Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
Writing Awards
JANUARY 16, 2017
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Carnegie Mellon University

Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards

January 16, 2017

Celebrating Excellence in Creative Writing and the Spirit of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
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COLLEGE POETRY
Asians have it easy: straight hair, straight A’s.
Off to Ivies to order IV’s.

*Hey, hey, girl in the pink coat, what does
ching chong ding dong ting tang tong mean?*

*How come you talk weird? Where are you from,
anyway? No, not like New Jersey, I mean like,
can we dig a hole to your real house?*

*General Tso’s chicken is so good!
How often does your mom
make it at home?*

Name something from American history
about race issues.

Good! Now name something
from American history
about Asian race issues.

…
Asians can play two instruments and tennis.
Asians in America are either bananas/Twinkies/or FOBs.
Asians must be good at math.
Asians can draw.
Asians are shy.
Asians are obedient.
Asian immigrants speak English broken pidgin funny.
Asians have no eyes.
Asians are too serious.
Asian parents are always controlling.
Asian kids do not have the guts to defy their parents.
Asians do not have emotions.
Asians are not athletic (except for tennis, maybe).

These are the tiny diamonds
that tickle away my top layers
until I wake up with my face
pinker than yellow
and cannot remember why.
ankle deep in my guilt now,
i have learned what it means
  to be whitewashed.

when my grandmother offers
  up her labor—biryani, hot to the tongue,
i raise my hands to silence her,
  chew the naan and plain rice.

she left one year ago
  said her bones needed a warmth
Indian summers and Sunday brunches
could not satisfy
  she calls when I am in class
and her pleas go to voicemail

i have chosen my vessel:
  days spent locked away from the sun,
lemon and milk baths to bleach the flesh,
  hoping I don’t end up like my father—
brown-skinned and searched at airports.
  though he has made himself forget
the language of his birth
what have we done to you?
my people are those of peace.
  my tribe is that of
Malala Yousufzai—
of strong-hands and students.

my grandmother is a teacher.
  and when she walks the streets
of Hyderabad she is Auntie Qamar—
the woman with the college degree
from the United States.
  the woman who feeds
the hollow children and stray cats.

the woman who married for power
  and used it for good.
her portrait, at twenty
still haunts my diary
but you ask me about Iraq
pronounce it eye-rack
and the harshness makes me cringe
these are a honey language—
made of cherry cordial and chai
meant to slip from the tongue like maple syrup
i cannot speak Urdu.
the only word I know,
یانج،
means sweetheart,
dear one, beloved—
a word my grandmother
uses to address my father.
though the welts
on his back raise
a redness in his face
though his blood is boiling revenge
the lid of the pot quivering
we are not so beloved.
the radiant Indian princess of my youth,
smelling of jasmine and cardamom,
saffron and ginger,
heart so close to mine,
segregated from the black top.
my friends said
“she doesn’t look like us.”
now you fetishize our bindis
and henna without studying the art.
you wear our culture
as an ornament to show
how worldly and wonderful
you have become
in your 20s.
you eat my food as a treat,
though I can no longer
stomach the spice
after a lifelong diet of shame.
but when I tell you how my land
was beautiful and luscious,
full and flowing
with mangoes and honeysuckle,
green forests and gold,
before the white man
touched it with his greed,
you ask me of war
and of terrorism,

and the Quran.
my Abuela’s spanish is quiet but loud with intention  
it has that perfect comprehension of life with that wariness of death  
and it’s thick with the breath of viejo san juan down its neck  
best believe it kept my mother in check  
cuz Mami’s spanish is the creation of the new nuyorican nation  
the 1970’s formation sung by boleros on each station  
tainos knew no lions until these women roared  
heard from los calles de cupey to lex and 103rd  

my spanish requires assembly  
palabra puzzle pieces thwarted by toddler teeth marks on their corners  
can’t fit when they’ve been constantly chewed by caucasian  
mispronunciations  
of my name culture and persuasion  

ms. ellis in the pre-k  
roll call on the first day  
ja-vee-air or ha-vee-ay  
too shy to speak up  

Javier that’s my name  
anglicized by twenty-six year old ellis and her disciples  
tyrannical tykes with whitewashed picture books as their bibles  
jack was adventurous, phillip was charming  
but in ’01 at 8:05 a.m. my name was too alarming  
syllables were stock to exchange in the morning  
monikers meant cash for little white boys only  
no bit-sized buyers wanted ha-vee or ha-vee-air, too many too exotic  
but i woulda gone broke to be a max, tom, or dick  

so Abuela and Mami, i never intended to lose who i was  
but i was sick of no one understanding:  
perdona me, jota’s like an h, this ain’t no french  
cuz i just wanted to uphold the hold on our third generation of american  
education  
and the missing puzzle piece seemed to be assimilation  

MIRA, when my accent faded and i waded out of spanglish shallows into  
the hallowed river of gentrification, leading to the mouth of the melting pot  
flowing into the ocean birthing our nation, i realized rita moreno lied. ain’t
no small fee to be free in america. there’s been a cost that can’t be paid by any ancestor’s loss, a cost mi gente sees everytime we turn on the tv and are reminded that the only way to make the great america what it used to be is to take any foreign flavoring out of its rice and beans y Mamí y Abuela i know you know that this man ain’t the first to tell us we have to go. it’s not just six year old toms and aged politicians building the partitions between nations and our coexisting visions, so what do i do when my broken spanish is the last of my ammunition?

permiso

con paciencia y fe help me put it back together for once i realize our pride, i’ll know no oppressor
COLLEGE PROSE
Day One

Why weren’t we enough? It’s the day after the election and this is all I can think. I keep thinking back to my grandma, wondering what she would say if she were still alive. I keep wondering if she would think her journey to the United States was worth it after seeing Donald Trump being announced President-Elect. How would she feel seeing a man who labeled Mexican immigrants like herself as “drug dealers, murderers, and rapists” become president of this nation she fled to for safety? And how would she feel knowing that this man also condoned grabbing women by the pussy, when she herself fled from an abusive husband, seeking refuge in the United States, a place where she thought things like that weren’t tolerated.

