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First Prize, Poetry
Ryan Hennessy, Carnegie Mellon University

Signifying

We are all living with loaded pasts
Which are perhaps reluctant to be unloaded.
People have begun to speak of slave reparations:
Uncle Sam's embarrassed shrug, like an abusive
Father's lavish gifts to children grown enough
To forget the drunken excesses of his past.
Some feel such love cannot be bought;
They would not have us so easily unburdened.
They would have us weight the past, not bury it.

We have come a long way,
Semantically — from nigger to Negro to black
And African American — it's the "vagina"
Of race. Any which way you say it seems strange.
Nigger has been re-appropriated, but isn't available
For general usage. Negro, while it had some
Glorious moments, still suggests an ugly southern
Twang — the "ne" stretched like a whip that spits out the "gro".
Black was beautiful for a time,
But too much gray has crept into race relations.
We are left with African American, whose syllables
Trip me up with clumsiness.
It's the antiseptic of racial politics, performing
A clinical violence upon the connotations
Of the past — good and bad.
Black might not have been accurate, but it had a certain
Grandeur. Black power, pride, young gifted and...
Black was cool and wise, hip and strong
Troubled and fierce, but complexity
Was part of its richness. We've been adding creamer
To our cup of discursive joe, masking certain
Bitter linguistic pasts, but our p-c has curdled to my taste.
It was the black of the 20's that put the African
Back in American, not the term itself.

I am an upper-middle-class white male,
And my walls are lined with dead Europeans.
Forgive my Caucasian forthrightness.
I am unsettled by this term, discomforted
By its comfortable assumptions.
I wield it gingerly, waiting
For you to say black first.
Second Prize, Poetry
Tyler Lewis, Carnegie Mellon University

HALF-SMILE

"I, at one time, loved my color —
It opened small doors of tokenism & acceptance."
Haki Madhubuti "The Self-Hatred of Don L. Lee"

Some kid I tutored called me
a sellout.
I kinda smiled, I'd heard it before.
Many times. He was only 10.
I didn't know what to say.
I used to love my color.
Perhaps for the tokenism? Perhaps not?
That little validation protected me
from the white hoods
from the broken bottles
thrown at heads.

I was twelve when I saw someone
shot walking to the 7-Eleven.
Bullet grazed my ear.
Nigga on the ground. Momma decided
To shop me off to a better place.
That is too vague a reason.
you know?

Once there, I began to love the me
That didn't court trouble. The me
That made them more comfortable.
I cried my eyes
out every time
I didn't defend myself.

I remember the streets of my youth.
It is not enough to say I've gotten out.
Life only seems good.
I sit by a window. The kid next to me.
I could have told him all this.
But I sit there, and kinda smile. He knew.
Third Prize, Poetry
Anya Adel Martin, Carnegie Mellon University

RACING IN AMERICA

In my college dictionary there are 24 definitions of race, beginning with obvious answers like #1; "a contest of speed, as in running, riding, driving or sailing" to #17; "a group of persons related by common descent or heredity". But then it becomes obscure with definitions like; "An urgent effort, as when a solution is imperative: "a race to find a vaccine". And then you fall into the deep shit like #21 "a classification of modern humans, some times esp. formerly, based on arbitrary selections of physical characteristics, such as skin color, facial form, or eye shape, and now frequently based on genetic markers as blood groups..." You can’t even read all the definitions before your mind is racing off to some romantic African plain where the natives compete bare foot or maybe the Orient where the locals pedal through jungles filling their rice bowls, even to German farmers sailing across the ocean to cut down trees, farm Indians’ land. Maybe you don’t know where the race begins, where the starting point is?

Home maybe? Yes, I did hear my father tell a racist joke. But I was much smaller then and didn’t get it. It had something to do with a black man on a boat with M&Ms’s. I can hardly remember. But jokes are a funny thing see because if you’re a certain ‘color’ or ‘heritage’ you’re allowed to tell some jokes, you know, like Chris Rock, but not everyone can do this. It takes a long time to figure out which jokes are legal; how and when you’re crossing the foul line. For I have laughed at Sushi jokes, imitated all accents, like ‘Ghetto’ Slang, Hispanic Taco, and Red Neck Flicks. But then there have been times when I didn’t laugh like in 7th grade at a Holocaust joke, something about taking ashes. I didn’t think that was funny. But we all hear the starting gunshot at different times, sprinting out of blocks at varying speeds, and speaking of that, I ran track in high school, there were 3 back girls on the whole team. Damn they were fast, but then they usually are — Aren’t they? Now see, you’re not supposed to make generalizations like that.

For example: I have a foster sister who I love, she’s from Brooklyn, she’s black, wait, not that everyone from Brooklyn is black, in fact, a guy in my acting class is white and from Brooklyn, but anyway, my foster sister is fat, and can’t sing or run fast — although she does have soul, but then we all do right? That’s one of those lines where we smile and agree that we’re all the same. You see the red and yellow, black and white hands shaking, “Embrace Diversity!”

And embracing diversity is great until you bring another “race” home as your dinner date, then your mother, who may even teach first grade and have a similar poster with rainbow hands shaking in her classroom, suddenly sees that embracing diversity was taken a little too literally. Because you can be open minded and still be a little racist, and sometimes that’s even ok, because you can’t deny the fact that there are “cultural” differences and nor admitting you have them could be even worse. But how do you even know if you have “them”, your prejudices? It’s not an easy diagnosis to make or disease to cure, especially now that we are all politically correct. Nazi doctors measured noses, and foreskins. Their vaccine for the problem as we all now was wrong. But at least they had a system, a way of dividing correct from incorrect. Unlike America today, where you need a thorough scraping of the tongue before speaking of spicks or chinks, niggers with crackers, see even in writing them my fingers get nervous. I mean, I only said the word “nigger” a few times in my life. The first time was in 5th grade and that was only because the black kids at my school, all five of them, cornered me and forced me to say it because they thought it was funny. Yeah, analyze that.

Because ever since I knew that it was bad to make “preconceptions” I’ve been trying not to. Yet, I learned in Social Psychology that making generalizations and pre-conceptions are inherent to survival. If we thought out every situation and were open minded about everything we might not live so long; for example: If someone comes in with a gun and points it at your head, you analyze too long, ask too many questions about what’s going on and you’ll probably end up dead. But then don’t categorize all robbers, murders, and rapists as black, although there is something like twice as many black convicts than white. But that’s because of our racist system, it’s all cyclical and being born into poverty leads to poverty. Yet, when I’m walking alone at night and two large black guys come up behind me, I must admit I get more nervous than if it were
two white guys, even though I have been raped by a white man and seen poorer white people in my life than black or Hispanic. But this is not what this poem is about, because men are often assholes, all kinds, although the Spanish ones are more aggressive so you need to be especially careful with them. — Now you're thinking, "oops" she messed up again, another gross generalization that is displaying my subconscious racism, that's what I would've thought too, until I worked in DC all summer, walking to work from Columbia Heights and praying not to get whistled, or stared at, followed by the men on the street shouting, "Mamita! Ooh!".

And I've tried to "help". I've spent entire summers in the "ghetto" Teaching "under privileged" children and teachers. I've made mission statements, I've corrected narrow-minded thinking among my friends and family, explaining words like "gentrification" and "self-fulfilling prophecy". I've been the only white person at poetry bars, rapped with seventh grade black students, knowing full well that I have no rhythm. I even managed to eat really spicy ethnic foods, Indian is my favorite. My roommate is Japanese, and she's teaching me how to use chopsticks! I've been the righteous do gooder, felt the white guilt heavy upon my shoulders, and at the same time relished patriotism for this great nation, racism and all. I have tried to believe in definition of RACE "the human race or family; human kind". But that's hard too since, God save us all, we hardly know what being human means. I mean there are 7 definitions for 'human' alone, not even taking into consideration all the things that being human entails, like love, hope, hate fear, etc. I can't get my head around it. And I'd like to say that if we'd all just put our head together, we could circle the colorful globe Embracing Diversity like a love ring around Jupiter and save the whales while we're at it. But I just don't know...

You know?

Third Prize, Poetry
Kevin Gonzalez, Carnegie Mellon University

Canto Immigrante

I did not come to your country for dreams—
I am still here

though I never encountered a spirit
to sink in a river

or a rain that could fit in my pocket.
I tripped on your culture

but did not fall. You came bearing
a barbed carpet.

I countered with the edge of a tired glance.
I know order exists

somewhere between the freight of our fists.
I too have pleaded clouds

and stood under streetlamps smoking
strayed nights-- my smoke

blending pacific. My shadow will never apologize
from under your feet.
Honorables Mention, Poetry
Eray Chou, Carnegie Mellon University

Color

Yellow is the color of jaundiced babies, infected cuts,
The color of rotting teeth and sour milk,
Of cowardice, dirty socks.

It is not the flaming red of a rising sun,
not the sparkling black of the midnight sky.
It is not the fertile brown of a fresh-tilled field,
not the tranquil white of a rural snow fall.

It's a scream, an exclamation of pain,
the color of my skin.

Honorables Mention, Poetry
Patrick Misiti, Carnegie Mellon University

Without Sanctuary

a strong man climbs an oak
the wrong way
stretched neck
pulling him skyward

Prichard Station's got a posse of heroes
on postcards

and even before the birth of "nigger"
there were other ways to send hate

the man's toes inch from the earth
the cushion of grass
he first made love on

it is July and no birds sing

he sees the sun setting
and remembers climbing this oak
swinging from strong arms
over his love

she was blushed red in the cheeks
and he worked hard for her

every season he farmed cane
the only thing close to her taste

the rope pulls tight
as his fists clenched behind him
and behind the posse's music

he can hear her voice
soft as a bed of ash
Honorable Mention, Poetry

Terry Degan, Carnegie Mellon University

Midnight, Pittsburgh

54C south from Oakland to downtown
the windows were glossed like a black
and white baseball game where the players
last names meant their ethnicity
she was a pair of headphones
she had braids pulling all the way back to her roots
and my roots
i wanted the name adam
i wanted to reach back
to where my family tree ruined us
choke the roots
i don't know my people
my people are dying for potatoes
she was schooling me about the right ways and the
wrong ways my bus would hopscotch
"just wait by the theater
it's my route too"
i could hear the Roots coming through her head
to the good ear she was using to see if i would talk
i would never tell her they were my new pacemaker too
i wanted to look like glass
pure silver
i wanted mercury for blood
and hip hop lyrics for an epitaph
for every thing wrong happening under stainless steel
white collar chatter boxes
waning above like threats; i wanted blood
i wanted to emit sadness
i was off the bus
melting through every manhole
sending signals across the street for anyone tuned to
hear sobs
for an audience
so i could remain here
i wanted a membership card for this moment

i wanted to find the correct blue
sign to stand in front of and wait forever
First Prize, Poetry
Desiree Henny, CAPA High School

Halloween in the Welfare Office

On the sidewalk outside
eyes search my body.
I can feel them running up and down
the vertical of my legs and the horizontal
of my face.
I look left and right, seeing if anyone
points or shakes their head.

