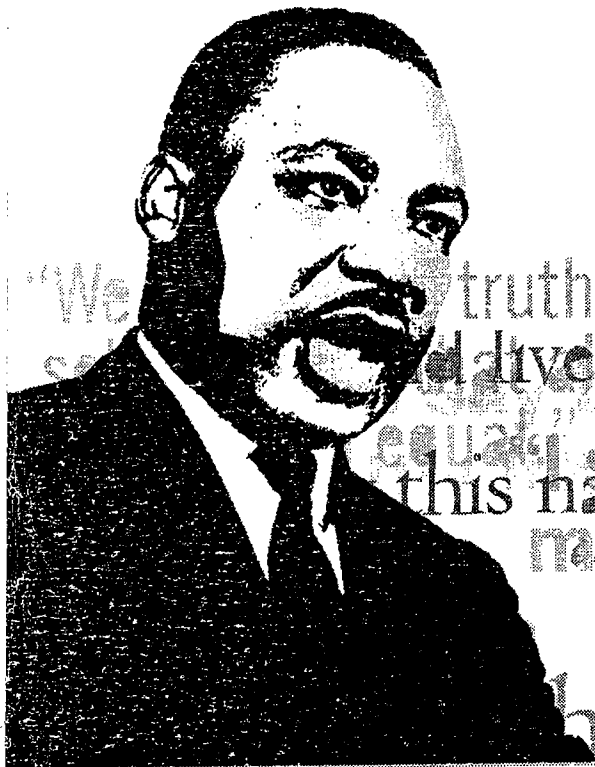


"I have a dream that

**The Martin Luther King Jr. Day Writing Awards**

January 16, 2006

at Carnegie Mellon



The Martin Luther King Jr. Day  
Writing Awards 2006

# 2006 Writing Awards

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Poems from  
Carnegie Mellon University

# Winter Fable

by Sally Mao

Out there on the devil-kissed snow,  
my father is driving home. In his trunk  
is a sack of rice, white yams, a bottle of red  
merlot, and a roast duck, sealed and steaming  
in its plastic box. Suddenly, the engine  
catches whooping cough, the windshield  
wipers whine like night whales

and the wind sneezes all over the starlit  
street. He pulls to a stop  
by the road, where four other cars parked  
like ancient caves around him. The snow scalds  
his boots as he finds his way through the dark flurry,  
one eye closed and one open to see  
a light barely kindled in a house  
across an amnesiac field.

This night a bunch of folks came  
to help deliver a baby in this house, in this storm,  
for a thirty-five year old Mexican woman  
who spoke fractured English.  
Her husband is stuck snowbound somewhere,  
and she left the burning stove untouched. When  
the neighbor heard her screech,  
he got everyone he knew to come:

a boy with topaz eyes  
& sallow hair speaks Spanish  
to soothe the poor woman with songs and  
poetry. A Russian cook who dampened the rags  
and let the pot of stew broil,  
the brown potatoes bake. A Japanese  
grandmother who used to play midwife  
to her seven grown daughters. The neighbor  
is a white man with three beautiful black children  
all of whom were roasting marshmallows  
around the restless hearth.

My father is a doctor. They welcome him  
as if he is their uncle, brother, father.  
He drops the bottle of wine  
on the plush carpet, and rushes to the woman,  
whose face is a persimmon  
with her mangrove tendrils & sticky sweat.  
She coughs, heaves, and screams  
like a forest fire. The Japanese midwife  
cools her with a round silk fan  
of frozen reeds by a river temple.

The baby is born at 11:24 pm.  
The blue smoke outside stills.  
All these faces smile  
especially my father's.  
The set of yellow cigarette teeth is his.  
This night they are one.  
They've helped bring Angelita into our world  
to thaw the winter, if only for a little.  
Around a table these strangers eat  
a roast duck, baked potatoes, a lamb stew, and yams.

Somewhere in Taiwan, my half-brother is shot  
on that very wintry night.

# Africa needs us

by Lillian Bertram

*Africa needs us.* Muhammed saying this,  
beads of other worldly abacus  
singing through his fingers.  
I steal looks: he's cross legged,  
spirits beckoning.

He says it again: *Africa needs us.*  
This time it is walking on an ice-pick;  
like flipping through a *Women of Soweto* picture-book  
while slinking out of my mother's eyeshot.

Back to empty blue enchanted land,  
great Nile-side real estate;  
dollar cabs and jitneys between shanties  
& for the choir's lost child  
repertoire: courtesy citizenship.