Next, I think of my mother, a woman who truly believes in the American dream of meritocracy, a woman who believes the work she produces speaks louder than the color of her skin, a woman who believes anyone can make it in this nation if you just work hard enough. And I wonder how my mother would cope with Trump’s victory, which shattered her American Dream, which stated that her brown skin actually was her defining characteristic, not the 25 years of military service, not her 3 tours of duty, not her 20 years of teaching, but her skin color. Because this day marked the day that 60.5 million people said, “You can sacrifice all you want for this country, but at the end of the day you’re still just a Mexican and you are not wanted here.”

Finally, I think of my younger sister. I think of the little girl back home who has been trying to erase the color of her skin for her whole 15 years of existence. I try to think of ways I can explain away the nation’s reinforcement of her already present shame of being “not white enough.” I think about how much I’d worked to protect her my whole life, how I took a year off college during my mom’s last deployment, how I tried to shelter her from her own self-doubt, and how none of this is enough now. Because far too many people in this country just let her down, just told her that her safety, her rights, and her value weren’t enough to stop them from voting for a man that ran a campaign in opposition to her very right to existence.

And when I can’t think anymore, I cry. I let my whole body shake as I ask again, Why weren’t we enough? Why didn’t they worry about us, the people
of color who have been sacrificing for this country generation after generation? And if what we’ve sacrificed isn’t yet enough, then when will it be? How many rivers must we cross, how many battles must we fight, and how much of ourselves must we give up before we become “white enough” to matter?

Day Two

“How are you today?” asks my white, history professor.

“Pretty bad. I spent most of yesterday in the resource advising center crying with fellow students of color and watching my supervisors break down as well,” I reply.

“Really? Your advisors were breaking down? I don’t understand that. I just don’t get why this election is so emotionally charged. I mean, don’t people understand that this was a problem of economics?”

Silence.

*How could this professor really not understand why this election is so emotionally charged? Is she really telling me that she didn’t experience the same fear that I did throughout this past year? That she didn’t hear the same racial slurs, didn’t see the hate crimes, didn’t fear for herself and her loved ones, not even once? God, how I envy that privilege.*

“Professor, everything about this is sexist. Everything about this is racist. Because even if Trump voters didn’t intend to oppress us – as women, as people of color – they’ve legitimized the very rhetoric of sexism and racism and that legitimization will have an impact. And we can’t just ignore that impact just because someone wanted an extra dollar because that extra dollar isn’t worth sacrificing someone else’s rights or someone else’s safety.”

“Well, we are going to have to understand their point of view if we want to work together.”

“Okay.”

Fast forward to the end of my film class when another student claims that working together is our only option.

I say, “You’re asking me to understand and empathize with people who never understood or acknowledged my existence and what their decision would mean for that existence. You’re really asking too much of me right now. And work together? I wish I could, but I’m not sure I can ever heal the tear they’ve created in my spirit, in my faith. You see, on that night, they stole something from me, something you shouldn’t be able to steal from a person. They took my faith, they took my value – two things I never thought to be so fragile and so out of my control. They reminded me that as a woman I have no value here, that as a Mexican-American I have no value here. And with that, they stole the faith I had left for this nation. So, you tell me, how could
we ever work together again?"

And as I sobbed for the hundredth time in 48 hours, my white, male professor came to my aid, repeating, “You matter, you are of value, you are important.” And I cried more as I realized that just as a white male had taken away my value, a white male was giving it back. Why couldn’t it come from me like it came from them? Why didn’t I have that same power to save myself? And I let the shame swallow me whole.

Day Three

I look at my little sister’s picture, and it’s one of the ones with her smiling. It’s a photo of the day she and my mom dropped me off at college. She had her short hair then from donating the rest of it to cancer patients, but her smile is still exactly the same. During the election, she said she was ready to go to Canada. What was I suppose to tell her? What was I going to tell a little girl who’s been trying to escape the limitation of her brown skin all her life? How could I repair the damage Trump’s victory caused and the devaluation of her existence that came with it? How could I help her understand if I didn’t understand myself? And how could I help fix her spirit when mine was so badly torn as well? Because she matters. I matter. We matter.

But my whole life has been about this little girl, about her empowerment, about her protection, about loving her. And if I was tired before, I’m going to be exhausted now. But I’ll be damned if I give up fighting now. Because her face, her smile, her spirit is worth fighting for, and I won’t stop until every single person in this nation realizes she matters in every decision they make. And once they do, I’ll be sure to never let them forget it again. Because she matters. I matter. We matter.

