Carnegie Mellon University

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards

January 20, 2020
“Fractured City” by Shelley Demus
“Ode to Deportation Jokes” by Juno Elio Avillez do Nascimento
“Luck” by Amelia Staresinic

“Mental” by Margaret Balich
“The Walk from Slavery to Freedom” by Oladunni Bejide
“The End of My Epente” by Benjamin Gutschow

“Seasons” by Q Quaye
“Thanksgiving” by Ethan Rhabb

“You Cross My Mind” by Victoria Avery
“Uneasy Bus Rides” by Erezi Ogbo
Pittsburgh isn't like other cities.  
The ones that crawl across televisions screens,  
often accompanied by the matter-of-fact voice  
of a white man and his breakdown of why yet  
another black boy's blood stains a police officer's uniform.

The officers I knew helped me cross the road in the mornings,  
Held my pigmented hand in theirs, while I skipped across streets.  
Blissfully unaware of the world around me.  
My white friend's dad was a police officer.  
I hadn't talked to him before, but he seemed nice enough.

I shed these memories a long time ago.  
No longer was I coddled by the world,  
but any enemy of it.

Sirens and badges no longer symbolized protection.  
Red and blue lights triggered anxiety  
that coils around my core.  
Images roulette across my vision.  
A firearm smoldered in crimson.  
Seared flesh. Blood coppery on my tongue.  
Tears taste like sunlight, blinding and hot.  
My tongue rests heavy on the roof of my mouth.  
Lips cracked like desert fire.

Face to gravel, lungs seized,  
too scared to ask why I was pulled over.  
Why I am a threat.

I used to think Pittsburgh wasn't like other cities.  
Now I watch the news and wait for the names  
of my father, or my brother, or my uncle  
to scroll across the TV screens.  
This time, the white man's voice  
didn't slide off my skin.  
It penetrated like the bloodstained bullet  
embedded in my childhood.
Ode to Deportation Jokes
Juno Elio Avillez do Nascimento

I am going to deport you
time
I laughed, remembering
how I made this joke
out of fear
to my brother

I am going to deport you
time
I laughed
only remembering
fear

I am going to deport you
time
I laughed out of
respect I know
was misplaced

I am going to deport you
time
I laughed because
laughs shake
the same way my
anger does

I am going to deport you
definitely not the last time
I laugh and
say you’re racist
you think it’s
a joke
You were young, maybe early twenties,
when the police pulled you over.
Put your hands on the wheel
the one closest to your rolled down window said.
The one farther back,
the one standing with his muscles taut and agitated,
the one with his finger on the trigger,
said nothing.
Slowly
he yelled
when you put your shaking, trembling fingers
on the wheel
too quickly,
too criminally.
The finger on the trigger twitched.
License and registration
he said next and you reached for your pocket,
slowly
watching
the finger on the trigger
tighten.
You pull out your wallet
and let out a breath.
He didn't shoot.
He could have.
But you are white
so he didn't.

You are white
so you are telling me this story
in the kitchen of our red brick house,
laughing because it was so long ago
and you are white so you can laugh
about these things.
You waited a long time for the officer.
He came back
but things were different,
his gait easy and his shoulders relaxed.
The finger eased off the trigger.
Isn't it funny
he said.
You matched the description
of someone they were looking for.  
Isn't that funny.  
Good thing the description was of a white man.  
Good thing you were a white man.  
We're lucky, I guess.  
Sitting at the kitchen counter,  
picking at the loose thread  
on my pajama pants, watching  
it unravel,  
thinking  
I'm here  
I'm alive  
because they didn't kill you.  
Because you are white.  
But what about all the little girls  
who listen to this story at their kitchen counters  
from their mothers,  
as they pick at loose threads and hear  
a different ending?  
What about all the children that  
aren't here  
aren't alive?  
We're lucky  
I guess.
One.

I first tell my mother about the thoughts when I am 12 years old, a few months into seventh grade. As I try to listen during English, my brain takes me to places filled with images of violence and death. My attention span sinks lower as the weeks pass, and I stare at the chalkboard while my chest flutters. So when my mother and I walk into Payless to shop for shoes, I pull her down one of the aisles and whisper fervently into her ear. Blood. Cuts. Gore. How do I explain that every time I see a knife, I imagine stabbing it through my hand until my fingers stop twitching? I start crying in my ratty orange jacket, and she holds me. She schedules my first appointment.

I'm not suicidal, although it may seem like I am. Headlines copy and paste themselves into my cerebral folds. What if I drove my father's car off a bridge? What if I held my breath until I passed out? What if I stopped eating? Other girls my age think about boys and drama during class, but these are the things that distract me from Pre-Algebra. My body folds inwards, isolated, like a flower in the harsh Pennsylvania cold. Anxiety forces my arms to shake, my limbs to weaken, and my veins to pulse harshly.

My first therapist is a family friend; he was my parents’ marriage counselor before their divorce. My mother drags me to his office in the early spring. The waiting room is stocked with National Geographic and other, saucier magazines that I eye up before his door opens. There stands the doctor, in his late 50s, with the air of both a wealthy professor and a failed stand-up comedian. His hair is graying. He likes to swear. We talk about school and my family, and he shows me how to meditate. As I picture myself on the beach, I tie my worries to a red balloon that floats away with the salty wind.