*You can get there, and they'll take anything* he says.  
*Even send our retired textbooks*  
*with Africa written out out-right*  
*and they'll give you a ticket to fly along*

My lips clamshell my mother's Africa trip,  
a truth & beauty fact finding tour some ten years ago,  
bus trips through Egypt & east Africa, though all of this  
does not compare to being scared shitless about her  
going so far on an airplane.

The singular vision left in my mind is of the sun hat  
she bought especially for this journey: wide brimmed  
flopping straw still-life masterpiece  
billowing like a lift off

& the cool of her bedspread on the back of my legs,  
purple flowers winking up at me as I pulled at the tips  
of my braids, braids that would have to be  
left to my father's hands.



Upon return, of course there were papyrus samples,  
kente cloth, cartouches; pictures of camels,  
sand, & scarabs. All these, I must have flipped through.

Most in focus is the photograph of her stabbed by the sun,  
wearing her souvenir of sad looks, cradling fistfuls  
of leaky facts, her head wrapped in shrouds of shadows,  
of antishadows, the hat having been lost on a tour  
through a tomb, having been misplaced in some pyramid.

# Dear Dad/Sperm Donor:

by Rebecca Bortman

My biggest concerns are heart disease and cancer.  
Do they run in the family? I kept getting asked  
at appointments and I always have to say  
“I am fifty percent unsure.”  
Once giving blood, the nurse got so excited:  
“I have never met anyone like you before.”  
People always say that.  
“Good for your mother. She must be a unique lady.”  
Thinking Mom was some sort of independent lesbian or  
logical single woman brinking menopause.  
I didn't have the heart to tell her I had a real dad.

What I really want to know is,  
What I am? Am I Irish? Russian? All Polish?  
In Scotland, I was, “One of the most American-  
looking people I have ever seen.”  
I suppose my face suggests  
boring, pale, and prairie state.  
Maybe that's just my Polish  
half covering up something  
wonderful. Some rich heritage  
like Native American or Japanese.  
My boyfriend Carlos tells me  
I dance as well as any Puerto Rican  
and I adore the delicacy  
of burnt rice at the bottom of the pot.  
What I really want to be is Jewish.

Please, please, please. Say I am Jewish.  
All the Shabbats and Yom Kippurs,  
don't stop the mothers from,  
“Well, you don't look Jewish.”  
An Asian boy once saw *the pain of ages*  
in my eyes and said he knew I was Jewish.  
Whatever I am. Thank you.  
Thank you for all limbs and no disease  
and a quality brain and acne so I'd use the brain.

Some good did come from filling  
that cup after all. Did you know?  
It's strange. I knew. I was twelve at a highway

diner and my parents started to tell me,  
but I stopped them.

I had only ever heard  
about it from watching *Made in America*  
with Ted Danson and Whoopi Goldberg.

Hey, am I black?

Until I know for sure, I say "I might be" to all those  
"Are you...?" questions.

It's better that way.

In the diner, I stopped them, "I know, I'm adopted."

That was wrong. Then I guessed right.

All I know is that you were a medical  
student and likely a doctor by now.

So I hope that's working out for you.

# Martin Is Untied From A Whipping Post In The Heat Of Slavery

by Chris Davis

With the sinews of his bull whip I will suture my bleeding heart.

I will lash their children to the stump of my left foot and dance my two  
step on the shoulders of their aged and dieing.

I will strangle these men with their fob chains and thrust my filth inside  
them until they are pregnant with vision.

I will set the serpents upon her ankles and turn my blinded eyes to her  
throes.

I will reach my thorny, leathured palms to rescue her fruit, but only to  
slice them up when they too are ripe.

I will leave her ghosts besotted on foreign shores, and fill the bedding of  
my children with their soft, sweet agony.

I will tear the south from this earth by her ankles.

I will spread my wings and set flame to this nation until she breaths her  
last.

# Grocery Shopping

by Ben Pelhan

If I were black  
I wouldn't care that Dr. King  
Plagiarized whole pages  
Of his doctoral dissertation  
For which he was awarded  
His Ph.D. in theology.  
Whole paragraphs!

But, I'm white  
So I have to imagine him hunkered  
Down in a basement digging  
Through stacks of essays  
With scissors  
And glue  
And a devious grin and  
One of those made for T.V.  
Muhaha's, and a desk lamp casting  
Shadows across half his face.

Now imagine strawberries  
Sitting red and ripe in the fruit aisle  
Suddenly getting sour and jumping on the floor  
Demanding to be treated like bananas.

Because I am white  
I have to ask that Boston  
U. revoke Dr. King's Ph.D.  
Since My grandparents hail from a place  
Called Scotland I must request that we call  
Him Mr. King instead.

But consider  
Chocolate covered strawberries.  
What aisle do they belong in?  
Fruit, or candy? Or Maybe  
In the frozen foods aisle  
Because you have to keep them frozen  
Or the chocolate will melt.  
Then they would just be strawberries.