And tonight I don’t cry.
DEAR SIR
Christian Manaog
Second Place

An open letter to the person who yelled at me on the subway

Dear Sir,

Before I address you, let me give you some brief context about my life before our encounter. My name is Christian Manaog. I am 19 years old, I’m from New York City (shout out to Queens), I attend Carnegie Mellon University, and I am Filipino. Growing up in the city, you learn certain lessons. I learned one such lesson when I was eight on the subway coming home from a concert. Exhausted, I was resting on my dad’s shoulder when some woman across the train started yelling at us. Well, maybe it wasn’t at us, because all I really remember was her yelling, and I was too tired to process what she was saying. What I do remember is locking eyes with her, and seeing an intense hatred that made me look away. When we got off the train, my Dad asked me whether I had heard anything the lady said. I said no, and he taught me something every parent in NYC tells their kids: “Whenever you meet people on the subway like that, don’t look at them. Ignore them, and they won’t bother you.”

So I hope you don’t take offense to the fact that I ignored you when you started talking. It didn’t look like you were talking to us, and frankly I didn’t notice you were talking to us until my friend messaged our group chat that “the person across from us is pissing me off.” That’s when I decided to listen to your babble.

“Go back to your country. What are you chinos doing in America?”

“I’m gonna sue you.”

“You people are so rude, you have no manners.”

“Oh my GOD, you need to learn English.”

And on. And on. And on.

I mean, I could talk about how I was born in America, or how I’m not Chinese, or how we were all speaking the language you told us to learn. But I listened to my Dad: I averted my eyes, I kept talking with my friends, and pretended you didn’t exist. I wanted nothing more than for you to go away.

Naturally, when I run into people like you, the train stalled right outside the station, so I enjoyed your presence for an extra few minutes.
Though I was talking with my friends I couldn’t ignore your words anymore; every racial slur, every insult shook the very core of my soul. It was at this point I felt something I had never felt before. I was speaking, but I couldn’t hear the words coming out of my mouth. I was smiling, but I was furious on the inside. I wanted nothing more than to yell at you, to tell you to shut up, to tell you that you do not belong in the most diverse city in the world.

“You don’t even like America, go back to China.”

“Now you ignore the black guy because he’s black. So racist.”

At this point, I was praying that the train would move again so we could continue with our lives. I was hoping you’d get up and walk to another car. I guess I was really just praying for you to just leave.

And then you stood up, took two steps, and hit my friend.

It was so sudden; I actually didn’t believe it happened. It was so fast too: a light slap on the leg. My friend glared at you, and then turned back to us. No fight, I thought. He must’ve been taught the same lesson I had learned, and was desperately clinging to it. At this point, I was ready to fight. I don’t know anything about self-defense, but when it comes to my friends, I’m more than ready to fight for them. It was evening, so there weren’t many people on the train. A couple across from us looked at me and nodded, a silent acknowledgment that if things escalated, they would help us. I considered calling the police, but if it got to that, he would probably have gotten to us first. I promised myself if he hit my friend again, I would spring into action. I would be ready the next time.

Thankfully, the train started to move again though you continued your verbal assault. Since our train was right outside the station, it pulled in quickly and I stopped simulating how our brawl would play out. My friends and I were the first ones to hop out of the car. We went to get dinner, but none of us were hungry. I’m certain that adrenaline was still coursing through our veins, our survival instincts kicked into full drive. So good job, you ruined my train ride and my favorite meal of the day.

Looking back on this still makes me livid. I regret being unable to move. I regret not standing up for my friend when you hit him. I regret not telling anyone. These are things I’ll need to live with for the rest of my life. Prior to this, my life was contained in a bubble. I didn’t care when people complained about discrimination. Why would it matter to me? I’m American. I wouldn’t be discriminated against, especially in New York. But now I know those muffled and drowned out voices on the subway – those ‘crazy’ people – have always been screaming at me with words laced with venom and dripping with hate. This is reality.

My bubble has burst, and two hundred years of an ugly symphony of
hate and racism are blaring all around me. As a Christian, I am called to love my enemies and forgive those who assault me. I’ll be honest, I’d be lying if I said I have forgiven you; this is probably something I’ll struggle with my entire life. However, I do not hate you. There is a lot of brokenness in America right now, and people are hurting on both sides. So I’ll be appreciative: thank you for opening my eyes. Thank you for giving me the resolve to stand for others who suffered through my experience over the course of their entire lives. Thank you for teaching me a lesson I never learned. I realize now that my parents’ lesson can no longer be the norm. If we want any hope for resolution, we must reconcile our differences, and sticking our heads in the ground will not help. So I hope you’re okay. Someone has hurt you, and I hope you’ve forgiven them and you aren’t yelling at random Asian kids on the 7 train anymore. There’s a lot more to life than that, and it’s too short to be wasting it on bringing more suffering into the world. So if I ever see you on the train again, let’s have a chat: a real one this time.

Best,

Christian Manaog
I not only embody diversity, but am an advocate of teaching diversity. The fundamentals of equality and inclusiveness are hard to define. There are some who promote equality as a baseline reference: that we are all equals irrespective of our history, sex, gender identity, or background. But I believe in celebrating equality through recognition of differences in positivism. I am a Bengali woman. I am an American woman. I am an educated woman. I am a cis bisexual woman. I am a student activist. I am an academic student. I am a researcher. I am a student worker. I am a daughter. I am a friend. I am Shamanta. I am Sam. And to some, I am a terrorist.

“Are you a terrorist?” asked my second grade librarian.