Counseling helps me re-center, but I get sick of my psychologist quickly. I'm not as responsive to his criticism as he might like. “If you just stopped procrastinating, it'd solve a lot of your problems,” he says to me straightfaced. I'm freshly 13—it's almost the end of the school year—and he makes me angry. I'm ready to enter eighth grade without listening to the doctor's dry jokes.

“I can't,” I sputter out heatedly. It is easier to leave than to argue and explain my cyclical methodology, I become so worried that I can't focus, which boosts my stress even more. Our last appointment together ends as I soak in stubbornness, face flushed and defiant. After around four months, I have barely changed. I don't see another psychologist for over a year.

Eighth grade sucks. I forget how to be a daughter, so I learn to count in fours and tighten my triceps, twice on the right, twice on the left, to cope. My friends think I'm weird and uptight—which, to be fair, I am—and they stop calling the bland landline on my kitchen wall. When I come home every night, I drop my book bag onto a chair and wallow in self-pity, sick of feeling unwanted and unloved. However, in the midst of my angst, I find Spotify. I begin listening to more music, expanding my taste and passion. Cringey alternative bands divert my attention from the constant negativity that I surround myself with. I transfer out of middle school and into a private high school, excited to reinvent myself.

Two.

Freshman year starts off well. I meet new people from all over Pittsburgh, and my first friend group solidifies within its first weeks. My heart explodes with joy in the warm light of fading summer. However, my anxiety comes back into full-force by November as our first grading period closes. Now, my heart feels like it will legitimately burst as it palpitates with adrenaline. Music doesn't help as much anymore. Just like an intrusive thought, my mental pain
continues to reappear at different moments and in different forms.

I meet my second and current therapist in February 2017 after a rough winter of self-consciousness and depression. She is a petite woman with a love for words, politics, and Goldfish crackers. I break down in her office during our first appointment as I pull my life story out of my stomach and leave it at her feet like a mangled ball of yarn. She guides me through the remaining trials of the year with a skillful hand.

Emotional consistency remains elusive through high school. I build myself up and break back down with surprising speed. One day, I fly through play practice, or do my homework, or play my guitar. The next, I hyperventilate on the hardwood floor in my dining room, unable to think of anything besides the constant darkness outside and my cabin fever. One warm night, my father drives me to Sheetz at midnight to get a drink. We sit outside and observe the metal table, saying little, as my face dries.

Three.

After four years of willpower, therapy, and mood swings, I see the psychiatrist on a crisp October day during my senior year. She is trim with close-cropped hair and glasses, and we talk for a while in her office before she lands on a possible aid for my underlying mash of anxiety and depression.

Lexapro, or escitalopram, is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor. It arrives at my pharmacy the next day in an orange pill bottle containing thirty 10-milligram doses. I swallow a tiny white circle with water each morning and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. A few weeks pass by. I still argue with my mother and stress about school, but I balance myself out. I’m more mellow, more patient. Medication is not the ultimate solution for mental health struggles, and it never will be, but, for now, it works.

I step into my grandmother’s kitchen carrying groceries. “You seem better,” she says to me. “I’m glad you’re smiling.” My face lights up. It’s good to be back.
I wasn’t happy to hear that the whole of ninth grade would be taking a walking field trip to the Heinz History Center. I didn’t want to learn about any more whitewashed history. It was my thought throughout the two stations we went through, but I was thrilled when I heard we were going to an African American exhibit. I wanted something real, something physical where my eyes could not be deceived. Where facts were harder to twist.

I bounced on my feet and took tiny steps through the little corridor where African artifacts lay on display with captions describing background information and origin. I ventured away from my assigned group in impatience. “We’ll now be entering the From Slavery to Freedom exhibit,” our tour guide explained. “It’s important to know that slaves had lives and civilizations before they were taken and brought to America. Their history doesn’t begin with unfortunate slavery.”

I silently applauded her. Every person I’ve come across seems to think African American history begins with slaves.

Her words took me back to my old classroom, seventh grade social studies. We were on our African American unit. Our teacher told us we would learn about it from the beginning of our history to now, but, unfortunately, he was exaggerating. Our first chapter in the unit was the Atlantic slave trade. He didn’t teach us about what Africans were doing before they were taken, what they had, or what they had accomplished. He made a major time jump and told us that that’s where African American history began. I never thought too deeply into it, and for a while, I believed it though I had living proof in the form of my parents, who came from Africa.

I took my first step into the exhibit, looking down at my checkered slip-on Vans, noting the contrast between them and the marble tiled floor. My mind went silent; the tour guide’s instructions became a quiet buzz in my ears as I took further steps into the exhibit. I was still excited, but it bubbled down as I heard the first daunting note of a slave song. I felt the tiny pinpricks in my eyes as tears started to form on the edges of my vision.

I turned to my right and saw shackles enclosed in a glass case. I sucked my teeth as I knew the urge to cry would increase as images of brown wrists and necks caught in them flashed through my head.