Now since we all know

That without his Ph.D.  
Mr. King never could have led  
The civil rights movement I have to ask  
That we return to segregating schools, bathrooms  
And even water fountains. Don't you think

That at the state fair  
They shouldn't always just give  
Out the blue ribbon to the biggest strawberry  
Or the yellowest banana. Maybe  
They should judge on taste.

Speaking of taste  
Did Hendrix ever win a grammy,  
I can't remember I just keep hearing  
Those six strings with their upside down howl.  
Oh don't get me started on left handed  
People. Maybe chocolate

Covered strawberries don't belong  
In an aisle. Maybe we shouldn't  
Even have aisles and any fruit  
Can be whichever fruit it wants to be  
Regardless of taste, color or vine of origin.  
But "that's anarchy," as my professor  
Would say. Did I mention he's  
Left handed. He's also black  
But don't make everything about race.  
Black is just all the colors combined. Dark  
Is the absences of light. White is the absence  
Of any color. White light  
Is the absence of imagination.  
Imagination is the absinth

Of ignorance. But why do blue  
Ribbons have to be blue?  
Lead Belly never won  
A grammy but Jamaica  
Got its bobsled team,  
And even though I'm white  
I think we should give  
Mr. King an honorary  
Ph.D. He's earned it.

Prose from  
Carnegie Mellon University

# One Person Wonder

by Ashley Birt

"Tell me, how do you feel about slavery?" For a good majority of people, the answer to this is some variant on "it's bad". Some may elaborate on the historical ramifications. Others may respond with a simple "well, no one *likes* it, right?". All of the above would be appropriate responses.

"I'm not saying anything," is mine.

Freshman year of college was the first time anyone asked me that. I sat in the back of my Carnegie Mellon classroom, my eyes weary from waking up so early, my head tucked beneath my arms to make sure that I was never at the teacher's eye level. If she never saw me, she could never call on me, participation grade be damned. On one particularly chilly day, I huddled in my spot, wrapped up in extra coats, completely hidden from anyone's view. Make that *almost* completely hidden; apparently my teacher didn't want my participation grade to be a zero, so she attempted to bring me into the article discussion. On slavery. As I raised my head, I focused my eyes on the people around me. My heart began to race and I sunk underneath my desk. No one, except for me, was black.

High school never put me in this situation. About 60% of the students there were black. Others varied from white American to Chinese to Bulgarian to Indonesian. Everywhere you went—the hallways, the bathrooms, the bus stops—had black people. Even my higher level courses, which were known for lacking diversity, had at least one or two other black students. When I graduated, I decided to stay not only in the same city, but the same neighborhood, yet within a year I discovered that the diversity from that one building did not extend all the way down to Carnegie Mellon's campus. College, for me, is only a short walk from my high school, but that short walk is the difference between reality and a parallel universe.

I'm not saying I'd like to be in a class of only black students. Even if I had that option, I would turn it down. I like people who are different from me; if everyone I know is the same, I will never grow as a person, and then life will prove pointless. What I don't like is being the only different person drowning in the sea of sameness. What makes it worse is that, for some of my classmates, I'm the first black person they've ever seen. Suddenly, I'm their tour guide, their expert, their gateway to a strange, new culture. I cease to be a person, but rather an icon; the ultimate representative of all things black. Me, who takes pride in listening to "whiney white boys with guitars", who prefers chicken vindaloo to fried chicken. I'm supposed to represent the culture that the media paints as a bunch of baggy pants wearing, slang speaking, ghetto fabulous "pimps and hoes". Now, this image is the farthest thing from the truth, but if that's the type of person expect me to be, they've got a surprise in store. I cannot and will



not be what they want me to be. By now, I've stopped being annoyed by this and started feeling pity; anyone who wants me to represent my race is certainly misguided.

Once in a class, we discussed the use of the n-word in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. My professor, a white man, had no idea whether he could read the word, afraid of offending any black students in his class. I went to raise my hand to say that, since it's part of the book, it didn't matter. I then remembered back to high school, and thought about how this man would have fit in there. He was stiff and studgy, fitting the stereotype associated with aging white men. His understanding of race relations appeared to be zip; while he could go on and on about the facts dealing with slavery and such things, not once had he ever spoken of it from an empathetic perspective. Rather than "it was bad, let's figure out why", he approached it as "it was." The fact that he was even asking this question suggested that he didn't quite get the distinction between a group and a person. He didn't appear to be the most aware or approachable man, and I could imagine a situation where some of the blacks in my classes would have either complained about him to the school's authorities or left him hanging from a locker. Slowly, though without any hesitation, I lowered my hand.

