

20TH ANNIVERSARY

# Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards

Carnegie Mellon University

January 21, 2019



**Carnegie Mellon University**

Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion

Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

English

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# Acknowledgments

The 20th annual Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards are sponsored by Carnegie Mellon's Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences, the Center for Student Diversity and Inclusion, and the Department of English. For their generosity and support, we thank Richard Scheines, dean of Dietrich College, and Andreea Ritivoi, head of the Department of English.

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We extend our deepest gratitude to the Pittsburgh-area educators who dedicated their time and energy to help students organize, revise, and submit writing for the contest, and to all students who put in the time and effort to submit their work. We value each and every submission as a voice against intolerance and discrimination.

Jim Daniels  
Thomas S. Baker University Professor of English  
Founder and Director, Martin Luther King, Jr. Day Writing Awards

## The Writing Awards Team

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## Participating High Schools

Allderdice High School; Avonworth High School; Bethel Park High School; Carrick High School; Central Catholic High School; City Charter High School; Fox Chapel Area High School; Lincoln Park Performing Arts Charter School; Mt. Lebanon High School; North Allegheny Senior High School; North Catholic High School; Oakland Catholic High School; Peters Township High School; Pine-Richland High School; Pittsburgh CAPA; Pittsburgh Obama; Pittsburgh Millions, University Preparatory School; Pittsburgh Science and Technology Academy; Shady Side Academy; Winchester Thurston School; and Woodland Hills High School

## Participating Colleges and Universities

Carlow University, Carnegie Mellon University, Geneva College, Point Park University, Seton Hill University, Slippery Rock University, University of Pittsburgh, and Washington and Jefferson College

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“Rest in Power” by Jimmy Coblin  
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To read the college and high school honorable mention selections visit:  
[www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/mlk](http://www.cmu.edu/dietrich/english/mlk)

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

## High Schools

Allerdice High School: “Tree of Life” by Dalia Maeroff  
Avonworth High School: “The Same but Different” by Hannah Meng  
Bethel Park High School: “Cases of Mistaken Identity” by Leslie Folino  
Carrick High School: “What the Pot Calls the Kettle” by Denay Clemons  
Central Catholic High School: “Honey Bee” by Nicholas Anglin  
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Oakland Catholic High School: “Other” by Kavya Weaver  
Peters Township High School: “A Dream” by Grace Meseck  
Pine-Richland High School: “The Bubble” by Taryn Douglas  
Pittsburgh Milliones, University Preparatory School: “They Shot My Dad” by Laniah Walker  
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Shady Side Academy: “The Parchment Stallion” by Akshay Amesur  
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Woodland Hills High School: “Our Race Is Not a Disgrace” by Melissa Foster

## Colleges and Universities

Carlow University: “Kings of I/we/us” by Cameron Short  
Geneva College: “Eric” by Nelson Lines  
Point Park University: “Sorry Not Sorry” by Ashley Southers  
Seton Hill University: “For Black Faces in White Spaces” by Morgan Allen  
Slippery Rock University: “Paving a Path” by Michaela M. Miller  
Washington and Jefferson College: “Porcelain Dream” by Ana Noriega-Cota

# College Poetry

FIRST PLACE

# They Sat in the Back

## Hannah Daniel

*Dedicated to Joyce Fienberg, Rose Mallinger, Richard Gottfried, Jerry Rabinowitz, Cecil Rosenthal, David Rosenthal, Bernice Simon, Sylvan Simon, Daniel Stein, Irving Younger, and Melvin Wax.*

We sat in the back.  
We were 13 years old, itchy, tired, and we didn't want to be there.  
We were anxious to leave our seats—  
we sat in the back to sulk,  
to count on our fingers how many more Saturday morning services  
we would have to endure before we could check  
the box for our *b'nai mitzvot*.  
We picked at our nails,  
but we sang the blessings because we loved them even still.  
The minutes limped along.  
We shifted in our dresses and our ballet flats that were getting a little too small.  
Our stomachs rumbled as we waited for *kiddush*  
and we sat in the back of the room.

They also sat in the back.  
Our matriarchs, our door-holders,  
the ones who had prepared our *kiddush* that morning.  
The ones who knew the code to the building was the same year it was built,  
the ones who drove us to this service.  
They were the ones who sang in the choir,  
the ones who taught your children their *aleph bets*.  
They sat nearest to the entrance, the ones who walked with walkers.  
The ones who parked right outside the temple doors to rest  
their stiff backs on stiffer benches each Saturday morning.  
The ones who have seen their children  
and their children's children  
through the sanctuary's doors.  
They built this place up from the ground  
and they sat in the back.

We did not want to sit in the front, where we might catch the eye of the rabbi,  
where God might see our lips stumble on our prayers.  
We sat in the back so we might easily slip out to use the bathroom,  
to get a drink of water, to check the broken clock in the hall.  
We sat in the back so that we could be the first to leave.

They sat in the back because they arrived early.  
They were our living ancestors, our *minyan makers*.

They sat in the back and they knew your name  
because they had been the first ones to welcome your family into the synagogue  
with a warm hug and *boker tov*.

We sat in the back; we wanted to leave.  
They sat in the back; they didn't have time.

SECOND PLACE

## Happy Birthday, Laquan McDonald Joss Green

We sing it the blk way first this time cause it's what you woulda done. It's drizzlin in Chicago, the droplets eruptin' off the ground with each stompclap. I got a million songs stuck on my tongue for you, have for bouta year now. Ion know if you would be protestin if it wasn't you who was shot but it was you who was shot so I guess that question don't matta much. Intrestin how it's always a issue 'a which time you in fronta a gun, almost neva a question of if ya ever found yasef behind one. It's ya birthday, so thinkin on ya as anything but saintly feels wrong. I ain't know much more about ya then what I saw in that video. I bet no one near me does. I wonder if you liked rain, the cleansing act of baptism as given by the Earth. But then I remember you was a nigga and niggas don't fuck with no soft shit. And though the obvious poetics of the fact that it is raining are not lost on me, I put that aside for the sake of yellin. Which is some shit that hard niggas can get behind. I ain't a hard nigga. But I sure as shit ain't soft. And I sure as shit ain't finna let him get off. This trial is four years too late but ain't no killer cops finna walk around this city on me and my clique's watch. He finna see justice, Laquan. Justice in your name for the sake of all 'em blk boys who got snatched and erased like you. You woulda been 21 today so we pourin up for you. Smokin out for you. Right in front of the cameras which parade our blk suffering to the white people who like to pretend that they care about you too but stayed home because of the rain.

