

Celebrating the Life & Legacy of

# Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Writing Awards

JANUARY 15, 2018





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We extend our deepest gratitude to the Pittsburgh-area teachers who dedicated their time and energy to help students organize, revise, and submit writing for the contest, and to every student who took the time and effort to submit their work this year.

Jim Daniels

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Founder and Director, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards

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## **Participating Schools**

*Taylor Allderdice High School, Propel Andrew Street High School, Carnegie Mellon University, Carlow University, Chatham University, The Ellis School, Fox Chapel High School, The Kiski School, The Neighborhood Academy, Oakland Catholic High School, Perry High School, Pittsburgh CAPA 6-12, Shadyside Academy, University of Pittsburgh, Seton Hill University, Westinghouse High School, Woodland Hills High School, Winchester Thurston School, and Cardinal Wuerl High School*

# THE 2018 WINNERS

## College

### Poetry

First Place: “Penance After DACA” by Marina Lopez

Second Place: “At P. F. Chang’s” by Julie Heming

Third Place: “Oreo Skin” by Mariah Barnes

#### *Honorable Mention:*

“Charlottesville” by Sydney Roslin

“I Saw Two Girls Holding Hands” by Naviya Singla

“To The Boy Who Only Dates Asian Girls” by Julia Hou

### Prose

First Place: “Gravel” by Brian Broome

Second Place: “How I Became a Cup of Hoodsie Ice Cream” by Brielle Marie Stovall

Third Place: “I Feel Most Colored When” by Yazmin Bennett-Kelly

#### *Honorable Mention:*

“Are You a Fan of Dark Chocolate?” by Anjana Murali

## High School

### Poetry

First Place: “Still Black” by Chelsea Lewis

Tied-Second Place: “I Want A Dog/Blue Tears” by Anonymous <sup>1</sup>

Tied-Second Place: “brave & true // the red, white, and blue” by Brenda Theresa Hayes

#### *Honorable Mention:*

“To My Mother Who Tells Me To Cover Up” by Madeline Figas

“White Noise” by Nika Gill

“How I Became a Minority” by Suhail Gharaibeh-Gonzalez

### Prose

First Place: “Where’s Waldo” by Emma Steckline

Second Place: “A Curious Retention of Despicable Victimization” by Eva Boeglin

Third Place: “Letter to A” by Evie Jin

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<sup>1</sup> This poem has not been printed in this booklet due to privacy concerns.

*Honorable Mention:*

“Football” by Elijah Parks

“The Struggles of a Hispanic” by Brayant Garcia

“Love Isn’t Skin Color” by Aaliyah Thomas

You may read the honorable-mention selections at:

[www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/mlk](http://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/mlk)

## ADDITIONAL RECOGNITION

Due to the high number and quality of the overall submissions, we also recognize the following students for the best entries from their schools:

Fox Chapel High School: “Unapologetic” by Ilhaam Husain

Westinghouse High School: “Colorless Flurry” by Shane Reese

Woodland Hills High School: “From Birth” by Andre Hilliard

Cardinal Wuerl High School: “I am a Woman” by Isabella Iozzi

Andrew Street High School: “Shades of America” by Tiara Tabb

The Neighborhood Academy: “My Broken History” by Bryant Jordan

Perry High School: “The Absence Of Color-Driven Hatred” by Aniyah Horne

The Ellis School: “Chasm” by Lauren Jasper

Oakland Catholic High School: “The Tower of Babel” by Yueyi Gu

Shadyside Academy: “You Better Aim it at the Sky” by Eliyah Roberts

University of Pittsburgh: “To My Dad’s Girlfriend” by Elsa Eckenrode

Seton Hill University: “Taboo” by Emma Steeg

# COLLEGE POETRY



# PENANCE AFTER DACA

Marina Lopez

*First Place*

Your silence is deafening.  
Who's to blame you;  
it's hard to relate to people who you don't know and who don't look like you.

But your silence is deafening.  
And the world seems so strange in its normalcy;  
and the continual chug of the gears of the daily business-as-usual grinds my  
bones to dust.

And I know that I also ignore those who suffer in far away lands  
so I can have all these daily comforts, trinkets, small treats of emptiness...

I understand how it goes: out of sight, out of mind.

But we are right here.  
Can't you see us?  
We're forced to stay low, tumbling from shadow to shadow,  
but I really thought you'd noticed us by now.

And I'm sorry for feeling personally aggravated by this  
even though it doesn't directly impact me  
yet.

I feel it encroaching upon me, like a many-fold roach;  
strong and dark and nuclear-resistant,  
drowning my morning sun.

Your silence is deafening.  
And it's hard to keep on loving you  
when you stripped all hope from my brothers  
for no good reason.

Your silence is deafening.  
Normalcy burns.  
And I guess the rest of the world will keep on hating you  
and I'll have less and less arms with which to defend you.

You'll keep believing you're a beacon of hope, when you're not.  
And you'll keep going about your days.

And I'm sorry I resent you;  
Life is tragedy.  
And you're probably just trying to get on by.

I'm sorry I'm so self centered  
and keep focusing so much on the heart  
you shred to pieces.

And I'm sorry that I came here  
(there is nowhere else to go).  
And I'm sorry that I left my homeland to rot and fester in its own sins.

Your silence is deafening.

# AT P. F. CHANG'S

Julie Heming

*Second Place*

Our waiter is a white boy  
and the whole night I can see him  
try to run the faulty equation in his head:  
white parent + white parent  
does not equal Asian child.

I want to tell him I'm just as perplexed,  
that blue and red veins run through my skin  
and the Korean and American flags  
share the same colors, like bruises,  
so even my blood is confused.  
Maybe I should tell him that a boy  
liked me just for my eyes,  
a teacher told me of course I'd be good at math,  
a friend asked if I could still love my brother  
even though we don't share the same blood,  
and new friends expect me to know  
the difference between *taiyaki* and *tteokbokki*.

But say each grain of rice in this bowl was a blessing.  
Maybe I'll tell him that I'm thankful  
for the plane that brought me here,  
the stranger-woman who held me on the flight,  
my older brother who waited for me  
with his nose pressed against the airport glass.  
Thanks for all the times my parents forgave me  
for peeing in my room as a child,  
for ripping down the window curtains  
and pulling the rod from the wall,  
for telling white lies,  
but this one, I swear, is the truth:

I will never stay mad at them  
(because it always creeps back in  
like fruit flies, like shadows  
sliding across the walls,  
the *I am only here because of you's*).