My friend walked up to me putting her hand on my shoulder already spying the glisten in my eyes before I had rubbed it away. She told me that she knew I would cry, her having experienced my bursts of passion for the African American people. She tried to soothe me and calm my tears, but as the slave songs played on I kept turning and getting glimpses of life-sized slaves. My tears pounded harder at my eyelids, but I contained them, drawing on an internal strength I did not know I had. I still don’t know how I kept it together that long, but I did.

One picture in particular reminded me of my mother, a shade of light brown skin. She, like my mother, was wearing a traditional wrapper, the yellows and reds contrasting off each other making it the first thing I noticed about the woman.

My mother and I have different views. She, as a traditional West African woman, thought herself different in America from African Americans. She thought that they were significantly different because she was African and she didn’t suffer like African Americans did. I had tried multiple times before to get her to put herself in their shoes, but she refused to let it sink in her mind. I told her that in white America’s eyes she was no different. She looked black; she would be treated like she was black. I told her they wouldn’t hesitate to kill her just like they wouldn’t hesitate to kill an African American. I told her they wouldn’t stop to ask her if she was African or African American. I watched her brush off my reasoning. So I told her to imagine she was little again, still in Africa and then she was all of a sudden taken by pale-skinned men she’d never seen before and raped. Her parents killed before her eyes and before she was thrown on a ship with no room to even relieve herself and sold as a slave once she reached her new destination. The argument had ended in uncomfortable silence, due to me possibly going too far with putting her in their shoes.
My attention shifted back to present, and I turned to the left and saw a picture of a woman rooting sugar cane, the caption under it stating that if your job was rooting sugar cane your life expectancy was seven years. I could have burst out crying right then and there. I remember thinking that it was horrifying. Imagine only making it to seventh grade and then dying all of a sudden from fatigue, exhaustion, and dehydration.

I thought back to the year I was in Nigeria. It was hot, and I was walking through my village. There were vendors left and right, everywhere you turned, and I remember catching sight of a sugar cane vendor. I wanted one so I bought one. I never once thought of who might have picked it or how I had access to it.

Right next to the picture of women rooting sugar cane rested a picture of a Confederate soldier, more specifically a general. He bought slaves to prevent them from being sold to slave owners in Britain, trying to help but not helping all the way. He reminded me of many people I know, people who don’t believe slavery was good, but living comfortably while thinking it doesn’t affect the generations of people that came from slaves, and not putting as much effort as they could towards the greater good. White people who thought that because slavery was 400 years ago, passionate people like me should forget about it, live life in 2019 as if it never happened. The same people feel some kind of deep-rooted guilt and fear passionate African American people like me.

It reminded me of African American people who have told me the same thing, who don’t feel as if slavery affects them, even though it does and it will. It will affect their children and their children’s children.

Black America today still feels the long-term effects of slavery and segregation, from the law being against us to the health field, to education, to the educational system, to the pipeline to prison, to the government and the distrust between them, to the problems within the black community itself. Problems like colorism, sexism (angry black woman), homophobia, sexual partner’s ethnicity, and so much more.

I walked a little further and I see a whip up close, in front of my eyes for the first time. It’s not like what I imagined. It was bigger than I thought; it didn’t have spikes at the end like I so childishly thought. It was longer than I pictured; it looked scarier in person. I thought of all the pain it caused. I had pictured a scene in my head of a slave, sweaty and dirty as he lifts his head and howls his pain and shame to the moon as the very whip I saw in front of me dug into his back.

I thought of one of the times I was watching a slave movie, always the same scene where a slave was kneeling in the dirt. A slave owner standing above them, the whip swinging in the air before coming down onto the slave’s back and the cry of pain that followed. I never really focused on slave movies or the meaning and history of them. They never moved me, like they were supposed to, designed to.

I looked up from the picture. The faint sounds of singing came to the forefront of my mind and focus. “Free,” a long sorrowful pull and never-ending note on that word broke the dam of resolve and the barrier for my tears and I shed them.

I made sure not to be too loud, because for some reason I was embarrassed to be crying in front of my classmates, although I wasn’t the only one. I was one of two students who were crying. My heart hurt and I wheezed from the emotional pain. Images of scenes about information I had just learned flashed through my mind, making my once sad thoughts angry and bitter.

I was slowly escorted out by an assistant tour guide and my friend along with the other girl who was crying. She was making her anger apparent and clear for all the world to hear. But me, I was just thinking of all the things I could do in my lifetime to help the descendants of people who suffered a tragic and unfortunate fate.
The End of My *Epente*
Benjamin Gutschow

I'm 10 years old and at the dinner table on what seemed like any other night. Green peas, cooked chicken, and steamed rice, the common meal of most nights. I can't remember if I had a bad day, or if something had happened on the news, but my mom put her hand on my shoulder and sat me down. With her soft grey eyes, she locked contact with me and said, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry because life will be harder for you. I'm sorry because I can't do enough for you." I don't know what prompted her statement, but behind her forced smile sat an utter look of anguish that would only make sense as I aged.

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It's the summer of 2015, I'm 12, and I'm traveling alone for the first time. Across the Atlantic Ocean, I go to live with another family for two weeks. Six American kids paired with six Spanish kids, we became familiar with their families, societies, and ways of life. Before embarking on our adventure, we had to part with our parents. We said our goodbyes and went to security. When I looked back, there were tears running down my mom's face, accompanied by a look of fear that echoed miles away. I broke eye contact with her and continued through the line. Like ducks in a row, we followed our leader to the metal detector. However, when I stepped forward, I got pulled aside, frisked, and scanned. For the first time, I understood the fear that was on my mom's face. Even at 12, it was clear why out of six children and one adult, I was the only one considered a security risk. It wasn't my age or my height, but the fact that I wasn't white.

