

Contents

Jonathan de Vries	My Father Tries To Bond With Me	
	<i>1st Place, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	4
Sarah Smith	Reading	
	<i>1st Place, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	6
Kami Smith	The Discovery of the Article...	
	<i>2nd Place, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	7
Kat Mandeville	The War On Terror	
	<i>3rd Place, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	10
Frances Ruiz	Segregation	
	<i>Honorable Mention, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	12
Dylan Goings	MLK Day Poem	
	<i>Honorable Mention, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	13
Emily Nagin	Keeping	
	<i>1st Place, Poetry - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)</i>	14
Kisha Landais	I Am, Oh Yes I Am	
	<i>2nd Place, Poetry - Schenley High School</i>	15
Emma Blackman-Mathis	Have You Ever	
	<i>3rd Place, Poetry - Schenley High School</i>	16
Elizabeth Snipes	Three Steps to Racism; A Brother's Love	
	<i>3rd Place, Poetry - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)</i>	19
Chelsea Jones	Rosa Lee Parks	
	<i>4th Place, Poetry - Winchester Thurston</i>	21
Chris Devita	Silent River	
	<i>4th Place, Poetry - Winchester Thurston</i>	23
Atrio Walker	Black Thoughts	
	<i>Honorable Mention, Poetry - Perry Traditional Academy</i>	24

Brittany Chappell-Ross	Bubble Yum and Mocha Chocolatey <i>Honorable Mention, Poetry - George Westinghouse High School</i>	25
Sierra Abram	Prichard Street <i>Honorable Mention, Poetry - Peabody High School</i>	27
Ashley Brit	Two Wrongs to a Right <i>1st Place, Prose - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	29
Ruben Quintero	White Wash <i>2nd Place, Prose - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	35
Shuang Karen Xie	Untitled <i>3rd Place, Prose - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	41
Catherine Scudera	Amen <i>Honorable Mention, Prose - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	45
Alayna Frankenberry	The Land of Other <i>Honorable Mention, Prose - Carnegie Mellon University</i>	48
Katie Scheines	My Lightning Bug <i>1st Place, Prose - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)</i>	51
Rachel Belloma	Ghost Dance <i>2nd Place, Prose - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)</i>	55
Katie Thomson	Jumping Ropes with American Girls <i>2nd Place, Prose - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)</i>	57
Patrice Desirae Alexander	Oreo <i>3rd Place, Prose - Winchester Thurston</i>	60
Brittany Boyd	Another Challenge to the Dream <i>Honorable Mention, Prose - Winchester Thurston</i>	63

Marwah Saad

Being a Muslim in America

*Honorable Mention, Prose - Peabody
High School*

65

My Father Tries To Bond With Me

On the winter day
I get home from Mexico
Dad tries to talk to me.

“You might want
to call up the docks.
Ron will put you to work.”

My knees squeeze
in the small passenger seat
of Dad’s red pickup
that smells like grease.
The truck almost slides off
our icy driveway’s first hill.

“Ya gotta work son.
Look at where
Blacks and Hispanics
are in this world-
they don’t want to work.
When I was in Nigeria
I couldn’t play golf
because the course
was used as grazing lands.
A beautiful course
with goats and sheep
shitting everywhere.
I couldn’t even play a little golf.”

His pickup skids
around a snowy turn.

“I asked a Brit in Nigeria-
that reminds me
have you ever heard a black
say ‘ask?’
They can’t say ‘ask.’ They say ‘axe.’
I said to the Brit in Nigeria,
‘since the Brits pulled out

has anything gotten better?
'Not one thing!' he says to me."

On the last hill
the truck's tires spin
like game show wheels.
We get out and lean into the vehicle.

"Mexicans take siestas-
not working because of the heat?
Huh! Do Americans
take siestas during the summer?"

The truck can't crawl up-
Dad leaves it swung sideways.

"Of course your mother
doesn't want to believe me.
Your mother; the eternal optimist.
Just something for you to think about son.
Welcome home."

His bloodshot blue
sixty six year old eyes
water above his gray beard
tattered like a newspaper
blown around dirty streets.
I walk across
the crunching frozen ground
look at the house
with the Christmas tree
glaring through the windows
and wonder whose home this is.

Reading

Somebody wrote a poem, and they put Hitler in jail.
Somebody wrote a poem about the skin lamps, the ears floating in wineglasses.
Somebody wrote a poem so good they put it in the newspaper –
in the newspaper!
Somebody wrote a poem so the children do not have to die anymore.
It is a poem they will use as shoes. If they added hot water, it could be soup.
Somebody else wrote this poem, I don't have to.

Somebody wrote a poem about the way we ride the bus together,
how all the white college kids get on at the same stop.
I think somebody is watching me.

Somebody, ask Bill Clinton to write a poem with his saxophone and Ray-Bans!
Bill Clinton, tell us about Harlem. Tell us about the barefoot South.
I demand to see your bootstraps.
Nobody had to ask John Ashcroft to write a poem
and he wrote a sonnet!
When does your biography come out?

Somebody wrote a poem for all the soldiers to read. Somebody wrote a poem
for the boy I went to high school with who burned Richard Wright's books.
That poem is about the boy's salty blood and crew cut.

Somebody wrote a poem, and it knows what I really thought about O.J.,
but I can't let you see it. This poem is as big and tall as me, but its eyes are not as
blue.

Nobody wants these poems. They are too damn much trouble.
The libraries are webbed with blood. Nobody reads those poems if they can help
it.

I saw the poem that they put up in Queens, it was as big as the 7 train
and every other moment the lights leapt out, and back on again,
and it was August for a little while longer, but everybody felt safe
reading in the dark.

2nd Place, Poetry - Carnegie Mellon University

Kami Smith

The Discovery of the Article and the Consequences of the Reading of Said Article in a Multicultural Collegiate Setting or A Matter of Ignorance

Written in response to the Tartan newspaper Natrat comic incident and the editorial condemning the singing of the national Black anthem "Lift Every Voice and Sing" in a campus-wide event

I sit in my red checkered Capri pajama bottoms
And lounge in the lounge with

My carefully straightened kinky hair and my Gap cardigan and contacts,
And I know they are not correct when they try to justify

This injustice that has been done because they can't understand
The significance, the other issues that simmer to the surface

In the interpretation of this one tiny commentary.
They can't understand my disgruntled attitude,

They don't see or understand that I'm not illogically furious,
I don't want to go out and do something completely illogical.

I don't rant and rave about the issue...well, maybe a little,
But I want to approach this with a good deal of logical thought

And adult responsibility because all of this mumbo-jumbo,
All of this confusion and this misguided exclusivist value system is done
entirely

In ignorance and I intend to reverse that process and kindly enlighten the
Highly intelligent, but obviously misguided people

With a few words of my own
And say, no, we (as a nation of ALL diverse people) may not still be in
chains,

And no, we may not still be oppressed like our forefathers,
But this history actually occurred in our past

And although we move on and grow from these things,
Although we can look to the past as a lesson for the future,

These things happened and you can't ask me to ever forget my history,
OUR history,

In this "melting pot" that we supposedly live in,
According to the Schoolhouse Rock episodes of my childhood.

You just can't tell me to obliterate my history from my mind, even if you
think that I have forgotten my deep roots

With my red checkered Capri pajama bottoms and
My carefully straightened kinky hair, suppressed under its Banana Republic

Blue bondage in pseudo-reminiscence of a long-ago heritage,
Mirroring the suppressed thoughts and emotions

That this issue inspires, as well as my Gap cardigan and contacts
That consequently doesn't mean a damn thing.

The purpose lies in others learning about
What happened, about our culture, about where we came from,

Because we have learned for years the conventional story
Of what happened to this one group of the generic American majority

Without realizing that there is no pure sterilized history
To be regurgitated on a test or in an essay;

Not just to rejoice to the African kings of old every time
You bite into a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken and moan, "Mmmmm!"

It's not for every time you take a sip of red Kool-Aid,
Or tune into BET, or sport Phat Farm or FUBU with your swingin bling bling,

If you believe that we're dividing by looking at how far we've come,
You are sadly mistaken because we are a nation of all people

But there are still injustices in this world on both sides
Which I am not excusing, but

We should all be able to look back at our history, every group,
Because the existence of this time and of this month

Is not only for me to reflect on, but also a learning experience
For you, but apparently, this fact stopped, checked you out, and rolled right on past.

And for this, I pity your ignorance.

The War On Terror

Without the Law a woman is as safe as the men allow her to be. – Louis L'Amour

Dear Sir, to continue from the party, last night's
playful banter, on inferiority and the sexes –
let us joke no more about men and women
and what really doesn't matter.

I know the strength of a woman. I've felt
my own impervious will – climb, fight,
move impossible things.

But I know the strength of a man –
the weight of a fallen tree
on a distracted traveler, I've had to gnaw
off a limb to recover the rest.

No, a woman is not helpless,
but don't let's pretend
her assets are your own.

When a dame says she sculpts and dresses
her body for herself, she means she is sharpening
her weapons, stocking her arsenal.

And we learned this in third grade when the boys
went helpless to the first girl grown breasts, forgetting
who she was, only what she could be.

And your goofy smirks and harmless slander
gave her permission to show more cleavage
and to turn away.

And this is her body
fighting back –
a tease protecting
the only real collateral.

Because she knows, deep down in places
we don't chat about at parties, that it is not
her mind – tear gas that clouds a room, leaves
a funny smell; it is not her ambition – which is
masculine anyway; it is not her credentials –
typed font ten just to fit all on the page,
not these obstacles –

It is the toss of her hair, and the swing of her ass
that will save her life. That as a commodity
she must improve supply to increase demand,
raising her value into something like integrity
and this is her only self-defense: to own
and distribute what everybody wants.
This is her pride – you love it
you want to tear it down.

So please, Sir, remember

That when you stroke my thigh without permission
you are mocking the only cards I hold
in this lousy game.

That my leg, is a blade

and when I watch your need and squeeze
your wrist, I'm admiring the mutilation,
how well you bleed.

That when aimed and cocked at your target,
half of us mean it, and half of us don't
and we all sound the same with the lights off.

That a woman without objection who follows you
home, is only the weight of metal, with no bullets left
and she knows it.

Segregation

I have a dream that my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

– Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Waaaaaaaaaaaaaassssup my niggah!

the drunk brown man
beside me in Chiefs says
as he slaps the back
of a dark black man.

You have to be careful
when you say stuff like that,
the dark black man says,
I mean, with your complexion
and all. A quick downing
of a shot, the blonde female
bartender wipes a glass.
You ain't black enough to
be called my niggah,
you ain't black enough to
be called my niggah, I sez,
you ain't black enough.

Freshman year, orientation,
“minorities” in a newly carpeted
room. We as people of color,
the director begins. Then
she pauses, looks at me,
her eyebrows raise, her eyes ask
what kind of a minority are you?
We as people of color must come
together to support one another.
Her gaze falls on me again. We
as people of color, C-O-L-O-R,
color. Not you, no, you're too white to
be cubana, too white to know how
to dance salsa, too white unless,
of course, your first language
is Spanish and you grew up
barefoot, picking
grapes with Mexican
migrant workers.

MLK Day Poem

She only dates Black men and her body
ripples like spilled milk on the dance floor,
like a flag surrendering to the Bambaataa
audiomatic assault weapon.