My silence doesn't come from a lack of opinion. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is one of my favorite books of all time. Slavery has had such a huge impact on American society that issues such as affirmative action, which feels very current, are being effected by it. With friends, I've been known to start shouting over those who don't realize that almost everything that deals with socio-economic factors also deals with racial factors because the two are so tightly linked. As in individual, this makes me opinionated. As a black woman, this makes me "normal". The stereotype is that blacks are angry and loud, which, if I care enough about the subject, fits me to a tee. This isn't a positive view, though; people assume you're genetically wired to be like this, which makes you less rational than everyone else around you. So, not only do I stand to misinform my classmates on what "the average black person" thinks, but I can be seen as irrational if my opinion exceeds the allotted amount of passion. Now do you see why I never raise my hand?

In high school we also read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* in a classroom with three black students and two Chinese. We read articles on the book, we studied opinions on it. We'd make fun of the NAACP's issues with the book constantly; clearly, by calling it offensive, they missed the point. During roundtable discussions in class, the black and Chinese kids would purposely sit away from each other; the joke was that we needed to integrate the room. Sometimes, when our teacher read it aloud, she said the word; other times, she didn't. She never apologized, and no one expected her to. Everyone had an opinion, *their* opinion, and she wasn't afraid to talk about things and get everyone's individual perspective. No

one in the classroom was anyone else's tour guide, and everyone had an understanding that people were speaking for themselves.

On some level, I suppose college has introduced me to a new type of diversity. Instead of sitting in classes with Mexicans and Australians (yes, *Australians*), I sit with the suburbanites and rural people I've always secretly feared. My only real experience with those who dwell in the suburbs is the one time my high school mediation team went up to Seneca Valley, a local suburban high school, for "Diversity Day" (we joked for weeks that the title came from the fact that we ourselves were the diversity). Sitting next to kid who "never really had any black friends" is a new experience for me, one I should probably cherish. Perhaps he likes whiney white boys with guitars, too, or maybe he's secretly a hip-hop aficionado and, in my ignorance, I missed this. That farm girl in front of me could transcend the idea of the country bumpkin and prove to be politically educated. I could teach this person about my personal experiences, and we could both learn something. Notice I said personal. I'm not here to teach anybody about "the black experience". There isn't one, just like there isn't really a "suburban experience", a "female experience", or any other type of experience. For all certain people have in common, whether it be location or race or gender, we are not the same.

I had a conversation with once about what it means to be black or white in America. In a John Deere hat and a plaid shirt, the guy I was talking to was the picture of white farm boy. Under normal circumstances, those items alone would be my excuse to get the hell away from him, but I didn't. I've talked to him before, and although he's what I'm afraid of on the outside, he does something that other people on campus won't: he sees me as a person, a single person. We sat there and had an open conversation about race (he thinks people blow things way out of proportion and do stupid things because of it, I think sometimes we don't take things seriously enough) and guess what? I made a friend! We aren't the same, but we can be honest, and that is the first step.

I'm sure others have been in similar situations. As we were walking down the street from dinner once, a college friend of mine told that in class that week he was asked for "the gay perspective" on abstinence; he was cracking up the entire time he told me. After leaving a lecture done by Maya Angelou (which feels like a very "black" thing to attend), another friend told me that a white classmate come up to her and apologize for her loss because Rosa Parks had died. She had never met Rosa before in her life. Her reaction was one of awe and confusion; *nobody* is really that clueless. None of us ever get upset in front of these people; it's not as if people know any better. The fact that they ask questions at all shows that they aren't being malicious, but rather insanely ignorant. More often than not, I simply avoid questions. I don't want to be "the angry black woman", a stereotype that has caused me to be silent to avoid it. To be honest, though, I'm tired of being quiet. I didn't come to school to be censored,

especially by myself. All I ask is that you see me the way I see you: as a person, an individual. Then, perhaps, we can sit back and discuss why slavery is indeed bad.

# Untitled

by Isabel Garadocki

Some days, I really hate the English language. I hate the way the consonants need vowel buffers and how letter combinations like “mgl” or “szcz” aren’t possible. I hate how awkward the words sound when my parents pronounce them with their Polish accents and how syrupy the sentences flow out of the mouths of Americans. By accident, this is why I am an English major. I realized early on that America was split into two different worlds: the one my parents live in with their immigrant friends and the one filled with Authority, Power, and English. The English language can turn a grown man into a bumbling child with the flick of the tongue. Just watch how Americans treat my father in the restaurant. The waitress stares like the bank manager stared like the shopping clerk stared at him trying to pronounce the words. I try to cover it up by smiling sweetly and ordering in overly proper English. See, I say, I’m not like him. I’m not stupid, I swear. And then I hate the English language because this scene has been repeated thousands of times before. My mother has pushed me up to store counters to ask for dress sizes and my father has had me call his electric companies and insurance providers to complain or clear up bills. I have been “Mrs. Elzbieta Gardocki” too often. One time, my grandmother called me from the hospital to have me translate what the doctor was saying. When I was born, there was no Polish-speaking person to tell my mother I had jaundice, so she got up and wandered the hospital in a panic looking for me.