A week passed, and I'm acquainted with my host family. A mother, father, and son named Alvaro the same age as me. They lived in a small apartment outside of Madrid, where I shared a room with Alvaro, my host brother. This proved to be an extremely awkward sleeping arrangement that differed from anything I had experienced. I don't know if I said or did something, but somehow my sexual orientation was no secret. Even at 12, this horrified me. I thought I had mastered the art of masking my inner *maricón* (the Spanish word for faggot).

*Maricón* is the most common insult in Spanish speaking countries, and continues to contribute to the unparalleled homophobia in Hispanic/Latino communities. This is why even at 12 it was not surprising that I followed the historic trend of Hispanic men masking their *maricón*. The irony was that gay Spaniards in the 1920s created the code word *epente* or *epentismo* that meant all things gay. The word was used when alluding to homosexuality because in their time, the Spanish government would execute on the basis of orientation, without trial or any explanation.

It was a calm summer's day at Alvaro's apartment, and we stood on the balcony eating fresh fruits. With one statement, Alvaro silenced my smile. He turned his head towards me, and with his heavy accent, he made an assertion that I was gay. Much like the Spanish government in the 20s, I had no trial nor chance for explanation. I was told that we would no longer be rooming together. He didn't ask if I was gay, or what that might even mean; he just switched rooms without a second glance. For Alvaro, being gay was enough to send him far away from anything that involved me. As anyone would imagine, this made the last week extremely awkward as I awaited my release. We were allowed one 20-minute call which I used after I was removed from Alvaro's room. I called my parents crying and begging to come home. After the call ended, I remade my mask, this time hiding the *maricón* better than before. I would only tell my mom the events on this trip years later, but it was her statement that I heard in my head once our call came to an end: "I'm sorry because life will be harder for you. I'm sorry because I can't do enough for you."
Summer has ended, and it’s day one of junior year. I walk into my environmental literature class with hopes to expand my understanding of the current environmental crisis. I’m worried, however, that the only valued voices will be the white ones.

It’s taught that Transcendentalism was the first environmental writing in America, even though indigenous people like myself have been writing about the environment far longer than any European.

Our teacher walks in with a stack of papers and a big smile, and says, “Our first assignment of the year: how exciting! Please take two poems from the packet and compare how ‘nature’ is used in each.”

I skim through the packet expecting to see faces of the same race, but, for the first time, there is diversity in my curriculum. There are Asian poets, American poets, Hispanic poets, etc. Most surprising of all was that the Hispanic poet’s orientation was no secret. I was astonished. That existed? I asked myself. Throughout my education, sexual orientation has been seen as something to hide. Epente was how homosexuality was taught—the notion that gay people did exist, but the words homosexuality or gay were never mentioned. If they were, the message that came across was, “You can be successful and gay, as long as it’s hidden.”

The masking of the maricón was what society deemed as successful. Yet here in front of me, a poet named Federico García Lorca basically said fuck society and its standards. He wasn’t shy of sharing his story. His story was in his poem, and to complete the assignment I had to analyze and compare it to another. Because of my predominantly white school, I decided to analyze the translated English version to avoid any confusion. It was easier anyway because my Spanish is lost little by little each day.

At my school I have no friends who can speak like me, no teachers who look like me, and no identity that can relate to me. That isn’t to say there aren’t Latinos at my school, just that most of them pass as white and don’t speak Span-ish. Even in my AP Spanish class, we speak more English than Spanish sometimes. My point being that I lose my culture as soon as I step into my school.

But for the first time, my culture could be seen. In black and white, a Spanish poem with an original and a translated text. I began my analysis and quickly became confused by the translated words that didn’t make much sense with the sentences. At first, I thought it was my dyslexia, but after reading the original version, I realized it was nothing more than societal homophobia. The Spanish version swam through sentences like synchronized swimmers: it was the most beautiful poem I had ever read. Each line was in alignment with my own life; the poem alluded to the confusions and conflicts of being gay in Hispanic culture. The gay Hispanic experience is utterly different and too often forgotten.

The machismo in Hispanic communities creates extreme hate for gays, while the gay community continues to dismiss blatant racism of anyone who isn’t white. I don’t fit with Hispanics and I don’t fit with gays. These contrasting identities are what created my host brother’s hostilities. I still find it crazy how it is the gay community who has been most blatant in their racism towards me. They think their own discrimination releases them from any form of racism.

The Hispanic hostility towards homosexuality was what made the translated version so terrible. The translator
removed and changed areas that alluded to homosexuality. My inability to comprehend the English version was a translator’s choice to mask the maricón of Lorca’s poem.

The awful irony is that Lorca didn’t mask his own maricón. After many years of denial and resistance, he accepted and expressed his homosexuality. It was Lorca’s generation who created epente, and Lorca himself who rejected it.