She only churns in the dark corner
of the room, away from semitic
strokes that expose my underexposed flesh
and melt into the shadows that envelope her,
coat her with a sweat that smells
of oil and coal and everything
flammable.

And in my mind only I'm 6'4"
can dunk the rock
can pop & lock
can fuck all night
get shot on sight
can pick this poem from the pile
with my divining comb and a smile
like Cool Whip plopped on top of hot fudge.
This hoopty dropped chopped-top jalopy called love
may be the only great equalizer, so
pump the bass, save face, I can't be interested
in running this race.

1st Place, Poetry - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)

Emily Nagin

Keeping

We are sitting on the jungle gym and it is cold and it makes the backs of my legs ache. Tobacco smoke curls messages in the sky, insubstantial and old, curvy as a jazz tune. The radio sings tinny into the air and the lyrics catch on the words scratched in the pole by my left shoe. Everything catches there, smoke circling it like a frame, my eyes snag on it and it makes a run in my pupil. Blow me Anne Frank. Two years ago I drank hot cocoa in the same house where she wished for sun and bicycles. Stood close enough to her bedroom walls to touch and tried hard to breathe. Our tour guide had a Dutch accent and a gap between her teeth. The people behind me spoke Yiddish and their words took me back to the yeshiva gym where I drank grape juice in a plastic cup. A boy with big ears blew the shofar and the rabbi spoke in Hebrew which I didn't understand and it was cold and my skirt stuck to my tights and I hated the kids who understood what he was saying and I hated their stupid skull caps and I hated being Jewish. On Ash Wednesday my school went to church and while the other girls knelt and opened their mouths for wafers Alex the Atheist and I sat together and rubbed the ashes from our foreheads. I didn't know the prayers so I mouthed the blessing for wine and bread during the Hail Mary's and understood why it is we hold on to things. In my head and in my heart and in my soul the radio sings thin tendrils into the sky and mixes with the smoke. I knew the video for this one. The singer is a dead bird.

I am Oh Yes I am

I am from the company Johnson & Johnson. I am from little hands, little feet, and a little mouth that has words in its system that are just waiting to flow out of its soul. I am from music like bum bum bum bum from Usher's newest CD called Confessions, to the rhythm and blues of India Area. I am from music of Mozart and Beethoven to the hip hop and R&B of 50 Cent, Lloyd Banks, and more. I am, oh yes I am.

I am from the smell of fresh cut grass, and the sight of beautiful flowers. I am from the screams of little children as they roam through the streets. I am from the wings of colorful birds that allow me to escape places when I feel down. I am, oh yes I am.

I am from the touching and feeling that was unwanted. I am from that one kiss that ended up with me. I am from the "stop, stop" that just kept on going. I am from a hurt heart that bled, but only the color of pain seeped out. I am from the definition of incest. I am from my dad, who is also my uncle. I am, oh yes I am.

I am from beautiful royal brown skin that wishes it matched that of a Caucasian person. Some people believe that the color of one's skin impacts the outcome of your future. I am from standardized tests that make me box in my ethnicity making me feel that being African American is only important enough to be in a small box. I am from milk chocolate brown eyes that see all the way down to the ripping and the beating of the skin of my ancestors. I am, oh yes I am.

I am from my mother who was determined enough to raise me at the age of thirteen. She surpassed the negative comments that were whispered about her. I am from God who taught me to love no matter what the circumstances are. I am from Martin Luther King, Jr., who made not only my dream, but many other African American dreams come true. I am, oh yes I am. I am, oh yes I am!

Have You Ever

They asked me if I was scared
Aren't you scared you'll catch it?

They asked us if we still talked to you
You still talk to her? Oh, you must not know

But time after time, we tell them
We all tell them
We tell them that you're being gay doesn't change you
It doesn't make you sick
Or disgusting
We told them
We know she's gay, but she's still our friend

I wonder sometimes, if people could know what it feels like
To have someone stick up for you
When you expected to have to have your own back
Do you know what it feels like?

People ask me if I've heard
Did you hear who he hooked up with?

The conversation continues
What're you doing this weekend? Are you going to her party?

And I wonder if people have ever considered something bigger
than themselves
Have you ever thought of someone outside of your life
Considered what it must be like
For people in Sudan
Who don't have clean water
Who can't walk out of their homes without being in danger
Who never eat as much food as you throw away from your table every
evening
Do you ever think about it?

I watch people everyday
They throw their candy wrappers in the fresh green grass

It always happens
The cars emit plumes of chemicals with every rev of the engine

I wonder if people realize that this earth gives us all we need
But that doesn't mean we need to strip mine every resource out
of her belly
Yet we still drill in sacred places
Destroy acre upon acre
For the sole purpose of gaining money
Is this how we should treat Mother Earth
Our caretaker and provider
Have you ever stopped to respect it?

I hear them everyday in passing conversation
Bitch
Fag
Nigger
Dyke
Whore

Directed at me and around me
That's so gay
You're retarded

And then I think
Do people see how much we have in common
Beyond race, creed, gender and sexual identity
Beyond language, beliefs and culture
We don't have to perpetuate this
This process of self-segregation
Of forceful discrimination
We cling to what makes us different
Unique
And it makes us reject
Even hate
Those who are different from us
But we can keep our individuality
Celebrate our own beauties

And also thrive in peace
Simply by accepting our differences
And loving what we accept

Have you ever thought about what it would be like?

3rd Place, Poetry - Pittsburgh High School for the Creative & Performing Arts (CAPA)

Elizabeth Snipes

Three Steps to Racism; A Brother's Love

Confusion

My oldest brother doesn't believe in God,
or anything at all, he doesn't understand
how Mary was a virgin and gave birth,
but he prays.
He only stutters when he talks about race,
and how Hitler was a good man.
I sometimes watch him read Mein Kampf,
his chubby hands busy taking notes.
My brother gets mad when I smoke cigarettes
in front of him and exhale
in his face, I ask him if he's raciest,
and my brother says no because he loves me.

Influence

I heard my three-year-old nephew say the "N" word,
my heart broke between my fingers
as I pinched his pink cheeks red
& asked him who taught him that word,
that it was bad and that he hurt my feelings;
he said his daddy says it,
and then asked what it meant.
I told him it meant Napkin
and then wiped my tears
with the back of my hand.

Hatred

My twin is my only brother of full blood,
our father being an African American
while my two older brothers are Caucasian.
My twin had never heard either
of them brothers say a racial slur
until the day my oldest brother's house
was broken into, he had said that it was probably
a spook in the night.
My twin didn't say anything back,
neither did I, we walked home

together with our heads down,
my twin occasionally stopping
to hit a tree with a balled fist.

“We all bleed the same,” my twin said.

Rosa Lee Parks

It was because I worked just a little too
Hard that my feet, fingers, and back ached
So that I just couldn't imagine standing up
Once I had sat down.

Just couldn't stand up again,
To stand would hurt,
Hurt.

Surely I had been asked, and undergone
Things which surpassed merely standing up
In their level of strenuousness. And all I would
Lose from standing would be my seat:

And a little more integrity
And a little more pride
And a little more...

In Alabama you have to think before you
Act, this time I didn't think to think. That
Silent word was voiced; leapt out before I
Could stop it, stifle it, squash it,

I didn't even see how it flew at them.
I only saw the repercussions;
I always miss the good part.

They went easy on me because of my
Wrinkled face, and their disbelief.
They told me a second time to get up
So the white could rest, but my

Was that word quick. That "no".
I actually did try to stand, but
That "No" was up faster.

I respected my "no" since it beat me,
And I sat until they gently helped me off
The bus. Then all because I was tired
that day, no shadow stained person rode.

I felt a little bad for it all, for
That trouble of walking everywhere
That they did because one day I was tired,
Tired of it all. But I also thought it was good, because I knew they were tired too.

Silent River

A girl at six,
I play on the porch, singing
 into the night to my symphony of
 silence. Mama snuffs my song.
She calls me.
The shadowed ghosts silently drive past, making their ride, making their
rounds,
 through my 'hood and past
 our shanty, tires hissing a warning to all who remain outside.
"Stop yo singin' girl!" Mama loudly whispers.
Girls outside of church do not sing.
It is their place.
It is, it has, it will.
Our place is silent. Those
 who escape the silence disappear.
Where they scramble to, some
 say to the North, some say to Mexico,
but only the men who
 tread, tread, tread
 the river bottoms know
 where the loud fugitives land.

A woman at sixteen,
I rouse my peers to break
my place, to escape the drowning silence.
I still fear the hiss of the tire in the dark, and
 dread the river bottoms, but
 I won't be silenced without a fight.
We shall overcome.
 I sing, I belt, I scream,
throwing back my head with a
 cry, a want, a need, a plea
to smash the silence, smash the system.
We shall overcome.

Black Thoughts

I wasn't there in slavery time
But it's the same as the grind
Forced to keep raking them crops and cocaine to survive
Pain is the drive, slave masters is where gangs reside
Put you in chains till you tried and ya brains get fried
Our ancestors worked, till they passed out from the heat
But I done seen my people sweat from passing out the chief
The white don't need to repel the black
They buy docks and we destroy ourselves, from sales of crack
Complaining that our race stuck
Sexual trades got aids up
For us they make cuffs
Should be getting our grades up
It's like the blacker, the worst
Like crack heads lips black from the birth
I have black thoughts and react wit a verse
Martin tried to move us forward, now we moving backwards
We used to pack church
Now we worry about, who's wearing black shirts
The point of this segment is
Blacks is negligent
Realize we the next black generation, protect ya kin
Pick a career, my position is lyrical technician
I defeat stereo typist
Wit my miracle inventions
Listen and your soon to see unity in black communities
Don't abuse the streets
Denas, this be yours truly peace.

*Honorable Mention, Poetry - George Westinghouse High School
Brittany Chappell-Ross*

Bubble Yum and Mocha Chocolaty

You're all peaches and cream

While you walk the runway,
Swishing your sweet honeydew,
Smiling and popping your bubble yum.

In your overcast shadows,
A ventriloquist,
Answering questions,
Background to your foreground,
Pondering my worth,
Wishing I had your
Sweet honeydew,
While hating my mocha chocolaty.

Showering and scrubbing away at my mahogany mind,
Envisioning the day when I could be you,
Searching my swollen soul, trying to find
Reasons not to cry.

Bare soul, standing openly toe-to-toe

A contradiction.

What is the difference between your
Sweet honeydew and my mocha chocolaty?

Without me there is no you.

Inside you feel just like me.

The fear of rejection turns and boils within,
With thoughts of securing your every desire,

Stepping back and thinking again,

Swearing to myself I would never stoop to

Your mocha chocolaty,

Mahogany, bubble yum, hating ways

Honorable Mention, Poetry - Peabody High School
Sierra Abram

Prichard Street

Mom could not wait to move, she had a lot of excitement about the approximation house.

The three of us could not wait to go outside to play, in front of that new house.

When the other kids saw us they did not want to stay.

Because of the supernatural beliefs of our parents past. "White is white and black is black." With that our parents should not allow our children to play together.

For whatever their reasons were, we were the victims of their past, full of anger and hatred.

I ran in the house to get my mom to see why they did not want to play.

Noticing my mom viewing us from the window.

I went inside, hurt and upset not understanding why mom said, "It was a new neighborhood; they just have to get to know you."

Yet day after day hurt and disarrayed, "I just wanted to play."

