap
looks up from his massive metal barbecue
and says without saying anything at all
White boy, you've got six-digit salaries
You can rent any place
You can run red lights
White boy, you could even be president.
And behind a chain link fence
I look back at this man
And behind a chain link fence
and an opaque layer of bullet-proof skin
I see into this man, and he is just like me.

A Lesson to be Learned

Jonah Rosenthal

Life is a common misconception
Ideas and bias skewed
People devalue each other
And others just don't care

Whirling opinions in the media
Strike fear about race
People don't know much better
To believe what they don't understand

You walk outside daily
Let bias live your life
Can't understand the public
So you acquiesce without a fight

It doesn't matter what color you are
What your yearly income is
What car you drive
Or where you live

People just don't understand
That race and creed doesn't matter
MLK would frown upon them
Hitler would sit and smile

You are taught to hate the wicked
Maybe you are the wicked yourself
To let the media blind you
On whom you should really hate

In truth everyone is the same
Everyone in the melting pot
So ignore what you hear
Because after all, we all meet the same end

And when the great recorder
Comes to write your name
It counts not that you won or lost
But how you played the game

Gunshots

Makala Williams

Pop, pop, pop . . .
The sound is like music to my ears
so I dare not get scared
of a sound so familiar

Pop, pop, pop . . .
Say good bye to the kids
you would hide so you
could seek those kids
who are now
buried six feet deep

Pop, pop, pop . . .
Look at the teacher cry
when they find out that
a student with so much
potential has died

Pop, pop, pop . . .
Leave the neighborhoods with whys
and listen to the white folks
love our black on black crime
for all we are to them is
another headline
gunshots the root of
another black crime.

Wrong Place, Wrong Time

David Peitzman

Prose from Pittsburgh's High Schools

I've always been exposed to stories of extreme racism and prejudice through movies and stories. I have never actually witnessed first-hand acts of bigotry towards a person because of his or her race or other characteristics. I knew it existed in society, but I had never seen it with my own eyes. Truly, I didn't think it was that big of a problem around my neighborhood or even hometown. It sounds naïve because everybody knows there's that ignored stereotypical judgment in most people's minds when they meet someone. It is simply each person's job as a human being to move on past these rash opinions and get to know the real person. The world, however, does not function like that. Human nature, for some primal reason, does not function that way. There's the repressed thought about an adversary that creeps around your brain, the friend who makes the joke that you couldn't help but laugh at, sneaking into our lives occasionally. It happens.

I realized in the past few years that some people don't have that instinct to ignore these judgments. That there are still people in this world who think they're superior to others because of their race. I had to learn this first-hand. I was a freshman in high school at the time and I had just started working at Boston Market. It was my first job and even though it was at Boston Market, I liked the job. I liked it mostly because of the people I worked with. They were all close to my age, except the managers, and all full of personality. Two guys especially, Clinton and Maurice, really were amusing characters. These were the two guys who cooked and cleaned in the back room where nobody could see them. They played the radio, danced, sang along, and just were amusingly obnoxious while doing their job. I immediately became good friends with these guys; they were just un and refreshing to be around. I forgot to mention: I was the only white kid working there.

After a few months, everyone became good friends. Work was actually fun for me and I looked forward to it. All of this changed in one night. I was closing with Maurice and Clinton. They decided to take out the trash together while I counted money. You must know, at this Boston Market, you can see everywhere outside of it. A window surrounds the entire street side of the restaurant. I watched them walk up the street with the garbage, and then after a few minutes, I saw them walking back. A young man, however, started walking towards them. By how they reacted, I figured out that they knew this kid. They stood there and talked for a little. Very calm, very normal but then something happened. Maurice had a candy bar in his hand and I guess he was joking around, but he pretended that the candy bar was a gun. He grabbed this kid from behind and pushed it into his back. At this time, I knew it was a joke. They were all laughing and smiling, but the cop that pulled up at the stop light as it happened did not think it was funny.