His rejection led to his death, and in the summer of 1936, he was executed by firing squad. Before his death, he was called “Rojo Maricón,” meaning Red Faggot. The loss of his epente is what cost him his life.

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Much like the Hispanic community, the Muslim community is also hostile towards LGBT+ members. It’s the sad reality of many minority groups; from African Americans to Asian Americans, as hostility rises, so do tragedies.

It’s the summer of 2016 and my existence is attacked when the largest LGBT+ shooting occurs at the Pulse Nightclub. It’s Latin night, and 49 faces like mine are erased. Names like Martinez and Valazquez keep being pronounced as dead. It was Latinos who Omar Mateem wanted to kill that night. . . Not just Latinos, gay Latinos.

U.S. officials have numerous reports of club-goers who had seen Mateem at the murder site a dozen times before that night. The bombshell exploded when a former classmate said Mateem had asked him out for romantic purposes, saying that the killer was a closeted, confused man. Speculations say his mass murder was revenge on Latinos who may have infected him with HIV. FBI profiler Mary Ellen O’Toole told CBS News that “to me this suggests somebody that may have had sexual identity issues and may have actually been struggling with the idea that he himself was gay and that would add a different motive and a different perspective on the case.”

Now when I look at Omar Mateem, I am not as angry as I am scared. I am scared that society continues to encourage so much homophobia. Eighty years earlier, Lorca stood refusing to mask his maricón, which led the firing squad to shoot him dead. It scares me that so little has changed from Lorca to Orlando; Hispanics shot for no longer masking their maricón. It scares me that I understand Omar.

Omar is the angry 12-year-old me when Alvaro exposed my maricón. Omar is the 12-year-old me remaking my mask. Instead of lowering his voice and changing his clothes like I did, Omar raised a weapon and erased 49 lives. As he loaded his gun, as he prepared to murder, he understood that his mass shooting would mask his maricón better than anything. Now remembered as a homophobic man who hated gays, the self-loathing confused man has faded away. Masking the maricón can lead to mass murder while standing against epete can cost us our lives. It’s the sad truth of our reality.

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Tears streaming down my face, it’s the first time I’ve read something where I can relate. I wipe the tears away and pick up my pencil. I’m at my desk after my first day of school, and something is different. I decide it is time for the epente to end. I won’t let the maricón be masked anymore. I write all night my own translation so Lorca’s true message can be represented.

That day I stand against epente. That day I stand for Lorca. That day I stand for myself. I get to the final stanza and pause. I look around at the listening faces, and my heart is now at peace. The maricón
no longer masked; I am able to stand like Lorca: proud, gay, and Hispanic as I read the final stanza,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{And if death is death,} \\
&\text{What will become of the poets And of the} \\
&\text{dormant things} \\
&\text{that already nobody remembers? . . .} \\
&\text{Today I sense in my heart} \\
&\text{a vague tremor of stars} \\
&\text{and all the roses are} \\
&\text{remarkably white like my pain.}
\end{align*}
\]
Seasons
Q Quaye

Everything changes.

You don’t date girls with skin like
dirt from the ground, looking like
eyes and teeth and moon slivers and
nothing else, you see nothing else
but silk and cork
and chewy caramel,
nothing sturdy, nothing strong.

I was a sapling with bendy green insides
and you could break my bones and man
did it hurt, but more importantly, oh man
did they grow back time
and time again and
now my hair is tall like the top
of a mahogany tree
and my roots run deep
and I’m old and I’m strong.

My new girl got skin that smells
like the coffee I make her
she doesn’t like cream but
she sure likes sugar and last night
we fell asleep on the beach and woke
up with our sun wrapping us up
like chocolate coins in gold.
Thanksgiving
Ethan Rhabb
Response to November 2018 at The Bronx High School of Science

Academy Academy
Better me Fetter me
Edify me Nullify me
Brighten me Enlighten me
Arrest Lynch and Vilify me
It's almost Thanksgiving
Hype up that No Shave November
Meanwhile I should stop complaining, be grateful
You ain't no slaves no more, Remember?
Well I'm still a bit hungry
With a deficiency of equality
So someone please tell me
what matters of substance you have to eat?
Kale
Curry
Corn
Rice
Black is just a Side Dish
But you can shit on me, eat my food
and I'm just a “triggered snitch”?
I've got family dead and in jail for crimes they did not commit
And you smack tomfoolery on my plate
and you don't worry
Because it's social media and “I'll just scroll past it?”
You see, well, maybe you don't see
I guess we're both blind in this ditch
You flex memes “Put em in chains, F*** NIGGERS” like
we all aren't in a sitch?
My Brother you're Color, why don't you grow a pair
say that flack to my mother
I thought this school was for leaders of a new world
Together
Sisters and Brothers
Well you can't eat meat
and you can act like you can't eat next to me
But if you really want beef
Then sit down
Let's eat.
You Cross My Mind
Victoria Avery

In the car on the way to a lakeside cabin in Portland, Oregon, I put my music on shuffle and lean my head against the window to look out at the fields and farmhouses passing by. “Need U Bad” by Jazmine Sullivan comes on, and I start crying, making sure to hide my head from my teammates next to me and coach in the front.