The following day passed and a bad blizzard came. Inch after inch, the snow fell relentlessly.

As the little girl watched with anticipation, she saw us beginning to make snowman and snow angels. I guess just being me myself, a nice playful African American child, made the little girl want to come outside to play with me.

I looked up a little later and saw her standing in front of her door; I just sighed with a friendly hi.

We introduced ourselves to each other and began to play and we played everyday forgetting about the color of our skin.

Two Wrongs to a Right

Three a.m. makes you think all sorts of things. When Alex's brother tried to jump out his third story window onto the roof of his porch and nearly broke himself in two, it was around three in the morning. Samantha spent a morning revisiting cookie dough in the bathroom thanks to a three a.m. binge. This particular day, I found myself strolling down the street, heading back home with a scarf wrapped around my head like a towel. It was damn near freezing, but I had decided to brave it after a party in the neighborhood next door shut down, thanks to obsessive music and paranoid parents. I wasn't bothered much, for I had come up with the most brilliant idea that had ever hit my head: I was gonna have a sleepover. Not just any sleepover, the best co-ed sleepover ever. And it would be great because my new neighbor would come. And he would smile at me and we'd realize that, perhaps, there was some sort of connection. And because all my friends would meet him and realize he's a great guy like I told them. And it would piss my mother off for all eternity.

My entire life basically a formula: I acted like myself, and I managed to embarrass my mother in the process. Not that this was hard, everything about me went against my mother's nature. She said ballet, I said baseball. She said doctor, I said painter. No matter what, I just couldn't be what she wanted me to be, the biggest wish being that I act like the perfect black princess. I was intelligent, I had talent (not the kind she wanted me to, but it was there), so all I had to do was represent my race in every endeavor that could possibly make it look good. Of course, this was another image I just couldn't fit.

My first mistake was elementary school, where I learned that people were different colors. Mrs. Simmons, our teacher, had passed out a box of crayons and told us to draw people from around the world. Some sort of diversity thing. Everybody pulled out the pink or the brown, or even the yellow in some cases, which made their people look sickly. I used pink, yellow, brown, orange, aqua marine, magenta, cobalt blue, and forest green for mine. My people, however, were none of these colors. All of them were lined up in a row, wearing coats of many colors, in identical skins of a grey hue. I personally thought my drawing was the best in the world. The punk beside me disagreed.

"You didn't do it right! You didn't draw yourself!" he yelled out, barely able to speak adult English.

"I did it! That's me righthere! I'm wearin purple and orange and..."

"That ain't you!"

"Is too!"

"It's not you! You didn't color any black people!"

Surely this kid didn't get it. "People ain't black!"

"Uh huh! You are!"

I turned to the girl beside me to see if she got what he was talking about. She shrugged; apparently she was as clueless as me. What was this kid talking about, people being black? I had a black crayon and I didn't look anything like it. I figured when I went home, I'd ask my mommy and she'd explain it and make everything all right. That day I got off the bus with that question in my heart.

"Mommy," I said after having her open the door. "What's a black person?"

"You are. Now go eat your cookies," was all she replied. Well, how about that. I was a black person. I didn't know what that meant, but I was! I asked if the girl beside me had been black, too, but my mother just laughed.

"Someday you're going to get the truth, child, and for you, I feel bad when it comes," she said. Even when I was seven she was acting like an ass.

I went to school the next day, eager to ask the girl what her mother had said. She wasn't too ready to tell me. She just sat there, green eyes glued to the desk, tapping out a telegram with her foot. I wasn't quite old enough to be confrontational, so I just sat back and watched Mrs. Simmons draw pictures of marsupials while talking about eucalyptus and the zoo. Thank goodness for the bell; five minutes more of that and I would've figured that skin color didn't matter, for I was probably a koala. Everybody filed into a line to go to lunch, one by one like primary colored blocks. I ran behind the girl and tapped her on the shoulder. She didn't turn around. So I tapped harder.

"My name's Samantha," she said back.

"I'm Angie."

"My mommy says we're different. She says I'm Messican."

"Okay. What about me?" I needed to know if our mom's matched up.

"She says you're black!" Samantha yelled out, perhaps a bit too loud. Mrs. Simmons stopped dead in her tracks, the fluorescent lights causing her to glow an unhealthy orange tint. Samantha got taken by the hand and dragged back to her desk, where she was basically shoved to sit. I didn't hear all of it, but I heard small bits, like "we can't just call people black out loud" and "apologize for making fun". Apologize? This girl had just answered my question-I was happy! Didn't matter, though. She spent lunch inside anyway. The Mexican got in trouble for calling a black kid black.

Snow began to dance around as I thought about that. Samantha, the girl who nearly got me hit by a car, who got stitches thanks to my wiffle bat and a badly placed terra cotta pot, got in trouble for basically telling the truth. You weren't supposed to tell the truth, I suppose. You weren't supposed to know it. The black and the Mexican weren't supposed to hang out, just so one could never turn to the other and mention the difference. My nose froze, iced with tiny shining snowflakes. A streetlamp coated us-myself and the snow-with a pale yellow shimmer. The time was getting closer to three thirty and suddenly my sleep over plan was seeming stupid. Why would anyone let their daughter sleep over some guy's house, neighbor or not? Surely they knew that, as a teenager, I had no control over my physical urges.

Once I was thoroughly dusted, I shook myself off, throwing bits of heaven to the ground. Okay, so I had messed up when I was younger and taken Samantha for a friend. Once I got older I would learn my lesson and make friends with the other black kids. It didn't take long for me to realize that I wasn't like the other black kids.

Please don't get me wrong; I had black friends. Just none in school. All of them had parents that were friends with my parents. We had a group of de facto friends, a bunch of nice kids who hung out because sometimes they had to, but had no way of seeing each other when their parents weren't around. In school, everything was different. A few kids hung out with me, but that had more to do with strength in numbers than anything else. By the time I made it to middle school, I came to the realization that perhaps I wasn't really black. The kids at school said I was white...for speaking correctly, for having parents who spoke correctly, for being blessed enough to live in a decent neighborhood with two married parents. Basically, having a nice life stripped me of my race. I was fine with this; life was gonna go on. My mother, on the other hand, was appalled by this.

"Why don't you make friends with those nice girls at school?" she asked me.

"Those nice black girls at school stopped talking to me," I replied deadpan.

"What did you do to them?"

"Nothing."

"What did you..."

"I made one of them mad."

"And how did you do that?"

"I refused to use street slang. I think she got confused by the correct English."

Apparently I said something wrong, because I got sent to my room to think about how to not insult people. This was happening more and more often; I would say something about those "nice girls"

and then I would get in trouble. Add that to a group of girls who called me a poser, or just plain white, and life was just peachy. I had become a traitor to my own race, which was exactly what I had planned, right after walking through a ring of fire. After awhile, Mom came up to check on me. She apologized...sort of. She just didn't understand why I couldn't just be nice to people. I told her I tried, but she didn't hear me. I mean, she heard my voice, but she didn't listen. She gave me a hug just to show she loved me, and then she left. At that point in time, I was permitted to leave, but I never did. I just didn't know what to do-bey myself or make those girls happy. Luckily, I found a middle ground in high school, and his name was Dorian.

When Dorian came into my life, my mother figured the doors had opened, she was ascending to heaven, and the angels were singing her song. This was the man of her dreams: tall, black, hot as I dunno what. A true gentleman. A guy who liked to spend his Saturday afternoons watching music videos on our beat up excuse for a couch. We would sit there making fun of the thirteen year old girls television now allowed to practice pole dancing to music while my mother stood in the corner and drooled. We were some sort of dream couple. Soon, we would go off to college and get degrees, meet again after graduation, date, marry, have kids, and basically become a real life rendition of the Cosby show. I never figured this was possible; I assumed that, if he were not fifteen and she were not married, my mother would throw me on the street and go after him herself.

His family wasn't much different around me. His uncles would shake my hand with vice grips while his aunts painted my cheekbones rubylip red. His mother always pulled me in extra tight when she hugged me. Apparently, I was being groomed so that, once I was part of the family, I'd be used to it all. An arranged marriage in the twenty-first century. That idea still boggles my mind. I liked his family, but I didn't want to marry Dorian. The thought of kissing him made me feel uneasy, though I couldn't explain why. I asked him about it once, while we watched a particularly bad dancer attempt to do an impression of an extraordinarily bad singer.

"Dorian, what do you think of that girl?"

"Her head and her butt are like the same size..."

"I'm being serious, here."

"So am I. I mean, damn, she's got a bowling ball down there."

"Dorian, what do you think of me?"

"You don't have a bowling ball."

That was the closest we ever got to discussing marriage plans. The only thing I got out of that conversation was that boys were just freaking stupid. Why would anyone want a girl with an ass like a bowling ball, anyway? More importantly, why was I mad about not looking like a video girl, a bad one at that? I thought about this as I

stumbled up the hill, still not quite home. My world was spinning as I twirled circles around a lamp post. I formed a pattern as I tumbled down-blurry world, blurry world, fall. Blurry world, blurry world, fall. It started mixing in with my memories. Blurs of Dorian discussing poetry, philosophy, dancing along to a 1970s soul groove, telling me I was above beauty, then ignoring me for a plastic woman on TV. Blurs of his mother beaming, my mother smiling with pride because I finally found a connection with a black human being, his Aunt Alice patting my head and smashing down my bangs, my father just laughing while informing me that "they think you're saving him as much as he's supposedly saving you". Eventually I came to the realization as to why I was saving him. There are two types of guys who notice that girls have bowling ball behinds-those that really, really like them, and those that absolutely hate them. I was black, I was beautiful. I was female. And he was gay.

Pelvis met pavement and I tripped on the pole for the last time. If that hadn't been a suppressed thought, I didn't know what one was. Not only had I befriended the Mexican, I had become buddy-buddy with a gay guy. I was well on my way to being the royal fuck-up of my race. I didn't fit in with someone's stereotype, and this was gonna cost me. It was already costing me. I had two real friends and a neighbor I had just discovered was cute. These were the people I related to. Almost on cue, two arms reached down from the heavens and pulled me back up. I turned back. It was the neighbor.

"You left so fast," he said. "Thought you were in trouble."

"No trouble yet. Let my folks find out I got in at three..." I replied.

"You shouldn't walk alone. I'll go with you."

"You don't have-"

"I live two houses down. You're always so nervous."

He was right, I was nervous. Not just because I found him attractive, but there was something else. I didn't want to admit it, but I just didn't want to be that fuck up anymore. Not this time.

"You know what? I'll be fine walking alone," I said.

"But it's dark and..." he said.

"And everything will be fine. No one's ever been killed or anything here." He was new here. He might not have known that. I skidded across the icy walkway as fast as I could, leaving him alone. He was standing there, trying to be a gentleman, trying to be neighborly, and I couldn't do it. I just couldn't.

"Why won't you walk with me?" he said running to catch up.

"I can't."

"Well, why not? You spend the whole night talking to me, and now..."

"And now it doesn't seem like such a good idea, okay?"

"I'm walking the same way!"

"And you can do it five steps forward or five steps back. "

"Did I do something?"

"No, it's just you're...you're..."

He backed away. I couldn't finish the sentence, but he knew what I meant. There would be no sleepover, there wouldn't be anything. I would do something to make my mother happy and pretend I didn't like this guy. Not because he wasn't worthy, just because he wasn't black.