THIRD PLACE

## A Brief Life Ariana Brown

so i'm wearing a black lives matter hoodie  
& walking through campus / because the protest  
is in a few minutes & the joke is  
i'm wearing black on black & standing near the jefferson davis  
statue / i mean i'm standing near the stump  
where the jefferson davis statue used to be / he  
was removed formally a few months ago / now  
only his name remains / engraved / in stone  
& the joke is i'm wearing a black lives matter hoodie  
standing next to the ghost of jefferson davis  
& of course / the campus police are driving by  
at this exact moment / & i turn away  
as though black isn't a vacuum of light / a gap left by loss  
a space entirely devoid of matter / a glitch in the sunlight  
as though the police will not detect the ghosts  
they left me with / as though i'm not always wearing blood on blood  
& because of the ghosts / or the heat  
or their own preference for intimidation  
the police keep driving

i take the back way to reach the protest  
anyway / the protest / which isn't even that large  
which is being monitored by police  
& i take a paper with the chants  
& the joke is there's at least ten chants  
& that's a lot to remember / for someone who was late  
to the protest / & walked past the ghosts of slave patrollers

& we begin marching / & white students in collars are laughing  
& i am offering my lungs to the hungry spirit among us  
trying to hear the chants in the back of the procession  
to make sure we are chanting the same thing in the front  
& we are moving through the campus streets  
& cars are honking / & when we reach guadalupe street  
the city bus drivers / all black & tired / are waving / snapping / hollering / hallelujahing  
& we are not met with tools of violence  
& i don't know what to make of that

& this is not my first protest  
but this is the first protest in which my grief  
did not become me / instead / my body leaned

toward my roommate / who organized the thing  
& looking over / i watch her  
dance / arms wound in freedom  
a good gospel / releasing  
from her limbs / & she smiles at me / & i join  
& the chanting is loud & immoveable  
& nobody dies on the street  
& the ghosts pull this brief life  
from their palms & place it in mine

& the joke is / one time i went to a protest  
wearing a black lives matter hoodie & i danced  
with my roommate / knowing  
i was hated / & knowing  
i was loved

College Prose

FIRST PLACE

## Bravery

### Qianou (Christina) Ma

*“Homosexuals betray the laws of nature!”*

It was during a history class. The teacher’s words left a bitter taste and made me feel dizzy. I wanted to stand up and demolish her “argument,” as I did in many debate competitions. Angry, sad, and shocked, I looked around eagerly to find another pair of eyes full of these emotions.

Some of my classmates bowed their heads, some kept spinning their pens with boredom, and some curled their lips to a contemptuous smile. Silent, sat still, in the same postures as any other class. Will there be an eruption under the deadly quiet sea?

*It’s the 21st century! Scientific discovery of sexual orientation spreads everywhere online and there are already numerous voices overtly opposing the prohibition on same-sex marriage. How can she use these irresponsible words to mislead kids as a history teacher?*

*I’ll stand up. But she’s the AUTHORITY. The school will take disciplinary action against students who “improperly” challenge the authority—of course homosexuality is “improper” under this circumstance. I want to stand up. Am I crazy? I want to stand up.*

The bell rang.

I realized that I had clenched my fists and my hands sweated. I could only mutter to myself, “*You are wrong.*” My desk-mate made no response. My words and courage died with the piercing bell to end class. As Dr. King advised, I would never forget the silence of my friends.

★★

*“Girls can just pick Liberal Arts, but we boys should be excellent in Arts and ace the Sciences as well!”* A teacher blasted these words to the whole grade.

*Does he understand what he just said? It’s the whole class’ advisory assembly for choosing between Arts and Sciences concentrations! This is sexism. Social bias like this had trapped people in a vicious circle of “men’s superiority in science” theory. Biological differences haven’t been proven to cause general intelligence discrepancy between males and females. How dare he say those irresponsible words!*

*I need to stand up. But he’s on the stage and with the microphone; there are too many people. I have to say something. Did I misinterpret his words?*

*“Is this sexism?”* I asked classmates beside me, tawing my frozen fingers on my burning cheeks. “*You are just too sensitive,*” some girls said. “*Yeah, what’s the point?*” some boys asked. I suddenly felt like a stranded fish, struggling to catch my breath.

★★

*A little girl came to me. Doubts fill up her bright and innocent eyes. "Mummy, my teacher said homosexuality is wrong and girls can only do Arts. I think my teacher was wrong! But what should I do?" I crouched down to rub her hair and said—I woke up from this dream. I don't want this future conversation with my daughter to end up with "Mummy encountered similar challenges before but I did nothing." I don't want her classmate to say "you are too sensitive" when she expresses her concerns.*

★★

My country hasn't legalized same-sex marriage, and backstreet sex-selective abortion is not uncommon in some underdeveloped areas in my country. However, it shocked me that in a developed city like my hometown, there were still teachers who make biased statements towards individuals' sexual orientation and overtly state that boys are more intelligent than girls. Instead of being offended, many students even can't recognize the bias.

Lack of awareness and inaction are the most terrifying of all.

★★

*"... You're really credible and influential to students who are just forming their values and independent views. I plead with you to make your words as objective as possible and help us think critically. Simply pointing out it's only your personal belief and encouraging students to always take different perspectives would help a lot. I respect you, but I suffered from your words. 'Amicus Plato, sed magis amica veritas. ...'"*

I regretted not being brave enough to stand up and respond instantly. I regretted not being brave enough to confront the authorities in person. I regretted not being brave enough to make this letter public. I hated myself for being so weak and unconfident that I was changing nothing.

I need to be stronger. To use my strength, to use my knowledge, how can I help and forward changes?