I fail to recall on how many occasions people have asked me those four words. Whether intended to be a lighthearted jest or a canny remark imbued with scorn, the effect is invariable. Shame and humiliation redden my cheeks. A nervous smile and blithe retort arrive at my lips. I busy myself with the nearest object, twiddling it back and forth between my thumbs—always remaining ill at ease. I have progressively come to terms with the fact that I will never be able to escape the perpetual cycle of that daunting word, constantly lurking in the shadows of my past, present, and future. After twenty-one years of questioning what or who a “terrorist” is, I realize now that I had allowed others to define who I was. Words are meaningless when it comes to character. I define myself through my own actions, my dreams, and my interests—not the stereotypical epitome of zeal and fervor.

Taken individually, each different aspect of my identity fulfills a certain niche or role in society. But diversity is not about dissecting roles and promoting individual identity rights, but rights that encompass a being in totality, a summation of his or her experiences and recognizing the intersection of aspects of our identity. Although I will never be able to recognize the hardships of certain groups through their lens, I will always fight for the rights they deserve through a humanistic lens. I have been committed to social justice work since I stepped on my campus, creating two clubs revolving around breaking the barriers of prejudice and institutionalized discrimination. Yet, even my own recognition of cultural competency of MY culture and the stigma associated with it does not expunge me from being ignorant to the pains of others. My freshman year of college, I used the word ‘ghetto’ callously to describe music, clothing, and behavior. I assumed the word was casual,
funny even, and not tinged with racist derogatory connotations that deems people as feral, shiftless, and criminal all from one word. I thought my own position made me empathize with shared pain of discrimination, but what I was blinded by was that my pain is no more than someone else’s, and that I am still learning how to be cognizant of other histories and cultures. I am one to recognize my ignorance on issues and learn from it, and relentlessly seek to better myself and humanity through teaching tolerance and cultural intersectionality. An activist is one that can act as healer for all, and I strive to do so in all respects.
HIGH SCHOOL POETRY
WE ARE AMERICANS
Zainab Adisa
First Place

When I speak with my friend
whose skin is smooth oak,
with curls on top
of his head the shade of low charcoal
I am mesmerized.
His accent is thick with South America.
Brazilian pride lining the sentence
he has told me often in variation:
“You know you’re not American right?”

I stiffen and scoff at such bluntness.
His voice speaks with a playfulness
I’ve come to love
yet a seriousness that my mind
associates with trivial business.
When we allow our words to flow freely
in debate we are defending our “nationalism.”

No, I am not American, he’s right.
My blood lines the heritage of Nigerian
village kin whose accents flow in a wind
I have yet to tame and words
I’ve yet to claim.

But when he says,
“You are not American”
I know he knows nothing about my heritage.

Without knowing, he is referring to citizens
of the United States of America.

Capital to the blondes
with blue eyes
and peckish habits,

to the brunettes
with long legs
and apparent attitudes.

Capital to the pale skinned
with their perfect
verb conjugations,
the “blacks”
with kinky curls
and grease slathered fingers

and lastly, the mulatto hued
with a sense of limbo
hiding between their words.

He speaks highly of his home
as we often do, though secretly loathing
the countries that never gave either
of us more than what we earned.

I want to ask him
though I’m not sure if I ever did,
“What defines an American?”
I AM NOT WRONG: WRONG IS NOT MY NAME

Elsa Eckenrode
Second Place

i.

When I cut my hair
my mother asks if I want to be a boy,
as if this new haircut has transformed my entire being,
and imagine this: the day after,
me, hunched over my kitchen table,
hair short and bleach blond,
my body in an XL black shirt, formless,
not angular or curved, she asks,
is this your butch pose?

ii.

How do I tell her I learned a while ago
to hate my body for what others see?
I learned to cover myself up
because when it’s 9 pm and I’m walking home by myself
I am: all skinny jeans and body outlined,
I’m nothing more to the man outside than
some dyke he’d love to see in bed,
but how do I tell him
I am more than just a body?

iii.

What does it matter
if my mom sees me as a butch
and men see me as a fetish
when at the end of the day I’m still thinking
about the first time a guy called me
a faggot for not flirting with him.
Why couldn’t I tell him he was wrong?
I was 14.
Will he ever know how scary
it is to be told you’re unnatural?
iv.

And one night 3 years later, at 17, my dad’s girlfriend sits me down for girl talk and asks me why I don’t like men, but doesn’t she understand we are so much more than bodies? Why can’t I tell her she’s wrong? It’s like I’m 14 again, numb and speechless, breathless. Does she know how much my chest hurts to feel so ungodly?

v.

I try to forget the sinking feeling but it starts eating me alive and I tell my mom the next day, broken down and sobbing in her car, and my dad promises she isn’t homophobic but how can he tell me I’m wrong when he wasn’t there? Why wasn’t he there for me? How do I tell him how hard it is to feel right when I’ve spent years learning I was wrong, but this isn’t who I am, I swear I’m so much more. I am not wrong: Wrong is not my name.
My sister’s brown skin glows when she lies down on the back porch, her lips are full. They point towards the sun. Her moles form a pattern across her face, her tight curls have to be teased into the bun on top of her head. Sweat dances across the tip of her ear. You can see the sun in her skin.

My cheeks, and nose and ears are burned with red. My curls plastered to my forehead, damp and drooping. There is no glow.

My hands wouldn’t even be compared to the paper bag. White without question. Blue veins stain my skin.

My dad’s hands are cracked and dry. Ashy lines cover every inch, the dark skin stretched so much it tears when he turns a doorknob. He walks past the lotion. Our hands used to bleed in the fields.