But I don't tell him anything.

Around my porcelain bowl, blue dragons  
chase their own tails endlessly.  
I open my lips and wait for rice grains  
to fall onto my tongue like warm snow  
but my fork scrapes the sides,  
the bowl is empty,  
and I do not deserve to ask for more.

# OREO SKIN

Mariah Barnes

*Third Place*

The chocolate on the outside  
Slowly fading away to soft white  
As my classmates in Malibu stare at my kinks and  
Tease me for not being “black enough.”

Coming from Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids  
To the buttery smooth waves of Malibu  
With the taste of sea salt in my mouth every day.

A perfect chocolatey blend of my parents’ holy matrimony  
Ending in divorce at the suckling age of 4  
Inheriting his heavy-duty belly laugh  
And her mouth, nose, eyes, ears, and everything else  
Especially her sesame-colored skin

My unintimidating creamy tan complexion  
A friendly face to represent “diversity”  
On the cover of the school brochure  
But not the darkest shade of oreo, that intimidates the little kids

Seven houses before  
Seventeen. Two states. Multiple Cities.

My mother spent her whole life in Detroit on Terry Street.  
18 years of hot coal and cold winters before clawing away  
To get to D.C...Howard  
The Historically Black College that she didn’t want me to attend  
“I don’t want you to be the best among Black people, I want you to be the best  
Period”  
Her determination bred me.

My father’s calloused hands sweep  
Over the keys of his sax, music flowing from his heart  
He’s in love with his smooth sound  
His rhythm and soul pulses through my veins

Don’t the strength and character from my mother  
And the heartbeat of jazz and blues inherited from my father  
Qualify me to receive a Black card?

Or am I defined by the similarities between the color of my skin  
And a cookie?

# COLLEGE PROSE



# GRAVEL

Brian Broome

*First Place*

There have been times in moments of solitude and silence that I have literally taken my right hand, placed it over my left shoulder, and patted myself on the back for surviving small town Ohio. I deserve it. And, if you are a black person from small town Ohio, you deserve it too. Go ahead. Do it now. Pat yourself on the back and be proud that you are still standing upright because, I may be biased, but I am fully convinced that the entire state of Ohio is nothing but a racist cesspool. You can see this fact much more clearly when you've put the Buckeye State deep into your rearview mirror, after you've vowed never, ever to go back no matter what. When you're on a Greyhound bus with all your belongings packed, speeding away from it all, you consult the murky blue depths of the Magic 8 Ball you've had since sixth grade and ask if it's a good idea to leave.

It says...

“Yes. Definitely.”

Of course, you don't know that you're living in a racist purgatory when you're growing up in Ohio. When you're a child, your immediate surroundings are your whole world and you just accept, over time, that your blackness makes you less. Less smart. Less capable. Less worthy. It seems that every election season, we as a country are shocked simply because of Ohio's geographical placement, that it always goes red as a baboon's ass. But I am never surprised. The entire state is the long-lost child of Jim Crow aching to get back into its father's loving arms. The state of Ohio wears on the black psyche until you either move or get good at football. But, again, perhaps I'm biased.

I couldn't wait to get out, and when I was old enough, I moved to Pittsburgh. It's not far. But, it was a city, and I knew from television shows that cities were sanctuary for black people. No more would I have to deal with small-minded, racist, white attitudes. I moved here. I reveled in my newfound freedom from racism, ignoring what I didn't want to see. I made friends both white and black. And then, Pittsburgh slowly revealed itself to me.

\* \* \*

Back in Ohio, I disobeyed my mother once and left the house while she was at work. We lived just outside the small, basically rural city of Newton Falls and I needed to go into “town,” so I set off on foot forgetting the fact that, even when I was in Newton Falls *with* my mother, she never let me out of her sight. There were rural roads leading into the city limits, no sidewalks. So, I took off on foot the way you do when you think you're a grownup and certain that nothing in this world can harm you. I don't remember why I was going to Newton Falls. That knowledge has been deleted from my memory. But I do know that it was

the most important thing that had ever been up to that point, and I remember that my mother just didn't "get it." So, I walked down a dusty road, the trees so high on both sides that they created a ubiquitous shade and I could hear the sounds of wildlife, crickets in the daytime. It was a road that my mother had driven me down several times on our way to the Sparkle Market to buy our groceries. My feet had never touched it before. It seemed vastly different on foot. Unrecognizable. Longer. Spooky. Dark green and ominous. Cars whipped by me so fast that I hugged the side of the road almost in the ditch and, whenever I would hear one approaching from behind, every muscle in my body would tense. And, as the road laid itself out before me, I was helplessly exposed, and the road got longer and longer. So long I began to wonder if I had even gone the right way. And then I heard the slow crunching of rocks beneath tires behind me. Not the scattering of them under the wheels of a car that was driving sixty miles an hour. But the slow crunch of gravel signaling that the vehicle behind me was slowing down. I hoped that it was someone I knew. Maybe one of my mother's friends who would scold me and then force me into the car with the promise to tell my mother on me immediately. I prayed for this. But my prayer went unanswered.

\* \* \*

My first friends in Pittsburgh were Todd, a white, red-headed, and muscular fireplug of a dude; Melissa, a white brunette with cat-eye glasses and a political bent; and Antoinette, a tiny black lesbian with a shaved head and a progressive attitude toward sex. We were liberals in the city, and everything was lit up. We loved to go out like you do in your twenties and had managed to become part of the scene. I met people with pet rats and learned how to do drugs off nightclub toilets and order martinis. We wore leather pants and danced until dawn. Nothing like my sleepy life back home, and, when we went out that night, we were prepared to have the time of our lives even better than the time of our lives we had the previous night. This was the kind of urban existence that I had dreamed of with the whole city lit up like a jukebox and all that endless freedom to do what I wanted. There was no mother here to tell me that I'd better not leave the house. There were clubs, hip coffee shops, and cabs as far as the eye could see, and I loved it.