★★

Attend local college lectures on gender studies, organize events to promote acceptance and understanding of homosexuals, and talk with professors and students about equality among boys and girls... I had tried all of those to raise awareness of our biased social environment and appeal for more rational thinking. Some succeeded, some failed.

Being brave takes time, but take it.

It is hard, but make it.

Be patient, keep trying, and keep encouraging yourself, because "our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter."

## SECOND PLACE

# To Forgive the Choice of Writing in These Very Words Xinyi (Joyce) Wang

*“When one remembers in an adopted language, there is a dividing line in that remembrance. What came before could be someone else’s life; it might as well be fiction.”—Yiyun Li*

In the spring of 2018, I spent a week in a hospital. I was not allowed to use my phone, so conveniently I did not inform my family of the news. After a few days’ persuasion from my ward-mates, I decided to give my mother a call. A nurse took me to an office and gave me my phone. Cracked screen. Many unread messages. Already anxious, I initiated a voice call with my parents on WeChat. She picked up. “喂，妈妈。” As soon as those words came out of my mouth, a shield was erected between me and the nurse watching over me, who was American and couldn’t understand what I was saying. This shield only protected me from one side. On the other side, I was left bare with my own voice speaking in my mother tongue. I heard myself telling my mom what I was supposed to tell: I was admitted to a hospital because of my mental condition. I was okay. The school officials knew. I was being smart about it and I would be out soon. Piecing these words together in Chinese and pushing them out of my throat gave me a visceral discomfort. In English, saying these words would be liberating. I might even feel proud of how under control I was doing it. It wouldn’t make sense to use English in this conversation. I must use Chinese to expose my ill, true self to my mother. I spoke like a nervous 15-year-old who made a shameful mistake.

I was 21 years old. I had been an exile of my own language for almost six years at that point.

When I was first learning English in elementary school in Beijing, my mother, who was working for a British firm at the time, told me that the mastery of a language is achieved once you can dream in it. For a long, long time, my goal was to be able to dream in English.

I was sensitive to power since a young age. In middle school, I decided that I wanted to go to America for high school. I am still curious what gave that child such ambition. Perhaps the competitive culture in the public education system in China. Perhaps all the signals I had been receiving insinuating that America was number one—the most gold medals in the Olympics, the most atomic bombs and aircraft carriers, etc. Perhaps a legacy of colonialism. Who knows? But I do remember that desperate desire for power—whatever that meant to me at the time—and in response to that desire I decided I wanted to go to America.

I started studying English like crazy. Everything in English, I took it in. I watched all the American movies and TV shows I could pirate on the Chinese internet. I bought vocabulary books and tried to memorize every page. I even paid special attention to memes, not for fun but for the knowledge of humor. Later in life I would learn that humor comes hand in hand with social capital. But at the time, humor just seemed like another thing I had to learn to assimilate into the American culture.

I did make it out. I applied and got into an elite high school in America. The moment of enrollment felt like a moment of emancipation from a far-away, inferior

Eastern country. I did not immediately arrive at a new home, however, and I was reminded of that in every aspect of life. From my first three years in America, among all the memories that stuck were the shame from asking the teacher how to say “two to the third” after pre-calc when every other student had left the room and the fear and loneliness of not understanding why everyone in the room was laughing at a joke that I didn’t realize I made. I did everything I could to force myself to feel at home. Finding a home in America meant studying the Western canon. It meant treating writing like a science before it became anything remotely expressive and cathartic. It meant using my English name so comfortably that my Chinese friends would call me by it too.

One time in junior year of high school, a friend told me that she didn’t even know I was from China until I told her—a statement I would hear many times over—and I took it as the greatest compliment.

What seemed like emancipation at the time would turn out to be a strange kind of exile.

I spent my formative years in America reconstructing a new me in a new language. I developed the emotionality and sophistication of an adult who speaks English. Since I so drastically switched my language of comfort, my ability to use Chinese language stopped developing at age 15. I matured and am maturing in the American way. Right now, I am able to think these thoughts, write these thoughts, only in English, not in Chinese. The shield of the American language keeps me protected as I write about my rage and depression. If I were to write these emotions in Chinese, I would not have the right words, and I am not sure if I can handle the brutality in such remembrance.

Right after graduating from high school, per request of my counselor, my parents took me to a psychologist who was also a family friend. I guess they thought it was best to meet with someone they already knew well. The four of us went to a restaurant near where she lived. Lunch started with catching up and soon turned into an involuntary therapy session. I realized I could not explain what was “wrong.” When she asked me her questions, I simply cried. It frightened my father. Years later, I still wonder, have I forgotten how to be sad in Chinese?

During my hospital stay, I met a Chinese American woman. She often spoke Chinese to me. She just had a baby and suffered from postpartum depression. Her husband admitted her to the hospital without her consent, and she refused to take the drugs that her psychiatrist prescribed her. Perhaps she thought I was more comfortable speaking my mother tongue, so she told me about her life and expected me to tell her mine. She told me she supported herself through Yale medical school. She taught herself Chinese during college because her family didn’t speak it at all. She often spoke to the nurses on my behalf. She told me Western doctors tend to overmedicate. She warned me to never marry a white man. I ran from her. Her language made me feel naked. In the hospital I was trying with every bit of my will to build a shield and that shield was American. The Chinese language would erode it to the core so I ran away from her whenever she got close. I ran from the kindness—or the desperate gesture to connect—of

a woman who thought she could bond with me because of our shared origin. What she didn't know was that this origin, this distant, mythical place that she wanted to find, was a place that I abandoned and also abandoned me in return.

The price of erasing the presence of the Chinese language during my formative years was the erasure of an identity. Not sure since when, I don't dream in either language. My body made the decision for me. It can't make up its mind. I wonder who I am right now. I often have trouble choosing from the glorious terms one could use to describe one's mixed background because I don't see my background as a peaceful synthesis, but a brutal, forced replacement of one for another. Calling myself a hybrid of any sort feels inaccurate, reductionist, irresponsible, and straight-up lazy. Hybrid sounds more like a superior existence than the different things that constitute it, but I feel more like a half-ass. My fluency in English is associated with the abandonment of my mother tongue. This association is something to blame and regret, but also something to forgive. Perhaps it is only through the forgiveness of self that I will ever be able to call a truce in my internal battles to a truce and see beauty instead of brutality in the co-existence of languages.