When the car pulls up to the farmhouse, I wipe my tears, talk to no one, and walk to sit on the swing set by the water. This is my last weekend of club basketball before I leave for college, the last time I’ll see my coaches and teammates, my best friends. This has simultaneously been the best and worst trip of my life—the melancholy end to a summer marking my last moments of innocence and adolescence. Mostly, though, I’m sad because it’s the last time I’ll see Nanai, a girl on my team who makes me question just how close I can come to love without actually falling. I think I’m pretty close.

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I meet Nanai six months earlier and feel ambivalent about her. She is so outgoing—friends with everyone and far too loud for my taste. I keep to myself, as I always have, until Coach Pops calls me over and introduces me to her. He tells me she’s from Sacramento, which is just over two hours north of Oakland, and at the end of practice Pops asks my mom if she can stay with us on weekends to avoid the long commute. I realize now that my summer is going to look a lot different than I had expected it to.

When we first spend time together, it’s awkward. She and another girl from Sacramento, Julie, drive with me to and from practices on weekends, and I feel more like a hostess than a friend. One day after practice, in an effort to kill time and provide distraction, I drive all around West Oakland—showing them my favorite street art and telling them stories about how the area has changed over the years. At my house, I make their beds and food, while struggling to find ways to entertain them. Not so discreetly, I hope that the rest of the summer won’t be like this.

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Eventually, Julie quits the team and disappears. I liked Julie, but I’m definitely not upset about this, other than the fact that it means that now Nanai and I will have to spend a lot of time one on one.

Quickly, though, Nanai and I become close. She always arrives at my house with a backpack full of candy to share, shows me songs like “Cross My Mind” by Jill Scott, and calls me nerd at every opportunity she gets. We spend time with our teammates Layla and Bianca—going to Sushi, watching movies and driving up and down the Oakland hills.

In the passenger seat next to me, I look over and realize that I never noticed how beautiful she is. She is half Samoan and half black, with a beautiful complexion, wide smile, and head full of long, curly hair she pulls into a giant pineapple atop her head. She tells me that her real name is Fa’afofoga Nanai Maui but that she goes by Nanai for obvious reasons, and that she’ll probably play basketball for the Samoan national team because her dad is from there and a lot of her family still lives there.

As the summer progresses, our relationship transitions from a friendship to something I’ve never experienced before. We talk every day, text constantly, and I look forward to the weekends when I will get to see her. At practice, we are inseparable and when she stays at my house we both now sleep in my bed.

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One weekend, we go to the beach by my house. Besides the view of San Francisco, it’s a crappy little beach—too windy, and the water is brown and always smells like shit. Nonetheless, today is a beautiful mid-June afternoon: not too windy and just hot enough to make the sand enjoyable to sit in.

We have our usual conversational banter—her calling me nerd and me trying to rebut but failing miserably. At a pause, though, she asks if she can tell me something personal, something that she’s never told anyone before. “Sure,” I say, and for a while there is silence.

She confesses that her dad has been consistently cheating on her mom for as long as she can remember, and that she will always hate and resent him for it. She has to take care of her younger brother and sister because he is too incompetent and only comes around every once in a while.

“I hate him,” she says through muffled tears, her head on my shoulder.

“But you do such a great job with your brother and sister without him,” I say, “and you have your mom, and Pops, and your friends.” And me.

“That’s not it,” she says, and proceeds to tell me something I never expected to hear. She tells me that her uncle touched her when she was younger and that when she told her dad he got mad and wouldn’t do anything about it.

I don’t know how to react to this. I try to console her, bringing her closer into my embrace and rubbing her shoulders. What can you say to a confession like this? “Well I care about you,” I muster, “and I wish that never happened.” We linger together in silence for a while.

That night, we order takeout from a Laotian restaurant and watch the sunset at Lake Merritt. I bring my camera, and as I’m taking her picture, a stranger comes up to us and asks to take pictures of us together. For the next few weeks, I look through the pictures of us constantly.

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A few weeks later, towards the end of the summer, we go to my favorite Thai restaurant in Berkeley. We talk about our plans for next year, and I ask her if she’s excited for senior year. “Not really,” she tells me. She’s the grade below me but nearly two years younger, and is trying to get re-classed to play an extra year of basketball. “Aren’t you excited for college though?”

“Yeah” I say, “but it will definitely be hard moving so far away from home.”

“What do you mean?” she asks. “Well, I’m gonna be in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, so I really won’t be able to see my family that much.” There’s a long silence. She looks confused and upset, which makes me confused and upset. “I thought you were going to school in Pittsburg, California,” she says, “right by Sac and Antioch.”

“No . . .” I say shaking my head, my voice trailing off. “Why did you tell me this?!” She asks, clearly upset. “I thought you knew,” I say, but she refuses to talk to me for a while, and we eat our meal without looking up.

After dinner, I drive us up to Panoramic, a view spot in the Berkeley hills just adjacent to Cal’s football stadium. We sit on a giant boulder and watch the cars go over the Bay Bridge into San Francisco, and I put my head on her shoulder. “I wish I didn’t know you were leaving,” she says. “It makes things different now.”

At my house, we watch Paranormal Activity and cuddle in my bed. Her hair smells so good, and her hands are so warm holding mine under the covers. For the first time, we kiss. And what begins as an innocent kiss becomes increasingly intimate, my hands in her hair and her hands on my waist. Enjoy this moment while you can, I think, because it won’t last forever.