We were headed bar hopping when Todd remembered that he needed cash. The hustle and bustle of downtown Saturday night was all around us with people laying on horns and shouting at one another. Those who had already been out for the evening were stumbling down the sidewalk leaning against each other for support. I looked good. I had done my best to tie a necktie in a way that I have since learned is dead wrong. It hung around my neck like a noose. Melissa wore her usual ensemble of all black head to toe with big clunky boots. But Antoinette had gone all out. She wore a giant afro wig and big hoop earrings. Black patent leather go-go boots and a half shirt decorated with roses. She wore false eyelashes and makeup. "Femming it up," she called it. We all looked gorgeous. Todd wore overalls with no shirt underneath and army boots.

But he needed cash. You can't get drunk without cash. So, we ducked off onto a side street to an out-of-the-way ATM and watched him pat himself down for his cash card. He knew he'd brought it, but couldn't remember in which pocket he'd tucked it away. So, we stood there lined up. Him at the cash machine frantically patting his own body down, Melissa behind him having decided that she could use some extra cash too, and me and Antoinette standing behind them both on the sidewalk. We laughed at Todd, telling him maybe he'd left his cash card in his ass, in which case, he would never find it. We laughed and never once thought how this arrangement might look to someone on the outside.

\* \* \*

670 County Highway 114, Newton Falls, Ohio, leads to the epicenter of Newton Falls which, back then, boasted one supermarket, a laundromat, and a variety store. The urban core. Newton Falls was all white people, and I wish I could remember what it was that I wanted so badly at that variety store that I'd disobeyed my mother. I dismissed every cautionary tale she'd ever told me about white people and took off on foot directly into enemy territory. Whatever that thing was, I have blocked it from memory. But, I do know that it most definitely wasn't worth the trip.

“Monkeeeeeeee!!”

The sound of gravel crunching slowly under tires had given way to a human voice—a man's voice. He trailed behind me slowly, chastising me for being what he called “in the middle of the road.”

“Hey, monkey! What the fuck you doin' out here, monkey? You almost made me wreck! Hey! Nigger! You hear me?”

Your body becomes over-all clammy when you're confronted by a racist. Your skin feels heavy and numb at the same time. You shut down, but you can feel the rage you're trying to suppress boiling like a hot cauldron deep inside, and a cold blast of fear commences to howl within you. Your stomach becomes a black hole that you wish you could disappear into, and the sweat bursts out of every pore on your body. But something tells you not to run. Something in your black DNA tells you that running will only make things worse. You bite your tongue when you're alone because there is not a doubt in your mind that these people think your humanity so non-existent that they would suffer no moral conflict in killing you and dumping your body into the Mahoning River. The man's voice behind me continued to taunt. Only now he's not talking to me. He is now just talking loud enough for me to hear. There is someone else in the car.

\* \* \*

On Seventh Avenue downtown Pittsburgh, Todd is still frantically searching for his money card. He's starting to look a little panicked that maybe he's left it on the bus we took down here. The rest of us are becoming impatient. We're anxious to get to the bar, and we all breathe a little sigh of relief when he finally finds it tucked inside his boot for safe keeping. The city is electric with noise as

we stand there waiting for him to now insert the card, remember his pin number, and snatch out his drinking papers for the evening. But, even though there is noise all around, I can still hear the telltale sounds of tires slowing down behind me. I now know it better than I know the taste of the inside of my own mouth. A car has slowed down. Its occupant has been watching us the entire time.

\* \* \*

On County Hwy 114 Newton Falls, Ohio, the man behind me is telling his passenger what's happening. He's narrating like a tour guide on a safari would.

"Look at this nigger taking up the entire road. I should just run him over. I don't know why he didn't just steal a car!" Then he laughs loud. His passenger says nothing. I hear the vehicle coming around to the side of me, and my blood is ice water and my head is full of static. I wish I'd never left home. I wish I'd listened to my mother. I wonder how cold the Mahoning River is this time of year, and it is at this moment that what I was looking for at the heart of Newton Falls is permanently wiped from my mind. But here is where I want to get at least a glance at my murderer. This man who hates me for no reason but feels he's come up with a good excuse to. I look up and he is sneer-grinning at me with pure malevolence in his eyes. He is driving a pickup truck, of course, and personifying everything I'd ever learned about white trash. Blonde as piss. Teeth caked in butter. He mouths silently the word "nigger" and shows me his middle finger and just over his shoulder, I can see his two passengers. Two little toe-headed girls with big blue eyes both in the front seat. They look confused by the driver's behavior, but they'll soon learn what he's trying to teach them. They will soon help to make America great again. They stare at me as if I am a wild animal with their mouths hanging open. We lock eyes before the driver yells "Fuck you! Stay out of the road!" and speeds off leaving me in a spray of rocks and dust.

\* \* \*

"Hey! Leave them alone!"

Nobody on Seventh Avenue notices the man initially except for me who heard his tires from two blocks away. "Leave them alone!" he shouts again, louder this time. I'm looking at him with bewilderment and, as he keeps shouting, Antoinette has now noticed him too. He is hollering at us and pointing his finger at the two of us, and we crane our necks toward him trying to make out what the problem could be. He is in a four-door sedan on his own. It's a royal blue color and shines like new money. "Leave them alone! Leave them alone!" Todd and Melissa have not yet noticed. His shouts blended into the street noise for them. But, Antoinette and I now have a familiar feeling inching up our spines. "Leave them alone! Leave them alone!"

There are moments in life when your situation becomes clear. I imagine that there's a moment of realization for people who are drowning just before they start to kick, flail, and panic. There is a calm inside that is disrupted when your entire system begins to realize that everything is not going to be

alright. There are moments like this when something real happens and awakens something real within you. The man has been watching us from his place in traffic. He has seen two white people and two black people approach an ATM and he has seen the white man frantically patting himself down for money. He then sees the two black people, one with his hand tucked firmly in his pocket and assumed that a nice white couple is being held up by two animals. One in a mis-tied tie and the other in a giant afro wig. He assumes the responsibility of hero. He will save the day by calling attention to this crime. He is shouting loud enough so that people on the street turn to look at us. He is pointing an accusatory finger at me and Antoinette from the safety of his vehicle. We are urban crime personified. He has seen it on the nightly news, no doubt— how predatory black people are holding up whites at ATMs across the city. He is doing a good thing.

When it becomes clear to me what he is doing, a rage builds up within me. But it's the wrong kind of rage. It's the kind of black rage wherein you need white people to validate you, and I spit at him words to this effect.