When one is in exile, all one wants is to go home. I think of James Baldwin's famous quote: "Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition." No matter how hard I tried to rip this condition off my skin, I cannot. But home is also generous and kind. It waits as I slowly crawl back.

My Taiwanese friend recently gave me a book, 《孽子》 by 白先勇. Every night, I read its words, right to left, top to bottom. Each character hides an attempt at redemption.

### THIRD PLACE

## The Hill Between Us

### Eion Plenn

*I don't see your stares. I don't see your race. I'm running. Why won't you smile back at me?*

Shattered beer bottles and Subway wrappers cover my path. My lungs gasp for breath, but all they find is car exhaust and marijuana. I turn on Kirkpatrick Street, an incline typical of the Pittsburgh topography. When I get to the top, I stop to catch my breath. Looking around, I feel lost. All I see are empty lots, dilapidated brick homes, and graffitied convenience stores. The majority of the residents are African American—almost all are staring as I run by. Eyes all staring at me. *Me? A white boy running through the Middle Hill? Why would anyone stare? Why? I'm making this about myself, aren't I. Segregation is a thing of the past, isn't it?*

It didn't take me long to realize running through the Middle Hill wasn't like running through Shadyside, Squirrel Hill, or other neighborhoods near Oakland. There was tension to the asphalt streets, pain hidden behind the boarded-up sandwich shops and the rust-dusted clothing drives. I recall learning the history of the Hill District my freshman year of college. Seeing vibrant black and white prints of the “Historic Hill District,” a place filled with movie theaters and soda shops, nightlife and music. *The Crawford. The Hummingbird. Jitney Stations. Musicians' Clubs.* Now, everything's gone.

Running down Webster, up Wylie, and across Bedford, I yearn for vibrancy. Instead, I pass metal cages covering stores, “No Trespassing” signs displayed on apartments. Large areas of nothingness permeate under the grey Pittsburgh sky, like someone planned to build something a while ago but forgot. Overlooking the battered brick houses stands an old public housing unit called Skyline Terrace. It reminds me of a 55-plus suburban community: modern, cookie cutter apartments equipped with double glass windowpanes, freshly mowed lawns, golden doorbells. And yet, there is an emptiness to these apartments, and an uneasiness that fills them. An uneasiness that fills me. As a white running through the Middle Hill, I am just beginning to understand my privilege.

I turn on Centre Avenue. Surely, this was not the same Centre Avenue I jogged on minutes prior, where I gawked at the luxurious Schenley Farms mansions behind the golden oaks. The Hill District's only a couple blocks north, *where are their golden oaks? Segregation could not be this obvious, could it?*

As a college student, I live in a constant bubble. I am always surrounded by individuals, like myself, whose biggest fear is failing an organic chemistry exam or getting denied a summer internship. I am as much in the city of Pittsburgh as I am detached from it. I take classes on diversity, literature, and sociology, all to become a more “worldly” individual. I volunteer at hospitals and tutor in public schools, all while pretending that race is transparent. Pretending the doctors that walk the hospital hallways are not predominantly white and male. Pretending that Housekeeping is not all Hispanic. Pretending that nurses' aides are not all black women.

*Segregation is a thing of the past, they say.*

Like many students at Pitt, I come from a white middle class family in suburban

Philadelphia. My school district was 85% white—my neighborhood around 95%. In elementary school, we were taught that segregation was a thing of past. Over with. *Vamoose*. I remember commemorating Martin Luther King, Jr. Day on the Friday before. We'd get a crosswords with Civil Rights leaders' names on it. We'd memorize how Rosa Parks sat at the front of the bus and how Martin Luther King had a dream. We'd watch a 90s documentary on Ruby Bridges. My teacher told us Ruby Bridges was the first black student to attend an all-white public school. I remember staring in awe at the fuzzy TV screen and admiring her bravery. I remember feeling the swears and rocks thrown at Ruby Bridges and thinking they could never be thrown today.

*Never today. Schools, segregated? No, never. How dare you use that "S" word. How dare you. How dare you.*

In college, I came to understand race within a different context. I learned in biology that race is dependent on the amount of eumelanin in the body. I learned in psychology that race unifies social groups and influences attitudes. I learned in sociology that race is discriminated against, selected upon, and deeply ingrained in our country's culture.

*Segregation was a thing of the past, they say. They are wrong.*

We often look at the Civil Rights Movement with rose-colored lenses, ignoring the segregation which persists in our country today. *How dare you use the "S" word. How dare you. Martin Luther King had a dream, and that dream came true. Didn't it?*

As I turn off Kirkpatrick and make my way towards campus, black bodies quickly turn white. Segregation is as present as the hills of Pittsburgh. Segregation is in the schools, the neighborhoods, the hospitals, the streets.

I'm running downhill now, and my steps become fast and heavy. My sneakers press firm against the beige campus sidewalk. The freshly cut shrubs and flowers become my new backdrop. I am transported to another dimension, a world of stressed college students, rap music, and Starbucks Frappuccinos. I think of where I've been, where I want to go, what I want to change. *Segregation is everywhere.* The uphill battle has just begun.

# High School Prose

## The Fear of Queer Madison Katariski

Princess Leia is my first celebrity crush. I sit on the shag carpet of my old, red-bricked home as my mom popped a VHS of *Star Wars: Episode IV A New Hope* into the player. While my parents sit on the couch, I stay on the ground, digging my nails into the carpet, waiting for the girl on the cover to cock her hip and ask Obi Wan Kenobi for help. When I'm listening to the girl speak, I don't hear Obi Wan Kenobi. I only hear, "You're my only hope."

When my parents are sleeping, I pop the VHS back in and turn the television's volume down enough that my parents can't hear the words coming from the speakers but loud enough that I can still hear the raspy trickle of Carrie Fisher's voice when she asks for help. I trace my finger against her cinnamon-bun hair. In this moment, my feelings are innocent. They are not lustful; they are not sinful.