I step into a small square room,
an old onion smell lies stagnant on the air.
There are dozens of people,
children are spread out on the floor
playing with the dust bunnies under
their mother's chair.
One takes hold of my attention,
she resembles my daughter.
She wears a torn black T-shirt with red
stretch pants, a black rose up the leg.
Beautiful little girl, long black hair, blue eyes,
pale as the ghost hanging from the ceiling.
She looks up when I walk past; as we make
eye contact, I wave.
She does not respond.

There is a thick, redheaded, white woman
behind the counter, talking on the phone.
She looks at me as if I am a fly
as she goes to retrieve a newspaper.
Oh my, Yes girl, I know exactly what you mean!
Uh huh... I knock on the glass
that separates us.
I'm here to pick up my check.
She tells me that I must wait
and that someone will assist me when available.
She rolls her eyes in her head, turns her back
and resumes her conversation.

I sit in one of the sunken-in, brown, polyester chairs.
The springs protrude out the side, and the arms
are almost completely torn out.
I look around the tiny space filled with lively
bodies, and my eyes stray back
to the little girl.
She intrigues me.

The girl's mother whispers something
Into her ear, still no response.
I put my nose in the air
Someone has on White Diamonds, my favorite perfume.
It is the old white woman on my right, she wears
A bright red jumpsuit with black trimming.
Her sunglasses are as black as the skeleton's
Eye sockets on the poster warning not to drink
And drive at the counter up front.
I smile and continue to wait.
Smith they call, as I move to the next seat;
The old woman gets up slowly and walks
To the gray-haired man who beckons to her.
I am now by the little girl.

I ask her, what is wrong, why so down?
She looks at her mother and then at me,
lifts a pale hand and places it on top of mine.
Her touch is cold as the vanilla ice cream
she spilled on her pants. Small fingertips
on the back of my hand,
a sensation of brushing against my satin.

Just as quick
the girl's mother grabs her
and takes her into the restroom.
They return what seemed years later,
and sit on the other side of the room.
The girl's hands are a bright red,
you can see the layer of skin
that has peeled way, raw
and with no protection.
A smell of pink soap fresh out
of the dispenser — so strong that my eyes
begin to water.
I move closer to the counter, trying
to escape the aroma of lilacs and roses.

Why did they stay in the bathroom for so long?
It was no business of mine, but in her absence
I felt dismal, like a child feels when she loses
a precious toy.
She was about to say something to me
when her mother took her away.
Right then it hit me...
I knew why her hands were red.
I knew why the sidewalk strangers
looked at me.
The blond-haired woman took the angel
and washed her cloud colored hands,
washed them until they bled, until she
remembered why she isn’t supposed to talk
to anyone that walks through that door.

That I wasn’t one of the exceptions,
hers mother whispered in her ear.

Second Prize, Poetry
Maura Jacob, CAPA High School

Elementary Knowledge

On a Friday afternoon, last pew of the church,
our feet dangle above
the kneeler.
Light streams
in multicolored rows
over the worn red carpet.

Our friends are dressed up
like couples atop wedding cakes.
Our teacher buzzes
fixing our hair, collars, and hemlines.
We sit and hold hands
in earth-caked jumpers
and flip through crackling pages of psalms
to the rhythm
of our polished shoes against
the cushioned wood.

I want her hair.
I want beads that bounce
when I run.
I want braids as tight as the snakes
intertwined upon the stained glass
whose light pulses across our faces.
I want to dance with her down
the aisle, twirling between white lace and clip-on ties,
faster and faster until we spread our bodies
before the altar of bread and blood.

She wants
my freckles.

Our teacher leads the precious lambs,
A great smile in her lit eyes.
She flies past us.
The piano begins to pound.
How will it taste?
Will it be coarse and bitter
as tired soles
and rub their willing tongues
smooth?
Will it be soft and salty
as lined palms?
Will it be thick and rich
or fragile and thin
as blood dripping from knee
to chalk-lined pavement?

* 
She and I watch
As our friends, in pressed linen
And crumpled spirits, process
Away from us.

* 
We don't know
how we chose each other.
We know where in the grass
it is safe to whisper.
We know what we can't accept.
What I know
is she is beside me,
last pew on a Friday afternoon,
singing psalms to a God
who will not take us.

Second Prize, Poetry
Mya Green, CAPA High School

Chocolate and Vanilla

TaMisha and I went
to the Sarah Heinz House
building every Tuesday after school.
And every day, we walked into the building hand in hand,
terrified of the white girls
that roamed on every floor.
I was eight years old,
and TaMisha was twelve.
Tuesday was swimming day
so we had to get dressed.
Walking back into the locker rooms,
clinging to TaMisha's left arm,
we staggered through a soul train line
of dirty looks and smirks.
Crammed into one bathroom stall,
we struggled to put our bathing suits on.
We didn't want them to see our skin
or our scars.
Momma once told me that chocolate
and vanilla didn't mix.
We listened for the locker room to clear
of loud chuckles, screams, and wet feet
slapping against the tiles.
Shoulder to shoulder in the tiny stall,
wrapped in our small blue towels,
we tip-toed out of the locker room,
and slid into the showers.
The steaming water burned
my chocolate covered body.
I wanted to know what it felt like
to be popular.
I wanted to have straight, sassy
hair and smooth legs.
Instead, I had hair that I now
saw as nappy, and legs that were
Scrawny and useless.
As we stepped out of the showers
onto the cold, damp floor, the steam
followed us to the pool
Jill, the gym teacher, rolled her eyes
at us.
I could see the veins bulging
out of her neck.
She swallowed hard and told us
to get in.
The water rippled rapidly away from us
as we put our toes into the water.
We stayed on the shallow side of the rope.
TaMisha and I couldn't swim
and we would never learn.
I watched the girls punch the volleyball
back and forth over the net.
TaMisha was floating alone in the corner,
practicing how to hold her breath.
I was wishing I could replace
TaMisha with one of those deep-end
girls and hold them under the water,
just long enough so that they reached
the surface gasping for forgiveness.
I floated closer to the rope
So I could watch them play the game,
and I saw them whispering.
I'm sure I heard them say
that I was polluting the water.
A few seconds later, the ball flew
over the rope and hit me in the face.
It hit with a force that sent
blood showering into the pool.
The girls jumped out of the water
sending shrill screams and laughter
bouncing off the walls.
With my busted nose, I cried
climbing out of the pool.
My tears and blood mixed
together and found their way
to the crease of my lips,
tasting like injustice.
I looked back into the pool,
and like vinegar and oil,
my blood separated in the water.
Jill moved slowly toward me
and told me to go to the nurse.
TaMisha and I walked down the hall
in our wet bathing suits.
shivering and feeling half naked,
we walked on the cold marble floor,
searching for the door that said "nurse".
When we reached the office,
there was another girl there,
stretched out on the resting bench
holding an icepack on her pale, blue ankle.
The nurse gave me a plastic bag
with three ice cubes in it,
instead of a pack,
and made me sit in a rusted,
brown chair with particles of paint
falling from it.
I was sent home twenty minutes later,
holding that baggy of warm water
up to my face.
My nose was red, scratched, and swollen.
Little drops of warm blood trickled
down and stained the little hairs
above my lip.
Every time I snarched my face
or had the motive to sneeze, my nose
shriveled up and made my eyes water.
TaMisha kept telling me it was going to be o.k.
And at that moment, I knew that it wasn't.
"O.k." was her way of saying that it wouldn't
Happen again.
Or that it would, just not to me.
Ever since I was a child,
My momma told me to be proud
That I was black.
Walking out of the building, I knew
I had let her down.
My pride had been shattered into pieces
by a single game of volleyball.
When we got home, I told momma everything.
She took us out for ice cream
to try and cheer us up.
"Thank you for being strong,'
She said, looking at me from the back seat
in the rearview mirror.
I forced a smile on my face
which sent a sharp pain through my cheeks.
My nose still felt broken.
When we arrived, the lady asked
us what flavor we wanted.
When TaMisha chose chocolate and vanilla
swirl, I looked at her.
I chose strawberry.

Third Prize, Poetry
Lauren Kelly-Chew, The Ellis School

I Walk In the Leaves

I watch the rain

sing. The sidewalk is a stream I race
down, a drum of leaves.

I see its color,

fall
down my skin.

It feels like a peach I skinned

this morning. The juice rained

On my hands and fell

in my mouth. Thick sweetness raced

Down my throat, and colored

in my leaving

Thirst. An amber leaf,

Settles, gives the street a skin.

A picture splatter-painted with color.

A river flows down the sidewalk of rain.
The sky is a race
Of bright shadows falling.

My hands are gentle, and hold the pouring falls.

I leaf
Through layers of water racing,
dancing as they hit the ground, drowning my skin.

Wetness reigns
my body, soaks my clothes, has no color.

Kids say I was colored
with permanent marker, but no one notices now. A sun slowly joins the fall,
drenches the rain,
leaving
through the skin
of air, changing its race.

My feet are erased,
color
Sits on my skin.

Fall covers me.

My shoes leaf
through the orangeness. I open my mouth to drink the rain.

Music drops from the sky, races to my ear. Chalk runs into the wet fall.

I feel my dark, pruned color smiling. The ground—relieved.