Sirens turned on, the cop got out of the car with his gun drawn. Maurice

That Not-So-White Girl

Isidora Concha-Loyola

and Clinton immediately backed off. Maurice kept on saying, "It was just a joke; it's just a candy bar." The cop didn't respond and just told them to get down on the ground. Maurice and Clinton, even the kid they did it to, kept pleading for him to listen. He paid no attention though. He put hand cuffs on Maurice and then holstered his gun. This all happened in a matter of thirty seconds. I thought that if I explained the cop would understand, so I went outside and started to plead their case. I kept on saying how they were joking around and it was just a candy bar. The cop listened and understood, but I could tell by his actions, he was not ready to just let these kids go. He asked each person what happened and each responded the same, "It was a joke." I could tell the cop was getting frustrated when he went back to his patrol car to radio into the station. Maurice was still handcuffed on the ground until the cop came back, grabbed him, and put him into the back of the car. We all started yelling and screaming, but he was a cop and we were teenagers who could never change his mind.

The cop took me aside and gave me an explanation I will never forget. He said, "All right, I don't really know what happened here, but when I pulled up I saw three black kids looking like they were up to something. I'm out past my shift, so somebody has to pay. I'm charging this kid with assault." I couldn't even say anything, he left so quickly. I felt overwhelmed. It's the feeling you get when you know the truth, but nobody will believe you. It makes you feel like nothing, insignificant, helpless.

The three of us remaining stood there in silence for a good period of time not really understanding what had just happened. Maurice was gone. It all started as some good fun, but then it turned into one of our friends going to jail. I can't really call the cop a racist because that's a strong label to give somebody I don't know. He may have had one of those moments when those ignorant judgments passed through his mind, and he just didn't ignore them. I'll never really know. I will just always remember his reason for arresting Maurice, "I saw three black kids looking like they were up to something."

"Who's that white girl that Javier's walking with?" Abe yells out from the basketball court, and Javier laughs, right in my face. He thinks it's funny when his friends ask stuff like that, and all I can do is smile back at him.

For the last time I'm not white; I'm Hispanic. Just take a deep breath and say your name, it's not a big deal. But the other part of me can't manage that, I'm furious!

Javier tells that dude that I am actually from Chile.

"Is it cold down there?" Abe asks the most retarded questions.

No genius it's not. "Not really."

"Oh but you eat chili right?" Like I said, Abe is a retard.

"No, that's like American food."

"Then why is it called Chile?"

Ummm, why don't you get a shapeup? I just shrug politely and don't say anything.

"You don't look Hispanic, you're white."

What am I supposed to say to that?

"Well can you say something to me?"

"Ok like what?"

"Something sexy, you know, like *papi*." Ok, my boyfriend's friends are losers.

But to be nice I say, "*Papi*." They seem happy with that so they ignore me for the rest of the time. Finally, Javier is done with his friends and we can go on with our *romantic* walk.

Now that all his boys are gone he can talk to me like a normal person. But instead, he says something about how he's never dated a white girl. So I ask him why that's so.

"They don't got enough *flava*."

Well that makes me feel better, I guess. He thinks I got that *chispa*.

He starts talking about the white girls walking by. "I mean like they're alright, but nothing compared to you." My face gets so hot I swear I go neon pink.

"You do look white though, and you act white, too. But it's fine, I can whip you into shape."

My smile fades just as quickly as it came. That's so typical of him. He says something so sweet that I want to scream, "I feel like a woman!" And then he has to ruin it by saying something like *that*.

He figures out that I'm upset, so he drops his right hand from around my waist.

"Aww, Boo's swole."

You bet I am.

"Hey come on now, you know I was kidding. Don't get mad at me over stupid stuff"

Stupid stuff? Maybe he's right. Why do I always have to be the one who says 'I'm sorry?' He is cute, though. Ok fine, I'll be quiet. "I'm sorry, Javier, it's just that the sun is in my eyes, I'm thirsty and there is no trees around for shade. I just need some cool air."