In the same year that I discover my six-year-old undying love for Carrie Fisher, there are 242 reported cases of aggravated assault, 448 reported cases of simple assault, and five reported cases of murder against lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. But I am too young for now to understand this. For now I will continue staring at Carrie, letting myself indulge in the tingly feelings that come with crushes.

My mom and I are alone in the car coming back from my dad's house. The roads are twisted here. In the dead of the night, the car's lights are the only source of illumination. The trees that line the road twist up, and in my anxious, 12-year-old mind, their branches look as though they're reaching into our car. They reach in because they know I'm hiding something that not even I know is hidden yet. My mother's face grows hollow in the slight dim of the lights coming from the car heading toward us. I bite my lip, feeling nervous guilt well up in my stomach, induced by the knotted faces of the trees and the conversation we just came back from with my dad. All at once I open my mouth and utter words I have been long reciting in my head, just waiting for the right time for the syllables to bubble out.

"Sometimes I just wish I was gay to piss off Dad," I say.

My mother's hollow face doesn't change. She stares straight into the empty road when she speaks.

"Well, are you?" she asks.

"No," I say.

It's a compulsory response, something trained by a force that wants to beat any thought beyond heterosexuality so deep within me that I wince at the thought of being anything other than straight. I don't think about what I'm saying. I just say it.

After Pavlov trained his dogs in 1897, he didn't know it would offer any insight into psychology. He was a physiologist set on researching the digestive nature of dogs and the role of the olfactory sensory system in relation to drooling. In terms of classical conditioning, he started with meat powder to induce slobber in the dogs who smelled it. This is called the unconditioned stimulus because the dog doesn't need to be trained to like the smell of food; dogs naturally like food.

Girls are my meat powder.

Next, he introduced the sound of a bell to call the dogs in. This is called the neutral stimulus because on its own, it doesn't cause any drooling response in the dogs.

Questions like, "Well, are you?" are my neutral stimulus.

But Pavlov started noticing something weird happening with his dogs: they would start drooling from the mere sound of the bell with no meat powder introduced—the conditioned response.

I noticed the same thing. When the thought of romantically liking girls is paired with the questioning, curt, impatient, accusatory tone of "Well, are you?" my body is conditioned to respond "No" only by hearing, "Well, are you?" I don't even have to think about the social repercussions of liking girls. My body is trained to respond in the most acceptable, most normal way it knows.

I'm sitting next to my mother on a hard, wooden pew. The smell of frankincense whisks through the room, exacerbated by the thick June air as Father John blesses the room. My entire extended family and I are here to celebrate the life of my grandmother who passed away from cancer. St. Abigail's Byzantine Church was the place she had attended the last few years of her life. My whole family had grown to know Father John, a stout man whose stomach always stretched past his waist. His beard was always white while his hair was always youthful and brown. He wore moon-shaped glasses that made his eyes look as though they were reaching towards you.

We start with a hymn.

"Hosts of an-gels on high, give You glo-ry su-preme," we all sing. It's typical of Byzantine hymns to be sung in staccato-ed syllables, rising and falling rhythmically in a way that sounds both holy and cultish. Father John's sermons are distinct in the same way: holy or cultish.

He starts by thanking the congregation. Apart from my family who is three generations removed from Poland, the rest of the congregation either wears veils that cover their faces or babushkas, traditional headscarves worn by many Polish *babcias*, or grandmothers. Many of the *babcias* mutter Polish phrases under their breath as Father John leads us in Hail Mary. My grandmother was the only person in the family left that could speak Polish. I wish she were here so I could hear what they were saying.

At the head of the altar is a long, white table adorned with doily-like cloths and candles. Behind the table is a golden arch with a ghastly depiction of Jesus on the cross. Tiny marble tears fall down his smoothed out, hollow cheeks as Father John continues the sermon. He is the Mona Lisa; his eyes follow me wherever I look. At 13, I start to wonder if I'm the reason Jesus is crying.

"As many of you know, in this holy month that celebrates the birth of John the Baptist, your senators have let you and the whole world down," Father John says.

"Last week, the Supreme Court decided that sodomy is legal in all fifty states," he says. Father John pauses and lets the thick exhale of sodomy sink into the cracks of

our lungs before he continues.

“They’ve decided that gay marriage is legal,” he says. “They will all go to hell.”

With the stained glass windows closed, the heat lingers. It dances around our feet, crawling up our legs.

“I am scared for humanity,” Father John says. He blesses us again.

Behind the towering crucifix of Jesus, there is a fiery portrait of hell. In tide pools of lava, Hitler and Osama bin Laden are naked, floating down the stream and moaning in agony. Am I as bad as Hitler and Osama bin Laden?

My freshman year of high school became a renaissance. I lose 20 pounds over the summer between eighth grade and ninth grade, cut my hair down to boy-length short, come to terms with my being, and I end my six-year no-dating dry spell. In my freshman year I hold someone’s hand in a way that I never had before. And people stare at me in a way that I had never felt before.

In the hallways, exchanged whispered are magnified.

One day, a girl meets me in the hall to ask me a question.

“Are you dating Sarah?” she asks. Sarah is the name of the girl whose hand I hold.

“No,” I say. I run into my next classroom before she can interrogate me further.

My response is another compulsory one, another conditioned response. After enduring years of newscasts’ worth of reports on violence against LGBT people, I decide it’s better to break her heart a bit than to risk dying.

The next day she and I still hold hands down the hallway, but now my palms are sweatier.

“Why are your hands so slick?” Sarah asks.

“I’m not sure,” I reply. But I am lying. I know why my hands are slick. My hands are sweating as a response to our peers staring at our interlocked fingers: a conditioned response.

She drops me off at my biology class before she heads off to chorus. As she lets go of my hand, she tells me she loves me. I don’t say anything back because I am scared.