Water coats my skin. I catch a leaf, shut my eyes, listen to the rain.
Third Prize, Poetry
Linnea Robison, CAPA High School

when we become hip-hop

twisting his body
into distortions of the human form
he is angelic
silhouetted by the lights behind him
defying gravity
abusing inertia

he spins
and we stand
in a jagged circle around him
the smoke
the lack of oxygen
intoxicating
electrifying

we all breathe this air
in this space
inhaling cold breath
exhaling life
the smoke and lights make all of us
transparent
pillars of darkness against
the brightness
signifying humanity

the rhythm
forces our hearts
to beat along
forces our blood
to remember African drums
we can all feel
the ground shake

we all came from Africa
no matter what sun or wind or cold
has done to us since
we are all moved by its simplicity
the aching heart turned
upside down

a man on stage moves his lips
so fast that it has taken time
for me to learn
understanding
but I can now see
this music is mine, too
it belongs to anyone
willing to listen

opening ourselves into the music
we are angels in form
some with stronger arms
to dance with
some with faster tongues
to speak with
some who can magic vinyl
into a new form

we are all taken
different kinds of wood
split down the middle
and exposed
different textures
from the same earth
formed into drums
controlled by the same force
the same heartbeat
and all changes are forgotten.
Honorable Mention, Poetry
Katherine Patrick, Sewickley Academy

Minority

The irony of the word
Curls on my lips and folds my brow
The concept is unclear
Yet its history manages to keep us down
Though the chains are gone
We are still ruled by the "old days"

"Minority"
when combined
is more than the half of the country's population
Despite the battle, the wars
The sacrifices and the pains
The dreams, the disappointments,
The tears and the gains,
It's still a white man's world.
Where those who are smart
Dance to their uneven tune
Losing the vibrant ethnic beat
Whose rolling rich rumble
makes the dust dance around
skipping feet.

Honorable Mention, Poetry
Diane Ghogomu, Taylor Allderdice High School

Friend

I hate black girls
she informed me
thrown out as nonchalantly as the morning paper
boldly and matter-of-factly
as told to a biracial girl
the room stopped
the walls and chairs and tables
stood quietly, awaiting
because I'm mixed
I am neither race
not black or white
transparent
I'm each, both
a union
of ancestors, history, family
inseparable bond
or so I believe
don't you think that's a little racist
my voice jagged with sorrow
my mind dripping with questions
fair-skinned cheeks reddened
she glanced up at me with bashful eyes
you know what I mean
she mumbled
realizing she insulted
ALL of me
relatives, memories, and friends
cultures, tendencies
shaken throughout me
she switched subjects quickly
chatting mindlessly
the room went about its business
though the walls and chairs and tables
were tainted forever more.
Honorable Mention, Poetry
Rachel Gross, Winchester Thurston High School

Blind Rice

tan lights
green lights
no shoes
on beat box
pick your afro
butter cream your skin.
Stand at the front of the
auditorium slamming poetry
Like you are better than me.
But it wasn't always like this.
Once, a very long time ago,
you were property.
You didn't own anything
you were just owned.
You worked the fields
like you were an animal.
But now, now that you
have your freedom, you look
at me with hatred.
Hatred as if I was the one
who did this to you.
You look at me and think
to yourself, "daddy's little
white princess."
Well guess what
stop being so self
righteous and open your eyes.
I'm from a tiny island in Asia.
My family was born and
raised there.
My ancestors were owned,
just like yours,
but they didn't work the fields,
they worked in the rice patties.
We have gone through our
own share of hardship.
and just because I
am not black doesn't
mean I don't have a dream.
Just like Martin, I have a dream.
A dream where blacks, whites,
reds, yellows, and browns alike
will all be able to wake
up one day and say,
"we are equal.
I am not better or worse
than my neighbor."
So tell me my friend,
are you too black
to be my neighbor?
Honorable Mention, Poetry
Katie Sweeney, Perry Traditional Academy

Discrimination

They hate you because you’re different
In your clothes, your hair, and skin
And the worst thing about you
Is you’re nothing like them

Dive headfirst
Into a pool of hate
Drown in ignorance
Because you can’t relate

They want you to conform,
To be perfect just like them
Buy their clothes, watch their shows
Play dress up and pretend

Dive headfirst
Into a pool of hate
Drown in ignorance
Because you can’t relate

Honorable Mention, Poetry
Maya White, Perry Traditional Academy

Am I Not Good Enough?

Nigger is what some of you white girls
Call me.
White girl, is what some of you black
Girls call me.
What am I, not good enough for
Either of you?
You each have a place when you sit down
For lunch.
There is no room for me.

You see, some of you white girls don’t
Want anything to do with me because
I’m black.
Or maybe, just too black for you.
But that’s a whole other poem.
This is for you black girls.

"you talk white" or “why do you act the
way you do?”
It’s a question that you all love to ask me.
Well, that is not the case.
I talk proper
The way our ancestors longed to talk.
Our ancestors fought to be so educated.
Some died trying to do so.
Yet, you still like talking in an
Uneducated manner.

We are very fortunate
To be getting educated.
You all do not appreciate that.
Yes, I do understand that every culture
Has its slang.
But there is a place to talk slang.
And there’s a place to talk proper.
I know the difference.
So when you open your mouth to talk
About me, remember this:

We all came from Africa
We were all on the slave ships
Together.
We were all slaves
Together.
We all fought and struggled
Together.
We watched our family and friends die
Together.
And we all faced racism
Together.

So whenever you laugh and talk about me
Think about this. I’ve bettered myself
From that which we once were.
I’m at an educated stage where
Our ancestors would be proud.

Now let me ask you this question —
Where are you?

First Prize, Prose
Laura L. Morris, Carnegie Mellon University

Not Today

Missing coats and hats were found, the first aid kit was
stocked, the kids were on the bus. That is, all the kids but one. I
sat under the teacher’s desk and refused to come out. My hands
were wrapped around the grating in the back in case anyone tried to
pull me out. My legs were spread wide against the front, making it
impossible for anyone to budge me. My teeth were barred. But I
was only boycotting the field trip.

“Marissa, come on. Everyone’s waiting on you.” Mrs.
Pritchard used her biggest smile on me – full of teeth. I didn’t
budge. I could see through her phony smile. I knew she was mad,
and I knew she would show her true colors if I stayed under the
desk any longer. I’d seen her show them before, but never on me.
I loved her; she was my teacher and my friend. Mrs.
Pethel, my third grade teacher, used to make fun of me if I couldn’t
pronounce a word. Mrs. Pritchard helped me. She encouraged
me to try, and I got better. I started reading because I liked to.
If other kids made fun of me, she stopped it. She didn’t
let anyone pick on anyone else. She taught us that we were all dif-
f erent colors, but God loved us just the same. That’s why he made
us different. She was my friend.

“We’re going to leave whether you’re coming or not.”
She started to get up, to walk out of the classroom. Then she
sighed and knelt down in front of her desk again. “I thought
you wanted to go! Come on!”

Her face was starting to turn red, but I held my ground
and shook my head stubbornly. Somewhere in the back of my head
I was wondering what my mom would think of this. She’d proba-
bly tell me a girl of ten shouldn’t be acting like a baby. She might
even whip me, but I didn’t think so. Maybe if I explained my side
of the case she’d forgive me.

“Here comes Mr. Thorne, Marissa. He looks mad.”
Mrs. Pritchard looked at me hopefully, but I just stared back at her.
My dad told me a long time ago that the best thing to do is not to
back down. Just like a cat, if it looks away before you do, you’ve
won. She looked away first but pretended it was only because of
the principal’s entrance. I knew better - I’d won.

She stood, dusting herself off in the process. I could see Mr. Thorne’s shiny black shoes walk toward her. I couldn’t see the expression on his face, but I could feel it in his words. He was angry, and I was the cause.

“Why hasn’t the bus left yet?”

Mrs. Pritchard didn’t say anything, but Mr. Thorne kneeled down and peered back at me. Then he straightened himself up and whispered something to the teacher.

“I don’t know!” she squealed. “She won’t budge. And I’m going to pull my hair out soon.” She was cracking; I could hear it in her voice. It was already high and nasally. I had never made her sound like that before. Usually I did everything that was asked of me. I never complained. I was the model student. That is, until today.

Mr. Thorne bent down and tried to pull me free, but I held on with all my might. He was grunting and groaning, his knees cracking with each attempt. He got one of my legs free and it was waving wildly in the air. I didn’t have control of it any longer. All I could do was wave that leg and keep my death grip on the desk. My leg was reaching for something solid, and he grabbed it in his hand. But his grip wasn’t tight enough. Seconds later it was free again, waving wildly in the air until it met with his face. I could see him throw back, blood starting to pour from his lip. He grabbed hold of his mouth and stood shakily.

I didn’t want to hurt him; but I couldn’t go on the field trip either. We were going to the fish hatchery, but it was in Mannington. My sister told me all about Mannington, how they still had their rebel flags, how they burned crosses in people’s yards, how they didn’t like anyone who didn’t have snow white skin.

I was in my room packing all the things Mrs. Pritchard told us we’d need for the field trip when my sister walked in. She plopped her butt down right on top of my pile of supplies.

“Get up!” I urged, pulling on her arm. “You’re sitting on my stuff!”

She rose slowly and glanced down at it. “Where you going?”

“The fish hatchery.”

“No you’re not.”

“Yes I am, tomorrow. A field trip.”

“It’s in Mannington,” she said ominously. “You can’t go to Mannington. They don’t like people like us there.”

I just stood and looked at her. She was always trying to scare me, to make me believe her lies. She liked to laugh at me afterward.

“I’m serious Marissa. Only white people live in Mannington. They don’t like us there.” Her eyes were big, bigger than I’d ever seen them. She was scared - really scared, not just pretending. Suddenly I didn’t feel so happy about the field trip. When she told me about all the things they do to dark people in Mannington, I was terrified.

I wasn’t going into Mannington. I wasn’t going to let them hurt me because my skin wasn’t pure white. Instead, I was going to fight with all my might and not let go of that desk until the bus was back with all the other kids. Mom would understand. She had to. She went to Mannington, but that was only because she had white skin, white skin with silky black hair.

I believed my sister, and that’s why I wasn’t going. My skin was too dark, my hair too curly. I wouldn’t get out alive - that’s all I could think.

“Marissa.” It was Mr. Thorne, leaning down to me, but not getting too close. He had a handkerchief pressed up to his bleeding mouth, and I was suddenly sorry. I could see the red pulsing out onto the white cloth with each beat of his heart. I was sorry I’d done it, but it couldn’t be helped. “We’re going now. And you’re going too.” His voice had a kind of finality in it, but I couldn’t let go of the desk.

