Chocolate and Vanilla
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Second Place for High School Poetry, 2002

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 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 scrunched 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 okay.
And at that moment, I knew that it wasn’t.
“Okay” 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 my momma everything.
She took us out for ice cream
to try to cheer us up.
“Thank you for being strong,”
she said, looking at me
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.