In April, Omar Mateen goes on a trip to Miami, two hours and six minutes away from Fort Pierce, with his father. While they’re strolling on the boardwalk, two men, like any other, kiss. Omar’s father Seddique Mateen tells the FBI that his son looked “very angry” seeing gay men exchange affection.

Homophobia is a tricky thing not rooted in fury or religion but rather apprehension and tension. In a study, 159 heterosexual men were exposed to male-on-male erotic films. When neurobiologists scanned their brains, they found streams of neurons traveling along the brains’ anger highways, but what the neurobiologist later found out was that cognitive responses to homophobia are rooted in anxiety and fear rather than anger or sadness. Omar is scared.

I imagine Omar Mateen in his house in Fort Pierce, Florida. Omar Mateen is preparing his attack. He's thumbing the trigger on his handgun while his AR-15 is laid out on his lap. His wife, Noor Zahi Salman, brings him snacks while he flips through the channels. His three-year-old son plays with army trucks and plastic soldiers.

When I hold my girlfriend's hand down the hall, we get stares. I'm uneasy, nervous, knowing what these kids might do to me. I've watched enough television, grown enough at this point to know that being a gay teen in rural Pennsylvania is akin to being covered in blood in a tank of sharks. We are vulnerable here.

Later, in June, Omar Mateen will travel two hours from Fort Pierce to Orlando to erase 49 lives.

One kid in particular likes to follow my queer scent down the hallway. He spits words at me, stepping on the backs of my shoes to see me trip as he calls me things that sink into the fibers of my body so heavy that it's hard to speak or breathe in those moments. Not only am I exposed. I'm unarmed.

But Omar Mateem isn't. On June 12, 2016 at 12:00 in the morning he will drive towards the Pulse Nightclub. He will think about those gay men and how scared he was seeing them kiss. At 2:00 he will open fire on a police officer standing outside of Pulse. At 2:09 Pulse will make a status update: "Everyone get out of Pulse and keep running." He will open fire on an entire room full of Latinx LGBT people. He will kill 49 and injure 53. He will commit the worst mass shooting in recent U.S. history. After two shootouts with the police and a plea to the U.S. to stop bombing his home country of Afghanistan, Omar Mateem will be shot dead.

It seems like the whole world cries that night.

As my mom watches the report, I can hear her quieted sobs. Numbers scroll across the TV: 49 dead, 53 injured. She cries because she realizes her best friend, my uncle, could have been one of those 49. She cries because she realizes I, her daughter, could have been one of those 49. She's aware, and she's scared.

But I'm not thinking about myself in this moment. I'm thinking about Omar Mateen. When they flash his face on the television that night I cry because I am angry. I cry that night because I am scared. I am still scared.

*Some names changed to respect privacy.*

## SECOND PLACE

# Apu? Daevan Mangalmurti

The Obama Academy of International Studies is not a beautiful building. If it was beautiful once, that beauty is lost, irreparably draped by dingy brick so that windows and light are rarer than emeralds within its crowded hallways. The students that pile in through its five front doors every morning, Monday through Friday, are different. They are what Baldwin and Wells would have celebrated: the admixture of mankind, owing an allegiance not to their kin but to the noble hordes of humanity itself.

I'm joking, of course. They are different. No one is a building, no person a towering edifice, and none of them can be at peace with each other or with the place of their being.

No.

The students of the Obama Academy of International Studies are a raging river of emotions, of war and battle between races and classes and people. They can, to the outside observer, be separated into two major groups, and then into teeming fractals of those two powers. Occupying the central territory are the white people and the black people, equal in their inherent American-ness, even as the white people grow weaker in power every year. On the outside of that natural boundary, that grey moat that cannot be crossed except by the chosen few, are the others. The minorities among the minorities, the token representatives of the forgotten peoples and the distant nations of the old world. Five of the native peoples of the Americas, their bloodlines so diluted that they are not autochthonous but light-rooted. The mixed-blood children of the Nahuatl and the conquistadors, of the Pueblo and Esteban, of John Henry and Marilyn Monroe. Two descendants of the fertile deltas and the roaring waters. And me. I am, alone among the six-hundred some students of the Obama Academy of International Studies, 9-12 only, a भारतपुत्र.

This is not new. This is the norm. I began surrounded by an alliance of colors, 20 children crowded into the basement the house of God for six hours a day, speaking the speech of Cervantes and Márquez. And then, for nine years, I was alone. Skin the color of canyon sandstone, dark in the summer, ruddy in winter. The token representative of a billion children of the Ganges, ambassador to a nation that assumed I spoke for all my kith and kin. To be an Indian child at the Fanny Edel Falk School was, in my youth, to be a curiosity of the highest order. A curiosity to a crowd that drew breath from half the nations of Europe, but knew only three children with skin darker than weak tea. I was, in my first 180 days of high school education, bombarded.

Hey man, do you know my friend from ECS? His name is Rohun. He's so stupid. He must be the stupidest Indian I've ever met.

No Fred, I don't. But hey, do you know this Polish kid I know? The only way he's related to you is that his grandmother immigrated from the same Old Country in the same century. But hey, you're both Poles... right?

And no, Chandragupta is not my daddy. He was, alternatively, a third-century before Jesus of Nazareth emperor who united India, pummeled the Greeks, slaughtered his enemies, and created the greatest empire in India since the fall of the sons of Kuru...

or a third-century after Christ emperor who united India, routed the Huns, married his enemies, and created the greatest empire in India since the fall of the Mauryas. Neither of those people are my fucking daddy.

Oh, and before you ask, I have no interest in trying out the Kama Sutra.

But Obama students are enlightened, you know. When they make assumptions about me, they don't assume my parents are 7-11 owners or motel proprietors. They assume they're rich doctors. Clearly, the times are a-changin'.