On Sunday mornings, I watch flames dance around the points of my aunt’s comb. She swipes her raven hair up away from the back of her neck, tugs the comb under her hair and pulls. She tells me, never come to church with naps. I touch the back of my neck. The hair is soft and straight there.

I told my mom she could no longer do my hair. She doesn’t do it right. How can a white woman do black girl hair, my friend asked. She can’t.

I wore my hood the rest of the day. My mom sent me to my room, after telling me she’s been doing it for 10 years. Her hazel eyes contrast her angelic face showing disapproval. Neither of us did my hair the next morning.

I steal my mom’s scarf and wrap it around my head, copying the woman’s movements in the video—they’re easy and swift. When I try, I look like an alien, lumps all under the scarf and my curls sticking out. The woman looks like a queen. She says to always use a silk scarf.

My mom doesn’t own one.

The black girls squint their eyes.

They tell me my uncle’s name is Tom.

He’s not our relative, he’ll never be.

Niggas don’t need to be using the word niggas. I’m not nigga enough.
BEING A MINORITY IN A SCHOOL OF THE WHITE AND PRIVILEGED
Djibril Branche
First Place

A Step-By-Step Guide

Step One: Your name

Remember the proud dignity that was once your name? Remember that even the phrase ‘proud dignity’ itself is a teeny-weeny bit challenging to pronounce, and even more difficult to spell; so when it comes to the proud dignity of your actual name, expect some alterations when you first announce it to your peers. Usually, in order that your name becomes palatable for even the simplest of speakers, the alteration will arrive in the form of a shortening, but in special cases, if your name is versatile enough, be prepared for many renditions. For example, if your name is Djibril, one can expect names like “Stabril,” “Djibo,” “Jipy” and maybe even “Jigaboo.” Be sure to laugh along with the other kids. ALWAYS LAUGH ALONG WITH THE OTHER KIDS, because you want to make a good first impression. Also, be sure to recognize that the beautiful cascade of sounds that is—or should I say was—your name is now whatever your class considers its most hilarious perversion. Your name has now become entertainment with its new purpose to amuse rather than to manifest your individuality. Don’t expect the hilarity to go away anytime soon; you’re stuck with it, of course you would be, it’s your name after all.

Step Two: “Where are you from?”

Now depending on your hue, some people at your school—students, faculty, administrators, and staff—might anticipate a certain exoticism to your birthplace and a simple “Hartford, Connecticut” just won’t do. As if attempting to wring some sort of secret artifact out of you, the dissatisfied will ask again, and again, and again putting increasing stress on the word “from” each time. Suggestion: don’t think of the question as “where are you from?” Think of it more as “What makes you the other, a minority?” OR “if your people hadn’t been kidnapped and enslaved, and if records had been kept, try to imagine what your nationality would be if you were to look at a contemporary map of the world.” Try your best to satisfy the inquisitive asker to that end.
Step Three – Racial Humor

A significant element of presenting as black in a majority white school is the categorization of every single attempt at racial humor that uninvitably lands on your doorstep as “funny” and “harmless.” These pitiful excuses for comedy rarely deviate from the classic “Haha, you’re (insert race here)” format. However, the five iterations of this same joke can and will occur in a multitude of situations: being late to class might inspire the quip, “He was on his own CPT (colored people time)”; the act of running might inspire, “He’s so fast because he’s used to running from the cops.” IF the word “black” is introduced in literally any context while you’re in the room, the environment will become slightly darker than usual. No matter how much you may protest, your race and all the struggles inherent therein will be reduced to the mere punchline of a joke. Always be sure to laugh at EVERY. SINGLE. ONE. You don’t want to be seen as oversensitive and as someone that can’t take a joke, do you? And besides, laughing is often—not always but often—way better than the alternative, in which you’re forced to believe someone was attempting to perpetuate America’s oldest and most horrific tradition. So you laugh and hope it’s the last time you have to hear it.

It never is.

Lastly, a short list of banned foods:

Chicken (Especially fried)
Watermelon
Kool-Aid (or any drink that resembles Kool-Aid, so particularly opaque brands of fruit punch are also out)

Remembering and applying what you learned here should make your school experience bearable, painless even! Just know that you will need to remember these steps throughout elementary, middle, and if you’re really unlucky, high school. But do be careful when going out into the world, ‘cause there’s a whole different set of rules for that one.
“No services,” I landed in the US: 11 p.m. It was a brand new world that I would explore over the next seven years. Initially, I thought my phone would work, but it didn’t. I waited and waited, strolled back and forth, and attempted to get a place where the signal was better; however, the plan totally failed. With despair, I was trapped in this situation, but I knew I was not the kind of person who would give up and cry when facing hardships. Looking for someone to borrow a phone became my next plan, in order to contact with my host family, who might still be on their way to pick me up. At the airport, I was surrounded by a stifling silence: few shops were open, people were sleeping or leaning on their seats, with detachment, and several men were drinking beers and watching a football game in the bar.

Anxiousness and loneliness suddenly spread all over my body, since almost all the people’s appearances were so different from mine: high-bridged noses, deep-set eyes, blond hair, and somebody’s mustache that grew all over his chin, which generated a sense of discomposure that haunted my mind.

I looked all around, scanning every person that looked Asian or Chinese so we could talk. I could ask to borrow their phone, since we were naturally more close to each other.

Soon, I saw a guy with an Asian face stepping out of the gate. He wore a casual T-shirt and jeans, smiled and dragged a medium sized suitcase with cute animation figures on it. “Here comes the chance,” I murmured.