“These are our *friends!* We are with *them!*”

I regret these words to this very day. They were said by a boy who never learned that he doesn't need white people to prove anything to anyone. But I used Todd and Melissa as a shield. A glowing white shield against the dismissal of my humanity. I go over what I *should* have said in my mind a thousand times over, even today. I should have just told him to go to hell; to mind his own business; to fuck right off. But, I chose to have Todd and Melissa's whiteness take the place of my self-respect. Ohio had taught me well.

When Todd and Melissa finally noticed what was happening, they did nothing. They said nothing. I imagine this kind of thing had never happened to them before. But Antoinette and I unloaded for every time we'd been followed around in a store, every time we had been falsely accused. When the man in the car realized he'd made a mistake, he offered no apology, just a middle finger as a defense against Antoinette's fuck you's and my apoplectic babbling. I thought I had escaped, but I've been learning ever since that I have escaped nothing.

When I look around the city in which I still live, I see a bigger version of what I'd thought I left back in Ohio. A shinier, busier version. A version that has a Civic Light Opera and all-night diners and beautiful museums. There is no difference. The neighborhoods are shockingly segregated, and black people who live here are among the worst off in the country economically. I see an island surrounded and infiltrated by invaders who bring their racist ideology to bear on everything this city produces or touches. There is no safe place in Pittsburgh for black people. The illusion of multicultural city life. But to be fair, I don't believe that there's any city in America where black people can exhale. But Pittsburgh is one of the worst. I suffer no delusions about this. But, I stay on. I stay here because I've found love here. But I never forget that I live in the citified shadow of Appalachia. We, as a city, have much work to do, and sometimes I doubt that this work will ever get done.

I don't visit my family in Ohio as often as I should. I vowed that I

would never go back there for any reason. I don't know how they do it. Todd and Antoinette are still my friends although only via social media. I often want to ask them if they even remember that night. Antoinette probably does. Todd probably doesn't. Antoinette had the good sense to leave the city. She tells me stories of racism from the West Coast now.

I don't hate Pittsburgh. But like every other city in America, as a black person, I know I don't belong here, which immediately begs the question "Where do I belong in America?" I shake up the murky waters of the Magic 8-Ball for insight. It answers...

"Reply Unclear: Try Again Later."

# HOW I BECAME A CUP OF HOODSIE ICE CREAM

Brielle Marie Stovall

*Second Place*

The star of every birthday party was always the grocery store sheet cake accompanied by Hoodsie ice cream cups: the paper ice cream cups that couldn't hold up as soon as the sun met the ice cream, causing it to melt, and the wooden spoon that was bound to slice the inside of your mouth as you hastily downed the mediocre ice cream. It was a tradition of mine to mix the chocolate and vanilla ice cream together, as I regarded the vanilla ice cream as being generally more boring than the chocolate. By the time the two were mixed, I could only see and taste the chocolate. For the majority of my life, I assumed no one saw my whiteness—just as I didn't see the vanilla ice cream—because my dark brown ringlets surround my caramel-colored face. I recently realized that I could not have had it more backwards. In fact, more people saw my whiteness than they did my blackness. This isn't about “Hashtag: Mixed Girl Problems,” though there are plenty. This is about how I came to realize that, despite the fact that I have to shop in the “Textured Hair” part of the hair aisle and my skin has more melanin than my pasty mother's, I have white privilege.

Privilege. There hasn't been a day in the last few months when I didn't hear the topic come up with as much ease and regularity as we discuss dinner plans. A black man is seen walking down the street and is shot and killed because he seemed like a threat. But a white man opens fire at a concert, hundreds injured and 58 people killed, and he's labeled a lone wolf. “White privilege,” we exclaim. Privilege extends far beyond race, though: education, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. In a country that was founded upon the backs of people that were deemed less worthy than those who founded it, the existence of privilege is something that has been ingrained in us, like words on a gravestone. It's almost unavoidable. So much so that it's not uncommon to be unaware of one's own privilege.

I grew up in a city in central Massachusetts where diversity was celebrated. The entryway to my high school proudly adorned over 70 flags—one from each country represented by the student body—and each year we put on an International Show, which occurred after a week of celebrating and learning about various cultures and peoples. Friday afternoon classes were cancelled so that the entire student body could engage in this celebration, in which students performed traditional dances and songs from their respective countries. It wasn't uncommon for people to learn and partake in performances from other countries as well. During my sophomore year, for example, my classmates and I learned a French song and performed it for the International Show. It's taken years for

me to appreciate and understand the importance of that experience, as it gave me the opportunity to learn about and appreciate a cultural aspect of a country that wasn't my own.

It wasn't until I left Worcester that I realized how lucky I was to grow up in such a diverse city. I started hearing stories about things that were said to other people of color in my life and how they were treated: microaggressions and blatant racism alike. To say I was horrified would be an understatement. I couldn't believe the injustice that people in my life were experiencing on a day-to-day basis, and I admittedly—and selfishly—felt incredibly lucky to have never really experienced it to the degree of so many people whom I hold near and dear. This most recent summer rolled around, and I decided it was time for a hair change, so I decided to have extensions braided into my hair. It wasn't an easy decision to make, though. I contemplated this decision for quite some time, as I worried that I wasn't “black enough” to pull them off. This hesitation alone was enough to make me start questioning how I viewed myself and the role I play in society as a biracial woman. What does it even mean to be “black enough”? And why do I feel like I'm not? I ultimately did it anyway, and found the answers to those questions.

I waitress part-time at my neighborhood Applebee's back in Massachusetts. It's slow over the summer, and most nights I make less than \$80 in tips. It's far from the ideal summer job, but I find myself enjoying my time there, nonetheless. I went into work the day I had my hair done and was immediately met with a multitude of varying reactions, which was to be expected. My manager, a large, middle-aged white man, immediately made it clear that he wasn't fond of my hair. He told me it didn't fit my personality and made me “look like a gangster.” I had hoped his reaction would be the worst of it, but instead, it only primed me for the next two weeks. I noticed a shocking shift in the way people spoke to me and treated me at work.