There's one thing, though, that I've saved, the one thing I've taken to heart. The best for last, I suppose. The years of my childhood were passed in the company of books and comedians. I was born into a house of a people who moved across a world for opportunity. Never, my dear, were *The Simpsons* in play. Perhaps that was a missed opportunity, for the day I walked into the dry, drab edifice that is the Obama Academy of International Studies, they very quickly entered the game. The questions always begin innocuously. Religion, culture, parents, kindred, food. In the spring of 2017, I walked through the halls towards seventh period, the ramshackle collection of students and teachers that the Civics class had devolved into. The Lusophone Mr. Danley had been removed from the premises. Pushing a child into a locker—the straw that broke the capybara's back. There were other things, too, but I failed to figure them out. Now our education on the great matters of the governance of man was insolvent, its proprietor a friendly, scraggly-bearded chauvinist who was not equipped to teach. So we sat about in irregular oblong formation, our desks drawn together in a simulacrum of active discussion. And we discussed. We did far more learning, in those several weeks, than we ever had in the past. Death one day, religion the next, the clash of civilizations third. It was on that day that I first heard the name of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon. I had heard "Thank you, come again," screeched laughingly with a terrible Indian accent, many times by then, and "Daevan Mangalmurti's Pharmaceutical Company" had come into this world only two weeks before, but I shrugged both off. Casual mockery like that happens everywhere; Obama students are just part of the great wide American wolfpack. But Apu was different. I opened myself up to it at first. I asked where these strange sayings came from. I never should have, knowing that kids who had known Richard Knight for ten years were still willing to call him Harambe when push came to shove, but I did. When push comes to shove, I'm an idiot, I suppose. Charles told me it was inspired by Apu. I asked who Apu was. Damian asked me if I had never watched *The Simpsons* before. I said no. And they all started laughing. And then one of them called me Apu. It was probably Richard. Funny, isn't it? I didn't understand it then. But I felt angry enough about it to be insulted, because this was not looking good. But I didn't know enough, and there wasn't anything I could do.

So I went home, and I asked Google about Apu Nahasapeemapetilon. Name inspired by a beloved series of Bengali classic films. Not bad. A cartoon character with skin the color of turmeric and a fake Indian accent. Not great. Voiced by a white guy. Looking worse. Subject of an upcoming documentary on racism. Oh boy. How bad could

this be, anyways? Pretty bad, it turns out. Calling me Apu is like calling a black man Sambo. And if no one of any decency uses the word Sambo in 2017, why does anyone use Apu? It's demeaning, it's insulting, and it assumes that all Indian people are the same and not worthy of their own individual characteristics by overshadowing them with a collection of negative American stereotypes of Indians. If you're an Indian-American kid growing up in a normal place with normal parents, Apu is a shadow hanging over you wherever you go, whatever you do. Don't take it from me. Take it from Priyanka Chopra. Or Hasan Minhaj. Or Aasif Mandvi or Kal Penn or Aziz Ansari or Hari Kondabolu. Apu is the cartoon equivalent of Ashton Kutcher in brownface in a 2012 Popchips ad being replayed on our television screens every day, every hour, for 29 years. Twenty-nine years. Since Apu appeared on our televisions screens, we've imprisoned thousands for low-level drug offenses, a bunch of fanatics have flown planes into American icons, a black man has ascended to the presidency, and South Asian-Americans have climbed, bit by bit, into the American media mainstream. But Apu stays, day in and day out.

Racism against minority minorities in the United States comes from all sides. In the 80s, Dotbuster gangs formed in New Jersey to attack Indian women. In the 2000s white people tried to kill some of us if we looked terrorist-y enough. The other Asians, the real Asians—we're not Asian to them. And now, African-American kids call me Apu. I don't know why people don't understand how pejorative that is, even when I try to explain it to them time and time again. I haven't been called Apu in months, and I haven't been told "Thank you, come again" in an even longer time. But Charles still has me as Apu in his contacts, and Evan Wessely still asks me if Chandragupta is my daddy. This is not the end. I am going to be part of my dingy, flourishing community for two more years. And, in all likelihood, unless he is carefully murdered with his own success by my people, Apu will be too. And so will questions, ignorant and racist, that will dog me for years beyond now. But now is as good a time to start changing that as any.

I cannot say, in all honesty, that I hate Apu Nahasapeemapieton. He is the symptom, not the cause. But he has inched too far into my life and the lives of people like me for me to laugh at him as another might do. Apu may seem inconsequential, but looking at me and calling me Apu is wrong, it's bigoted, and it shouldn't happen, because it perpetuates the identification of every Indian in this country as Apu, as a racist stereotype of 1.3 billion people concocted three decades ago and unchanged since. Names matter.

Racism hits all of us, and it doesn't matter if the person hurling slurs is black or white, brown or red. We always have a chance to be better than our past. My fear is that we shall not seize it.

*Names changed to respect privacy.*

# High School Poetry

FIRST PLACE (TIE)

## A Sacrilegious Seder Madeline Bain

How is this night different from all other nights?

On this night, it does not rain. It storms. It downpours outside my window,  
the same window that early this morning, my father told me not to look out of,  
told me to step away from, because bullets can break glass.

On this night, our country is aching. My neighborhood is aching.  
Rose Mallinger's house down the street is silent and empty,  
her son sitting shiva next door.

As the sun sets on Saturday and Shabbot ends,  
Orthodox Jews across the nation are turning on their televisions  
and learning that their brothers and sisters are dead.

On all other nights, we welcome the feeling of our pillows on our cheeks.  
On this night, the moon only solidifies reality, locks the massacre in history,  
forces us to wake on Sunday morning and relearn the news,  
double over in pain and feel the grief in entirety again.

On all other nights, we eat chameitz and matzah. Why on this night, only matzah?

On all other nights, we gather as a family and dine together.

On this night, we pull an ancient box leftover from Passover out of the cellar pantry  
and try our best to eat.

On all other nights, we eat all vegetables. Why, on this night, maror?

On all other nights, we are not in the basement at 8:00 p.m. crying over matzah,  
but are cooking in the warm kitchen, glasses steaming up over the pot of soup,  
scents of dinner wafting through the house.

On this night, we eat no soup,  
but instead taste the bitter herb of sadness and loss,  
the devastation of tragedy and hate,  
the maror of our troubled country's calloused inhumanity.

On all other nights, we don't dip even once. Why on this night do we dip twice?

On all other nights, the only salt at the table is shaken atop our food.

On this night, it falls from our lashes and we dip twice, once for each teary eye.