It turns out I didn’t have to. The next thing I knew Mr. Campbell and Mr. Donaldson were in the room too. They, along with Mr. Thorne and Mrs. Pritchard, grabbed hold of my legs and pulled as hard as they could. This time there were two on each one so they wouldn’t make the same mistake twice. I felt like I was being quartered. My arms were pulling in one direction, while they pulled my legs in another. It was too much for me. My arms let go suddenly, and the four teachers flew backwards as I slid across the floor, my dress rising to my waist. I could feel the blood rushing to my face and felt like a boiled lobster. Everyone was staring at my Tuesday underwear.

I curled up in the middle of the floor and cried. I couldn’t help it. My resolve to stay was gone, but my fear wasn’t. The
teachers stood over me, suddenly uncomfortable in their newfound win. I didn’t even glance at them. My thumb went into my mouth, something I hadn’t done in years, and I lay crying and sucking my thumb, feeling like the entire world wanted to see me die. It wasn’t just those people in Mannington. It was the people at my school. I saw utter hatred in their eyes.

My sister told me to be careful of people who want to take you to Mannington. If they have white skin, they have no clue. She told me about the girl in the class ahead of her who told everyone that people spit on her in the street. They treated her like an animal. I wasn’t an animal. West Virginia or not, I wasn’t going to be treated like I was inferior.

It felt like flames were leaping from my teachers’ pupils and falling onto my little body, trying to make it darker, blacker, than it already was. I was contorting and twisting on the floor, trying to dodge the flames, but I just looked like a little girl having a temper tantrum.

“Marissa,” Mrs. Pritchard said in her normal voice. I opened my eyes and saw her kneeling beside me. Everyone else was gone. I could see Mr. Thorne waiting on the other side of the door, but he was talking to the other teachers. “Sit up honey.”

With those words of love, she suddenly looked like the teacher I’d known all year long, the woman who loved me, dark skin and all. I sat up. I looked into her eyes and could feel them searching for something in mine. But they were still full of tears ready to brim over with the slightest provocation.

“Now, talk to me. Why don’t you want to go with everyone else?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t. How could this lady with blonde hair understand what they did to dark people in Mannington?

“It’s going to be fun,” she went on, pretending she hadn’t expected an answer. “All the other kids are excited, and you’re letting them down. They’re all sitting there on the bus, ready to go. But we’re waiting for you. You don’t want to let everyone down do you?”

“No,” I whispered.

Her eyes brightened. “Then let’s go.” She stood, her hand held out to help me up, but I just sat on the floor and stared at her, shaking my head no with the brimming tears now falling freely down my cheeks. She sighed and sat in front of me, Indian style, just like we used to in kindergarten.

“Oh? If you tell me what’s wrong, we can fix it.”

“I can’t go to Mannington. They don’t like dark girls there. My sister told me. They hate us. They kill us.” Sobs were rising in my throat and I was choking to get them back down. I needed to tell Mrs. Pritchard the truth. For some reason I suddenly felt that if she knew the truth she’d cancel the whole field trip. She’d be outraged at the gross prejudice in Mannington, and the entire trip would be canceled. Then, I’d be everyone’s hero, the one who saved the entire class from ruin. “I can’t go. No one can who isn’t white.”

I looked up, done with my confession. Instead of horror in Mrs. Pritchard’s eyes, I could see laughter. Then, her eyes couldn’t hold all that laughter, and it moved to her mouth. Her smile turned big and her laugh was loud. Because there wasn’t enough room for all that laughter in her mouth, it started to spill out of her eyes in the form of tears. But they weren’t the same as my tears. They were tears of mirth. Seeing the horror on my face, she leaned over and hugged me. “I’m not laughing at you honey. It’s just that that stuff doesn’t happen anymore, not in Mannington or anywhere else. It used to, but not now. Whoever told you that was wrong.”

Here she looked in my eyes for some sign that I trusted her. I looked at her in defiance as long as I could, but I had to look away. This time, I’d lost the staring game, but it was because I knew she was wrong. And you can’t tell your teacher that she’s wrong.

“I promise. Nothing’s going to happen there.” She paused. “Do you believe me?”

She looked at me for some sign that I did, but my chin was plastered to my chest and I was playing with the tassels on the sash of my dress. She lifted my chin, forcing me to look at her. “Do you believe me?”

“No,” I whispered before looking down again.

I could hear her sigh and get up. I could hear her footsteps, heavy in defeat as they moved towards the door. Then, I could hear both her and Mr. Thorne’s footsteps come back to me.

“Oh, young lady. I’ll tell you what we’re going to do,” Mr. Thorne said with the fake cheerfulness he always used. “You and Mrs. Pritchard are going to stay together for the whole day. Nothing’s going to happen to you. Okay?”
I nodded yes, because after you've kicked your principal in the face, there's not much more you can do that same day without getting into trouble. I let them pick me up off the floor and help me toward the door. I could feel my feet moving, but inside, I was frozen still.

They led me from the classroom and down the long hallway toward the front door. I could feel the eyes of teachers on me, but I didn't lift my head. I didn't want to look at them, at the people who didn't understand what I was going through, only that they had a girl who was throwing a tantrum for nothing, for things that didn't happen anymore. It was all too much to bear. I could feel myself being led to my death, like they were leading me to the firing squad. Outside, in the bright sunlight, I felt the lifeless plodding of my feet across the playground, out of the fence, and toward the bus.

At the door of the bus, my mind caught up to everything that had been happening. I could feel my entire body stiffen. Mrs. Pritchard was trying to push me forward, but I couldn't move. Instead, she picked me up and started to carry me to the bus. When we reached the door, my arms and legs suddenly found life in their former lifelessness. They stuck out straight, barring my body from entrance into the bus. I could hear curious children peering out the windows at me. I could hear the labored breathing of Mrs. Pritchard struggling to push me onto the bus. But I couldn't see anything except my arms and legs reaching for something on the sides of the door to hold onto, something that would bar my way onto the bus.

"Marissa!" Mrs. Pritchard screeched. "I've had enough." With that, she let go of me. I could feel myself falling and straightened my legs so I wouldn't fall. But my arms were still reaching for something, anything on the side of the bus.

I could hear an animal-like screech rising from my throat. Now, instead of being gentle like before, Mrs. Pritchard pulled my arms from the sides of the bus and pinned them close to my body. Then, I could feel her lifting me, shoving me onto the bus. Another teacher took me from her arms and pulled me up and onto the front seat. I curled up in the corner. Mrs. Pritchard sat beside me and I could feel myself shrinking from her, from the woman who had forsaken me, who was leading me into the clutches of those people in Mannington.

The bus started up, and I could feel it moving away. I slid slowly from the seat and curled up on the floor. "Marissa! Get up off the floor." She was saying it, but I really couldn't hear it. I was looking down at my arms, at their darkness, watching the tears hit my skin and make it darker.

Now, it was too late. I was on the bus. I couldn't change it, so I wrapped my arms around my body, shaking in both fear and shame, hoping for the best and fearing the worst. Above me, Mrs. Pritchard stared ahead, pretending none of those bad things really happened, not anymore, not today.
Second Prize, Prose
Stephanie Ng, Carnegie Mellon University

Blind Sight

I hear the hum of the dryers and the monotonous buzzing of the large fans that are supposed to cool us down, but don't really. And behind the hum one of the TVs drone on while its brother on the opposite side of the room crackles with constant static. I wrinkle my nose at the smell of cigarette smoke. The hardness of the plastic underneath me keeps me restless and my mind wanders from the book I've brought to keep me company.

I look around the large laundromat as I wait for my clothes to dry and spot a little girl towards the end of the table I'm sitting on. The white t-shirt she's wearing plays in sharp contrast to her ebony skin. She walks this way and that as she waits for her worn-out mother to finish up with the clothes. Her red and white heart shaped beads swing along with the rhythm of her braids. As I'm looking at her, her brown eyes meet mine and I smile. She looks at me with wide eyes for a second and then turns away, taking one last quick glance as she retreating to her mother's side.

I often wonder what people think of me here. A single chinese in a black community. Me, with my pale skin and straight, black hair and small, squinty eyes. Am I the korean cashier at the beauty supply store? Am I the owner of the chinese restaurant at the end of the strip mall?

So one day Pudge and Elbert drop by, as they had been doing for a while. Pudge, with 10 years of wisdom behind his belt, and 8 year old Elbert, with his raspy voice and cute button nose. They haphazardly swing on the hammock we'd installed on the black, rough roof that was the bridge between our two flats.

Pudge, with his tight curls and droopy eyes, looks from Christine back to me. "Is she your sister?" I look at Christine and laugh.

"Pudge! Do you really think we look alike?"
"Yeah! Your faces look the same." We try to briefly explain that she is korean and I am chinese and the fact that we have the same hair color doesn't mean we're sisters.

"Are you from the place where there's the fat people and they fight?" It takes me a little longer to figure out exactly what they're talking about. And then we cheerfully offer another explanation of sumo wrestlers and the japanese. We hope they understand even though their young minds haven't begun to delve deep into the issues of race. Or have they?

"Can I have another freeze pop?" Elbert asks, holding out the remains of an already spent freeze pop. Traces of artificial orange still cling to the side of the plastic. He looks at me with a grin I can't refuse.

The girls and the boys love playing with my smooth, untangled hair as I sit on the yellow and orange Fisher-Price table in the church's nursery. There's a reason I didn't cut it before I came, despite the fact that I'm tempted to shave it all off after a long day of heat and humidity. But I endure for the sake of the children.

Jamal climbs into my lap and rubs my hair against his face before he lays his head on my shoulder. I rub his almost bare head and feel the wiry coarseness. Behind me little Cornisha deftly weaves my hair into a braid that liberates itself the moment her tiny hand lets go. Then Jamal sits up and looks into my face with his big beautiful eyes. "Miss Stephanie, I gotta use it."

As I walk along the sidewalk, I feel a little nervous. Is it just the new surroundings? Perhaps. The wide street is bordered by buildings the church has converted into a gymnasium, a development center, and the Garden, where I will work as a teacher. I walk past the green doorway of the Hope House, a Christ-based rehab center, where a couple of daunting black men stand gathered. I look at them and hazard a smile, but quickly avert my gaze without ever meeting their eyes and continue on my way. What do they see me as? A timid little Asian girl who's intruding on their territory? Hoping to stay for 6 weeks, make their world a better place, and then leave?