Customers seemed to be surprised when they found out I was a college student, not to mention a student studying opera at Carnegie Mellon. Microaggressions kept flying at me from all angles, whether they were comments made in line at the grocery store or by classmates in daily conversation. I immediately found myself wearing my reading glasses more regularly because I realized that when I wore my glasses, people seemed less surprised by my level of education. The most shocking and blatant change I experienced was the amount of money I was making at work. My sales remained approximately the same, but I went from making around \$65-\$70 in tips per night to averaging somewhere between \$40 and \$50. This remained true for the entire two weeks I had braids.

When I talked to my mom about these changes I was noticing, she said to me, “You see Brielle, for much of your life, people always saw White Brielle, and even though you're the same person, you look more like Black Brielle.” She didn't say this to excuse the way people were behaving. It was merely an observation, and she wasn't wrong. It was in that moment that I realized that I had become the Hoodie ice cream cup at every elementary school birthday

party. My vanilla had been completely masked by my chocolate, to the point where people didn't even remember I'm half vanilla to begin with.

That experience made me dreadfully aware of a lot of things I hadn't considered before. It made me reflect on my own identity and what it means to me to be black, but beyond that, it made me think twice about my own immediate reactions to people. Too often, I find myself making assumptions about people based off of shallow judgments. Having now been on both sides of the judgement coin, I can't be angry towards the people that treated me the way they did. The assumptions I find myself making are, more often than not, societally driven, and I believe that to be true of most people. The hard part is learning not to act or speak upon those judgments.

That experience also taught me about something huge: the privilege that I possess simply because I'm half white. It isn't something I ever thought about until I had it taken away from me, but having had that experience made me reflect on what it means to have white privilege. I immediately felt guilty and, in some ways, dirty, as white privilege is seen as the enemy in this world. That said, privilege isn't something we can avoid in today's society, nor is it something we can control. There are ways, however, to channel one's privilege into something not evil. People whose voices are inherently heard louder than others need to step up. It's a tough balancing act, though, because having privilege doesn't mean you can speak for those whose voices have been silenced. It's my job, as a person with privilege, to get the attention of those who speak too loudly for others to be heard, and redirect their attention to the voices of the silenced. In a world where we're constantly threatening to build walls, it's my job to be a bridge.

# I FEEL MOST COLORED WHEN

Yazmin Bennett-Kelly

*Third Place*

How could I be so optimistic yet so naive? I was ready to study and learn. I was looking forward to personal growth, long-lasting friendships, and learning about my ancestors. I had no idea what else I would encounter on this journey. Some of my friends and family feared me traveling to Africa. They got some of us so bad we're scared to travel and trace our roots. They got us so bad, we're believing everything we see on TV. Well, the Africans weren't dangerous at all. They didn't make me feel unsafe. Of course, on the first night I was a little uneasy because I was sleeping alone in a room in a foreign country. However, of all the things that made me feel unsafe, it was not the locals around me. In fact, it was the white Americans I traveled with to Ghana. When did I almost lose my mind? Was it when they constantly asked the African-Americans if we were okay just because we weren't speaking at the moment? Or, was it when they repeatedly used microaggressions such as, "Are you allowed to wet your hair in the pool?" Or when they met the only male within our group and in just hours of knowing him assumed he smoked marijuana and was related to Snoop Dogg? Or when the white American professor told a Black girl her hair was unusual. Or maybe it was when the traveling professor from the United States told me my dream of opening an all-girl charter school that caters to the needs of African-American girls is unrealistic. Or maybe when she pet another Black girl's skin while telling her, "Oh, I get just as dark as you in the summertime." Or you know what? Maybe it was when my friend got box braids and the professor made an announcement to the class about how long her hair had gotten. Actually, no, I think it was when one girl who was constantly making subtle racist remarks put on Kente cloth and called herself the "queen mother." Wait, no, I think it was when another girl said our African male student helper looked like one of the monkeys we were feeding. And then after all of this, having the nerve to take photos with/of Ghanaian babies. Wait, I forgot something, maybe it was when we left the Cape Coast slave dungeon and they laughed. But I think I really almost lost it when we were on the bus and they played and sang along to Big Sean's "I Don't F\*%# With You" on a Sunday in Ghana, a country where the language is formal, and informal language is hardly used, especially on a Sunday. So here I am in West Africa, Ghana, living a dream come true, but I am still being reminded of white privilege and racism in America. I was so uncomfortable, and some moments I just wanted to cry because I couldn't understand why these things were happening. Of course, me being the strong-minded young woman I am, I spoke up and attempted to educate my peers on these microaggressions and why they were problematic. They apologized and many said they understood, however things did not change. One girl even thanked us for coming to them and addressing the issues. I appreciated this until

the same girl told me, “I completely understand you because my grandparents were Native American.”

Although most of the microaggressions weren’t directed at me, I treated them as if they were. The other Black students and I became family. I even met two wonderful friends who became my sisters. We stuck together like glue, and one reason is because we genuinely bonded immediately, and also because we had to stick together to stay sane. We would come together every night and share thoughts/experiences, which I cherished. A psychologist named Beverly Tatum has an article titled “The Complexity of Identity” in which she constructs research and writes about how Blacks are seen as subordinate to whites and how that impacts their daily lives. Tatum mentions how much of our daily lives is tied to survival versus satisfaction. Think about driving, walking in certain areas, or just going to a store. I mean just the way my friends and I gravitated to one another is a prime example. We just want to feel safe and comfortable. Think about what we as Black Americans go through on a daily basis whether directly or indirectly. Systematic racism is affecting us daily! So, imagine how five brown women felt when they left America and traveled to the Motherlands. Imagine the warmth in our hearts that was almost frozen by our peers who lack culture awareness.

I say all of this to say, it was hard. I was called racist when I addressed the racial comments, and I was also called a bully. When one of the girls went to my program director crying, upset, and informing her of what was going on, my director then wanted to speak with all of the students. When it was my turn to speak, I informed her of everything that had taken place and let her know about the microaggressions. When I gave her an example of how the girl singled out my friend by questioning her on whether she was “allowed” to go swimming and wet her NATURAL hair—she responded, saying “Don’t take it to heart ...they are curious.” I expressed to her how that is probably not the case because these students are from various states in America and they have had to have been around Black people at some point in their lives. But she really didn’t get it. She told me to go check on the girl who came to her office crying. At this point, tears are running down my face because I’m sitting across from a woman who looks like me, actually darker than me, and she has not a clue on what I go through as a Black person in America and she couldn’t even empathize for us. It was a harsh reality to face, the reality that Africans and Black Americans often view racism and America completely different. Now that was a hard pill to swallow—you would have thought I was speaking something other than English the way she genuinely did not understand. And I don’t mean this in a way that is belittling, but in a realistic way. African Americans and Africans see many things very differently because we are different. This is one reason why it is important to step outside of yourself and do something extraordinary like visiting another country.