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On the farmhouse porch in Portland, Coach Pops comes up and asks to speak to me. I wonder what this
could be about. It’s been a horrible trip, no doubt, full of racist people and tense emotions. The culmination of the trip comes when a referee calls my coach the n-word in the middle of our basketball game, to which my coach responds by swinging at him and yelling, “I’m from Oakland, motherfucker!” before storming us out.

Now, I wonder what he’ll have to say to me. Will it be about the events of the trip? “I think it’s best if after this weekend, you don’t come to practices or games anymore,” he tells me. “I don’t want you hanging around Nanai, you’re a bad influence on her which is why I separated you two on this trip.”

“What?” I ask. I’m confused. And shocked. “I don’t want you two talking anymore,” he says, “and you know I love you kid, but I have to do this.”

Immediately I break down. When I go to tell Nanai about this, she tells me that she already knows. “He told me at the beginning of the trip,” she said, “and he was screaming at me.” He yelled at her that we came to practices with hickeys on our necks after she spent the weekend at my house, and told her that he knew there was something going on between us. “I’m not with that gay shit. You’re too good for that,” he told her. I guess I could have expected this homophobic sentiment from a 74-year-old Baptist man, but I never thought it would come from Coach Pops, a man who was like a godfather to me, let alone that it would culminate in my being kicked off the team.

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Weeks pass, and I never tell my mom why I stopped going to practices and games. Nanai and I still talk, but far less often. I resent Coach Pops every day, and the fact that he could take away something so important to me for so selfish and ignorant a reason. Still, I think about Nanai all the time, and write a poem about her:

Questions

have you ever met someone with a presence so transcendent words are inadequate to describe them? someone with energy that just pulls you in? when you hear their name it automatically makes you smile? when they touch you it feels like the sun on your skin? everything you see reminds you of them? their voice is the song you want played a million times? you see them often but still can never get enough? you talk to them all day every day and the conversation never runs dry? they teach you about yourself and the world at the same time? someone with a love so deep you can feel it in your soul? someone so authentic and passionate they inspire your mind? you open your eyes and realize they make reality better than your dreams? their beauty is more sublime than all things lovely? you never want to lose them because you know that they’re irreplaceable? Yeah.

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The week before I leave, I invite her to my going away party. She can’t make it, which I expected, so I ask if she’s free at all. She tells me she’s free the day before, so I make the crazy decision to go and see her. I tell my parents I’m going to my friend’s house, and then take the car and make the over two-hour drive up to Sacramento alone. I pick her up from her house, and she takes me to her church where she is a youth pastor. I’m not religious, but I love listening to her speak. She commands the room with her humble voice and it reminds me of the calm I would feel when listening to the priest give a homily in high school. We go to Old Sacramento, meet up with some friends, and get dinner. At the end of the day, when I drop her off, we don’t kiss each other goodbye. Maybe it would be too sad.

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Since that day, I have never seen her again.
Out of the corner of my eye, I see him. Silently, yet very deliberately, he invites me to sit in the empty seat beside him. There was no way I wouldn’t have noticed him. His gestures are a bit too forced, too dramatic, too loud in their silence.

“Thank you, but I'm okay,” I automatically reply with a polite smile, standing in the aisle beside his seat. As the words involuntarily tumble out of my mouth, I raise my eyes and glance at him. His dramatic gestures are overshadowed by something else. His brown eyes. They are a clear window into his soul and are filled with multiple emotions. Some emotions caused by earlier experiences, and others, undoubtedly caused by me. The emotions reflected in his eyes are all too familiar to me. They have been my reality. My heart immediately sinks and I am filled with regret.

Yikes!! I didn’t mean to. My lips are mentally grimacing. On the outside, my facial expression remains the same. Stoically, I look far into the distance as I face the front of the bus and focus on the lyrics of Burna Boy’s “African Giant” blaring through my Bose headphones.

A few seconds later, I look more closely at the man from under my eyelashes. The melanin in his skin stands out in the sea of mostly white and Asian passengers on the bus. If the color of his skin doesn’t make him stand out, his hair does. The medium-length dreadlocks on his head are held in a ponytail and fall to the nape of his neck. Mid-40s-to-mid-50s quickly jumps into my mind as I try to guess his age.

Before getting on the bus, I had been at the Forbes and Morewood bus stop for about 15 minutes and watched with increasing frustration as three buses passed by without stopping because they were too full. In the 15 minutes, the number of people waiting to get on a bus had increased from around 10 to over 40.

As the wheels of the bus begin to roll forward, I glance around. It is at about 90% capacity. All the seats towards the back of the bus seem to be occupied, and some passengers are standing along the aisle through the middle of the bus.

Yet, the seat beside the man in the front section of the bus remains empty.

SIT BESIDE ME.
It’s all I can do not to scream. I am sitting in a window seat with my backpack on my lap, trying to shrink myself into the corner so that the empty seat beside me will be more attractive. Despite the cool fall weather, I can feel the damp sweat in my armpits from anxiety. It’s rush hour and I’m on my way to campus for a 9 a.m. class.