White Wash

We're going out to dinner, my father told me, which came as a surprise. It was a rare thing that we went and ate out, especially together. Sometimes he would go with my mother, or with his friends, but most of the time we all ate at home, all three of us gathered around the dinner table eating the food my mother had made—empanadas or arroz con pollo on a good night—while some merengue or ranchero music played in the background. So when he said we were going out, I got ready immediately, like I was afraid he'd change his mind.

I was already surprised that we were going to dinner. But when my father told my mother to stay en la casa, I was stunned. She kissed us both goodbye, whispered *pasenla bien*, and went back inside.

A night out with los muchachos, my father told me. Then we got in the car and drove out. My father drove a pickup—a white beat-up junk heap that he threw all of his crap into. While he drove, you could hear it shifting around in the bed. We were quiet for a while just listening to Tito Puentes, I at least was still wondering what had brought about this spontaneous outing.

My father tried to do things with me periodically, but usually we just had a conflict of interests. Countless times he tried to get me into futbol, but I never saw the point in it, never got excited at goals, even with the announcer screaming *gol gol gol gol*. He even put me on a team, but I was miserable at the game, and didn't last a season. Same went for baseball. I just fell asleep during the games, and he would get all pissed off. I just didn't—don't—see the point. A year or so ago, my father had tried to get me into dominos. He took me to Salsa Café, a local mom and pop Venezuelan restaurant with platanos to die for and pernil straight from heaven, as though every three days God himself came down loaded with pernil and dropped it all off for Mr. Vargas, the owner. It was a Saturday night, the buffet tables were steaming along the walls, and there were tables of four set up all over the restaurant. The lights were dim, the place was smoky, and everyone was loud and drinking, and playing domino. Not what I would call my scene. A few games confirmed my thoughts. People would get upset when I made the wrong move, or didn't play 'correctly' enough. After enough coños and mierdas, I left and spent the remaining 2 hours talking to the cook.

I guess you could say it's been difficult for my father. It must be frustrating that his only son doesn't accept or fit in with the key parts of the culture that my father loves. Our only real common ground is music. Our worlds may be drastically different, but we both like a good song.

So we rode on, silent except for Tito Puentes.

How's school, he asked finally.

Fine, I said. Just fine.

Any new chica, he asked, looking quickly over at me.

No new chica, I said. He frowned.

What's the matter, he asked, no chicas that you like.

I nodded. He rubbed the stubble on the side of his face with his hand. My father was a big man, strong from long hours of moving heavy boxes in the warehouse where he worked. But besides his truck, he was generally neat, especially now, when he was going out—hair combed, shirt tucked in. Only his stubble betrayed the image.

You should come out with me, he said. We'll find you plenty of chicas. More than enough chicas for one man.

But not tonight, I asked. Suddenly I wasn't so sure that I wanted to be going out to dinner with him. He'd tried futbol, baseball, and dominos. Maybe now he was going to try women.

No, no, not tonight, he assured me.

Better.

We fell quiet again for a moment.

Have you ever even had a novia, my father asked, knitting his eyebrows—that's how you could tell he was thinking, his eyebrows.

Middle school, I said. Natalia, remember?

You know, your mother and I met when we were in high school, my father said. I took her out for the first time in tercer año. I asked her to marry me before we graduated.

My father was always telling that story. It was his way of being proud of my mother, of showing his appreciation. Because in the story, he wins her over—a poor boy barely out of the barrios wins over a sophisticated woman. And he was proud of that, proud and happy that long walks to and from her house, that small gifts he stole for her from market vendors, that late nights he worked almost right up to the first bell sounded for class had ended in a better life with a loving family, even in a new country.

I just haven't met anyone I like, I told him.

You graduate this year right, my father asked. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, beating out the song.

Yeah, only a couple of months left, I said.

What about Carla, my father asked. She's pretty. You two spend lots of time together.

She has a novio, I said. She's with Vince.

You're better than him, my dad said smiling. He wouldn't mind if you took her, would he? I know if I were still your age, I'd like her.

Don't you have to turn left up here, I asked. My father was a crazy driver, so sometimes I'd try to queue up actions that would lower chances of a triple lane change or 45 mile-per-hour U-turn.

And Yeli, he asked. She doesn't have un hombre, right?

Apparently my dad liked my latina friends for me.

Who are we eating with, I asked. Turn left.

My father turned off onto a small two lane road. When we did eat out, we normally went to these small latino-run places. Most of them, my father knew the owner or cook, or someone in the establishment. The latino community seemed to limit itself to its own stores, its own restaurants—a way of supporting each other and not leaving the familiar at the same time. Displaced from their countries of birth, they built their own, smaller version here. At La Teresita, he knew almost everyone.

Claudio's already there, my dad said. Luis and Javier will be here in a bit.

Did you know Javier's girlfriend esta esperando, I asked my father. I heard mami talking about it.

I think they're going to get married, he said. They should if she's pregnant.

I think they're going to have to with a baby on the way, I said, or Javier might be down some bolas pretty soon.

My father laughed. He pulled off to the right, crunching gravel beneath our tires as he maneuvered into a parking spot. Then he killed the engine, and we went to go eat.

La Teresita was a hole in the wall, except somehow it had pried its own tiny building out from the strip malls around it on the busier streets. The walls were white and mostly bare, with only the occasional half-ass latino decoration. The tables were barely wooden, covered with red checkered tablecloth and surrounded by cheap plastic chairs. The napkins had smiling teddy bears, and the only other adornment was a pair of salt and pepper shakers, the salt one filled more with rice than salt. But the atmosphere was warm, sociable, and very simple. Bien acogedor.

As it turns out, we had beaten Claudio, Venezuelan's tended to be late to pretty much every occasion, so we just sat down on opposite sides of a four person table to wait. I idly turned the menu around, just a two sided laminated sheet of paper, even though I already knew everything they had and what I wanted. My father turned around to talk to the family behind him.

I sat and watched the waiters mill about. It wasn't a particularly busy day, but they always seemed to be moving, if only because someone they knew sat down and they wanted to talk about the latest happenings and gossip. They hovered from table to table, laughing and motioning with their empty hands, occasionally taking another order—never on paper, always with a nod—and every now and then bringing food or drinks. There was one I didn't recognize, which was odd considering we knew almost everyone in the place, whether formally or

just through word of mouth. He was an attractive young man, had to be in his mid twenties. He had his hair spiked forward in the front, and the rest carefully messy. He was walking toward our table.

Even from here I could tell.

Do you want anything to drink? He was looking at me, while my father slowly turned his attention back to our table.

I asked for an orange juice, my father wanted a Corona. The waiter excused himself and walked off toward the kitchen.

Who's that, I asked.

Never seen him, he said. There they are.

He got up. The rest of the gang had arrived. After generous greetings, Luis pulled up an extra chair, and they all sat, with Javier next to me.

They were finishing their introductions when the waiter came back.

Your Corona, sir, and your orange juice. And for ustedes? He pulled out a pen and paper from his front breast pocket.

They ordered, drinks and meals together. He wrote each order down carefully, mouthing the words as he put them into ink. Then he excused himself and walked back to the kitchen.

The table was silent.

Javier leaned forward, ducking his head a little. So who's the new maricon, he asked.

They all just looked at him for half a second, and then broke out into laughter. I mustered up a smile.

"Y para ustedes?" Luis imitated, gratuitously tilting his hand and emphasizing the accent. Another round of laughter. My father slapped the table, unable to finish his own rendition.

The waiter came back out from the kitchen, and walked over to another table. There was nothing odd about his walk, just a slight indication, a minor hint. They loved it. They were pointing and jeering. Javier excused himself to go to the bathroom, daintily walking off with arms forward and hands bent down. More laughter from them.

I was just trying to keep my smile on. My father looked over and must have noticed, because a mixture of laughter and concern washed over his features. He turned back to the group.

Eventually Javier came back, and they settled down a little. When the waiter brought out the drinks and food, they at least smiled and said thank you.

Hope the food's not infected, Luis laughed.

You're going to end up at that gay bar on 7th, Claudio said to him, nodding toward the waiter. Next I see you, you'll have a guy on one arm, and that mujer on the other.

They all laughed again. My father smiled, but was silent, eyebrows knit, looking into his beer.

Our waiter was back at another table, patiently writing down orders. He didn't look phased or disturbed, though I thought for sure he could hear our table. He even had the ghost of a smile on his lips. He didn't stay and talk with the customers. Just took their orders, and carted food and drinks back and forth from the kitchen. No small talk. No *como estas, que tal, como te esta tratando la vida*. He just wrote everything carefully and went back to work.

Our plates were clean, so he came back.

How was everything? He asked, collecting the empty dishes.

He got short "good"s around the table.

Anything else you want? He shifted the stack of plates, placed his pad on the table so he could write.

Four *cafesitos*, my father said. He looked at me quickly. Sorry, five.

The waiter wrote it down carefully again, then went back to the kitchen. He wasn't even out of earshot when they broke out in laughter. My father was still quiet. One of the hovering waitresses passed close by our table.

Rosa, my father called out. Rosa, come here.

Everyone said hi to Rosa. *Hola, bella*.

Who's the new guy, my father asked.

She looked around for a second, then leaned in. His name is Marco. He got hired a couple days ago. I don't know much about him. Lives by himself.

Did he just move into the area, my father asked.

No, no. He's lived here since his parents threw him out. He's worked around quite a bit, just never in our places. Rosa threw a quick glance at her tables.

Conversation slowly veered from him. A few *marico* jokes here and there, but nothing major. Marco emerged from the kitchen again, five *cafesitos* in tow. Rosa saw him, and quickly excused herself.

He got to our table, gave us the *cafesitos*, our bill, and walked off. No conversation. Even the flickering smile was gone now.

I watched him walk off, and I felt sorry for him. My table went on, trying to think of other *maricos* they knew, or had seen. It was depressing to watch him, dutifully going about his business. Very polite, very respectful, but very clearly not a part of anything between these whitewashed walls. I thought of him going home to an empty apartment, knowing he was the topic of conversation for a growing portion of our community. Our community – what a thought. To think we could bond together because of our shared roots, form little sub cultures within this vast country as a means – a means to what? To preserve our culture? To inject a lost sense of home in this new world? To surround ourselves in little spheres of comfort, a comfort stemming from common memories, common foods, common wants, practices, and prejudices? And to be

excluded from even that comfort. To be refused entrance. To be denied even a foothold, a foundation of safety in this crazy world. And for what?

I thought of the looks his parents must have given him, the look his father must have had when he told him. I thought of what he must feel. Every night. Every day. To have it out in the open like that, for everyone to notice and judge.

My father looked over at me, knit his brows, shook his head, looked away.

I wondered how it must feel to let everyone know. How it must feel to spit out the growing lump in your throat, and not keep it down.

I watched the waiter for a moment. Very polite. Very respectful. But very clearly not a part of this.

Untitled

Growing up in China, I was hardly aware of the existence of race and skin colors. If I had known anything concerning difference of appearance and social status, it was the northern minority groups who had facial features like middle easterners and darker skin than the majority. While the government and schools promoted equality between the two groups, the majority assumed a position that is far superior to the minorities. Although the minority groups were accepted as Chinese, their customs and geographical location decidedly separated them from the mainstream culture. Throughout the years they managed to peacefully coexist with rare outbursts of disharmony. Therefore in my first fourteen years of existence, I was unaware of the concept of race and diversity. The closest I ever came to understanding diversity was in an art class in elementary school, where we had to compose a drawing based on the theme of world peace. A majority of students drew planet earth colored in patches of blue and green, and people with different skin colors holding hands and surrounding the sphere. The teacher taught us to color the people white, black, and yellow. They had golden locks, black spiral curls, and straight black hair. Every drawn character sported a lovely smile. At the time, I wondered to myself why I had to color the Asian character with lemony yellow. I had only seen white people on TV and had remembered them to be no less pale than I was.