This was the only “negative” aspect of my global experience; however, I have taught myself to see the value in all things, or to at least try. So, when I got past my angry stage, I started to think critically. I thought about the systems

placed to keep Blacks below and whites above. I thought about my white professor who taught me what white privilege really means. I thought of the divisions within the Black community. I thought of the representation of people who look like me. I thought of the white people I know and love who have never made me feel anything such as the feelings described in this essay. What this did teach me was to always love myself and my Blackness—also to always stand up for what I believe in/what is right. I honestly felt like I was being tested. Now more than ever, I love myself and everyone who looks like me. Imagine being called names for standing up for your family—that’s how I felt. Then I realized, “You can call me every name in the book but I will stand up for my brothers and sisters until the day I die.” See, my experience in Ghana was absolutely amazing...the good, the bad, and the ugly. I learned something valuable that I will carry with me for the rest of my days, something I will teach my students and children: your voice is important and should be heard. People may not like the message you are giving with your voice and they may not like you period, but one thing for certain is that you grow through the people you meet and the places you go. So, maybe those girls consider me a bully and a racist, but I truly believe that one day maybe far from now they will look back and reminisce on the words we exchanged and they will have learned something.

At times it gets exhausting being Black. I really start to feel what Malcolm X was trying to do, but I have some ounce of faith in humanity. I may be an optimist, but I truly believe we can do better and we will. We all are one race, the human race. If I’m not mistaken Black and White bodies decompose the same. Let’s love not hate. Let’s teach not degrade. Let’s uncover biases and remove stereotypes. Like Dr. Martin Luther King, I too had a dream. I dreamt of visiting Africa someday. I dreamt of a world where the standard of beauty was people who looked like me. I experienced that. My dream came true. Now we shall wait for the same for Dr. King’s.



# HIGH SCHOOL POETRY



# STILL BLACK

Chelsea Lewis

*First Place*

I sit in my kitchen,  
on a wooden stool while  
slowly sinking in black  
blood. I weep while  
watching Channel 2 news.  
Black babies with red X's  
across their faces.

I'm breathing the air  
of the deceased; I look  
up to the heavens and wonder  
why our blessings are cut  
so short. I inhale, hearing  
hummed spirituals and cries.  
I exhale, we're near nothing left.

I strut and glide on molten bones,  
I hear I'm pretty to be black.  
I just want to be woman.

I'm stuck in between  
changing this skin into something  
lighter, telling myself to be softer  
or embracing it. I stare face  
up into the sun. Waiting to darken,  
melt, charcoal puddles. Waiting  
for days to brighten.

I remain resistant,  
pressing my fists  
into the sky,  
kneeling.

I remain black,  
sweet like cocoa  
beans yet drowning  
in bloody seas.

# BRAVE & TRUE // THE RED, WHITE, AND BLUE

Brenda Theresa Hayes

*Tied - Second Place*

red //

is the blood caked in the pages of my american history textbook and  
leaking into the streets and news stories of my 16th summer  
from young and old black bodies

the anger in the air  
the stench of money the smell of greed  
my mother's accent, spilling onto her flag,  
to the left of the hawk with a snake's  
weight hanging from its beak

it's the color of my mouth — summertime — my little sister's cold cherry smile  
— her curls flying, triumphant.

white //

is the smoke from gunfire that fills the sky  
people watch this and do nothing  
they know their cues, but never go on.  
it is the hoods that cover the faces of hate  
and the pale inconsequence of privilege  
private prisons tall trees segregated cities

the color of my father's teeth and my grandmother's pearls, but somehow it is  
not Ours — strikes like lightning — wakes me up, cold and impersonal.

blue //

is the hum and throb of the heartbeat  
the black boys who die quiet  
the black girls who carry burdens  
the stiff uniforms  
the rose petal bruise

it's the color of my memories — i dip them in this ink and hope i forget them,  
but they stain the inside of my eyelids and torture me when i try to fall asleep.

////

my grandma hides her horror stories with imprecision  
and alien conspiracy theories  
but I see them haunt her eyes and puckered skin  
(the ghosts of boys and discomfort, every girl I know has them)

like the two boys I didn't know,  
knocking on my car window  
holding the door handle, laughing at my head shaking no  
(this is how the mixed girl's heart breaks, that brown magic show)  
they walked off because that was just another thursday  
even as i parked my car and tiptoed to the theatre  
they lingered in the air as I stomped my feet into lonely and alone  
(because i am always lonely and alone)



# HIGH SCHOOL PROSE



# WHERE'S WALDO

Emma Steckline

*First Place*

I remember I was at a party once. It was a friend of my mom's, and she was moving away. One of the organizers of the party had her cousin come over. I helped him set up the flowers and we talked. I remember he talked with that stereotypical "gay" accent. But I couldn't assume anything because that would be hypocritical of me. I remember I hoped though. I hoped that he was gay, and at first this thought rang off the bars in my brain as something wrong. Guilt slugged through the veins on my hands as I arranged the candles like he told me to. I guess I felt bad because I didn't want to push it on him. I have heard people throw around the word "gay" to anyone that fits the fabricated mold, and I didn't want to be that person.

The more I thought about it, I realized that meeting him was a novel thing. That assumption I had was born out of a want. I never had any gay adults in my life before. I wanted somebody to look up to, somebody real, somebody who was proof that it isn't something I will grow out of like people have told me. Sometimes I forget, since I am surrounded by teenagers who are queer, that we really don't have that many role models. I remember seeing two women kiss each other and having to stop for a second. We might see this in social media, celebrities who have come out. But so rarely in real life do I witness the people who aren't famous. The people like me, LGBTQ+ people who don't have a platform, who just want to be.

It is like I am looking at a *Where's Waldo* book; it is impossible to find any representation between the busy pictures choking the page.