"Oh alright. It's cool. Let's get some ice cream at the park then." He wraps his arms around my waist again and that's how I know we are cool.

I remember hearing my grandmother preaching about our personality. "We are so strong we could make the earth shake with our wrath, but somehow men just know how to shut us up." She never taught me to be scared of them, yet she did point out that all the women in our family have never stayed with a soft guy for long. So after a full eighteen years of living, I have come to the conclusion that Hispanic women like *macho* men. Fair enough, they are what we've always known after all. A nice guy couldn't handle us anyways. That's why Javier is not a nice guy.

"So you over your little tantrum yet?" Javier looks at me, challenging.

"Excuse you? What tantrum would that be?"

"Yea, you were being real spoiled, just complaining over dumb stuff."

"Hold up, first you go on laughing with your boys about my race. I'm Hispanic, not black and not white. Then you have the nerve to say I don't look like what I am!"

"You can't take a joke?" Ok what the heck. His hands are not only not around my waist anymore, but they are now balled up into tight fists. "You look white enough. I don't know how you expect people to believe you're not white!"

"Say what! Oh no you didn't, Javier, I cannot believe you just said that!" "You better believe it."

"Javier, are you *trying* to get me mad? Come on now, you know I'm proud. Just because you don't respect our culture doesn't mean you got to put me down." I got him now. Just look at that dumbstruck look on his face.

"There you go with your white girl thing again. I know what I am. I don't need the world to know it. I'm 'bout to just take you home."

"Oh but you don't go with white girls, so I guess I'll just have to walk myself home." Who said that? Was it me? No!

Walking down the main street, trees finally shading my path, I feel the

ice cream freezing up my hand. When I hear the twigs snapping close behind, I know that it's Javier coming after me. Now it's time for me to whip my man into shape.

A Moment of Prejudice

A.J. Smith

Being the son of a middle class white family, racism hasn't touched me in the same way that it has touched others. I've never been discriminated against because of my skin color, jeered at for my beliefs or felt it necessary to do either of those things to another person. Certain older members of my family, however, grew up in times when such prejudices were thought to be the norm.

My grandfather, a former army surgeon was and still is a great man. He has been a great influence upon my life since I was a baby. Strangely, perhaps unfortunately, one of the strongest memories I have of him is negative. I grew up in Penn Hills, and one afternoon as he was driving me home from school, we saw what I believe to have been a failed car jacking. I do not remember the exact nature of the crime that had been committed and that isn't what was important about the event. The important fact is this: A police officer was dragging a black man out of a car pulled over on the side of the road. My grandfather promptly locked the car doors, turned to me and said in the voice he reserved for lectures, "That's what you get when you live in a nigger neighborhood."

I had just recently learned the implications of the word nigger and was shocked to hear him say it. I understand now that when he was growing up, that word was a widely used phrase. I understand now that to him the word nigger was not so foul a curse. All the understanding in the world, however, will not make what he said right or in any way excuse it. More importantly to me at the time though was to hear so foul a word come from a mouth I had never heard say anything but kind and beautiful things. I was shocked to the core.

I responded in the only way I could think to do so. I looked at my grandfather for a long moment, got out of the car and began to walk along Frankstown Road. I remember thinking that I would rather have been anywhere than in that car with him. After a few hundred feet of him driving along side yelling at me, I gave in and silently resumed my seat next to him. We rode home in silence and I spoke not a word to him for days.

The actions of our parents and grandparents impact us as children far more than the stories they tell. This momentary lapse in my grandfather's character has stuck with me more than all of his tales of childhood and World War II. Even my mother, who grew up during the Sixties, during that time of social change, has not escaped the prejudice of her parents entirely. I have never heard my mother blame a minority for anything but it's easy to tell that she's uncomfortable around people of different ethnicities, especially African Americans. It's all little things; locking the car doors if there's too many black people on the street we're driving down, looking uncomfortably around if we're the minority in a restaurant or other public place.