“Hi, uh, I can’t find my host family, and I need them to pick me up. Could you lend your phone to me please? Just one phone call very short,” I said to him, with my clumsy oral English, hoping my speech somewhat moved him to give his permission.

“Sure.” He glanced at me with a shallow smile, and I saw his expression reveal an implicit kindness and willingness. After a few seconds, he handed his phone to me. While I was using it, several Japanese characters popped up. “He is a Japanese,” I thought.

At this time, my mind was floating with distractions. In fact, I didn’t expect that I would ask a Japanese for help. Isn’t it a fact that Chinese hate Japanese? From a very young age, I was taught numerous stories, either in TV shows, or from my parents, about how Japanese imperialists invaded China in WWII, how cruelly the Nanking Holocaust happened, and how Chinese
pushed the war back and achieved victory. Due to my naiveté, my first impression towards the Japanese was sort of resentful. (But frankly speaking, I was still watching Japanese animation and cartoons, because they literally produced the best of them.) Should I just go away in order not to leave a weak and helpless image of a Chinese student to a Japanese person?

Nevertheless, I couldn’t waste this opportunity and his kindness to me. I called my host parents, hearing continuous beeps from the other side. I felt my heart suspended as beeps were going on, afraid that no one would answer. But finally, a woman answered the phone, saying she was already at Gate 1 waiting. A sense of vitality flowed immediately into my fatigued body. My heart was now settled, with all of his help.

“Thank you very much. They were already waiting at Gate 1,” I said. At this moment, I felt relief and guilt, for the fact that I’d held a strong prejudice against the Japanese for a long time. “Am I really deserving of his help?” I asked myself.

But from his perspective, he might not even have realized that I am a Chinese; he was just being kind to other people, without considering races.

The moon was hanging in the sky; its obscure light went through clouds and fell on the ground. I breathed a sigh of coldness, while I was standing in front of Gate 1; even though it was summer, the night was still colder than China’s. Unfamiliarity also probably caused coldness. Anyway, I finally got out of the airport. As I sat in the car, I was pondering my “instinctual separation” towards the Japanese. All of a sudden, I remembered in 2012, when I was a young “activist” in a “Protect Diaoyu Island” protest.

Since the Japanese government’s declaration of sovereignty over Diaoyu Island, the whole of China was enraged, from top to bottom, which was followed by a series of anti-Japan protests in many major cities. My hometown was one of them, and I was one of the protesters. To be honest, this was the only one protest I’d ever experienced, yet, I thought, it was a riot, with violence, curses and all kinds of ugly deeds.

During that time, I believed nationalism was the propulsion that drove people into the streets to put up signs, shout slogans and boycott Japanese goods. But gradually, which nobody anticipated, the foundation of the protest was twisted and that fevered nationalism was tainted by racism. I saw a restaurant put up a sign saying “Japanese and dogs can’t step inside.” I saw a soccer game where Chinese audiences were cursing Japanese players while they were competing, and I saw Honda, Toyota, and Lexus 4S stores burned down and people’s cars (Japanese brands) smashed.

I used to be willing to talk about my participation in this protest, and a sense of patriotism rose when I thought about it. But in the car I realized, I’m not proud at all. People’s patriotism shouldn’t be expressed in a way of
hatred and prejudice towards a certain race. That patriotism was irrational, as well as intensifying the “scar” between these two countries. Racism happened during this protest; people did not stop until the government instructed police to control the situation. To some extent, those radical protesters vented their patriotism to Japanese people, who were actually victims of governmental conflicts.

Now I could see that all kinds of prejudices that I used to have about the Japanese were immature and lacked deliberate thinking. It was not patriotism at all, but an impediment that insulated me from another culture and people. That was a total mistake of my mind.

Nobody talked in the car, except a few greetings that people needed to do the first time they met. My host mother remained silent and drove the car rapidly along the highway. The atmosphere made me sleepy. I didn’t know if she’d ever talked with a Chinese before or anticipated having a Chinese living with her family. After all, in the United States, where all races and immigrants live together, everyone has some stereotypes—which could either be good or bad stereotypes—towards other races; they played a role in people’s first impressions. She might think I am not good at speaking English, but better at doing math problems or physics; she might think I can cook Chinese food. As we are getting along in the future, time will eliminate those stereotypes or prove them. For me, I used to have stereotypes, or prejudices against Japanese, until I met the man who offered me the kindest help at the airport. It might not be a big moment in his life, but for me it was. That moment eliminated my rooted prejudices and opened a bright gate that was once closed for so long.
SONO CON VOI?
Adero Kauffmann-Okoko
Third Place (tied)

I usually go to visit my family in Italy during summer breaks. We fly into Milan where my grandfather, Nonno, picks us up from the airport and proceeds to take us to the apartment. My grandmother, Nonna, is on the balcony seven floors up waving a towel with one hand and yelping ecstatic shouts of “CIAO! BUONGIORNO!” Milan’s rapid, upscale atmosphere is something I quickly adapt to.