"You shouldn't come here expecting to change things," says Scott, a tall bald guy as Caucasian as they come. "We're here to learn from them. We build up their community from the inside, not from the outside." In the heat of the noonday sun and the artificial breeze created by fans placed strategically around the room we nod and wait for more. I've just arrived here, in this Chicago community called Lawndale.

I climb the narrow wooden stairs not knowing what to expect and am greeted by a sparse living area with large rooms that have no doors. I'm told that there will be three girls in each room
and I toss my bag onto one of the sagging mattresses. The walls are a freshly painted white with salmon colored windowills, hiding the traces of its past. But the darkened wooden floor reveals its scars left by previous inhabitants. I walk through the flat, across the roof into the other flat. It's similar to its sister, except with a light curtain drawn across the room where the guys will be sleeping. I'm a little disappointed despite the fact that, coming from the wonderful town of suburbia, I claimed to have no expectations, and I don't think I'm the only one. We complain about the lack of shower hooks and the rickety porch steps made of scrap wood and cement blocks.

Later on, Scott's wife Haley confesses in a sharp voice the hurt she felt from our lack of appreciation. "You should have seen what it looked like before. The Hope House guys spent days repairing and painting it." So we feel ashamed and cut a card out of construction paper, hoping to show even a slice of our gratitude for their efforts. And we come to fall in love with the place, despite the mouse we affectionately name Scrappy and the perpetually clogged bathtub. At least the girls don't have to take bucket baths like the guys do.

We've come here from different backgrounds to discuss God and racial reconciliation, 5 whites, 3 blacks and 2 asians. They toss around terms like "white privilege" and "ethnic identity" that flirt through my brain in the beginning but eventually begin to take hold. We watch movies about the Rodney King riots and blacks in the south. We talk about black community building and the effects of slavery. We try to create open communication in our own house to join us together across the boundaries of race. My mind churns as I try to process the information and regurgitate what I've just learned, but I find myself mentally gagging Black versus white. White versus black. Black versus korean. Hispanic versus black. Where do I fit in? So I try to sit unobtrusively in the corner of the sagging couch as my mind draws a blank and I feel Haley's eyes burning into my head so I avoid her gaze.

Christine talks about how she feels intimidated by blacks, and I nod my head in agreement, thinking back to the walk on the street. But then after I reflect on it as I lie on my bed, staring at the white ceiling, I realize that I'm intimidated by everyone, asians included.

I often wonder how people see us when we go out to eat or shop at the nearest Walmart. Do we look like one big happy family? Whites and blacks and asians all getting along? But we know we all have walls in our hearts that we're trying to break down. And sometimes those walls are thick and stubborn but everyone's is starting to crumble.

One day as I'm scrubbing fan parts in the bathtub, Elbert is kneeling beside me as he tries to help me clean with the little toothbrush in his hand. "So, Elbert, what do you think of all of us living together?"

"It's weird. Blacks shouldn't live with whites."

"Why is that?"

"Because blacks are mean." I look at little Elbert, who thinks that staying out in the sun makes blacks white and who has a raspy voice from being beaten up by his sister. I look at him and feel like crying.

"No, that's not true."

I'm sitting with Tracey, helping to undo her braids. "Just cut off the rubberbands. It takes too much time to try to pull them off in one piece." So I learn to carefully cut the rubberband without getting her hair, pull off the smooth little cowie shell, place it in the plastic container, and undo the braids that have controlled her hair for the past couple weeks. Soon her hair has free wild reign again. "You know," says Scott. "Tracey is being very open to you all. While whites have a body image, blacks have a hair image. Letting you guys see her hair like this is like letting you see her naked." And I begin to understand. A couple days later, I have graduated to helping her braid so that she can sleep. I learn the routine of conditioner and water. The texture of her hair and the greasiness of the conditioner feels foreign in my fingers. And I feel privileged to be shown such an important part of their culture.

On a Saturday Scott and Christine drive us to the Little Village, an hispanic area adjacent to Lawndale. We get to their bustling main street as the sky just finishes drizzling. My eyes and mind take a little while to get used to the sight of tanned skin, and black skin is curiously absent. We walk up and down the store-crowded street, looking in the cheerful bakeries and at the colorful murals depicting different aspects of hispanic culture. We stop at an ice cream store and enjoy the surroundings while licking the sweetness off the cones. Mark strikes up a conversation in Spanish with an old man who tells the story of his immigration.
As we're driving back to familiar Lawndale, I remember what I learned about how banks don't consider black communities good investments so they don't establish any there. Instead, blacks use the check cashing places that drain their money and grow up not knowing any better. I remember seeing a bank in the Little Village. And Lawndale doesn't have a main street. As we cross the railroad tracks we are back. There aren't any hispanics on this side of the tracks. But it's the sadness of Lawndale that makes me love it even more.

I'm holding a bunch of colorful construction paper strips. "Ok, so we're going to make a prayer chain. I'll write down your prayer requests and make it into a chain so you'll remember to pray for whatever is on it. You can tell me anything that we should pray for." I receive blank looks from my kindergarten class. Arthur fidgets in his seat. My teacher and teacher's aide, Deborah and Keigia, stand in the back waiting as I finish up the spiritual development section of the day. I rack my brain to come up with a kindergarten explanation. "Umm, if there's anybody who's sick we can pray for them to get better." Felicia with her loose, twisted ponytails raises her hand with a smile on her face. "Yes, Felicia?"

"Well, my cousin went to the store and then somebody hit him over the head with a stick, and then he got knocked out and he's in a coma."

In disbelief and not knowing whether Felicia's looking for attention again or whether she's being truthful, I ask her, "How old is he?"

"25." A week later, we hear fire engines and see puffs of smoke down at the corner two blocks away. A woman dies in her house after it's burnt down from an overloaded electrical circuit. But the other story we hear is that her son was playing with firecrackers.

The first and last nights at the house we hear a woman screaming at a man on the corner of Cermak and Ogden. We rush to look out the window to see the man hitting the woman. Latina calls the police.

"Don't look out the window like that," she has to warn us both times, "You don't want people to know that you were watching."

As we walk across Ogden to pay a visit to the beauty supply store, I happen to glance back and see a man standing in an open door a couple doors down from our flat. "The Hope House guys have got your backs," Haley tells us. Once we're safely across the street and I look back, the Hope House door is closed.

I'm sitting at the miniature table on a miniature chair with 4-year old Lena, watching her distractedly finish up the homework her parents have given her. "Come on, Lena. You want to finish them before your dad comes so that you can show him what you've done. Now what rhymes with 'cat.'" Sweet little Lena looks at her sheet and giggles. "Bat!" As she reads her paper I am amazed. Her dad taught her and her brother how to read when they were 3. She hasn't started kindergarten yet, but she can read better than any of the kids in our class.

And then there's sad-eyed Stanley who struggles to write his numbers but can already shoot baskets with his kindergarten strength. Will he grow up to be a rich and famous basketball player? That's the dream of every boy. Some of them believe that it's the only way they'll ever make it big in the world. But Lena's dad knows better so he pushes his children even at their young age. Little Lena gives me hope, but then my heart sinks again when Artaesia tells me that she doesn't have anything to write with for the homework that she's volunteered to take home. The only pen in the house belongs to her grandmother, and I think about the stash of pencils I have in my desk that I will probably never use.

One day we go on a prayer march with the Hope House men. I envision our going around in groups of two and threes praying for random people on the streets. A man with a bullhorn shatters that illusion. He leads us in singing rousing songs as we stop in front of A's Submarine Shop. He shouts into the store and the owner comes out. "We know what you're doing in there!" The owner shrugs, looking annoyed. So the bullhorn goes on. "You're dealing drugs in there! Stop selling drugs to our kids! Stop killing our kids!" The people in the crowd loudly "amen." Then the chant goes up. "Down with dope! Up with hope! Down with dope! Up with hope!" We say a prayer for the store and continue down the street singing. As we march and sing and pray and shout, I am reminded of the pied piper as we attract crowds and a following of kids with nothing better to do on a summer day. Finally we are finished, and, exhausted but uplifted, we return home.

That's how I feel all the time. Exhausted but uplifted. Glimpses of hopelessness mixed with glimpses of hope. I work
alongside Deborah and Kegia and accept them and their direct ways of communication as they accept me, not as the universal Asian but as the college sophomore struggling to keep the kids quiet in the gentlest way possible. I do my best to teach the kids, but I find myself learning from them even as I chase Arthur and Jamal around the room for the fourth time because they won’t sit still. As I constantly brace myself for conflict in the house. I also open up to their love. I learn to see differently but it doesn’t come without effort. I need to struggle with the brick barriers of my own heart that obstruct my view. I want to see people more as people and less as colors.

I watch my load of colors as it spins in the washer. a blur. Out of the corner of my eye I see the little girl in her white t-shirt walking down the aisle. As my brown eyes connect with hers, I venture a smile and she smiles back.

Third Prize, Prose
Sindya Narayanaswamy, Carnegie Mellon University

The Mirror of History

September 11, 2001, the day of the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, was a day for which years of mourning will not suffice. Repercussions of the event only brought sorrow upon sorrow, one of which is the persecution that Arab-Americans, Muslims and South Asian people have been facing since the Saudi extremist Osama Bin Laden was first suspected of planning and executing the attack. Retaliation of this type is a chilling recurrence. Historically, racial discrimination has occurred time and time again. Native Americans, African Americans and Japanese Americans have all faced the horror of being hated for the sole reason of being born of a certain skin color and ethnicity. But justice is not lost to cyclical evil. History is also a springboard for hope and a steppe look at it gives us examples of rectification and righteousness.

It is instinctive for us to retaliate against pain. Pain was what September 11th brought; and its retaliation has been devastating. Countrywide, there have been racially motivated incidents of murders, beatings, arson, firebombs and threats. A few days after September 11th, Balbir Singh Sodh, a Sikh and native of India was shot and killed in his gas station in Phoenix by a masked man. On September 16th, Waqar Hasan, a grocer of Pakistani origin, was murdered in Dallas. Amrik Singh Chawla, a turbaned Sikh, was chased into a subway station by a gang of young men who yelled out “Terrorist” and then threatened his life. Racial slurs have also increased in frequency. Muslim mosques, holy places of worship for the Islamic community have been targets for gunshots, rocks and misguided words of hatred. Followers of the Sikh religion face harassment for wearing their traditional turbans and long beards. Muslim women, who observe “hijab” and cover their hair and face, live in fear of becoming targets of animosity.