When I was in middle school, the administrators came down with dress codes, and the more progressive members of my class were stuck with conservative school attires. In desperate need to distinguish themselves from the rest of crowd, they started using bleach and shades of blonde hair-dye to hide their black strands. Back in the days, the school's administrators were much like vigilant soldiers, ready to wipe out any trace of rebellion. Grandmother had seen my yellow-haired classmates and commented on how they looked like ghosts and devils roaming freely in the streets. "There is no point in altering what your mother gave you," grandmother had a head of silver hair and natural full red lips, "Those kids are going to end up bold by the time they are thirty." She grew up in an era when knowledge outweighed superficial beauty. Whether it was the impact of westernization or the rise of individualism, the result seem to displease my dear grandmother quite a bit. While I laughed out loud at grandmother's jokes, and read fashion & music magazines with yellow-haired Asian celebrities slapped on the cover, the trend of hair-dying had swept across the country. By the time I left China for high school in America, several of my classmates

and a vast amount of teenagers had transformed themselves into color contacts-wearing creatures with wispy, damaged yellow hair. The Asian admiration of Caucasian beauty and features became ridiculously prominent as I grew older. Perhaps 1.3 billion people with dark-hair and dark-eyes were much too dull for the younger generation. They had somehow managed to label the conservative views and lifestyle decadent by throwing themselves into a vanity hole. Why so many of my classmates tried to transform themselves I could not understand, my upbringing gave me a very traditional sense of beauty and I did not see the point in ridding of myself straight black hair and dark brown eyes. As grandmother said, natural beauty came in a package, and the colors worked well with each other. And above all, they were given to me by my parents.

The first day of high school in America has etched itself in my memory, in an especially agonizing way. During orientation, I sat in my homeroom and followed crowds in the hallways not knowing a word of English. Sitting at my desk and taking a glance around, I noticed the natural ivory skin of the rest of the girls and the beautiful curly blonde strands that quietly framed their faces. While they cheerfully chatted and laughed among themselves, I sat there wondering how I would get through the day. Out of emptiness and silence there sprung in my heart a desire to be noticed and liked, but it was all too apparent that I did not belong with them. I was neither white nor American. Oh the irony, I was a foreign girl in a foreign land surrounded by foreign people. Before noon, I had gotten lost twice in the maze of a hallway and was constantly on the verge of breaking into tears. Wandering on the second floor, I passed by three Asians girls accompanied by several white girls chatting joyously while my hope for rescue from people who resembled me slowly diminished to zero. Later I came to realize that they were born in the states and knew little to none Chinese. During lunch I sat by myself in the corner of cafeteria and noticed that most of the students were voluntarily divided into groups by their skin colors. At the time the concept of Caucasians, African-Americans, and Latinos were still unknown to me. When I eventually learned about the concept of diversity and the termination of segregation that civil rights leaders fought so hard for, I wondered about the voluntary segregation among students in school. Does it mean all the leaders' efforts were in vain? Or was it merely difference in customs and culture that divided people? Either way, it seemed to me that the blacks and whites had little intention to mingle, and I awkwardly stood in the gray area.

Several days into freshman year, during lunch time, a group of African-American students sat at the table next to me in the cafeteria. Their unfriendly disposition and strange stares made me uncomfortable from the start. The feeling of loneliness was terribly frightening, but the invasion of my little haven in the corner of the cafeteria worsened

the situation. One of the boys looked at me and said something in an unnaturally high pitched voice with a hint of a contemptuous smirk on his face. I did not understand him, so I timidly forced a smile. The rest of the crowd suddenly broke out in hysteric laughter as the boy suddenly threw his hands up in the air and feigned to have fallen to the ground. I was capable of understanding ridicule without knowing English. It struck down my last line of defense and tears rushed out of my eyes as I shot out of the cafeteria. A trail of laughter followed. It was as if I had no direction or destination. My heart stopped for a moment and I just wanted to breathe out and escape. I did not realize the degree of sensitivity that I possessed until that very moment. My self-awareness reached an all-time high, and when I stopped at the top of the stairs, a kind of pain that was formerly unknown to me grasped and mercilessly pierced my heart. I had never been so humiliated. I had never been so helpless.

If a person is not at all fluent in a language and is of a different race and nationality, does she become worthless and emotionless in the eyes of others? Is she to be judged and mocked ruthlessly in front of others? Is she to be considered an object of taunt and humiliation because she is incapable of defending herself? I do not believe these thoughts ever occurred to that group of students. After the incident, I never went to the cafeteria during lunch without company. Day by day I floated through halls and sat through classes that I could not understand, and I felt invisible. But as long as I was invisible, there was no risk of me being attacked or humiliated. I was afraid that if I had to confront it again, I would fall into pieces. Eventually, the environment forced in me a misconception that I had to conceal myself and side with a majority if I were truly to be accepted. Naturally, I sided with the friendlier Caucasians and purposely avoided interaction with the African-American crowds due to an unexplainable fear. Looking back, it was regrettable how I immediately took notice of their skin color and assumed that the entire race was out to get me. The root of racial prejudice is fear resulting from generalization. When a person is humiliated or injured, he is always desperately looking for ways to classify the attacker. When it comes to race relations, it is incredibly easy for people to assume traits by skin color. The need for control and safety, along with the disinclination to verify the truthfulness of an assumption lead to the expansion of prejudice. I still find it ironic how a group of students' racial ridicule led to the development of my biased generalization and prejudice.

My language abilities improved considerably during the first two years and by the beginning of junior year, I was taking several AP classes and doing well in them. With the ability to communicate came friendship. However, as I felt more and more comfortable in a primarily Caucasian crowd, my curious desire for Caucasian features became

increasingly evident. In order to get doll-like eyelashes like Audrey Hepburn, I bought lash curler, lengthening mascara and thickening lash coats and experimented with them. My short, straight lashes were horribly abused and after three coats of mascara, I looked more like a raccoon than an American beauty. Within two years, I dyed my hair three times to achieve lighter brunette shades because I thought my black color made me look rather dull and unpolished. My third attempt to give my dark hair some ash blonde highlights proved to be a disaster. Thankfully, I did not become the roaming yellow-haired devil that grandmother once criticized. But I had edged dangerously close. If my old schoolmates' dyed-hair and colored-eyes were a declaration of uniqueness, my attempts to transform myself were calls for acceptance. It is quite clear that which one is more pathetic. It was not until I came to college that I met many black-haired Asian students and started gaining confidence in my natural beauty and let my hair regain its dark shine. Half of my hair still bears a dark brown coating, serving as a constant reminder of my days of identity crisis and conformity.

I remember stepping out of the corridor with a group of friends after class and catching our slightly distorted reflections on the glossy blue locker doors. For a second I was astonished by the image I saw, it rarely occurred to me that I looked so different from my blonde and brunette friends. The person I saw was so familiar yet strikingly foreign to the extent that I felt slightly appalled. She had a round face, a pair of almond eyes, and straight hair. She was not smiling. I was not aware of her existence among my friends. It was not until that moment that I realized that all my efforts to obtain acceptance were of no meaning. After all, my efforts to escape the gray area were no more than an imaginary race to live up to a false expectation that was not meant for me. A wave of disappointment, rushed forward by a sense of relief came towards me and wrapped itself around my entire body. I heard my shield cracking under the weight of all these years of pretense. I heard the laughter of a crowd and the silence of piercing pain. Ah! I felt myself being thrown into a body of water then pushed up, all the while shedding my skin. I screamed and screamed for rescue. Then suddenly a warm current came towards me and pushed me ashore. Facing up with my arms over my head, I took a moment for me to see the vanilla skies overhead and a black-haired beauty standing over me with her arms outstretched. The feelings of exhilaration, relief, and fatigue rushed over me simultaneously. I laid there watching the face that my parents had given me. The sound of the water moving rose up into the sky. It was rhythmic.

Amen

"Do you know why you're here, son?"

What a stupid question.

"Because I'm gay," I replied. None of that avoiding-the-question bullshit where I whine about how my parents are forcing me or I lie about my guilt over my "sin," the perfect word for that lie because that's what he would call it. No, I'd just hit him with it right off, since he already knew, and what was he gonna do about it, anyway? He nodded his head like he was falling asleep, his chin rebounding off an invisible shelf about halfway down his neck.

"Perhaps we could start with a prayer," he suggested. "Could you lead us in the Lord's Prayer?" He bowed his head and folded his hands before I had the chance to answer. He watched me through half-shut eyelids, waiting for me to follow suit, and his cloudy green eyes told me that he thought I was diseased. Not all of the priests I'd spoken to looked at me like a leper, but Father Andrew was one of the least understanding of them. He and I'd been close since I was preparing for my first communion - and until I came out to my parents - and that's why he was asked to "help" me. I knew he'd be disappointed in me, but I hadn't really objected to his selection because it's not like it was my choice to talk to any of them anyway.

Confession had been just about as not helpful as this was already looking to be. Confession's suppose to be anonymous, but when you've been going to the same church since you were born and none of your priests got fired for molesting anybody, it's not nearly as anonymous as it should be. I knew the voice behind the curtain was Father Thomas', and I knew it was Father Thomas who had married my parents, who had baptized me and all of my baby sisters, who was the only person to tell my mom what a perfect Christian name "Mathew" was when everyone else teased her that she had spelled it wrong, that her son was gonna get walked all over. When he asked how long it'd been since I'd last gone to confession, I couldn't remember, and fumbling for a number of weeks made me feel worse than admitting that I actually felt more comfortable sucking my boyfriend's cock in the bathroom connected to our friend's parents' bedroom than dancing at my junior prom with the dark beauty from my fifth period history class. I didn't admit it like that while I was in the booth - Father Thomas always looked like he was about to have a heart attack any minute - but that's how I was thinking about it when I began, "Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned."

I cleared my throat.

"Our Father, who art in Heaven." I couldn't remember when I'd first learned this prayer, or how many times I'd said it since. It rolled out of me mechanically, and my mind began to wander.

"Hollowed be thy name." Hallowed, hollowed - Father Andrew didn't notice my slip-of-the-tongue change, but I did. That was one way to say how I felt: hollowed. The past month had split me open and scraped out my insides. I was a pelt, I was another successful conquest on display in Brian's trophy case.

"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Our first kiss, my first kiss, was at a water polo party at the end of the winter season. The liquor was good stuff Michelle had pilfered from her parents' liquor cabinet, but neither of us had had so much to drink to excuse ourselves that way. I knew he'd been with lots of other guys before because he was out and proud, but that didn't bother me too much. I saw him as braver as I was, and a great kisser, because of it. A couple of girls, both goalies, saw us outside on the porch while the party raged on in Michelle's basement, and they started pointing and giggling uncontrollably. Brian saw them, smiled, and kept kissing me.

"Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses." I didn't think about whether or not I was getting in trouble with G-d while we were dating. It hadn't occurred to me to think about the heavenly consequences of being gay until my parents told me that I'd have to go to counseling. I'd never done anything particularly sinful before, so I'd never had a reason to worry about me and G-d. Brian was a first for me. I'd always assumed that if I kept going to church, kept doing a rosary or two when I remembered to, everything would be cool with me and The Big Man. But I could see, once we were over, why my parents were concerned. I'd stopped going to confession and only grudgingly went to church because Brian told me I was supporting the suppression of "our" people. "The Nazi's tortured and burned Catholics and gays too, you know," he said. "We should be working together, trying to stop oppression, but we don't, and it sure as hell isn't because of us." I asked him if the Jews and gays, or the Jews and Catholics, or the Poles and Catholics and gays and Jews, really got along either, and, since they didn't, who was to blame for that, but he said I was missing the point. I still don't really know what his point was, but it did the trick: I stopped wanting to go to church, and in the end, isn't that what temptation really boils down to anyway?

"As we forgive those who trespass against us." I didn't cry when he broke up with me. He called me, couldn't even give it to my fucking face, and told me that he didn't want to be tied down when he left for college in two months and that he wanted to spend his last weeks with his friends and, more specifically, not with me. I could only say to him, "But I just told my parents," like that would change his mind. It didn't.

He said, "Oh - shitty." I hung up the phone and sat down numbly on the black leather couch in our living room, just as my parents had the week before when I'd told them, when my mother whispered over and over again, "But you're our only son, our only son." Not much got any better for me after that. My parents still don't understand it, and I still don't understand why I believed that Brian and I would last long enough to make all the aftereffect shit worthwhile.

"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." I didn't really know what to do now. Brian had dumped me. My parents were disgraced by me. My friends thought I was too goddamn emo to save. Even Jesus hated me. Everything I thought I had, everything they tell you as a kid you're supposed to always have, was gone.

"Amen."

"Thank you," Father Andrew said. "'And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' When was the last time we really thought about these words of praise for our Lord? When was the last time we really let the Holy Spirit grace us with its presence? Mat, the Holy Spirit is here with us now, and it can help you understand the true meaning of this prayer, but only if you let it, and I encourage you to let it..."

He kept talking. He hadn't listened to me, hadn't really listened to me, so I zoned out too. I could tell he was scripted, that this speech was as standard issue as the Lord's Prayer, because he talked like the notes were right there in front of him. He kept talking, while I rubbed the tears off my cheeks and choked down my sobs.

The Land of Other

I work at Kennywood in the summer, and occasionally I get stuck working in the pavilions. This is a job that no one else wants, because the pavilions are rented out mostly to groups for nationality days. As I hand out free Pepsi for hours I am forced to listen to Slovenian accordion music, or ten different versions of “Who stole the keishka?” or, on a good day, some traditional Russian violin. So tired and underpaid in my ill-fitting polo shirt and grease stained sneakers, I stand at my post and watch for hours. I watch the grandmothers trade recipes, the children parade around in traditional costumes, the couples in matching flag t-shirts, and I watch the same expression on all of their faces. They seem so proud, so content, so connected. I hate them and I envy them and I wonder what its like to feel that way.

I remember one day I came home from school and was excited to discover my nationality. Our third grade English teacher had just made this topic into a project for us and it occurred to me that I had no idea what my nationality was. I had never asked. This may seem odd, but when you are adopted there are a lot of things you don’t ask about. My mother dodged the issue initially, replying to my questions with, “Well dear, I am Slovak because Grammy and Pappy are Slovak and your Dad is Polish, Italian, and Slovak because that’s what his parents are. Your sister is Polish too.” I was confused. It all sounded the same to me, though I felt for some reason like it was very important. It had to be important or I wouldn’t have to go through all this work.

“You didn’t answer my question. I asked you what I am.” I persisted.

She hesitated for an instant, as if she was trying to remember. “You’re German.” She conceded at last.

My project went well enough, though I noticed that everything I knew about my nationality came from books. I’d never had a German meal, or had my Grandparents teach me German phrases. Of course my home life was infused with the cultures of my adoptive family, but I always felt estranged from those customs, like I was constantly vacationing in another country.

Like I’ve said, being adopted wasn’t something I brought up in conversation, especially with my family. I had my share of questions, but I never wanted to ask them because I was afraid that doing so would be like saying I wasn’t happy with what I had. Though inevitably the topic would sometimes find its way to the surface, poking through the conversation like a corpse. It did so once about five years ago. I

was in the car with my mother and I asked her what she knew. I don't know what I was looking for; I didn't want a detailed history of my circumstances, just a few answers, some concrete facts, good or bad.

My mother seemed concerned and I automatically regretted the question. "She was eighteen and German." She replied. I knew these things already and she sensed my disappointment.

"You know you can always look through your files," she added slowly, "the ones in the safe in the game room. You can always look through those if you want." She said it in a way that made it sound like I had always known this, though she had never told me about it before.

I waited for a day when the house was empty to open the safe. At first I was frustrated by the stacks of papers, and it seemed like I would never find what I was looking for. But, dusted and thin, I eventually found it, a brown manila folder labeled, "Alayna." I held it for awhile before I stuffed it back inside, between all the others. It took me a few more days before I could open it. Most of the papers were forms and certificates, legal papers and documents I didn't understand. There was one packet though, that held all of the facts. Still, they were sparse and ambiguous.

Apparently my mother had been adopted herself and did not know much about my father. She never identified him officially, so all of the information in his column was blank. I remembered that fateful third grade assignment and looked everywhere for my nationality. The papers didn't say. The only thing I would find in the entire folder that hinted towards nationality was a space under 'biological mother' where someone had typed 'Dutch?' This is where my mother had induced my heritage, this one word, and that question mark, was that a typo, or were they just guessing? In a closed adoption, a question mark is cruel, and I will always hold hatred in my heart for whoever's hand struck that key.

I don't think people realize that nationality is such a common topic of conversation. I don't think I would have noticed either if not for everything I've just explained. It comes up at the strangest times, at parties, weddings, and school assemblies. Each time someone brings it up, you can see faces light up around you. Everyone jumps at the opportunity to contribute, to tell you that they are one hundred percent Greek, or five percent Cherokee. Everyone is always proud of their nationality, or at least they pretend to be. Sometimes a group of people will try to guess someone's nationality and support their claims with examples such as, "Well look at his skin and his attitude, he's obviously Italian."

When the conversation turns to me and I have to uncomfortably concede that I don't know my nationality, I am consistently surprised at how sad everyone looks. I can tell they feel sorry for me, and often they take on consoling tones and play the guessing game. They tell me I must be Jewish, or Irish or a whole other list of nationalities. This always

saddened me and it has taken me a long time to figure out why. It is as if, in our society, the idea of nationality is linked directly to identity. Without a nationality, then, it is as if a person, as if I, am incomplete.

Katie Scheines

My Lightning Bug

In the morning everything is different. Milk caps don't fit and the cereal tastes like straw. Maybe that's why I never learned how to be afraid, because in the morning everything seems normal. Walking next to an eight-foot black man with a shaved head, ugly eyes, and a bleeding torso never seemed scary to me. I wasn't taught that it was supposed to be. And I only walked next to them on my way to school. Sitting in the playground waiting to go in it wasn't odd for strangers to step through the broken fence and share our benches.

I wasn't taught to be afraid of certain people until I was older. I didn't learn segregation and differences of race until after I was ten. I grew up as a white kid among blacks, friends with people who didn't look like me. It never really occurred to me that color made a difference. No one sat me down and said they use to be our slaves, drink at different water fountains, live only in the ghetto. I went to school in the ghetto and I never noticed looking out of windows you never saw one white person. Or one person without a hard face and a gunshot in there left thigh.

I was taught to be afraid in fifth grade. They wouldn't let us go outside because a group of black men, possibly gang members, were walking by our school with liquor. I didn't really understand. I saw those people everyday. Our school was always half white, half black. We had the classic black people who acted whiter than anyone else and the white people who wanted to act black. But I didn't know what acting black or white meant until years later.

I had this friend named Alex. Alex Sinclair. His middle name was Stevens and we use to sit in corners and write out his initials with giggles and hidden smiles. He would come over and help me catch lightning bugs and keep them in jars. We would catch one and spend the rest of the night watching it and worrying about whether or not it hurt every time he turned on his light. Alex was bigger than me, with a dark black body and darker black hair shaved off to mere fuzz. People used to tell him he acted white because he hung out with me. They also told us we would get married and have lots of messed up kids. We never listened.

He changed his personality like lightning bugs turn their lights on and off. One minute he was with me, joking and speaking right. Doing math problems and telling me what he thought of movies. The next minute he was with Veryl Long, the blackest of the blackest, and slapping hands and talking in a voice he didn't have. Suddenly he was

some tough goof off and didn't know how to treat women. Other times he would hold me up when I lost my footing. I didn't learn that he was acting black with them and white with me until after he was long gone.

Lesley used to sit with us sometimes. She was mad that I was friends with someone of her origin. Her best friend was white and skinny, with whines to match her long blonde hair. Lesley would come over to complain about her when there was nothing wrong, just so she could talk to us and make fun of us and pretend he didn't like me. Which, around her, he didn't.

She would sit us down and laugh with him and ignore me while I worked busily at something or other. Normally Alex would lean over my shoulder and help and we would figure it out, or get the cheat sheet and pretend to check our answers, but if she was here I was on my own.

"You ever gonna marry a white girl Alex?" Lesley had asked with slurred blackness.

He shrugged. "Proly not." With me he would've said probably not. But I wasn't there to him now. He was acting his act, switching on his light.

"Then why you wasting your time with her?" Lesley said with a nod my way.

"Shut up Lesley," I would murmur quietly, aware more than ever that I didn't like her. I wanted to ask him if it hurt, turning it on. Keeping the light on for so long.

She laughed and pinched my cheek as if she owned me. "It's okay baby, someday we'll find you a white guy that likes you."

I felt disgusted. Alex was just sitting there, like always. He had stopped being my protector since he'd looked in the mirror but that didn't stop me from expecting it and getting disappointed every time it didn't happen.

"Shut up Lesley," I repeated, too afraid to yell at her. Lesley had a sort of hidden rule over our class. Alex ruled all the guys with a nice little hey what's up and Lesley did it with cruelty and mockery. She never would've hit me, but I didn't get the guts to stand up to her and realize I was stronger until years later.

Lesley rolled her eyes, "I don't know what you see Alex. She's just a scrawny white girl."

And what was everyone else in this class? Lesley was scrawnier than I would ever be. No one in this class knew the definition of meat on your bones.

"You know we're just friends man," Alex said with a laugh, pushing her shoulder. She looked at me with a conquering grin, knowing that I wanted more.

"I think I'm done," I said, standing up and walking away. In any classic movie Alex would've come after me and apologized. I had given up on that a long time ago. We were mean sometimes and nice

sometimes. Correction, he was black sometimes and white sometimes. I liked it better when he wasn't black even though most people would call that the faking part because of his dark skin. I felt his attitude was far from the cruel slurred words that Lesley and Veryl used when they wanted everyone to know exactly where they came from.

When Alex and I stopped being close, fourth and fifth grade, when they gave us different carpets to sit on in circle time, it was odd how fast we adapted to not being with each other. Like we had forgotten that every other point of our day use to be taken up with only each other. Now we talked in the halls sometimes and sat together on field trips if we were in a particularly daring mood. I started hanging out with a group of all American boys, and he stuck to the bad asses who would grow up to wander onto our playground and call the streets their home.