“I waited and waited for you while the other babies were wheeled into the room,” she told me once, “and when you didn’t come that day, I thought they had taken you away from me.”

I imagine her walking from room to room in a standard issue hospital gown and my heart breaks. She is helpless here when she shouldn’t be. Adults should not be helpless in the eyes of children, but I always felt like my parents’ protector. I would walk a step ahead of my mother and enter any English-speaking place first. She would follow and stand humbly behind me while I told the receptionist, the secretary, whomever, our names and listened to the instructions. The same thing happened with school functions and anytime she met an American. My mother gets nervous around Americans and forgets words. She forgets verbs and the conjugations we have practiced. I made her worksheets about the present perfect and conditional tenses but “would,” “could,” and “should” were not real to her. I have never heard her use them in a sentence on her own.

“Hello Elizabeth!” the American would say, trying to be friendly, “How are you?”

My mother gets headaches talking to Americans. She turns crimson and her eyes flick down for a second. She is not good at making small talk

in Polish and is even worse in English.

"Gut, gut," she would say, "How ees Ah-shlee?" Or Jessica. Or Carrie. It didn't matter because the conversation would soon be over. I would crack a joke to ease the tension once there was a felt pause between the two women and we would be on our way. Listening to these conversations was painful. My body tensed and I felt like I was watching a train about to crash. The train was about to go off the cliff and there was nothing I could do about it. My mother told me once that the other mothers were mean to her when I wasn't there. One mother even asked mine *What Are You Doing In this Country and told her to Go Back.*

In middle school I got made fun of because of my parents, so as a rule, I never let any friends come over. My house was too Polish. My parents looked too Polish, with their round faces and blue eyes. My father had a mustache when no other fathers had one. Even the way they wore their American bought clothes was Polish. I was disgusted. Why couldn't they watch some television and assimilate? Why couldn't they get some American friends? Why wasn't the American culture rubbing off on them? To become American seemed so easy to me and it came with perks. Americans didn't care when their children got bad grades and let their kids go out whenever they wanted to. Girls in my class talked back to their mothers without fear and were allowed to put on makeup and go to parties. Lying in bed at night, I would close my eyes and ask God to change my parents into Americans. Everything about being Polish seemed unfair. "You are on your own when you leave this house," my parents would say, "because you know we are not American and we can't help you. We don't speak this language." I hated hearing them reinforce that over and over. I hated feeling so alone in my American culture.

My brother and sister felt the same way, especially my sister. Even to this day she denies being Polish. She never bothered to learn the language and my parents never sent her to Polish school. My relatives look at her as if she were some sort of anomaly. "How can your daughter not speak Polish?" they ask my parents, "It is a shame." My grandmother does not acknowledge her and my sister, in turn, does not acknowledge Polish guests in our house. She will stare past them as if they were furniture or give them an American eye roll. Instead, my parents will call me over with pride and fear in their voices. They want me to impress their guests, so I make an effort to smile pleasantly and speak with a perfect accent. What Is Your Major the guests ask. English. My mother giggles nervously and tries to cover up "English" with a joke. "My daughter is majoring in a language I cannot speak," she says. Everyone laughs, but later on my father will tell me that so-and-so's daughter is going through law school and that so-and-so is forcing his son to become a doctor. Every once in a while, my father and I will find ourselves alone in a room and after a worried silence, he asks, "What are you going to do with an English major?"

How can I explain that what drew me to the language in the first

place was my desire to protect him? Rather than do math problems, I stayed up to comb the dictionary for adult-sounding words. I let the sciences slack so I could absorb Charles Dickens and speak more impressively. I read and read with fervor because somewhere between those lines lay Authority and Power. Even during my junior year of high school, I still thought about being a biologist but some days, I just really love the English language. Words like "pen" and "flower" seem more inherent than their Polish counterparts "długopis" and "kwiat." Pens at their cores are three letter objects. The only true downfall to being an English major for me is that my parents won't really ever understand my work. If I managed to write the Great American Novel or a little newspaper column in some weekly, the beauty of the words in that order would be missing to them. To my parents, a pen is in its essence forever a "długopis."