It's these little things that cause me unrest, and yet give me hope at the same time. In spite of my mother's quirks, she has still taken a huge step from

the sometimes barely concealed prejudices of my grandfather. It seems that children these days learn more from society than their parents. I have none of my mother's veiled paranoid prejudice, and neither does my little sister. The fact that we, like our mother, stepped away from our parents' views and chose instead the desired attitude for a successful society fills me with hope for the future generation. With luck, perhaps three generations from now our society will have completely forgotten those prejudices that kept a race enslaved and then as second class citizens for so long.

Racial Injustice

LaTica Boykins-Williams

At the young age of 9 years old, I never thought that I would be discriminated against because of my race. I was with my grandmother and my mother a mere 8 years ago when an incident at the Wendy's in Squirrel Hill took place. We were not the group of people that the [Caucasian] man supposedly had a problem with, but since the people he had a problem with were black, he took it out on us. It even got so "ugly" that we had to take the case to court.

In around April of 1999, my grandma pulled up to the Wendy's in Squirrel Hill to place an order at the drive-thru window. Once she paid, a lady at the first window told her to pull up to the second window. We waited at the second window so long that my Grandma turned the car off. The man, with long blonde hair, told us to pull over to the side because our order was not completely prepared yet. So, frustrated, my Grandma did so. We waited for about 15 more minutes until my mom realized that all the people behind us, and even people that had just pulled in, were getting their food before us. She also noticed that they were white. So my mom told my grandma to pull back around, so she did. She asked the man how come they weren't getting their food yet, but everyone else was. He told her, with an attitude, to pull back over to the side and be patient. She told him no because there was no way our food wasn't ready when a number of people, families even, were receiving their food after us. She demanded her money back and he told her no. She said she wanted to speak to the manager and his exact words were "No ma'am, I've had too many problems with YOU people this week. I don't need anymore." My grandma snapped, said some words I can't write in this paper, pulled over, and we went inside the dining room area. She demanded to see the manager and she told him the problem.

When the manager finally came out, she told him about the situation and he didn't seem to care. It was like condoned it or it was okay for him to talk to, or treat, people that way. They got into another shouting match including my mom and finally my Grandma asked for his name because she would see him in court. He tried to solve it another way, but she didn't want to, she knew that something had to be done before they treated another paying, African American customer that way. So she took him to court, with my mother and me as witnesses.

In court, the man with the hair said he was not racist and he did not mean it in a racist way. When he said "you people" he didn't mean "you BLACK people," he meant customers in general. My mom, me, my grandma, my family, nor the judge was buying it. Finally when it was my grandma's turn to speak, he interrupted her with a smart remark. She retaliated with a smart remark and he interrupted and said (exact words again): "Do you hear the 'black' attitude, your honor?" At that moment, the judge dismissed the case and he had to pay a fine to my grandmother, he had to be fired from his job, and the manager also was suspended from his job too for letting him treat customers the way he did. He got suspended because the court found out that this was not the man with the hair's first racial offense at that Wendy's and the manager was aware of that.

Color Blind Hate

Keanna Cash

In the summer of 2003 I went to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to visit my cousins Nori, Briannon, and Julieal. I can't remember the name of the summer camp we went to, but I will always remember the experience. Our counselor was racist. She changed her ways, but it was still very disrespectful.

On the very first day of camp she separated the African American kids from the Caucasian kids. The kids with different races were put with African American children. The African American kids were stuck watching the food so it wouldn't burn, or cleaning. We, the African-Americans, had to eat frozen dinners that you heat up, while the Caucasian children got to eat the good food like pizza, hamburgers, and cheese fries. We didn't get to go on field trips either. There were so many things that almost everyone in my group missed out on.

I couldn't fathom that she was getting away with this or why she was doing this. I ponder the thought of how long she did this. All the kids grew angry so we told another counselor. When he witnessed this he reported her. She was immediately fired. Finally after she was kicked out we got our summer and fun back.

