

## College Prose Honorable Mention

### *More Than That*

By: Lurnie Wilson

I stand in a sea of pale faces, camera clutched in my right hand, lens focused on the gigantic structure before me: The Forbidden City. The sound of a dozen little cameras click around me. The flash of their tiny lights obscures my view, causing my index finger to hover over my own camera, waiting for the perfect moment to snap a single picture. But the others aren't looking at the palace. They're looking at the oddity in front of it. They're looking at me.

I squint more intently at my camera, swallowing the self-conscious lump that has formed in my throat. My face flushes and I become acutely aware that my every movement is being watched; documented by dozens of cameras owned by people who will carry my image to friends and family members and say, "Look what I saw today! Look at this!"

But when they flip to the picture, their astonishment will not be about the Forbidden City, it will be about me.

I am that unusual creature, that rare sighting they will brag about at home. Like spotting an endangered animal on safari, I am an unexpected bonus to this otherwise normal day of sightseeing.

But why?

I don't need to glance down at my hand to remind myself that I am tan. A balanced blend of my mother and father, I am the color of sweet caramel. I see my complexion reflected in the eyes of all who stare at me, fingers pointing, cameras flashing, mouths whispering.

I am tan. Growing up in America, I had never defined myself by one race. When standardized tests required an ethnicity, I was always the "other." In my mind, color is a

part, not a whole. But there, color was everything. Color was all there was. Color was all I was.

At first I didn't feel so ostracized. The constant flashing of cameras recording my image like the paparazzi made me feel different, but only on the surface. After all, that's what it was- a superficial difference. But as the days passed, it was as if I could feel my color seeping deeper into me with every stare. Color seemed to be replacing all else. That was all I could be.

If no one ever tells you you're different, you'll never give it a second thought. But I was very different. And I thought about it more than just a second time because every movement I made reminded me of what I was.

I have been told that those who gaped and snapped photos were merely curious. I understand curiosity. But curiosity can be considerate, respectful, and kind.

The curiosity of those I encountered caused me to question my very core. Was I really so different? Was I really so strange? In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in a city as globally connected as Beijing, I had not expected to feel so... foreign.

People skirted around me as one would a car accident or a caged cheetah, curious, but cautious, and unable to look away. It was as if I was a different species entirely.

Surely I am human, too. I have to be. I am. I am just as human as anyone else in this world. And because I am human I am just as equal as anyone else.

But society is a strong force. And when society does not understand and accept who you are, how are you supposed to? It's a rough tide to swim against, even when you know you're in the right: perhaps especially when you know you're in the right. You know exactly what you want, what you deserve, yet everyone around you is saying you can't have it.

All I wanted was acceptance. All I wanted was to walk down the street like everyone else. That was all. And yet, even that was too much to ask.

Returning to America was a relief. No longer was I on display, a circus sideshow in the flesh. I could breathe easily again, relish in my utter normalcy, my innate humanness. I could be judged fairly on my character and not solely on my color.

I could be myself.

That was, ultimately, what I had been deprived of: myself. It scared me to feel that I had almost lost it, almost lost the most integral essence of who I am, almost allowed it to be taken from me. And the worst part is that I had almost lost myself to complete strangers.

The people who stared didn't know who I was. They had no real, concrete authority over me: nothing more than the accusations they held in their eyes. But that had almost been enough.

It's a scary thing to feel that your self worth rests in the eyes of others. I know now that I am as worthy as I allow myself to be. Yes, I am tan. But I am also intelligent, sincere, determined, and empowered. I am tan, but I am also a daughter and a friend. I am tan, but I am also a singer, a traveler, and a writer. I am tan, but I am more than that.

## High School Prose Honorable Mention

### *Assumptions*

By: Madeline Schmiedeknecht

“Where’s the peach color?” Perla, my seven year old little sister wonders. She is in the midst of coloring a person; coloring another family portrait I presume. Perla used to love coloring rainbows, similar to my seven year old self, but within the last month has progressed to the art of portrait making. As I attempt to sneak a peak of the picture Perla quickly covers the paper with her small, marker colored hands and begs, “Wait Madeline!” I respect her wishes and sit back down across the table, imagining the portrait of our family. We are similar to any other families in that we have our own little quirks that differentiate our family from others, similar to how other families have traits that differentiate themselves from other families.

It is fun to learn about different families, to learn what other kids your age do, their hardships, and unique qualities that make their family unique. Learning about other families or cultures even, is harmless, but it is when a person becomes too enamored with figuring out another family that they start to make false assumptions, based on inadequate observations.

I consider my immediate family in Pittsburgh to be a daring, fun loving family just as any other. Yet, people look at my mom’s, sister’s, and my interactions and don’t see what seems so obvious to me. At the blue slide park, as it is commonly known as, Perla was sliding down the grand swirl slide as I came racing after her when a young lady asked, “Excuse me, are you her babysitter?” I replied no. I said that I was her sister. She turn to look at Perla, who was now watching impatiently, and then back at me; she smiled and walked away. Perla started to run away again and I scurried after, we were both used to this question. People do not notice the way Perla and I know each other so

well; how I can anticipate that she will go down the slide, which lets me jump off the ladder to catch her. They do not notice how I know just the right tickling sites to make her laugh. No. They notice the difference in skin color and assume we cannot be related.