Poems from  
Pittsburgh's High Schools

# Eye to Eye

by Emily Nagin

The sign says that 100 people  
stood chest to back to shoulder  
to cheek to neck to thigh to eye  
to eye in each boxcar.

Inside it smells of old wood and old air,  
the windowsills are worn smooth  
by years of hands, brushing.

My two friends and I spin slow circles  
and I try to imagine us,  
wrist to wrist, together here.

She is Jewish. He is not,  
but if anyone told they'd take him too.

His chest is delicate as a bird's.

Her mouth is set and stubborn.

I think of us in camps together, their faces  
going up in smoke and I want to hide them  
somewhere safe, bulletproof.

I think that when age has carved canyons  
through my cheeks I will still remember  
this day. How we stood,  
the hair on our arms rising,  
the pressure in our throats.

I think I will remember the still air,  
the smooth windowsills.

I think I will remember  
her set mouth, his delicate ribs.

I think I will remember it perfectly.



# 77D

by Duncan Richer

It is so late,  
it's actually early.

The solemn glow of the streetlight reflects off the wet dew  
glinting observantly on the pavement.

The bus moans-  
it turns 6 today.  
Nobody is celebrating because busses can't eat cakes.

I sit there, quietly

B

u

M

P

I

N

G

on the seats with cushioning like carpet  
at the federal building where my aunt works.

All the white men with business suits and Rogain-smearred scalps  
are also

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And so are the loud black girls with Wendy's uniforms and no-cream coffee as dark as they are.

They are

B

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too.

The strong bus driver is  
bumping.

But that's because he has his seatbelt on real tight.

And when the bus

B

u

M

P

S

real hard because the city is poor and potholes are invading  
and the black girls coffee

makes the white mans shirt brown

everybody just sits patiently. They become bystanders. They become wit-  
nesses. They become spectators.

They know he's going to explode.

And when he does,  
everybody acts like they just saw the chick  
flick with the predictable ending.

And then they

step

off

the bus's stairs and I try not to notice the crying girl  
with not enough napkins.

# What *Really* Happened

by Rachel Jardini

Every time I try to write  
this poem about racism  
I get this far  
but erase what I have  
because I am worried  
that it might be offensive.

I am worried  
because I know  
that the stereotypes  
are based on truth

I hate that this is a common problem  
and that the truth is worse  
than the lies we use to hide it  
and that we are ashamed.

I want to write a poem  
about my black brother in jail,  
about the smart Asian in my math class,  
about the Mexican girl on welfare,  
about the Iraqi man that blew up a train,  
and about the white lawyers with SUVs.

I am tempted to start over  
and write a poem  
about the new student in our class  
from a country we had never heard of  
that we befriended,

—  
because I am the only one who will know  
that we never actually talked to her  
because her accent was weird.

I am tempted not to write  
this poem about racism at all  
but I know that this  
cannot be left unsaid.

I am tempted to find that girl  
whose name was foreign to us.  
But that doesn't matter  
because we never took the time  
to say her name correctly  
or to get to know  
what else defined her  
besides her foreign name  
and her olive colored skin.  
I wish I could find her and ask  
what *really* happened.

# Back Then With My Faith

by Vaughan Stephenson

Back when I still kept faith in God,  
back when I was little,  
seven or eight,  
I used to go to temple and listen to the Rabbi's stories,  
Then go out with my friends and look  
in shop windows at clothes and books,  
Then I would walk and get ice cream,  
Back then before my parents divorce,  
Before my stepfather left my mom because he hated women,  
and he flew away to Israel,  
the day before my little sisters birthday,  
his daughter left alone,  
back then when I was innocent,  
I went to temple one day.  
The Rabbi told us a story of a  
man who sailed across the ocean,  
and he went to an island covered in Rubies,  
and when he went back home all he had was chicken dung,  
after that I left with Eli and  
Abe and we went to look at books,  
I said by to them and they walked home  
and I went along alone on my way,  
then I saw two boys, sixteen or seventeen,  
coming towards me,  
I wasn't afraid, why should I be?  
but they pushed me onto  
the ground and called me 'little Jew boy',  
and they took my five dollars away, my rubies,  
and I returned home with nothing but chicken dung.  
That was the first time I  
realized that there was prejudice in this world,  
and I cried to my mom and she told me it was Ok,  
she told me that everything would be Ok,  
but I knew it wasn't because of her fights with my step dad,  
and all of the hate in the world.

# White Lady Greens

by Justin Platek

I followed Felicia and Shawntae  
into the small house with the glassless door.  
It smelled like  
a small corner restaurant,  
cornbread, Miss Marjie's famous chicken,  
seafood salad, grease.  
Thanksgiving in July.