One time, the family decided to go out for dinner. Nonno called the restaurant earlier that day to reserve a table for our family of twelve, and then as the sun began to go down, we walked through the mostly empty streets to the pizza restaurant nearby. My cousins, my sisters, and I raced ahead of the group of parents, aunts, and grandparents. We dashed through the parked, compact Italian cars, racing to reach the building first. As we arrived to the restaurant, I noticed the awning overtop the few outdoor tables, shading them from the setting sun. Behind the tables, large windows gave away soft, yellowish light. Walking into the restaurant, I noted pictures of smiling people hanging on the wall behind the host’s podium; the stack of empty pizza boxes by the bar waiting for an order to be made; and the thin, white, table-clothed tables occupying the floor space. The waiter greeted Nonno and happily began seating the family. First Nonno, then Nonna, then my aunt, my mom, my great uncle, my great aunt, my older cousin, my younger cousin, my baby cousin, and then he turned to my two sisters and me.

“Sono con voi? (Are they with you?)” Facing my grandfather, there was a prominent crinkle in the waiter’s forehead as one eyebrow rose above the other. Nonno quickly said yes, giving a light laugh as he explained that we were his grandchildren. I laughed it off, too, my eight-year-old brain not immediately understanding why the waiter did not know we were related. Looking around the table, I observed my cousin’s pale features as if for the first time. I realized how their external appearance is different from my own and began to feel uncomfortable because I felt as if I was an intruder.

For the rest of that trip, and for almost every trip afterwards, I would subconsciously hold my mother’s hand or walk between my cousins when we walked in public together, as if trying to prove to the rest of the world that I am not some random girl stalking them. Even today when shopping with my mother, I sometimes worry that passersby do not know we are related and could possibly think that I am trying to rob her.
Once when I was shopping at TJ Maxx with my mother over the summer, I decided to leave my phone in her purse while I went to try on clothes, and so when I was finished, I came out of the changing room looking for my phone. I reached into her bag while her back was turned and noticed someone looking over at me. Immediately, I called for my mother’s attention and began talking to her and hugging her. That middle-aged, suburban lady probably just made eye contact with me while scanning the store, or she was examining the line of shoes behind me, but I perceived her as looking at me.

Although these worries seem ludicrous, the reality is that race has always been a big part of my life, subconsciously or not. The constant underlying feeling of not belonging increases my general and social anxiety, affecting various parts of my life. I was finally able to relate my struggles as a multicultural person to others this past summer. I joined a club where we discussed how others perceive multicultural and/or multiracial people and how those perceptions affect us. As I sat on the hard, plastic chair, I listened to an Ethiopian-Indian student’s story of not being sure whether to join her school’s Black Student Union since she was not completely “black.” Her story reminded me of how I have ignored the African-American Student Barbeque emails since my freshman year. Only recently have I been able to attend Black Student Union meetings, the question of how I can claim to be an African American student when I never identified as such always plaguing my thoughts. Her conflicting emotions were so similar to my own, and hearing how she felt finally validated my sensitivity to racial characterization.

Being able to legitimize my experiences allowed me to relax when I have feelings of not belonging to a certain group. I now know that it is not unusual nor is it unreasonable to have such feelings, which permits me to discuss them and learn to accept who I am. Even with the newfound knowledge that my feelings are not abnormal or irrational, the events in my past are always lurking in my mind. Shopping trips with my mom still elicit hyper-social awareness and BSU meetings still evoke anxiety.

Having this experience made me think of all the other people who go through similar ventures. No matter the scale or context, the feelings are the same. When I see timid students visiting my school or meet frightened immigrants who have recently come to America, I try to validate and be perceptive of their struggles so that they can be less anxious or uncomfortable and more able to be productive in other areas of their life. I have and currently do struggle with confronting my own racial discomfort, and even though I am not sure it is something I can completely eliminate, sharing similar stories and showing empathy towards others can lead me towards a future of commonality and assurance.
Growing up, we are all taught words that we shouldn’t say. We hear them on TV, in movies, or from adults around us. Some of these words make others uncomfortable, so we are told not to repeat them. As children, we have to know why we aren’t allowed to do or say something, but sometimes we are not given a clear answer. As a result, we live our whole lives with a subconscious negative meaning attached to these words. The most common one we all know is probably the “s word”. The word isn’t shit, but suicide.

I can’t recall the first time I heard the word suicide, but I can remember at a young age being confused about what it was and never having it explained to me. Anytime I heard the word or spoke the word “suicide” there was an automatic tension in the room, one I didn’t understand. In grade school, there was a story on the news about a man who committed suicide by jumping off a bridge near my house. I felt sad, but I was also cynical towards the man. That sounds weird because I never knew him but I thought that killing himself was selfish. I thought about his family, his friends, all of the lives he was affecting by taking his own. I didn’t understand at the time that the man was sick and that his illness had prompted him to act. When I asked questions about the incident, everyone stayed silent, which added to the weird tension around the word. When I was in 7th grade, there was a shooting at Western Psychiatric Hospital. This was the first time I learned that Pittsburgh, the city I’ve lived in since birth, has a psychiatric hospital. I live less than ten miles away from this hospital and had no idea it existed. After hearing about the shooting and watching it consume the news, I assumed this hospital served crazy people. I had heard of psychiatric hospitals prior to this and anytime they were talked about it was in a negative way. I used the terms “nut house”, “insane asylum” and “psycho” to describe the hospital and those inside of it, not realizing that it’s a serious hospital helping people who are legitimately sick. In a society where everything we say has to be “politically correct”, it’s ironic that I was never corrected when using those terms, words that were not appropriate to be using.