\*

The other day my sister told me that there was now a gay character on the Disney Channel. My first reaction was fear—something in me didn't feel right. I know it has been done well before; including people from the LGBTQ+ community in the media has uplifted me, has made me feel valid, represented, accepted. But the other 80% of the time, I am surprised the character even has a name because it seems like their only personality is gay, transgender, lesbian, etc... They come out, and all of sudden their only plot line is their queerness. And I understand to some extent because we can't ignore the oppression people face when they come out, the dangers even. At the beginning it makes sense, but I have seen the people around me as they are struggling with their identity, and it isn't every single thing they talk about. It is false to make that our only storyline, because we are not just our gender or sexuality.

All I can hope is that the newest member of the TV LGBTQ+ community doesn't turn into just "the queer one." I hope he is truly developed and stays as a main character. That he isn't smothered in the blanket of his gayness.

\*

One day my friend's sister asked which of their friends were "the gays and transgenders."

We all laughed about it when we heard, thought it was funny that this was the only association we had to our names, at least in her mind. It managed to stick in my mind though; something about it made me squirm.

Last year I finally came to terms with the fact that I am gay, one of 'those people.' 'Those people' who every single day are reminded of our minority status. When we see our world powers we are looking in a misprinted *Where's Waldo* book except the stripes on Waldo's shirt are rainbow colored and they forgot to print his picture on any of the pages. And there are different versions of the book: *Where's Waldo Book Two: Can You Find Any Queer Singers?* *Where's Waldo Book Three: Can You Find Any Queer CEO's?* *Where's Waldo Book Four: Can You Find Any Queer People in Government?* The list goes on and on. America sits on copies upon copies of books with no representation for centuries, and I know it isn't just us. I know that it isn't just the queer community because even within, we lack representation. We pride ourselves on how accepting we are, yet still we don't listen enough to the voices from queer people of color. But of course we couldn't be prejudiced because we are oppressed. And we have made copies of the book too, *Where's Waldo Volume 10: What Queer People of Color Can You Find in Movies/Books/TV Shows/Businesses/Government?* The results are too slim to be acceptable.

# A CURIOUS RETENTION OF DESPICABLE VICTIMIZATION

Eva Boeglin

*Second Place*

First grade, running around the playground kissing boys. Apparently Chad touches a girl *down there*. Chad doesn't get in trouble, but the girl is punished.

Second grade, having the teachers yell about us wearing our jumpers too short. It fit me a month ago and I can't afford another one. Is it really my fault?

Third grade, wanting to play tag but I'm not allowed because I'm a girl. Girls play jump rope, boys play tag.

Fourth grade, having Eddie McWelder corner me on the playground. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours." I don't know what to say.

Fifth grade, having the teachers take all the girls into the other room to tell us why having sex is a bad idea until marriage. The boys just get to watch a movie and play board games.

Sixth grade, getting my period and ruining my khaki pants. All the boys laugh at me and call me gross until I cry.

Seventh grade, telling my crush I like him. He says yes, only to ask me to send him naked pictures so he can share them with his friends.

Eighth grade, learning what the word *shut* means and being called one because Andrew spreads a fake rumor that I blew him in the locker room. Of course, he tells me to my face that I'm too ugly to ever date.

Ninth grade, meeting a nice guy and going to his house for dinner after a week of dating.

Ninth grade, finding myself alone in his room with his hands around my neck and his pants down to the ground.

Ninth grade, feeling violated as I am too afraid, too humiliated, to scream for help. I don't know these people. I don't want them to see me as a victim.

Ninth grade, him pulling up his pants, telling me I should feel honored that someone found me attractive enough to put their dick into.

Ninth grade, sobbing to my best friend, wondering if it's my fault. I shouldn't have gone to his house. I shouldn't have been in his room. I shouldn't have been a *shut*.

Ninth grade, staying up until 2 a.m. while the hospital performs checks. A pill a day keeps the pregnancy away. He said to me that if I get pregnant, he won't let me get an abortion.

Ninth grade, learning the police decided not to pursue. He is an honors

student. And I am a *slut*, or so it seemed. Why ruin someone's life just because a *slut* claimed he raped her? That he put his hands around her neck and forced himself upon her, even when she kept saying no.

Ninth grade, being afraid to go to sleep because I might dream of him. Might remember the feeling of his hands around my throat. Failing whole classes, falling asleep at my desk, because I can't deny my body its basic needs. Sleep and food. And according to the police, sex.

Tenth grade, flinching when someone's hand touches my shoulder. Sometimes it's easy to play off; other times it's harder. I don't remember his face anymore. I remember his hands. That it felt good. Deep inside some primitive part of me, it did feel good. That makes me feel worse than anything the cops could say. Anything the adults could say. It felt good, even if I absolutely despise it.

Ninth grade, wearing my purple jacket. I haven't taken it off since that day. Purple Jacket Girl—that's what they call me. But I don't dare take it off. The moment the polyester leaves my skin, I am a girl again, powerless to defend herself against the world. This jacket makes me ugly. This jacket makes me plain. But it also makes me feel safe.

Tenth grade, getting into a fist fight because I'm angry. Angry at the world that doesn't take the time to give a damn. Angry at myself for my own weakness. Angry at the guidance counselors that don't know how to help me. Angry at everything and everyone. I can't keep running away.

Tenth grade, spilling my feelings down on an empty page in hopes that someone will finally listen, wearing my purple polyester jacket. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for being a *slut*. I'm sorry for feeling pleasure from it. I'm sorry for crying whenever I dream of his big, broad hands.

I'm sorry I wasn't born a boy.

# LETTER TO A

Evie Jin

*Third Place*

It's funny, sometimes, to look back at the people we used to be. To laugh at the stupid, childish things we said or did and shake our heads, not believing that it was us. Usually, the memories are decent ones, and we smile in amusement as we recall the time we accidentally slipped and tumbled down the stairs because we were running too fast, or when we went ice skating for the first time and clutched a cone like it was a life preserver, taking half an hour to make it around the rink just once. These are the memories that we laugh at and cherish, keep close to our hearts as reminders of our childhood despite their clumsy, almost endearing awkwardness.

But occasionally, what we remember isn't funny. Sometimes it's painful. Sometimes it's embarrassing or disgraceful or inexcusable, and five or ten or fifteen years later, we still think of whatever it was we did and cringe in shame. We all have these types of memories, and I am no exception. One such recollection, specifically, still appalls me even now. And that's where you come in.