Then, in sixth grade, we were integrated into one class again. American boys, Alex, Lesley, me, and all the other messed up kids who didn't know how screwed up this school had made us. I sat across from Alex in English and suddenly it was the same all over again. We were friends and together all the time, except now the marriage jokes got us blushing.

But it was different. Two years can do that to you. Now there were no hidden corners when he would talk right and hold me up. Now he was helping trip me and laughing along. And it was funny, I mean everyone did that to me. I couldn't not laugh with him. But he used to be my get away. Now he was the one I had to get away from sometimes.

It changed so much. He used to know me, he used to care. Now he was Veryl Long and Lesley McKenzie, knowing exactly what buttons to press. It was that year I stopped waiting for him to change. I got my first boyfriend, my first official best friend, and a chance to move on.

By seventh grade I had finally really stopped liking him, officially and utterly, so it surprised me on our four-day trip when suddenly we reverted to exactly the way we used to be. We were by ourselves a lot and we weren't terrified of what other people thought. I would trip and his hands were there, reassuring, on my waist. Of course it wasn't completely the same. With certain people he was his tuff self, but it was almost perfect. He even started hugging me again, when I had thought he was afraid to touch me at all for fear my whiteness would rub off on him.

We got back to Pittsburgh and the dreary mornings when we had to make our own breakfasts. Back to big black women cussing me out because I was a little white girl who didn't appreciate what I had. What a shame.

"Alex, you ever gonna marry a white girl?" Lesley asked. I was scribbling away at social studies. He was doing the evens and I was doing the odds.

He shrugged for his answer. That wasn't good enough.

"Come on, if you had to choose a white girl or a black girl, come on, who would you pick?" Lesley asked, leaning over to mooch off my answers, urging on his light. Urging his fakeness like she urged on my pain.

He shrugged again and kept his head down. He was struggling more than he use to. He was keeping his light off.

"Alex! Just answer!" Lesley screeched. I wondered if it hurt for him to turn on his light. I wondered if he felt it every time, like I did.

He looked at me and then at Lesley. "I dunno. Prolly not."

She smiled the way she does when everything goes her way.

"Then why you bothering with her?"

"Shut up Lesley," right on cue. I stood up to go to the bathroom before she reached my cheek. How could someone stay exactly the same for all this time? He had changed and changed back and changed, and he still came back to the way he had started.

A month later Alex stopped coming to school. First it was a day, and then a week, and then no one was answering his phone. Apparently he had left over the weekend for Ohio, his new home, and hadn't had time to return the textbooks or tell us he was leaving.

The teachers said it was such short notice they were too busy for anything. The black acting people said his dad was in the military and they had to move all the time. Even though he had been going to our school since preschool, apparently this happened all the time. The white acting people said that his parents didn't tell him until after they were gone. Wouldn't he have had to pack his stuff? I think I would've noticed we were leaving before they dragged me onto a plane.

I couldn't decide what I thought. I didn't agree with any of them. I thought maybe he didn't know how to say goodbye. Maybe his parents said Alex you wanna go into school and say goodbye to your classmates, and he said no. Maybe he couldn't decide if his last moments would be black or white. Maybe he couldn't decide if he would be addressing the whole class as his mocha-skinned self, or if he would be addressing me, the only one who really knew him in the dark.

Rachel Belloma

Ghost Dance

The night my mother met my father she asked where he came from. He said, "McKees Rocks." She said, "No, I meant what country." My father was not surprised. While living in Pittsburgh he had been Mexican, Korean, Cuban. Nobody recognized his Cherokee face, not even my mother.

My mother's family is legend in our house. I was young when she told me how much I looked like my grandmother, brushing my hair in front of the mirror. My grandmother, she told me, was the granddaughter of Benjamin Harrison who was a President once. In eighth grade my teacher who was young and believed in exposing the history of our country read from Bury My Heart At Wounded Knee. In the massacre of 150 Sioux, Benjamin Harrison had sent the order down. Sioux women, Sioux children. It was all I could think of. It was a disgust I could not ignore. I look too much like my grandmother.

When I sought refuge in my father's history, he had none to offer. All my father had was a childhood with a dying father and a run-off mother and nights he spent in a dark apartment feeling more alone than I can even imagine. He never knew his Cherokee name. There were no headdresses, no ghost dances, no funny names in my father's life. A face with no history, a Cherokee—too common---who knew nothing and felt he had nothing to know.

My father is gone now. I cannot find a textbook to fill in the blanks of his family tree, of their place in American history. I do not even look enough like him that I can prove to myself that this secret part of me exists: this unexplainable history, this tribal blood. When I see my own face, I see my mother and my mother's family and Georgia and Louisiana and never, ever Virginia or reservations in the West. I am forever sitting in front of the mirror, my mother brushing my blonde hair, thinking how much I look like the Harrisons. In the mirror, I am nothing more than a silly white girl. Only in a set of lidless eyes (that are sometimes confused for Asian) am I at all a part of my father, only in that am I at all Cherokee.

When I sit at a table with a Jewish boy and his mother (who worries that someday her grandchildren will look in the mirror and not

see their history) all I can think of is my father. This boy's mother, who lost parts of her family tree in Europe, looks at me and sees birthrates and baptisms and not my Cherokee father at all. When she tells her son that he shouldn't see me, I want to tell her that I know something about disappearing people,

Katie Thomson

Jumping Ropes with American Girls

“My class is better than your class, we don’t got no Chinese people,” those words still ring in my head after the light skinned boy Peter yelled across the playground to a dark short boy Devon. My hands flew to my eyes, which showed easily that I was born to Chinese heritage, and my accent, which revealed I was an immigrant from China. I lived in an apartment on Fifth Avenue where most Chinese-American’s lived. We had a four-room apartment, a kitchen/living room, a small bathroom, my bedroom, and my parent’s bedroom. And soon my grandparents and baby brother would be joining us in this already cramped house.

Why did they always pick on the Chinese? Why not the boys from India, or the kids from Mexico? Or maybe the Thai sisters or the family from Switzerland? We were lucky though; we could confide in each other because half our class was Chinese, and by being Chinese it gave us some secret bond between all of us, it linked us together.

The white and black American born little girls didn’t want to play with us; they would have their own little world in their jump rope games and hopscotch. Our accents scared them and they wanted to be safe in the world of American slang and bubblegum.

The American boys played football and soccer, and left the Chinese boys out, making them play by themselves. The American boys didn’t think that the olive skinned boys could throw, catch, kick, or win a game.

Our school was split up into three classes, two of them magnets, where you learned Spanish, and then one non-magnet, where the kids from the neighborhood could take the same classes that the magnet students took, but never Spanish. The Indians, Chinese, Mexican, Argentineans, all took this class. The non-magnet students didn’t learn Spanish; to most of us English was a second language. If you were in a magnet class you had a higher chance of becoming popular. If you were in a non-magnet class you could never become popular, it was an unspoken rule that the kids in the elementary school had made up. We were the weirdos, the ones with the funny clothes, the accents, the ones who ate the food with the strange names like Tarantule, Chitoum, Kim Chee, So Kuo Yo Toe, or Cho Do Fu.

My World was so different from theirs, my hair was long, straight and a shiny black color that stood out against all the blondes, and light browns that all the other girl’s hair color seemed to be. I wore

pastel colored skirts all through elementary school and my feet and body was much smaller than the American bodies.

I stayed with my Chinese friends, Jia Li, Mingme, Shu-Fang, and Chyou. With them I was safe, after school, I walked home, did my homework, my Chinese homework, watched Chinese TV, ate Chinese food, and slept in my Chinese bed,

In fourth grade I left my Chinese friends. I met a girl named Sarah, she was a white American born girl, and she went to the magnet class, learned Spanish. She told me right off that she was adopted, and that her parents were from the United Kingdom, but she was born in Mexico, even though her birth certificate says 'Queen of the Valley Hospital; California'. She said that she thought that school was only a day care for us because the government doesn't know where else to put us. But she did her homework, and studied for tests because she didn't know what else to do with herself either.

Once I asked her why she was being so nice to me, and why she didn't care that I was from China and that my accent was different from hers. She explained that because she was adopted she doesn't know her background and that she can't hate people of other races because everyone is part of her and she doesn't hate herself.

She played soccer with the boys, but hated football because she said that football looks like a bunch of sweaty fat men running after a ball. She played hopscotch and jump rope. She jumped to the beat of chants that the girls with the beaded cornrows recited.

Police lady police lady do your duty, 'cause here comes the lady with the African booty

Or when the white girls chanted it was:

Down in the valley where the green grass grows there sits Sarah as sweet as a rose, up came Will and kissed her on the cheek, how many kisses did she get this week?

She would get embarrassed and stop after they got to the word 'week'. Will was a short white American boy who played soccer. I never talked to him. He never talked to me.

On days she was too tired to jump, she let the girls braid her hair until her scalp turned red. She bit her nails and stretched her arms to the sky and said that if she stretched far enough God would pull her up to heaven.

She let me into the American world; she opened a door for me that I would never have dared touch.

The first time I went to McDonalds with her I stared up at the menu, trying to figure out if a McChicken was actually made out of

chicken or what a Big Mac was. Sarah ordered French fries, and root beer, she crunched on the ice and I sat on the other side of the table from her poking at the hamburger I bought for ninety-five cents.

When she snapped her gum in fifth grade, I went home and sat in my bedroom for hours trying to snap mine. Over and over again my gum rolled around my mouth, trying to be an American girl, I hoped if I could snap my gum, then my black hair would magically change into blonde, and I could be a real American.

And she got me to persuade my mom to buy me my first pair of blue jeans. She taught me how to pout just right for my mom to believe buying those jeans would be for the better. And she gave me the world when she taught me to stand up for myself against people like Peter and Devon, and other taunting boys in the playground.

If I could live that day over in the play ground, when Peter said he was proud that there were no Chinese people, I would have called back I was proud that I was Chinese-American and none of his hating words could change that, and the memory wouldn't haunt me so.

When my baby brother came I held him close to my flat chest and helped my parents name him. His body wiggled in my arms, his eyes shut, and his jet-black hair wet. He smelt of baby powder, hospital.

"Toby." It's not a Chinese name, he's not Chinese, born American; he won't be teased.

Oreo

Back in my dorm room, alone, I contemplated whether I should respond to the knocking on the door. After the first couple of nights at Grove City College's Entrepreneurship Summer Camp, I noticed that each evening most of the girls congregated into a different room during "free time." I heard knocking on my door about the third night, and I figured it must be my turn. But I didn't know why I should let them in, especially since I'd received hostile treatment since camp began.

I've always had a natural inclination towards hospitality, so I introduced myself and initiated conversation with some girls on the first day of camp, but I only received terse one-word answers and the feeling that they didn't want to be bothered. That evening in the dining hall I could hardly eat, for I feared that I might further contribute to the apparent comic show I had begun. I could feel ten pairs of eyes burning through me. My heart beat as fast as the blinks of their eyes. Before dessert had even been offered, I heard the word "Oreo," and knew immediately that they were not referring to the cookie by Nabisco because of the incessant snickering that I heard among their conversations. Oreo, the black-on-the-outside, white-on-the-inside, cookie is often used as a metaphor to describe some African-Americans. I'd been deemed this appellation before for various reasons. I was curious to hear one more, but not that evening. I had had enough for only the first night.