Such behavior is not new to society. Historically, in the U.S. alone, groups of people have been victims of persecution simply because of their ethnicity. Native Americans faced severe torture and genocide by the first Europeans who came to North America. African Americans were slaves, pieces of property - bought, sold and used - until the late 1800’s. They continued to face open ine-
quality and segregation clear through the 1960s. During World War II, Japanese-Americans felt the animosity that America felt towards Japan. Approximately 120,000 Japanese in the United States, two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were evacuated from their homes and put into prison-like camps.

As history has progressed, however, racial discrimination has become an act of the minority rather than the majority. In the days of early settlement, kindness on the part of Europeans towards Native Americans was a rare site. During the Civil Rights era, many Whites marched alongside Martin Luther King in his cry for equality for Blacks, but many others accepted segregation and inequality. Today, the problem is not as extreme. We live side by side, and in harmony, with people of all backgrounds and religions. We face a much smaller group of people that act irrationally and violently.

However, the problem of discrimination still exists and remains large enough to be addressed. Discriminatory behavior is not a phenomenon that must inevitably recur. There is potential for societal reform, and it comes in the form of education. Just as children learn to think before acting, we, as a society, can learn to understand the innate fallacies in bigotry, prejudice, and stereotyping.

In the same sense that parents provide guidance to children, social reform requires the guidance of great leaders. History reminds us of some of the leaders who revolutionized society with their words and charisma - Martin Luther King Jr., Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela. King fought ardently for the rights of African Americans in the United States; Gandhi brought freedom to Indians from the tyranny of the British; and Mandela secured life and liberty for Black South Africans. These leaders worked wonders by speaking their minds and by showing strength through persistence and determination, but not violence. They fasted for days and weeks, walked miles upon miles, and spent time in jail - all for the love of a people, for the belief in humanity and for the hope of realizing a dream. The brave acts of everyday people have made an equally important difference. Rosa Parks, the woman who dared to sit down on a bus in a section reserved for whites, has gone down in history for her courage. Her single act brought renewed vigor and strength to the Civil Rights cause. The racial crimes that we face in the 21st century can be fought in the same manner - with education, inspirational leadership, and heroic men and women who have the courage to take a stand.

The brave souls today who fight to uphold the motto of this nation - to be a land with "Liberty, and Justice for All," will be tomorrow's saviors. They will move our country forward, away from a black hole of hatred that promises nothing but darkness. Shortly after September 11th, Attorney General John Ashcroft met with leaders representing Islamic, Sikh and Arab-American communities to discuss violent acts against these groups. He, along with President George Bush, has been speaking out against acts of racial discrimination since September 11th. In Pittsburgh, on November 1st, a young woman, only 5 feet tall and 105 pounds named Hannah Mumma was walking home and saw a white man of medium height punching and kicking a darker-skinned younger man while screaming, "Are you from Afghanistan? I'm going to kill you!" Hannah ran in between the two men and began screaming for the attacker to calm down. Eventually, she was able to dial 911 and neither she nor the young man being attacked were injured. Once again, history serves as a mirror. It is optimistic this time, as the courage of Rosa Parks manifests itself in people like Hannah Mumma and our leaders call upon us to unite in love and protest hatred.

Nearly 40 years ago, Martin Luther King Jr. said "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a world where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." His words pounded through the nation that day in 1963, and they continue to ring in the ears of Americans today. We see that racism and injustice are not battles that have ended, but battles that must still be fought, fearlessly and tirelessly, with the hope that one day dreams of equality and justice will be realized.
Honorable Mention, Prose
Jennifer Schauf, Carnegie Mellon University

At Midnight

Rae sat across from me in the wine-colored booth years ago at the Mom and Pop Deli-Style Restaurant. There were only about six booths and four tables in the entire place and a counter off to the side where people could buy cheeses, meats and egg or wheat bread. The walls were painted a timid shade of yellow, a fitting background for the black-and-white photos and signatures of people, no one famous, who had come into the restaurant since its opening two years ago.

Rae began to light up a cigarette, but her gaze fell on the "No Smoking" sign at the corner of our table. She looked around her, checking to see if anyone was there; the large, hairless man behind the counter, his arms staunchly crossed, his eyes glossed over and an undistinguishable tattoo on his white-as-flour forehead hol-lered, "It's only about an hour before close. No one'll probably be in. Smoke all ya want." He took a few shaky steps back from the counter, and his gut jiggled as though it was trying to escape his massive body.

Rae nodded her head at him and lit her cigarette. She took a quick puff and then whispered, "I'll bet "Mr. Pop" over there has been smoking in the back room, if you know what I mean." Her laugh floated up with the ringlets of smoke. I remember how she tilted her head back, and the laughs came out in short, abrupt spurts and then escalated into one long guffaw.

While I sipped on my lemon water, I noticed Rae's slender, hairless arm (she waxed quite often) while she began to fish through the bag on her seat.

"I have to show you these bridal magazines," she mumbled, with the cigarette between her teeth. We had spent the entire evening at David's Bridal and Wedding World in search of dresses for Rae's upcoming nuptials, but nothing seemed to fit the image that she had in mind.

"I want something that resembles my mother's dress," she said, as she produced the magazines from her bag.

I gazed at her olive complexion, her oval face and the gray eye shadow that matched her Ralph Lauren periwinkle top with the suede spaghetti straps. "I know you do. You really should hire someone to make the dress you want. You still have that picture of your mom's dress, right?"

Rae straightened up in the booth, stamping out her cig-arette in the napkin, since there was no ashtray. "Yes, I do. You're right. I should've thought to bring it with me today." She began to laugh. "I knew I asked you to be my maid of honor for some rea-son."

Rae and I had been friends for about two years. I first met her when she was in charge of an animal rights' rally outside the biology class I took my junior year at New York University. I was trying to fix the strap on my backpack after class when she shoved a microphone in my face.

"Do you enjoy killing innocent animals in biology class?"
I looked down at my dirty sneakers, the yellow fading into a muddy brown. "Well, we haven't..."

I looked up at her piercing eyes that seemed to shoot holes in my skull, one bullet at a time. The other members of her organization glared at me with the same ferocity. I quickly ducked under her microphone and sprinted down the hallway.

I saw Rae later that week when I had biology class again. This time, she pulled me aside and apologized for frightening me. She joked that her "passion" sometimes had that effect on people. She wore a lavender sundress with knee-length black boots, and she showed me pamphlet after pamphlet about the abuse of animals.
Her eyes began to glow more intensely with each word. She had a way of speaking that mesmerized me, brought my knees to pudding, and it felt fantastic. That same day, I bought a sundress from Bloomingdale's and dropped biology.

Ever since that meeting, she had taken me under her wing and had shown me Los Angeles, Europe, the Eiffel Tower and En-lish guys with French accents, one of whom followed us back to America and became Rae's fiancé. After graduation, she and I moved into the same apartment complex in Long Island. Rae was in 3A and I was in 4B, but her marriage to Henrik was taking her to a four-story London home with a Jacuzzi and a three-car garage. The two of them were going to rent the attached guesthouse to me until I was able to get situated in the new city.
"Well, of course, I am your maid of honor, Rae; I know you better than anyone. We've been friends for a long time now," I said as I watched Rae fluff her eyelashes with her pointer finger to make sure that there were no clumps of mascara.

"Oh, I forgot," she suddenly said, her foot tapping loudly on the floor like it usually did when she got an idea or had just remembered something interesting. She rummaged through her bag and pulled out a small box wrapped in gold paper. "This is for you."

"For me?" I asked.

"Of course, silly. Who else is sitting across from me?"

I took the box from her manicured fingers, each nail a different hue of red. I gradually tore off the paper and then stopped to admire the black velvet texture of the box.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Her eyes twinkled with excitement. She pulled out another cigarette from her silver case.

I opened the box and pushed aside the specks of cotton. "Oh, my goodness! Oh, my, it's the gold medallion I saw when we were in England!"

"So you love it, then?"

I placed the medallion against my bare neck. "I adore it, but how...?"

"Let me put it around your neck." She placed her unlit cigarette on the table and came over to my side of the booth. "You know how Henrik went back to England for a few weeks?" I nodded. "Well, I asked him to pick this up for you. It's our gift to you for helping with the wedding." She clasped the medallion around my neck. "There," she said and then walked away from the booth in order to survey the final product from a distance. "It's absolutely gorgeous!"

"You really shouldn't have; it's too much..."

"Nonsense. Just enjoy it." She sat down, pushed her strawberry curls off her shoulder and lit her cigarette.

While I was fingering the round medallion with the engraved cross in the center, I spotted a woman with a pink apron and a white blouse walking tentatively towards us, trying to balance two plates in her hands. "Here comes the waitress."

"Good. I'm starving!" Rae exclaimed, smoke exhaling from her nostrils.

The waitress approached our table, her face partially concealed by the plates she was holding. "Sorry for the wait, ladies. Who gets the grilled cheese?"

"I do," I said. She carefully laid one plate in front of me, the other in front of Rae.

"Your first waitress got ill, and there was this big-to-do with her calling her husband for a ride so I had to get the order ready and it's so late... well, never mind 'bout that. If you need anything, just give a yell. My name's Jasmine." She smiled but in a way that people do when they're tired but are trying hard to be polite. She was a heavyset woman with skin as brown and smooth as a candy bar. Her head was tiny in comparison to the mid-section of her body. When she opened her mouth, she showed her straight, clean teeth. As she walked away and pulled a pencil from behind her ear, I noticed pieces of dark hair with streaks of gray falling out of her bun.

I decided to reach for the ketchup when I heard a small groan.

"Oh, no. I think I got the wrong order," Rae said as she pulled off the lid of her veggie burger and scrutinized the contents. "Yes, it is. I didn't ask for charcoaled."

"There was probably some mix-up when the other woman left," I replied.

"There are no pickles with this either. This definitely isn't the right order." Her fingers probed every inch of her burger. "I can call Jasmine. It's no prob..."