We were five years old and only in kindergarten. Do you remember how we used to pull out the plasticky, blue-green mats every day and spread them across the floor of the classroom for nap time? We'd curl up and fall asleep at the feet of tables and chairs, sucking our thumbs, lost in the ethereal wonder of childish dreams.

Some of us wouldn't sleep—we'd crawl off our own mats to visit our friends, join them on their rectangles of allotted space while laughing quietly at our small acts of rebellion. We'd sit huddled together in the darkened room, a little group of campers gathered around the bonfire of our friendship, giggling behind our hands and poking each other just for fun and sharing ghost stories, probably. Whatever we did, it must have been something only kindergarteners would find fascinating, some innocent game or fantasy that doesn't seem like much now but meant the world to us back then. Which is understandable, of course—we were only children.

I was a child and had no concept of race. I reasoned that since I wasn't black, I must be white, and for many years afterward I labored under the delusion that there was nothing else that separated people, that the world was black and white, and that was all there was to it. I laugh now at my flawed reasoning, how naive I was, but I guess race is one of those things that young minds can't fully comprehend—not until they're older and have experienced the true consequences of being different and the little derogatory remarks that people drop as casually as litter, but that sting like alcohol on a wound.

Back to what happened—do you remember? It was nap time one day and you crawled up to me, and what I did next I know will always jab me with

hot pins of shame whenever I think of it. Eleven years later, I still feel a twinge of mortification when I recall how you came over to me, how I sat up and looked straight into your eyes and said, “You can’t come onto my mat because you’re black.”

I didn’t understand what the big deal was; why teachers converged on us with serious, almost angry looks on their faces; why Mom came to school before the day was over and took me home. I guess she explained to me later what I did wrong, safe in my room from the prying eyes and ears of the rest of the world, but I don’t remember what she said. All I could comprehend was that I’d made a terrible mistake, and I nodded and looked serious and promised I would never do it again.

Listen to me: I had no intention of hurting you. I remember what I said, but I have no idea why I said it. Maybe doing so made me feel powerful, somehow, like a queen deciding who was worthy of sharing her castle, or maybe I was only trying to think of a reason to leave you out, and so I fixated on and dug deeper on the most obvious thing that made us different. But that’s what everyone does, isn’t it? That’s how racial prejudice begins.

Honestly, I’d rather you didn’t remember what happened. I don’t want you to remember the hurt and the shame, the discomfort and disbelief. I don’t want you to feel bad about yourself, because no one deserves to be ridiculed or excluded for who they are.

I’d rather you didn’t remember, but if you still do, you can look at me now and laugh. You can laugh because now, eleven years later, we’re even. I’m telling you, I’ve been the subject of racial slurs and ridiculous stereotypes and I can finally imagine how much it hurt you when I said what I did that day. I’ve been told that I “should be good at math” because I’m Asian. I’ve been mistaken multiple times for other Asian girls, simply because we “all look the same.” I’ve been repeatedly paired with the Taiwanese boy in class when my so-called “friends” were picking cute couples for every girl in the grade. Even teachers were always shoving us together, partnering us up for every project, and I hated it. But once you leave that sheltered, cozy kindergarten classroom—that safe haven where racism is unaccepted and untolerated, where the teachers will always sort it out—it’s everywhere, and no matter how small the act or how quietly the words are uttered, it still stings like hell. But we can’t escape it.

It gets to the point where I try as hard as I can to forget myself, to pretend I’m not Chinese. I refuse to wear light shirts, because they make my black hair stand out even more. I pepper my speech with American slang. I avoid speaking Chinese in public. Sometimes, I am able to ignore my Asian self, keep it carefully folded and hidden away, and I can simply exist without paying much heed to the cold reality of being different. But there are other occasions when I’m sick and tired and ashamed of being Chinese. I hate feeling like I don’t belong. I’m constantly wishing that I could trade my wide, bulbous nose for an elegant, narrow European one. I wish my hair was lighter so that I won’t stand out so much. I know that’s why I caved one day and dyed half my hair blonde—it wasn’t because I “just wanted a change,” as I told the many curious people

who asked, but because I wanted to look less obviously Chinese, to begin taking small steps away from my Asian-ness.

It's funny that I'm telling you all this. I don't know where you are now or what you're doing. I don't know who your friends are or if you still even live in this city, but maybe I'm telling you because I want to show you that I'm no longer a queen, that I realize how horrible I was to you and that you can come and talk to me now and I won't turn you away. We can play together like we never did anymore after kindergarten and regain all those years of lost friendship, pretend we're royalty again. But really, at the end of the day, we're both commoners in this society we live in just because of the color of our skin, and there's always going to be people who look down on us and mock us because that's how life works when you live in a kingdom. I'm sure you knew that already.

Listen to me: I'm sorry. I never would have said it if I had recognized the implications of those unforgivable words, and if I could trade a thousand stars in the sky for the chance to take them back, I would. You know that, right?

I get tired, sometimes. Tired of hearing the demeaning remarks, tired of silently simmering with rage and not being able to do anything about it. If I hear "Asian eyes" or "konichiwa" one more time, I swear to God I'll scream, and some days, I just want to escape from it all, withdraw from the discrimination that makes life unbearable at times. But it doesn't work like that. Once the world takes hold of you in its seething and prejudiced jaws, it won't let you go. Meanwhile, innocence is like water in cupped hands—slippery, quicksilver, delicate—and can never be regained once it is lost.

I wish I could take back what I said to you. I wish you were here right now so that I could tell you, with living, breathing, heartbroken words, how sorry I am. More than anything, I wish we could go back—back to when the world was black and white and race didn't matter, to when tables were castles and dust motes twirling and dancing in the sleepy haze of late-afternoon sunlight were fairies and we were just kids . . . sitting and laughing together on the floor of a kindergarten classroom when we should have been napping.





## WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER



We work better when all of us work together. Inclusion means every person is valued, and all contributions are welcomed. At UPMC, inclusion begins with the core belief that everyone deserves dignity and respect. UPMC Center for Engagement and Inclusion inspires a culture of collaboration throughout our company and within the communities we serve, all based on the simple idea that inclusion matters — to all of us, every day.

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