Yes, I had known that this camp had been designed for African-Americans, but I had not known about the surly attitudes that I'd have to tolerate. Since age two, when I began school, I've attended predominantly Caucasian-American schools, but my church consists of mostly African-Americans. I've always believed that it's important to have a diverse group of friends to expose myself to different cultures and beliefs. Most of the time I could fit in with anyone just fine; now I was unsure.

It was about ten o'clock, an hour away from our "bed time," and I was about three-fourths through a very engaging novel; I let them all in nonetheless. Some sat on the beds, some went through my clothes, and some played with my hair. It took all of thirty seconds for the questions to begin rolling.

"What is you reading?" one girl asked.

"A novel," I responded.

"Oh, for you school?" she asked.

"Nope, I just love to read," I responded.

"Why, if it ain't for school?" she asked.

I guess doing beyond what's required of a student wasn't the "cool thing."

"Reading is a way I relax," I replied.

It wasn't so much the fact that I was reading a book as it was the fact that I liked to read in my free time as opposed to doing something more "black" like listening to rap music that posed as the problem. Apparently that wasn't the right answer because another girl asked the question I receive far too often.

"How come you act white?" she asked.

This was going to be interesting I thought; I knew this question had been coming, and I was more than ready to respond.

"What do you mean 'act white'?" This question had always perplexed me since I found it to be ridiculous that a person could be pinned as acting like a particular race.

"Well the words you be using and stuff, and the clothes you be wearing, you just act white," she responded.

"Do you realize how incredibly racist that statement is? Why do I have to be acting white because I choose not to use slang but instead proper English? I don't 'act white' I act like an educated human being," I quickly replied in defense.

"You be using words and acting all smart like Andrew," another girl stated. Andrew was the sole Caucasian-American attending the camp. Like myself, he chose to use proper English when he spoke.

The girls held these racist stereotypes that I was determined to alter. I said to them that if they continued to hold such beliefs their cultural exposure would never progress. That took care of the "words I be using." Now, I had to address the "clothes I be wearing."

As to my clothes she was referring to, I had on a pink polo shirt and a jean skirt from the GAP. I knew that I probably would have been more easily accepted if I had worn a pair of Baby Phat Jeans, or a Rocawear jersey dress with my hair braided, to prove my "blackness," but I chose not to be like everyone else. I chose to wear my naturally long wavy hair down and to dress how I desired.

I told them that one doesn't have to be like everyone else, dress like everyone else, or talk like them. They were surprised that I viewed the fact that I don't act like the stereotypical black teenager as my uniqueness.

The conversation that evening broke the ice between the other girls and me. I knew that they actually considered everything I'd said because they told me in their own words that they didn't intend to marginalize me and make me feel uncomfortable, but they could tell that something was different about me--a difference they had previously evaluated as negative, but that I was determined from that moment on to

be viewed as positive. By the end of the week, we had exchanged phone numbers, email addresses, and street addresses. One girl even borrowed a novel I had brought with me. Another girl even gave me a new appellation: "smart girl." I ended up forming some great friendships and even changed some girls' perspectives of race while I was at it.

I believe that I stood out to these girls because of my determination and motivation to succeed while remaining unfazed by what my peers may be doing. While it pleased me that I could change their opinions, it upset me very much to see these girls associate opportunity and success only with being white. I think about the long battle Martin Luther King, Jr. fought to achieve civil rights for people. I believe that we live in a nation today where people aren't judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their characters. Strong, determined people break the racist stereotypes of the past every day. We live in a nation today where people can do whatever they want to do with their lives and become whatever they desire to become if they are willing to meet the intellectual requirements of their destiny and society. Even if I can only change one person's perspective at a time, I won't stop doing so until everyone believes in opportunity.

Another Challenge to the Dream

When I read the email that I had won second place in Carnegie Mellon University's Martin Luther King writing contest last year, I felt very proud of my accomplishment. In addition to winning second place, my article was also featured in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette newspaper on Martin Luther King's birthday. I was excited that my story had been recognized as a good piece of writing, and I was even more excited because I knew that I would be able to speak in a university setting. This honor meant that my concern about black-on-black racism would be heard at a respectable college. When I took my place at the podium, my heart was beating fast and my palms were sweaty; however, I also felt a sense of great pride to be able to present my story. I was sharing an important message of the need to stop black-on-black racism.

Shortly after the contest while I was at school, a message appeared on the message board addressed to me. I wondered who would be sending me mail at school. My friend Na-Tasha and I went into the bathroom so that I could read the letter in private. When I opened the letter, I saw that it was regarding the essay I had written for the contest. Immediately I thought to myself that it must be a letter congratulating me on how much they liked my essay since it was featured in the Post Gazette. However, the more I read the letter, the more that I saw it was quite the contrary.

The "stranger" who wrote the letter to me identified himself by an address label that had a picture of General Robert E. Lee on it. In addition, a confederate flag had been copied on the right side of the paper. It never occurred to me that the letter that I had received would be one that would cause me fear, nervousness, and a deeper understanding of racism. In the opening of his letter he wrote, "I dispute the common black claim of white discrimination against you people," - - an objection that confused me because my essay focused on black-on-black racism. He also included in his letter other provocative statements such as, "I don't call it discrimination for us whites to take reasonable self-protective steps to protect ourselves against black violence and black crime," and "You blacks run your mouth and the white power structure caters to you blacks and gives you blacks whatever you demand."

As I read the letter over and over again in my school's bathroom, I grew more and more angry and fearful of this man. Tears began to build up in my eyes, yet I was too embarrassed to let my black friend Na-Tasha see me cry. I was confused. First, why did this man write such crude remarks to me? I was only in eleventh grade. Second, why were

his words so hurtful and racist? For the first time in my life, I did not feel like a human being; I felt like an animal. Being referred to as “you blacks” with such negative connotations stirred up feelings of anger in me. I was hurt and embarrassed. Finally, I let Na-Tasha read the letter, and then when she was done, I had to leave to catch my bus. As I walked out my school’s doors, tears rolled down my face. During the bus ride home, I couldn’t help but read the letter over and over again. When I got home, I ran into my mom’s arms and showed her the letter. The tears were uncontrollable at that point and I was entirely distressed. My mom immediately tried to soothe me with her tender words, as she always does when I am upset. She told me to try not to focus on this man’s words. From the tone of his letter, she said, he appeared bitter and there was nothing we could do to change his feelings. She then reminded me that only I could control how I reacted to his letter.

I have many friends from various races and I have always felt accepted. However, amidst the diversity within my group of friends, I finally realized that some people still believe in the white supremacy and Jim Crow racist laws. All of my life, I have strived to live by Martin Luther King’s lead and not react violently or crudely when racist slurs or thoughts have been said to me. Even though I had gotten this rude letter from this man, my values did not have to budge nor change. I would still continue to lead a good life and be an example for others. I did not react rudely to the letter.

From this experience, I realized how humiliating an attack of verbally degrading and vulgar words can make anyone feel whether you are white, black, man, or woman. However, it is an individual’s choice how he or she will react to the situation. I truly believe that this concept of maintaining individual integrity is the message that Martin Luther King Jr. wrote of and displayed. Yes, he was called every name in the book, imprisoned, and sought out to be killed. However, rather than reacting with violence, he reacted with tolerance and intelligence.

Being a Muslim in America

Islam is not just a religion, but also a total way of life for six to eight million people in the United States and over one billion in the world. Muslims are spread all over America and take part in all walks of life. After September 11, however, Muslims have been labeled as terrorists and criminals. Most Americans do not understand Islam, which results in a great animosity and racism towards Muslims.

As

a minority in America, Muslims face many constant struggles and challenges. One of the greatest struggles that Muslims face today is ignorance about Islam. Ignorance has led to fear and distrust. Muslim American citizens are being questioned about their loyalty to the United States. They are being dehumanized and have become easy prey for prejudice and racism. Muslims were beaten, robbed, and in some incidents

even tortured following September 11.

There was an overwhelming report of vandalism and beatings following September 11. There was an outbreak of racism against all Muslims. Before September 11, most Muslims hated America for what it stood for. In a Muslim's point of view, America stood and still stands for Israel. The United States pays billions of dollars worth of taxpayer dollars to Israel yearly. Muslims feel that America stands for Israel because of its support for Israel both financially and politically. The following is a short poem published before September 11 in a Muslim magazine.

"In Israel Israelis Are Killing Palestinian Babies"

Heba Soliman

Amongst the rubble a woman cries
Besides her shattered home she lies
Tears hot with frustration and despair
Grief-stricken she mutters "revenge I swear"

Revenge for her husband shot in the head
Revenge for her son killed in bed
Revenge for her daughter soon to be wed
May she rest in peace among the dead

Mohammed, the eldest dragged from home
Destination was unknown
Before he knew it, he was in jail
And his mother left to wail

What is happening is inhumane
Yet the injustice will remain
Will there ever be peace?
What has become of the Middle East?

Weaponless with stones in hand
Struggling to protect our land
Everyday we face obsession
Now revenge is our oppression

This poem shows that, to Muslims, Israel is a killing machine, killing Palestinians for only one reason: land. Palestinians have answered to these killings by using suicide attacks. Muslims see Palestine as a country that was slowly dying and losing everything. It had no army, no military, nothing to defend it from Israeli troops. Then, slowly, groups formed and started attacking in retaliation. Muslims in many ways blame America and Israel for what is happening to the Palestinian people today. They blame America because of its financial support for Israel and for the billions of dollars worth of military equipment used against Palestine today. Muslims hope that someday Palestine will be acknowledged as an independent country.

After September 11, however, Muslims feared ever publishing anything that spoke out against Israel and America. America saw such writings as the works of a terrorist. Muslims dreaded being thought of as a terrorist. Muslims feared showing where they stood in politics. Muslims observed the Patriots Act as a direct way of arresting them without evidence. Muslims saw their way of life threatened by living in a non-Muslim country. As a Muslim in America, I, myself, have never experienced any acts of racism aside from name-calling, which I tended to ignore. A friend of mine, however, did experience racism. This is Dalia's story.

Dalia, a secretary, usually took the bus to and from work everyday. On September 19, 2001, a week following September 11, she got on the bus as usual. As she was getting off the bus, a man, who had sat behind her, threw a bottle at her. It hit her in the back. Then, he yelled "Get out of our country, Muslim." Dalia ignored him and went to work as usual. Dalia was not hurt, nor did she file a complaint. Dalia was one of the lucky ones.

Dalia is like so many Muslims. Muslims are ignoring that there is a problem. Racism against Muslims has yet to be addressed.

Most Muslims want to look the other way. They want to pretend it is not happening; but it is and Muslims have to address it. If we ignore this problem, it will escalate and get out of hand. Muslims can address this problem in a number of ways; the first, and most necessary of all, is to help Americans see a Muslim's point of view. If Americans are able to understand the Islamic culture, they will be able to accept Muslims for who they are. In America today, many Muslims are trying to help Americans see a Muslim's point of view by holding open houses and other events that include non-Muslims. The holding of these events has yet to show any progress. There was always been a race that faced racism. In the past it was African Americans, now it is Muslims. As Malcolm X once said: "You can't have capitalism without racism." I believe that racism against Muslims will eventually pass. It is just a matter of time.