What she did really hurt me at the time. I then realized why she was doing these acts, she was racist. I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before though, because it was so clear. To me it made no sense how could she just hate us for no reason whatsoever. The reason why it hurt so much was because she wouldn't lift a finger to change that. I really did hate her with a burning passion of a thousand suns! But I decided to take the higher road and forgive, but not ever forget!

Dear Martin Luther King,

Tony Nguyen

What's Good Dr. King I wanted to tell you how the world been since you left. It's cool right now but there is still racial and prejudice people still breathing in this world but no crazy action had happen yet to caught the world's eyes. People still need to show appreciation to you because you made a big change in America. The world is still having problems like 9/11, war in Iraq, the most ridiculous person named George Bush is president at the moment, and the late great Rosa Parks had passed in 2005. As you see Dr. King people still struggle through this thing called life although you are gone but it could have been worse if you never stood up for the people like Rosa Parks did. I just wanted to thank you personally in this letter if you were to ever read this letter. People do still remember you, you have a holiday, they in the process of making a statue of you right now, and they have black history month where people need to know what you went through to put us people where we at right now. I think it was very brave and courageous what you did during the Civil Rights March. Is crazy how a man like you died more people should look up to you because you was a very positive person and you helped America to realize what they was doing to the people was wrong and harsh. All of your speeches always touched the people when you spoke to them even the people that was there and still living will tell you your speeches was deep. I don't even know you from a can of paint but I know what you went through to get where you at today I have much love for you Dr. King is just ashamed how you passed away at an early age like that you had a very bright future if you was still here. I know a lot of people thank you for what you did but I'm thanking you again for what you did bless you and REST IN PEACE Dr. King watch over us and keep us strong.

Variants

Jessica Packer

When I was little, my mother did her best to make race a non-issue, an insignificant and superficial factor in the grand scheme of things. She wanted race to be like multiplying by one. She wanted race to be as under my nose as the paint on the walls, to also melt into the plaster around me. Periwinkle, turquoise, North American Robin's egg on the seventy-fourth day of spring – who really cares what precise shade of blue the paint is anyway? Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, African-American were all nonsense words.

For the first five years of my life, I was as close to color blind as a person could be. I remember lying in the gross shroud of heat that accumulated every summer beneath the tin roof of our porch, braiding knots into unusually long blades of grass that my black playmate Natalie and I had collected. My mother was with us, lecturing on the importance of learning to tie your shoes. Of course, I clearly recall tuning her out. Then, even more clearly, I recall my admiration for how closely my mother's deeply Ocean City tanned skin matched Natalie's dark arms.

"Do you go to the beach without sunscreen, too?" I asked Natalie, touching her elbow with my pale finger. She said she didn't like the beach and I, satisfied, merely finished a loop in a green bow of dandelion stems.

Another time, I remembering curling up in my *101 Dalmatians* sleeping bag and chomping on my second yard of Fruit-by-the-Foot. *Bill Nye the Science Guy* was on again and I was amazed at his uncanny ability to show up on my television everyday at exactly the same time. This time, he was giving a lesson on the human body and was explaining skin pigmentation.

"Which is a big word for color," Bill explained helpfully, pointing at a spectrum of every different shade of brown you could imagine – off-white to beige to almost ink black. He explained that every person's skin pigmentation was different from everyone else's skin pigmentation. However, the point was that in the end everybody was just some variant of brown.

"Great," I said to myself, stretching apart yet another ribbon of tie-dye sugar and countless dentist bills, "Of all the colors, we got stuck with brown."

That same year I started Kindergarten. My teacher was not nearly as objective as Bill Nye the Science Guy. She was a hot-blooded woman. Her black skin was like leather and she talked with her hands, hips, knees, and funny bone. Her booming voice shook dust out of the corners of the walls. The janitor loved her.