My mom, Perla, and I were visiting a neighbor at the nursing home in North Hills. We stopped in the cafeteria for what we thought was a brief second, but ended up being much longer for all the elderly women were enthralled with Perla. Being in their eighties and in a nursing home, they did not get to see little kids too often. After oohing and awing over how adorable Perla was, they asked my mom where Perla's mom was. My mom, being accustomed to these questions, promptly responded that she was her parent. The ladies, however, did not believe her and we decided to leave before Perla noticed the doubts of the elderly ladies in her and our moms connection.

It is one thing to make assumptions on race when it is a quick observation that leads to a false conclusion. But it is another story to not accept people as a family due to their race, even after the family has assured you they are related. To be fair, these ladies in the nursing home were old and did not understand a lot of things, such as what the day was. I have no right to get upset either, for I too make assumptions based on my quick observations. If there is a girl and a boy who both have red hair, I may assume they are related, when really they could be just friends or not even know one another. However, these assumptions, based on only superficial appearances lead to harm. They can lead to the idea that having a biracial family is hard, when it should not be.

"Is it hard for your sister to not look like you or your mom?" a woman at church asks. This commonly asked question is sad. It is sad that people assume having a biracial family is "hard." However, it is heartbreaking that sometimes these people are right—it is hard for some to have a biracial family. It is hard because society makes these quick, false assumptions based on appearance and skin color. It is hard when your little sister notices people's questions and starts asking to have your blond hair and peach skin.

Everyone makes assumptions; it's our way of categorizing and figuring out people in society. The reason these assumptions are important to recognize and avoid is because they lead to harm. These assumptions lead to the formation and belief of a black man being subordinate to a white man. These assumptions lead to a woman not being hired due to her gender. These assumptions lead to a four year old girl confused at why the ladies did not believe her mother was her mother.

Discrimination is derived from these assumptions. Even my assumption that the two red heads were related because of their red hair leads to discrimination. I then start assuming that people who share similar qualities must be related, and those that are different cannot be family. Although many families do share their looks, many families do not. By making these assumptions, I am discriminating. I am becoming as ignorant as the person at the blue slide park, who asked if I was Perla's babysitter. By making these assumptions, I could become like the elderly women at the nursing home, where they have been making assumptions all their life and cannot believe anything that goes against their beliefs, even if it is the truth. These supposedly harmless assumptions are at the route of racism today.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. bravely and rightly informed the world of the racism in the 1960s and is our duty to fulfill his dream of a society free of discrimination. To do this, we need to stop making assumptions off of physical appearance. Although they may be right at times, they can really hurt people when they are wrong.

"Ok Buddy, you can see it now," Perla reveals, trying to not sound too excited. I slowly get out of my seat, building up the anticipation, and walk over to see. It is exactly as I thought. Perla, of course, is in the middle sporting pink pants and a purple top. Our mom is on her right with crazy curl cue brown hair. I am on the other side of Perla, the tallest of all three, my proudest trait. To Perla, my mom, and I this is our badminton loving, bean hater family, but to the common citizen who makes assumptions it is an incomplete and mix match of two Caucasian females with one Guatemalan little girl.

## High School Prose Honorable Mention

### *Ending Hatred: My Struggle with 'Reverse Racism'*

By: Bill Fox

Recently in English class, we were discussing Dr. King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" when another student came up with the phrase, "there can be no change until we end hatred." This idea strikes me now as representative of the entire problem of racism in America; it is as well representative of my personal struggle with issues of discrimination, not just by race, but against any group, be it one of differing sexual orientation or differing religious affiliation. This idea simply is sensible, and puts forth a clear goal, yet we are still mired in petty issues of discrimination.

My struggle is not about my own feelings; it's about others' feelings and my struggle with them. I struggle with the theoretically stark division between "black" and "white." In History class, we are taught that the "whites" oppressed the "blacks." But then, in middle school science, we learned that only a few genes separate "races." If we are so similar, it just doesn't make sense why we can't get along. Yet, we are still taught with emphasis on the sharp distinctions between such similar groups. Maybe it would be better to say, "There can be no change until we end differentiation."

Being a so-called "WASP"- a "White Anglo-Saxon Protestant" and growing up in a middle-class suburban neighborhood, one with no sidewalks or any children my age, I've had practically no encounters with other racial groups other than in my high school. Even there, it's a controlled environment, where the motto is to "think also of the comforts and rights of others." I've never witnessed anyone put down because of their skin tone. What Dr King struggled with every day of his life seems impossibly far away. Yet, I hear about things like the shooting of Trayvon Martin and "racial quotas" that confuse me in terms of racial identity. I don't know if I'm supposed to feel culpable for the horrible actions of some white people, just because we share the same color skin. Aren't "white people" to

blame for the wrongs done to the blacks' ancestors? Yet I can't simply ignore the problem. At the same time that we are being told that we are equal, we are being told that we aren't.