"You know, it's getting kind of late. Why don't we go back to my place and get something to eat? By the time she cooks another burger... anyway, I just know this kind of thing won't happen in London." Her face scrutinized up like the face of the tiny mouse we found in my apartment one evening while watching reruns of "Friends." When we managed to catch it in the kitchen, its nose and whiskers couldn't stop twitching before we set it free outside. I could tell there was something else going on inside of Rae. I looked at the pickles on the corner of my plate. "You can have my pic... But, Rae was already putting on her coat.

"I know mix-ups happen, but I just thought those kind of people were better at serving food. That's all," she said. She turned towards the zipper on her coat, but I could see a redness creep over her face. She was blushing. But, Rae didn't blush. Ever.
She didn't need to; she was always so confident.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

She began to twirl her cigarette around on the napkin, around and around in a haphazard fashion. You know...black people had to serve at one time. I just...

"I don't understand. They had to serve?"

I could tell that she was able to feel the penetration of my eyes and the unexpected sting of my voice. She quickly began to search through her bag, her hands aimlessly moving through its contents. "I just expected, uh, more from people who had no choice but to serve, you know, us, in the past..." Her words came out in fragments; she was like a piece of china that had just fallen to the ground.

She pulled out a wallet from her bag. "Let me leave a little money for the meal. It seems like yours is right." She threw a crumpled wad of ones on the table.

I watched her cigarette burn into ash on the white napkin, smoke clouding the "Tom loves Suzanne" phrase marked all over the back of Rae's seat. I could barely make out Rae standing in front of me, waving her hand.

"Did you hear me, Sherry? I'm going to be outside hail a cab. I'm getting really tired."

I watched the cheese drip from the toasted bread on my plate. My stomach churned. I looked up at Rae, who seemed to be searching my face for something. What it was I didn't know, for I didn't recognize that look. Was it reassurance that she wanted? Or maybe my acceptance? I looked away and slowly began to put on my coat. As I bent down to pick up my purse from under the table, I heard Rae speak. "I know what you're thinking, but I don't have anything against those kind of peeps..." Her voice began to fade as she walked towards the exit; the heels of her shoes clicked against the wooden floor.

When I sat up in the booth, I noticed Jasmine over near the counter.

"Is there a problem, Ma'am?" she asked. I looked into her eyes, eyes that were as brown as my own. I wanted to explain, to apologize, to say anything at all, but I could hear Rae telling a cabdriver to stop.

I touched my medallion, no longer feeling any pride or excitement. Without glancing at the waitress, I got up from the booth and walked out into the chilly night.

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First Prize, Prose
Boaz Munro, CAPA High School

The Rivers

No two rivers are the same color. They can be blue, green, brown, red, and are found in an abundance of shades. One of nature's many fascinating phenomena occurs when two rivers meet. Even after they join, the resulting river often keeps the two colors separate, thereby segregating the integrated.

The year was 1964 and I was a tenth grader at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. The school had been the first one integrated in the South, but I had been so young that my only memories of the event came in blurry black and white photos and equally blurry memories played through the 5 year old mind that had perceived them.

I had no friction with Negroes. I had different eyes than my daddy and different hair than my mama. Why hate peoples' looks? I never saw any sense in it.

But our integrated class was still quite segregated in itself. The black kids sat on one side, the whites sat on the other.

One thing I noticed, which had apparently never been of interest to the makers of the unwritten rule, was the vast spectrum of colors within each group. The "black" students were dark chocolate, milk chocolate, cinnamon, cocoa, one was even a little yellow. None of them were black.

The "white" students were similarly dissimilar. The darkest one, John, a tanned boy from California, was darker than the lighter Negoes. Among the whites, I was an average shade, a bit dark, I guess. Eugene was the only boy on the class who was actually white. He was like a ghost.

And so it was. No one questioned it, not one violated it, and no one talked about it. No one had ever told us to do it. In fact, Mr. Carlson, our very smart teacher, often looked disappointed but wholly unsurprised when he entered the room. He was old, maybe sixty-five, with wispy gray hair that danced like an anemone when he moved. He never said anything about our seating arrangement; maybe I just imagined his disappointed look.

The Negroes and we got along fine. We did stuff together, danced with each other at dances, and shared drinks.
fact, Mary, a Negro, and Jerry, a white kid, were getting along a little too well, if you know what I mean. They'd been going steady since seventh grade.

Then came May. May 1, 1964. As long as I shall live and probably a little longer than that I will never forget what happened that day. It was early that spring morning, but the pink and yellow sky was quickly blending into a confident shade of blue. I walked into class. Eugene, the only other kid in the room, was sitting in his usual seat, somehow looking very intensely at nothing at all. His hands were folded and his feet planted firmly on the ground.

"Hi, Eugene," I said.

"Hello," he said, his icy gaze unwavering from its invisible target.

Two Negro girls, Jamie and Jaqueline entered the room and passed me where I stood, in between the room's two halves. They giggled and gossiped as they entered, their strides relaxed, their heads bent inwards, and sat next to each other in their usual seats. Eugene's entire body tensed. He looked pretty scared.

I sat down as the class began filling up. Only John, the Californian, Sam and Stuart, the Negro twins and Mr. Carlson were still not there.

The Eugene sort of snapped. With great dread exceeded only by resolve, he strode across the room and firmly planted himself in Stuart's vacant seat, next to Jamie. My jaw dropped. Jamie gasped.

"Th-That's Stuart's chair!" she finally protested. Indistinguishable mutterings, mostly of agreement came from her side.

"This is no one's seat," said Eugene quietly. His face was like a star in a black night, a lighthouse on a dark stormy sea, an unwanted stain on a rug.

"Hm," said Jamie. "Fine. Then I'll..." she picked up her bags, "take your seat." She nonchalantly ambled over to his seat.

"Okay," he said, grinning.

"C-mon, Eugene," said Kenny, a Negro. "Why's you makin' everything so complicated?"

Eugene stood up.

"I've been watching this class for a long time," he said, addressing the Negroes. "I'm sure you all are aware of our coincidentally simple seating arrangement. Blacks on one side, whites on the other. How convenient! It's so simple! And easy to remember, too. But do you know what else it is? It is what your parents and grandparents and ancestors have fought for hundreds of years. Segregation! The schools are finally integrated, and you still must segregate yourselves. Take advantage of this! Rejoice in our unity! Learn from each other," he said, now facing the whole class. "Did any of you ever hear of Plessy v. Ferguson? Have any of you heard the phrase separate but equal? Who wants this world to be separate but equal?"

Not a hand was raised.

"There," he said. "It has become our nature to separate! And distinguish! And why skin? Why not separate by shoe size, or gender? Come on, everybody just listen..." He never finished his speech. I had gotten up and sat in Sam's chair. Jaqueline switched with John. More and more kids stood up. Two oceans of color swept across the class and collided. Kids sat down where ever, shaking hands and laughing, rejoicing in the mixed, disorganized frenzy that engulfed the room. The class was in a beautiful mess. Eugene cheered.

Mr. Carlson entered, muttering to himself. He looked up, and grinned so broadly I was afraid his nose would tip in two.

"Good job, class," he smiled. "You are now desegregated."

Ten years later I moved to Pittsburgh. Once, while at the Point, I looked out along the Ohio River. I looked to my right, at the blue-green of the Allegheny, and to my left, at the muddy brown of the Monongahela.

I noticed that even after the two rivers merge to become the Ohio, this great river remains split, blue and brown, down the middle as far as the eye can see.

I remembered 1964 and thought happily to myself that my tenth grade class had beaten nature to tolerance.

Not bad.
Second Prize, Prose
Everett Lauffenburger, CAPA High School

Black Ivory

He was Black, I was merely Blue. I am not referring to race; these were our Kung-fu ranks. As a black belt he was widely considered to be better than I was. I believe that he was merely more experienced. He didn’t care if I had potential, and he was sure that I would never reach his level (after all, I was only blue).

“You can’t bruise me.” His name was Ivory, and while we sparred he refused to wear protective gear. But of course, he wore that shining ebony sash around his waist, the knot falling on his left thigh, a fire in his eyes. Nobody protested (after all, I was only Blue, and he was Black Ivory).

The Sihing of my school is Master White. His name is fitting, as it links the highest level in the school to the lowest. Sihing completes the circle from white to black and back. He allowed Ivory to teach for a short time and Ivory took on the air of one whose head is far too big. He acted like his three levels of seniority qualified him to be the Sihing—the Sifu, even. But I couldn’t say this (after all, I was only Blue, he was Black Ivory, and our Sihing was a Black Belt called White).

Recently I ran into Ivory at a special class. We sparred and he knocked me down. This was a rather normal occurrence when we spar. I have become quite used to pulling myself to my feet. However this time, I saw Ivory reach out to help me up. A confused smile switched onto my face as he hoisted me up.

“Thanks, Dan,” I told him uncertainly. He didn’t have to help me up (after all, I was only Blue, and He was Dan Ivory).

Third Prize, Prose
Shalita “Starr” Gray,

Dipping My Race Beneath the Surface of My Shadow and Rising Three Years Later Still Holding the Same Breath

A breeze shoves its way through the open, ugly, brown paint-chipped windows once every ten minutes causing the dirty beige shades to bend and crinkle like an old newspaper. The sound doesn’t disrupt the high school students, who patiently wait for their teacher to finish giving his lecture, or what I’d like to call a plea for attention.

“We need more participation in this class. You’re all very bright students, and I know you know the answers. I’d really appreciate your comments.”

Almost all the students’ white-fleshed arms — the color of cookie dough and Wrigleys’ spearmint gum — become raised.

“I really need some class participation,” he reiterates, time stressing the work “need.” The other students gradually put their hands down once they realize that he’s looking at the girl in the last row, who is often referred to as a freak by her other English classmates. She continues picking the old black fingernail polish off of her nails although she knows that the teacher is looking right at her. Once I notice that he’s basically asking for all the students in the last row’s attention, I immediately place my head face down on my desk and fold my arms over it.

“I need your attention.” As his footsteps become closer, the dirty cement floor squeaks below the soles of his big black dress boots. My heart pounds as I wait for him to come over to ask me to put my head up. The sound of his footsteps are steady and evenly paced like the sound of faucet water dripping on metal pots in a sink. “Would you mind waking up?” he asks.

“I’m not ‘sleep,’” I say as I raise my head while blinking a couple of times to adjust to the light.