Our teacher always resided over our lunches at the end of the table, utensils clenched tightly between thumb and index finger. But one day, she had the black kids of the class sit with her. "Not too many years ago, the other boys and girls would make us all sit down here, apart from them, just like this," our teacher said, as she pulled one of the boys, who was reaching down toward me after a

roll away grape, a little closer to her side.

Later, in circle time, our teacher explained that the “other boys and girls” were the white kids and “us” was her and the other black people in the room. Brown never had existed. In fact, for a long time, the white kids had kept the black kids separate from themselves. Blacks drank at different water fountains and could barely make money. That was the day I began my habit of always introducing the word “black” with an awkwardly careful pause. Natalie and my mom weren’t similar anymore.

I went home and explained everything I learned to my mother. “We are different from them,” I summarized.

“Everyone’s different from everyone,” said my mother. I jumped when she slammed her coffee mug on the table and we were out the door in a second to drive up to the school. She demanded an explanation for her daughter’s new “discriminating mindset.” My mother had a loud voice, too, and I held my ears as if it were fireworks.

My teacher put her hands on her hips and stuck out her lips. She said, “You’ve got to explain these things to them while they’re young.”

“She’s too young.”

“Racism’s everywhere. You don’t talk about it now, someone else will do it for you and your kid’ll be ruined.

I still had no idea what “racism” meant and didn’t think anything of it. Things went as usual for me. A couple weeks passed. I drew my mother a picture and made her my model, but instead of using the brown crayon to match her tanned skin, I left her face and arms blank so that the white of the paper came through. My mom looked at it a long time, her eyes hard, before she threw it away.

The Color of Courage

Delvin Turner

It was in the year 1998 I was gazing out my window, watching them move in across the street. To me they were just a family and he was just a kid; however to the elders of the house they were a *white* family intent on destroying what we had fought so hard to protect, during a time of civil despair.

At this age I did sympathize with my family for its hardships faced in the past, striving to fight for equality. However, I never understood *why*. Why I shouldn’t make friends with someone and invite him over for dinner just because he wasn’t black or at the time ‘colored.’ I was at a very young age and I was already tired of being told who I could and couldn’t befriend.

My grandmother walked into my room as my face pressed against my bedroom window, eyes gazing at the new family. “Can I go say hello grandma,” eager to make a new friend. She leaned over my bed, her old and fragile hands touching my back as she gazed out the window. I remember watching her facial expressions. It was as if my grandma had a vision of the past. I could tell that my grandma had been hurt by people like them. Her wrinkled face began to take a different form, her beautiful big green eyes began to open wide and she surprisingly said, “No!” “But why not?,” I asked, my voice challenging her authority. “It will do you no good to talk to those type of people! Now you mind your manners and don’t ask again!”

I ran outside my room, down the steps, and slammed the door. I could hear her fragile voice calling out to me. Besides my friends in school, I remember not having a lot of friends in my neighborhood. “It’s just not fair,” I remember yelling out. Tears began streaming down my face. “You never let me do anything with anyone.”

In reality my grandma was just doing what her heart compelled her to do. She was doing what any black woman; once proclaimed as a *freedom rider* would’ve done. At my young age I had heard stories of her rides and struggles. She would’ve done anything to make sure I didn’t face the same frightening dilemmas as she, her parents and her grandparents. I couldn’t realize why things were the way they had once been and why my grandma couldn’t find it in her aging soul to let me befriend whomever I choose. It would soon strike me that it wasn’t just my family who felt this way.

The little boy walked out to the car. I began to wipe my face to cover my emotions. He glanced up at me carrying in his hand an exact replica of my Sega Genesis game *Mortal Kombat*. My grandma’s warnings began to pound in my heart and I remember actually feeling scared to talk to one of my peers because he was white. “Hey,” I said as I began to wave my hand. He turned towards me and smiled.

After everything that our friendship had to face, I disregarded other peo-

ple's opinions. He was just a kid . . . I was just a kid, we both needed a friend. It didn't matter about color. The only thing that mattered was that we cared for each other. He had the courage to view me as a friend, and I he!!!