As the hysteria around the shooting slowly ended, I didn’t think much about the hospital or the types of people within it. The only time I ever thought about mental health was when I saw anti-depressant commercials on TV. The commercials always showed an adult who couldn’t get out of bed because they were “so sad”. These overdramatic commercials irritated me more than a commercial should. I didn’t believe that these people were as sad as the commercial made them seem. “Life isn’t that miserable,” I thought to myself. I was skeptical that a pill could make someone happy and the
plethora of side effects rambled off at the end of the commercial really didn’t convince me. I thought that people who needed an antidepressant were just exaggerating their symptoms of sadness. Little did I know, I would become one of the people from the commercial. I had been applying stereotypes and discriminating against people with mental illness for years, when in reality I was one of those people.

For years I had denied my symptoms of depression for the same reason I didn’t believe the commercials: I thought that I was being dramatic. I thought that isolation, skipping meals, and panic attacks were normal for a teenage girl. I was wrong. I put on a mask for years, pretending to be happy, just so people didn’t label me as “the attention seeking one.” The mask was exhausting to wear 24/7 so sometimes my family could tell something was wrong. When they suggested I see a therapist, I said that there was absolutely no way I was seeing a shrink. “I’m not crazy,” I told them. I was so offended that they thought I was the type of person who needed to see a psychiatrist. When they pushed the topic, I argued that they were overreacting, that I was just being a normal teenage girl. But what does any of that mean? The word “crazy” or “the type of person who needs to see a psychiatrist”? Why did I think that it’s wrong if someone needs to see a therapist? Why was I offended when my parents suggested I talk to someone? Why was I discriminating against myself?

My mindset was completely transformed while in the waiting room of the hospital that I once thought crazy people went to: Western Psych. I had previously visited the hospital a few months earlier after a severe panic attack but even after that visit, I didn’t accept that I was sick. This time was different though, I had actually tried to take my own life. So many things entered my mind in the waiting room this time around. I thought of how I viewed mental illness: how I thought people who went to psychiatric hospitals were crazy; that people on anti-depressant commercials were dramatic; that people who committed or attempted suicide were attention seeking. I applied all of these labels to myself. I realized I was one of the “crazy, dramatic, attention-seeking” people. This realization came to me after my dad told me something in the waiting room that I remind myself of everyday. He said, “Kristen, if you had a broken foot we would take you to the hospital to get it fixed. There is something wrong with your brain so we are going to get that fixed.” He couldn’t have been more right. We are so quick to treat something like a broken foot or diabetes, but when we can’t see exactly what’s wrong, we ignore it. I thought to myself, “Our brains are the most important part of the body, yet we give it the least attention. If our brain isn’t working properly, how can the rest of our body?” This thought made me angry. I was angry because I used to judge and discriminate against people who were seriously ill. I was angry because I knew most of society has the same mindset I used to have. I was angry because we don’t talk about mental illness and we don’t try and educate people about what it really is. I was angry that the word suicide
makes people uncomfortable and so we ignore it. I was angry at how big of a problem this is.

During the months following my hospitalization, I slowly recovered and became more aware of how severe the discrimination against mental illness is. Because I missed school to recover and receive treatment, I didn’t hear the rumors floating around the halls about why I was absent. I eventually started to get word that people were saying I was a “psychopath” and “faking it.” I tried to ignore the rumors but deep down it hurt. I had no desire to return to school because I dreaded seeing the people who were saying these things about me. Once I returned though, the worst part weren’t the rumors or the mean names, it was the way people isolated me. Girls who I had gone to school with acted like I was a completely different person; they were afraid to talk to me, afraid of saying or doing the wrong things. I was awkwardly approached and was treated like I had been living on Mars for five years. I was so bothered. I didn’t want my classmates to think of me any differently just because I had a sickness. I know for some of them it was pure shock. I had always appeared to be an extremely outgoing, confident person so the news of me trying to kill myself was a slap in the face for most. I tried to ignore it and surround myself with people who didn’t treat me differently for what I had gone through. But I was still bothered. Not because I was offended, but bothered because people thought they had to treat me differently. But I thought to myself, five years ago I probably would have treated someone with a mental illness the same way I was treated, with fear and judgment. I could have accepted the treatment I received, but I couldn’t just passively let this go on. I wanted to change the attitude around this subject.

I began to openly talk about my battle with depression and before I knew it, people were reaching out to me for help. This has motivated me to apply what I have learned from my own struggles when encouraging others to ask for help and receive the treatment they deserve and so desperately need. We have created a society that ostracizes people who have invisible illnesses. We live in a world where using every swear word possible in a rap song is appropriate but a word that describes how someone died is not. We need to stop silencing people when the conversation of mental illness is brought up and we need to start saying the words that make people cringe until they aren’t cringe-worthy anymore. Because if you had a broken foot, we would get that fixed.
Due to the high number and quality of the overall submissions, we also recognize the following students for the best entries from their schools:

Brashear High School
“Cultural Immersion in Morocco”
Jahonna Lipscomb

Carrick High School
“A Man Who Had Given Us All Hope”
Kiersten Lee Ketter

Fox Chapel High School
“Five Dollars”
Joshua Cagan

The Kiski School
“Golden Tears”
Wells Watson

Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School
“Venison”
Hailey Bartlett

Obama Academy
“Middle Man”
Daniel Simmons

Our Lady of the Sacred Heart High School
“I Am”
Nathan Walter

Penn Hills High School
“They Notice”
Christina Reed

Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy
“White Board”
Charity Anthony

Westinghouse High School
“Resilience”
Mae Knight

Woodland Hills High School
“Stereotypes’ Effect”
Anh Nguyen