"Don't be shy now,"  
a woman, probably  
Felicia's aunt (not "ant")  
said to me, piling stacks  
of the indigenous chicken  
covered with Family Dollar hot sauce  
onto my thin white plate.  
Her perfect piano key teeth smiled.

My friends got theirs and  
we finished helping ourselves.  
"Dammit, Nat, where's the greens?"  
Felicia demanded.  
"Eatch your other food,  
we'll put em out when they're ready."

We took our food to the dining room  
and ate at the crowded table.  
It didn't bother me that the walls  
were the only other things white.

"The greens is here!"  
hollered a tall black man, leading a small group  
through the front door.  
"Susan made them."  
I looked at the first few females that came in.  
None of them looked  
like her name was Susan.

But I knew her when she entered,  
a large chrome bowl covered with plastic wrap in her arms.  
I smiled at the irony  
of Susan serving the greens.

I expected to hear some  
smart remarks,  
but no one said "Ew, white lady greens."  
or  
"They ain't gon' taste right."

"These rull good S," that tall man said.  
She smiled and glowed soft red.

I ate my greens, wishing silently they  
were called something different.  
Nothing should be known  
by its color.

# My Brother's Keeper

by Sade Turner

I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU DIDN'T FINISH  
HIGH SCHOOL  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU DIDN'T DO WHAT YOU  
PROMISED  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU DIDN'T GO TO THE NBA  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU HAVE SO MUCH HATE IN  
YOUR HEART  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU ARE SO  
OVERPROTECTIVE  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY PEOPLE WANT TO KILL YOU  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU FEEL DRUGS ARE YOUR  
ONLY INCOME  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY GOD IS NOT A FACTOR IN  
YOUR LIFE  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU NEVER ATTEND MY  
BASKETBALL GAMES  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU HATE DAD SO MUCH  
I WANT TO ASK YOU WHY YOU NEED A GUN 24/7

I ALWAYS WANT TO TELL YOU THAT I LOVE YOU SO SO  
MUCH AND I WISH THAT I COULD KEEP MY BIG BROTHER  
FROM THE ENVY THAT YOU TRY TO KEEP ME FROM  
I WONDER WHAT I COULD DO TO KEEP YOU FROM THAT  
ENVIIOUS PLACE YOUR FIRST LOVE  
I ALWAYS WONDER WHAT I COULD DO TO KEEP YOU  
ALIVE  
I THEN REALIZE THAT I AM NOT YOUR KEEPER  
I CAN'T KEEP YOU LIKE I WANT TO BECAUSE THAT PLACE  
KEEP YOU FROM KNOWING ME LIKE I WISH YOU COULD,  
THAT PLACE HAS A HOLD ON YOU THAT I OR THE FAM-  
ILY NEVER HAD  
THE STREETS ARE MY BROTHERS KEEPER

I LOVE YOU KPT



Prose from  
Pittsburgh's High Schools

# The New South: Small Town America

by Michael D'Emilio

I have grown up and still live in a neighborhood of white traditionalists; my educational opportunities are the only threads that keep me from being cast into my town's fiery pit of pettiness, intolerance, and bigotry. It goes without saying that my suburban home, Plum Borough, is a sheltered grotto of racial bias. No one says anything about it, and of course the residents would deny it, but the air is all too revealing—we are a racist community.

In all the years I have lived in Plum, which now number sixteen, I have seen only a dozen or so “people of color.” I remember meeting a wealthy businessman named Matt Mitchell, who had worked with my grandmother on the town's bicentennial when she was the Borough manager. And I remember Jeff, a young black student who went to my elementary school. When I was eight and naive, I didn't really look at him as anything but a kid; he just happened to be tanner. In fact, Jeff even stood up for me one day when the white “jocks” of fourth grade taunted me.

“I like Mike. He's a cool kid,” said that young student who treated me like a human.

What Jeff really stood for, though, was the erratic pattern of race in my school and in Plum. One day my class would have several black students in it; the next day it would be as white as cream. Jeff was originally in my first grade class, then he disappeared for two years, and then reappeared in fourth grade. Little did I know that this pattern would always repeat itself whenever there was a black student in my class. It didn't even take a whole year for the “racial purification” to occur—African American students entered and exited as if Holiday Park Elementary were a bus terminal.

Just a few months ago, my neighbors decided to sell their house across the street. During a tour of their home, they came over to my family's house until the visitors left. As I got two bottles of water for them, we began talking about the tour group. The first thing out of my neighbor's mouth shocked me into silence: “It's a colored family that's looking at the house.” I didn't know what to say; I was totally stunned. She said that she didn't mind, but that her parents and many other town residents held on to segregation and the racial views of old. When my family find out about the colored “tourists,” nearly everyone became awkwardly silent. My uncle, on the other hand, was incensed. He had a different view of blacks—to him, they were not just odd or undesirable to be around, but they were men and women who brought moral, social, and physical decay upon the area they inhabited. To him, blacks were synonymous with

urban destruction.