When I got on the bus, it was only at about 10% capacity, which meant I could choose my favorite seat, opposite the back door. Bus stop after bus stop, I watch as riders got on the bus in Squirrel Hill, heading towards downtown through Oakland. Most of the riders that got on the bus are Pitt and CMU students. Yet, the seat beside me remains empty.

My thoughts shifted from willing a rider, any rider, to sit beside me to wondering what it was about me that made everyone avoid the seat beside me. Could it be the color of my skin? Over the next four years as a student at
CMU, I would have many discussions about being African versus being African American. I would be enlightened that to a non-black, Africans and African Americans are the same. Therefore, the discrimination that African Americans face, by default would become mine. To African Americans, Africans are different, they do not fully understand the struggles they and their ancestors went (still go) through. And to Africans, they are different from African Americans; they have been given this opportunity to make the best of their lives in a new country, and they would not let anything get in their way, not even discrimination.

Sitting on the bus, I don’t share the determination that is common among Africans in the diaspora. Instead, I’m anxious and just want to blend in. I wonder if the people on the bus could tell I am African and not African American. I knew they definitely couldn’t tell the country I am from. So many times, I would tell people I’m from Nigeria, and in response, I would hear some story about a friend or a daughter who lives in Uganda or Kenya. Would a Brit hear stories about Finland in response to “I’m from the U.K.”? I often wondered.

With a neutral expression on my face and mindlessly scrolling on Instagram, I remain preoccupied with my thoughts. Was there something about the way I sat or how I was dressed that made it obvious I was an outsider? I had only been in the U.S. for about two months and felt very foreign. Not in a good way. I was wearing a blue pair of jeans and a cream sweater that I bought from H&M a few weeks ago. So it couldn’t be because of my clothes, I told myself.

Maybe it’s because of my faux locs. Conversations with my sister in London flashed through my mind. “These oyinbo people don’t know the difference between braids, dreadlocks, and faux locs. They see all those styles as unkempt and unprofessional,” she had told me years ago.

I focus on my breath, trying to steady my heart as it slammed against my chest. I ignore the bus riders as they get on the bus and continue to avoid the empty seat beside me like a plague. We are at Forbes and Murray now. Over 90% of the seats have been taken, and the aisle had begun to fill up with standing riders.

Yet, the seat beside me remains empty.

~ November 2015—September 2019

Over my four years as a Ph.D. student, this happened too many times. Sometimes, I noticed it and would mentally scream, sit beside me. Other times, I relished in the fact that I had an empty seat beside me, and would nonchalantly place my backpack there. Very rarely, a rider sat beside me.

In the first couple of years, I felt grateful when someone sat beside me. But by my third year, I remained indifferent regardless if the seat beside me was occupied or empty. A rider sat beside me because they needed to sit, not because they were doing me a favor. The only exception was when a familiar face got on the bus. Then the uneasy bus rides were easier. The short bus rides filled with anxiety, the feeling of being invisible or indifference were replaced with the excitement of recognition, the feeling of being seen, and a brief chat.

Dealing with my experiences on the bus was a journey that spanned over four years. As my Ph.D. journey came to an end, my struggle with uneasy bus rides came to an end. I became proud to be maladjusted as the seat beside me remained empty on most bus rides.

~ 5:05 p.m. on that weekday in October 2019

I should sit beside the man, I tell myself as the bus headed out of Oakland towards Squirrel Hill.
a 305 Fitness class at the gym on campus and didn’t bother to change out of my workout clothes before heading home. It’s an intense class, and as always, my clothes are soaked in sweat. Almost in the same breath, I decide it isn’t worth it to sit in the public bus in sweaty clothes even though it might make him feel less ostracized.

But I still feel uneasy.

I had a reason why I didn’t sit beside the man. It was clear and logical. I knew the reason, but the man did not. I began to wonder, does he think I avoided him like a plague? Could he tell I am coming from the gym and I am sweaty and that’s why I didn’t sit beside him?

My thoughts shifted to my personal experiences while riding the bus in Pittsburgh. What if the other people on the bus, over the past four years, weren’t ignoring me? What if they also had logical reasons for not sitting beside me? Maybe most of the riders that preferred to stand were fitness addicts that were looking to increase the number of hours they stood. Maybe most of the riders that sat beside others sat beside a friend.

But, what if they were ignoring me? Maybe it was indeed a race thing.

I grew up in Nigeria, where over 98% of the people living in the country are black. If I sat on a public bus in Nigeria and no one sat close to me, I would never have an issue with it. I studied in the U.K. for a year. When I traveled on the train and no one sat beside me, I never thought it was due to race. Maybe it was because, during rush hour, I was rarely the only Black person on the train. Even if I was, there was never an empty seat anyway.

In the U.S., the issue of race cannot be ignored. As a person of color in a university where only 2% of the students identify as Black, I inevitably examine the racial implications of my experiences. Across the U.S., racial discriminations are prevalent, racially charged microaggressions are common, and violence against people of color continues to be an issue. So it is no wonder that in less than two months of being in the U.S., I had become more sensitive to discrimination based on the color of my skin. And while I hope that I am not being judged by the color of my skin before I even have an opportunity to speak, the impact of living in this environment is undeniable.

The implication of an empty seat beside a person of color on a bus ride is more than just a short uneasy bus ride.