Interestingly enough, the place where I've encountered discrimination the most is my home. Simply bringing up blacks, Muslims, or Hispanics with my parents (not to mention my die-hard Republican grandparents) involves wading through angry stereotypes. Back when I was entering high school was the first time I heard about "racial quotas," in a conversation with my dad. He was stressing the importance of good grads, but what he said next shocked me: "You need to maintain great grades," he told me, "and keep up your extracurricular activities. That's the only way you'll be noticed by the colleges; they're not looking for WASPs, they need blacks for 'diversity.'" I didn't know how to respond to this other than to simply nod. If it was true, it was blatant discrimination on the part of the colleges. Later, my dad also told me of different, easier tests and hiring quotas for people of color. It's hard to tell when affirmative action becomes unfairness. Even then, political correctness says that it's wrong to criticize any agenda other than that of "whites."

Dr. King's legacy is a difficult concept today. Everyone can agree that he was an amazing leader and speaker, but what about his ideals? How are we supposed to know when the goals Dr. King died for have been completed? Have we reached a time when "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers?" These are the questions that I struggle with, and it doesn't seem like the answers are anywhere to be found. If it is true that there can be no change when the world still contains hatred, then how can we end it? In Martin Luther King's time, there was a clear goal for oppressed blacks of America: desegregation, and subsequently equality socially and economically. Today, there is still a difference between groups, but it is more a case of shades of gray (or a rainbow) than simply black

and white. And today, we have no Dr. King to lead everyone, whatever their colors, into the “palace of justice.”

## High School Prose Honorable Mention

### *Discrimination in a Changing World*

By Naeem Davis

I was walking to the University Of Pittsburgh from lunch, and I passed a man, I looked at him, and he looked at me. It appeared that this man was “black” but it was hard to tell I walked to the end stopped at the crosswalk, and he eventually caught up with me. I could see from the corner of my eye, that he is looking at me, and he didn’t seem like me, judging by the non-verbal signals that he was transmitting,. I also noticed, that this man doesn’t seem to be from the United States. I evaluated myself, looking for something that could cause this man to look at me with such suspicion, he seemed to be glancing at what I was wearing. I hadn’t been impolite to him, or committed any foul actions, I looked at what I was wearing, shoes, pants, shirt... That was it. It was my shirt, I was wearing, a shirt with the Ghanaian flag on it with “Ghana” written underneath. I thought to myself “Oh, maybe he is Nigerian. Perhaps he is looking at me unkindly because of cultural differences between Nigerians and Ghanaians in the past, and today.” Then, I realized that I could not determine who this man was based solely on how he was acting, because there are so many possibilities as to why he was looking at me so suspiciously. I may never know, but this encounter highlights an interesting phenomenon. Lets pretend that the man was in fact from Nigeria, and was acting in the way that he was based on my shirt. It shows that discrimination between what at a glance seems to be two “Black” males, can exist. Discrimination has always been a more complicated issue than the visual identifiers like our race, class, or sex.

Historically in the United States, differences between individuals, like race, have been more simple than they are today. But in an increasingly diverse United States,

more complex differences are being exposed, as people of different nationalities, immigrate to the United States in larger numbers. The encounter that I had with this man, captures one result of this change. This was the distinction between two identities that previously, for the most part, was not made. The difference between Black Americans and African Americans, I am an individual of African descent, born in the United States, making me “Black” or “Black American”. This man was an African Living in the United States, but was not from the United States, making him “African” or “African American”. These two groups of people differ in so many ways, historically, geographically, culturally, and one could argue that they even differ racially. However, to most, there will be no social separation between the two, despite the huge difference between them. These vast differences call for almost complete separation in identity, but from the perspective of someone living in the United States who is neither Black nor African, the situation is a little interesting. More and more frequently, people will have to differentiate between Blacks, and Africans; Two peoples that should belong to the same race, but do not. Because Black identity is something that was created in the United States, the two identities will remain separate. This will inevitably result in some amount of discrimination from both groups, discrimination not much different the discrimination onto me by this man.

Discrimination is something that can reach farther than it has in the past, not along the lines of how extreme it is, but in both the ways in which it is expressed, and just exactly who discriminates against who. Discrimination is no longer something that falls only along the lines of race, sexual orientation, sex, gender, or socioeconomic status, it can be caused by so many more things in a society that is becoming increasingly more diverse. Does it matter what exactly this man was looking at me for? Is the fact that he was giving off negative vibes towards a fellow human the problem?

Where does discrimination really start? In an increasingly diverse world, division and tension can arise between groups that at a glance could be called the same.

This makes me question what discrimination really is, and what thing or things specifically cause discrimination between persons. It is important to determine exactly why we discriminate. To see the ways that we justify discrimination, or actively discriminate in our lives. Discrimination is the distinction between one thing and another, it is recognising the difference between people. We should think about our discrimination of other individuals, and the way that it affects the way which we think or behave. We should judge the effects of these behaviors and discriminatory thoughts are morale and just. We must make a conscious effort to go against division and discrimination that are unjust, especially in regards to differences that we as humans have created, like nationality, or religion, or economic status. We must not let the differences of our own creation divide us.