“Then I suppose you have something to say about what we’re talking about then.”

Although the darkness of his green eyes and quietness of his desperate voice plead for attention, I reply a bitter and
untruthful, "No."

He sighs and walks away, making me feel worse than I already made myself feel for not speaking up.

Later that day, I wanted to go to my grandmother crying as I begged her to let me go to a different school, but instead she comes to me first saying that the teacher called and told her I sleep in class and never participate. I don’t deny it either. I just listen as she talks just as my teacher had, her eyes and voice pleading the same plea, except her voice is a little more stern.

We instantly have what she calls a 'talk,' which is basically her talking and me listening because I can’t dare tell her (who’s never afraid to say what’s on her mind in front of anyone) the real reason why I never speak out in class. I am afraid that she’ll think that the fact that I am ashamed of sharing my thoughts and opinions has something to do with my being ashamed of my race. The truth of the matter is I’m not ashamed of my race but ashamed and afraid of being without people of my race. In my other classes, like African American History or gym, I can always voice my opinions and have them accompanied with ‘yeah, girl, that’s right,’ or “I know what you’re saying,” but never in English. I believe even some of the most outspoken people, no matter what race, would react the same way if they were in that same situation; a situation where they’d feel outnumbered and everything they say will be contradicting what everyone else is saying.

I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m afraid to speak in that class just because if no one in the class will be able to relate to what I’m saying, but not because I feel like what I say is going to sound stupid to them. I just think that they won’t be able to understand a lot of things that I say because many of my opinions and ideas are often based on two things of which they are neither, the African American culture and African American race. I’m not saying that Asians don’t know anything about Caucasians or African Americans don’t know anything about the Japanese race. I just believe that if someone is part of something, they can appreciate and understand it more. As a matter of fact sometimes, I think maybe the people in my class, especially the teacher, want to hear my opinions, so they can learn more about my culture or so they can get a different point of view on a certain subject. I guess I’ll never know because here it is, three years later, and I am still dipping my race beneath the surface of my shadow while in that class.

Third Prize, Prose
Tony Rodgers, CAPA High School

A Mugger’s Euphoria

It was warm that night. My friend Jay and I had been loafing around Oakland all night. I remember the slaying lights of the Original Hot Dog Stand. There was nothing happening that we could afford. We decided to go home. There are two ways to get to his house from Oakland. One is through the longer (yet safer) bike trail. The other way is to walk down Swinburne. It’s shorter but there are not sidewalks. At night cars fly around the bends like it’s the Autobahn.

We walked under the broken streetlights towards Greenfield. It was scary on that street at two o’clock in the morning. A car was coming to a stop beside us. I tried to ignore it, still walking. The bridge to Greenfield Ave. was in sight. It was so close but I had a feeling we wouldn’t make it. The kids jumped out of the car. They were all black. My friend Jay and I were white. I know they would hold this against us.

“Empty out your pockets,” one kid taunted. I was so shocked that I stopped in my tracks. Jay kept on walking. They asked me if I had any money.

“I have no money,” I kept repeating, foolishly thinking that they might drive away. I watched as two kids went through Jay’s pockets then punched him in the jaw. He dropped like bricks. I can remember not being lucid. Screaming.

“No, please no!” They didn’t care, turned out my pockets and change hit the ground. They were upset. They asked why I lied. I didn’t know they were looking for change. One kid pulled out my bus pass. Foolishly I reached for my photo ID. bus pass that cost my mother fifty dollars. They didn’t like it and clotheslined me into the guardrail. After that it was a blur of punches on my head and back. A truck was crossing the bridge so they jumped back into their red car. Before the drove away they stuck their head out the windows and yelled “Cracker.” I still wonder. Would they have stopped if I was black?
Honorable Mention, Prose
Benjamin Czajkowski, CAPA High School

My Mis-Education

When being a child, color, race, history or family does not matter. In kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, everyone is gray. Neutral. There is no color. When fourth grade begins instilling its education, the world takes blossom and colors form onto shapes of classmates and teachers, best friends and worst enemies.

Kickball in the fourth grade gym class began my education and opened my eyes to the world. The blossoming of color into my world had the ability to rip friendships apart. Where the bond of mutual, unconditional love once stood, the ignorance and misinformation built walls between best friends.

"Let's start!" the fifth grader commanded the field of players anxiously awaiting an exciting kickball game.

Glancing along the third base line, I saw my best friend still standing there. "What about him?" I sheepishly asked, daring to break the unwritten rule of a fourth grader communicating with a fifth grader.

"We don't need him on our team," he responded, a sneer in his voice.

Confused, I asked, "Why?"
"Because he sucks at kickball."
"But, no he doesn't. He's one of the best kickers here," I commented, still confused at his remark.
I could tell he was becoming agitated with my questioning of his judgment. "Well, it's because he's a nigger."
"Nigger? What's that?"
"The dirtiest type of person around."
"But he is always clean."
"Stupid, fourth grader. Can't you see his skin is brown? Dirt is brown, making him dirt. We don't want him."

I stood there, in awe, and for the first time in my life I saw that my best friend wasn't the milky-skinned color I was. He looked like an alien, standing there, watching the world. I remember his eyes, and how even now their deep brown shade was totally alien to me. His eyes wandered to mine as I stood staring at him. I could tell by his reaction that he knew what I was thinking. And with no words, a beautiful relationship ended.

After kickball in the gym class, words couldn't fill the gap that was between us now. I couldn't say I was sorry because I didn't understand what the fifth grader had told me. I hadn't realized that he handed me the key to difference. His words were enough to break the bonds and love that two best friends share. No matter how many times after that I tried to reconcile with him, my thoughts, and education that day, I still always come back to the memory of my best friend standing along the fence. He was secluded from the white world, as though in a chain-link African slave ship, watching a newer, whiter world for the first time.

It took years to bring him back to being a human being and even a friend. By then, however, color had taught hatred and prejudice, building years of walls that set us at different ends of the color spectrum. There was no more neutrality, just the shades of shame our skin tones reflect.
Honorable Mention, Prose
Andrea Wennesdae Metil, CAPA High School

In a Pool of Cream and Ink

I remember the first day of kindergarten. I remember everything from my denim dress, to the spoonful of peanut butter that my father had packed in Tupperware and placed in my tin Care Bears lunchbox. I remember being the only girl in my class who didn't cry when her parents left her behind. One girl cried tears that seemed of a heavier mass than any of the other children's. Her tears were heavy and fell like smooth glass beads against the lap of her lilac colored overalls. I skipped over to where she was sitting and asked her what was wrong. She told me that she was scared of riding the school bus and that she missed her mother. Her mother hadn't brought her to school that day. When I asked her why, she cried until she couldn't anymore.

Over the course of the next few months, we became an inseparable team. We both liked building blocks and Barbie dolls. We both liked eating strawberries with powdered sugar and writing stories about calico cats that metamorphosed into princesses when kissed by rats. During playtime, the room separated into two groups; one was black, one was white. The black girls did each other's hair on one side of the room, while the white girls drew pictures on the other side. Christina and I meshed the two sides by sitting in the very middle of the room to play "Sei-Sci My Playmate." We were cream and ink, swirling together into beautiful shapes and patterns for the next two years.

At the beginning of second grade, Tina and I were still close. All that had separated us was the summer. She often spoke of her loneliness, of not having another to speak to who understood her advanced mind. When we spoke, considerations of the physical universe were subordinate. Neither of us had any other friends. It was because of each other. Black and white found us gray, and left us with each other. We were alone. We were alone together.

That year, when we returned from winter break, an unspoken separation occurred. We didn't sit together at lunchtime, or wait at each other's lockers anymore. One of her friends came up to me during recess and told me that Christina's sister Nikita had told her not to talk to me anymore. My eyes welled up as I watched Christina play double dutch with her new friends. I asked why Christina and I weren't allowed to play together any longer. She replied simply with, "because you're white."

We spent three more years in the same class, with the same teachers. I slowly made a few friends, and realized that innocence and purity could not see color. We hadn't realized that there was anything tangible that separated us. Our adoration for each other was real, and it was beautiful.

I have heard of her a few times since elementary school. She became the director of her church choir, gave birth to a daughter, and was a bridesmaid in her sister's wedding. I became a poet, made my hair purple, and fell in love for the first time. As children, we never realized how separate the two of us would become.

I still think of her occasionally, and the excruciating silence and emotional expanse the occurred between us. I hurt, and wonder if she did too. I had a feeling that she did. The nature of our communication heightened our awareness that, in general, what was real for me was also her reality. Our affinity for each other was real, and we were colorblind until we had our first taste of the infinite cynicism of adult life. From those moments, things haven't been the same. I wish that they'd never changed.
Honorable Mention, Prose
T.D. Laskow, CAPA High School

She Knew Me

Life went slow in the hospital. The sun rose on the east wing and set on the west. It was quiet. Then pick-limbed, chalk-skinned Nick came into the common room. He was still wet from his bath. Shane lit up.

'Ah look at you, handsome little baby! (Nick was thirteen, but malnourished.) You remind me of my baby. (Shane was fifteen and had rich eyes.) Comin' little Nicky. I'll make you handsome.'

Nick blushed.

Shane produced an orange plastic container of styling grease. It depicted a seventies era white couple both with huge black Afros. Shane put the grease in Nick's wet hair. She gave him a part on the far left near his ear. He looked shiny. It was handsome. But when the floor nurse saw him she was furious. The nurse scolded Shane and said she knew better than to put grease in somebody's hair before bed.

One night after dinner and a movie ("City Slickers," the third time that week) Shane and I talked. She was depressed because she missed her baby boy. We lay down on the blue polyester common room carpet. First she described him. Her boy had rich eyes, light skin and big beautiful ears like Will Smith. Her boy was funny too. Her voice broke. I tried to calm her.

"Breathe, Shane. Remember your goals, stay on track and you'll get him back. You'll get him and get through this."

Shane laughed and rolled her gleaming eyes. She wiped her tears with the inside of her wrist. Suddenly she tired. Her words came slow and labored. She pulled the words from her throat.

"But it's not alright. I've been in someplace since I was seven. I don't get out. I'm here 'cause I ran off with my baby—"

She held her tears.

"They didn't treat him right. I wanted to be with my baby. Now I'm here. I don't know when I haven't been stuck be-