On this night, we cry for everyone lost today and everyone gone before.

For not only Jews, but for Antwon Rose,  
the young black boy killed in East Pittsburgh,  
cry for the Mexican children in concentration camps, the Muslims ripped from their families  
and deported to a place they may not remember ever calling home.

We cry for death, for the profound disconnect between the shooter and self,  
even between neighbor and self.  
We cry for how lonely it can feel to be human.

On all other nights, we eat either sitting upright or reclining. Why on this night do we all recline?

On this night, we recline with each wave of remembrance,  
each renewal of reality. We recline in pain. We reel.  
On this night, our elders recline, too, in their hospital beds,  
in the morgue, on the cold, hard floor of their place of worship.  
They will soon recline in their graves, coffins so dark  
that the Stars of David around their necks  
can't even catch the moonlight.

FIRST PLACE (TIE)

## Searching the Lines of My Palm Ilan Magnani

I.

The hands of thieves, sliced  
    like deli pork, stretch the skins  
of their palms wide. God offers  
    no rain to populate  
their flexion creases with gifts  
    of life and erosion,  
only copper pennies,  
    crafted from Congo mines.

II.

The latest autopsy  
    of a country reveals lungs  
lacerated, breaths overthrown  
    by blood diamonds that gleam  
like my mother's kitchen knives,  
    illuminated by stove and dishonored  
by mango's flesh.

III.

    I've heard it costs  
two cents to make a penny.  
    The thieves pay only one—not a cent,  
but a hand, much like my mother's,  
    its weight darkening with shadow  
forgotten grids of the globe  
    in my bedroom.

IV.

*Thank God we are alive*, say the teachers  
    at my school's annual Holocaust remembrance  
assembly. I pray the way sinners do; not *Thank God*  
    *my family survived*, but *This shouldn't have happened*,  
and my father won't ever buy  
    a German car, but while my parents fast  
on a holiday I can't remember  
    the name of, I fall asleep  
in the back of a Volkswagen,  
    wondering why I have never felt  
lucky. I wake with my body  
    not emaciated, with my limbs

intact. I dirty my mouth with fruit  
and say no more prayers.

V.

*Nobody's going to grieve  
over us, the Jewish*  
boy I've just met says. *Everyone is just going to forget.*  
His whole body convulses,  
a VHS tape rewinding.

VI.

*Antisemitism is like a fire,*  
my grandmother says. *It simmers down,*  
*but never goes out. It's always ready to be stoked*  
*again.* My grandmother and her daughter, both rabbis,  
carry a righteous gene I lack.  
Still, I listen to their preaching.  
*At the first red flag, go.*  
*Pack your bags and only take what you need.*  
*Leave the country.*

VII.

*There's an active shooter at Tree of Life,*  
I tell my sister, reading from a text message,  
as we watch a horror film  
on the couch on a Saturday morning.  
We switch to the news  
and see our street. Outside, a helicopter  
circles.

VIII.

My grandmother, a reverse hoarder,  
refuses leftovers. Her apartment is a child  
unfed, rich  
with promise but devoid of food.  
*I won't waste, she says.*  
On her door, a HIAS sticker—*my people  
were refugees*  
*too*—models a Magen David.

IX.

One week after  
the synagogue shooting, my mother  
enters my bedroom crying. *What's wrong?*  
In the corner of the room, a tapestry  
bearing my name—the Hebrew  
word for tree—wrestles against wind.  
*I'm holding so many people's pain.*

X.

The gunman's Twitter feed  
claims, *HIAS likes to bring invaders  
in that kill our people.*  
I scoff at the irony  
to splint the silence.  
I count my own breaths  
like the worshippers  
counted corpses. I sleep.  
I breathe.

SECOND PLACE

## Rebirth of a Nation Destiny Perkins

Ashes to ashes, burnt black bones recycled  
like old news, discarded in mass greedy

graves like victims of a modern plague,  
symptoms diagnosed by the melanin clouding our blue faces.

Over the decades the names pile up,  
pictures of mutilated pride metamorphose

into high definition. Too large for human  
comprehension, man-made compensation,

my tongue holds no more capacity for bitter body rinds.  
Bent on hand and knee, I regurgitate  
bodies that've become bland—  
useless,

and let my excreted sorrow bleed  
into the drains of neglected streets.

I trace my swollen lips and savor  
the acidic flavor of giving birth.

My jeweled sons, still spill onto the streets,  
black bones bruised like sapphire,

holes in collapsed obsidian chests glistening like rubies.  
No one stops to adore their riches, to reap their wealth.

THIRD PLACE

## My Black, My White Journey Washington

*Long hair, tall, happy, and thin,  
Doesn't matter the color of my skin,  
I'm too black for my white,  
Too white for my black,  
I'll never fit in,*

What's poppin later,  
What are we getting into,  
Let's do sumn,  
You tryna come through?

Oh, nothing much,  
I'm safe in my home,  
Watching TV,  
Playing a game on my phone,

*I talk too white for my black,  
Too black for my white,  
No matter how I switch,  
It's never quite right,*

Flat dress shoes,  
Buttons up high,  
Nothing too tight,  
Always passing my thighs,

Jogger pants,  
Jordans on fleek,  
Everything is tight,  
I'm aiming to please,

*I dress too black for my white,  
Too white for my black,  
It's never enough,  
Some things I'll always lack,*

At the school dance,  
Rocking that hip hop and R&B,  
Shoot, dab, floss,  
Ain't hard for me,

Although I am dancing,  
I am sad as can be,  
Everyone laughs,  
No rhythm they see,

*I dance too white for my black,  
Too black for my white,  
I'm trying so hard,  
To get it just right,*

The streets are quiet,  
The air is fresh,  
Birds are chirping,  
As I take a breath,

My hood is loud,  
Filled with debris,  
Sirens loudly screaming,  
Not a place most want to be,

*My city is too black for my white,  
Too white for my black,  
I'm beginning to think,  
Acceptance is what our society lacks,*

While reading this poem,  
You'll see what you see,  
My race is unknown,  
But who I am  
is just me.

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