"We'll all be living in Wilkinsburg," my uncle said.

His rhetoric and "logic" hinged on the idea that if an African American family moved into a white neighborhood, property values would plummet and white families would lose the money that had worked for. He had only to look at the statistics for evidence. As of 2003, the average black family had one-eighth the net worth of the average white family, and whites typically had two times more wealth than blacks. But the statistics failed to illustrate the reason for the disparity, the system of racial settlement that had been going on since Levittown. Plum remained a Caucasian area because its population had lived and remained homogenous through the 1940s and 50s, when white America had gone to great lengths to define neighborhoods by race. If a black family moved into white suburbia, Caucasians packed up, sold their homes, and resettled, lest their money and safety be lost with the increasing crime and declining economic prosperity that had been prophesied by avaricious real estate agents. But these omens, were no longer needed; the white communities of America perpetuated this propaganda. The history of ignorance and hate in Plum was the guiding force behind my family's desire to shut these migrants out. Not only was a black presence a change no one wanted, but the belief that the community would turn into a battered and decaying ghetto, a parasitic sore on tranquil life in the eyes of white suburbanites, gradually began to occupy the minds of many in my family.

When the black family did move in, nothing happened. They turned out to be an elderly couple who had gone to college and who were taking care of their amiable grandson. My uncle wondered what had happened to the grandson's parents, but the worrisome idea of heterogeneity died after the town remained standing; no fires or rapturous apocalypse overtook small Plum Borough. But the racism didn't die; like times before, in the wake of the storm, it simply returned to a state of dormancy, ready to rear its vile head once again at the sign of color.

Today, I still see Jeff on the way to my bus. He is tall and burly now, always wearing a sagging basketball jersey and a do-rag. I'll look at him, he'll look at me, and neither of us will smile. Sometimes I'll wonder if he hates me, and I think he wonders if I'm a racist. For him, it wouldn't be hard to believe; the cool kid he knew in elementary school hadn't talked to him in years. For all he knew, I could've been captured by the bigoted hand of Plum. Someday I'll tell him I wasn't and still am not.

# White Coat

by Gretchen Gally

Lawn chairs, stools and recliners taken from the garbage rose up from the small patch of dirt situated at the bottom of the auction house. The oldest farmers and best breeders sat in the recliners, their feet up on the wooden plank that kept the bidders from falling into the pit with the auction cattle, sheep, pigs, goats, or occasional mule. The stench of dirt and sweat from the show ring, or the men, was so strong that it stung the inside of my nose. I winced and held up my hand, hoping that the scent of soap and lotion could cover it. My cousin, Jenny, born and raised on a farm, breathed normally.

"City-girl don't like the farm animals," my aunt teased. She patted my shoulder, gingerly, not to get my white coat dirty. I smiled.

"It's not just the animals." I pointed down to one of the Amish people wearing a heavy woolen shirt and black boots with laces. He had bowl-cut hair and yellow teeth. "That's Jonah," Jenny said. "He helped build our barn."

The man looked up from filling his pipe, his hands working swiftly over the tobacco and packing it into the bowl. They were brown hands, stained from hard work and hours out in the fields guiding horses and plows. He looked up and around the auction house when his eyes met mine. He smiled, but I turned my back on him.

"How long do these things usually last?" I asked.

"Usually an hour or two, depending on how hot the bidding gets, or how much stock was brought." Jenny looked over my shoulder. "Jonah's coming over. Be polite."

"Polite? What?"

The man called Jonah showed up at my elbow. He held his pipe in his left hand, using the other to tip his hat to my aunt, cousin, and finally me.

"Ladies, how are you?" When he spoke, I expected broken English to come out. Instead, his German accent rolled out with the words and filled the space between us with something of tradition and lost culture, something different from myself. "Are you planning on buying any animals, young lady?"

"Me?"

"Her?" My cousin laughed and leaned against the back of a chair to support herself.

"Jonah, this is my niece, Sarah. She's visiting from Pittsburgh." My aunt put her arm around my shoulder.

"All the way from Pittsburgh? It's nice to meet you, Sarah." Jonah wiped his hand on his grey homemade pants before he held it out to me to shake. I stared at it. "I'm Jonah Yoder."

I paused too long and I felt a finger in the small of back from my aunt. I looked up to her; she scowled. I carefully stuck my hand out of my pocket and gave Jonah's hand a quick rattle. His hand was rough against mine, like he worked too hard or I didn't work hard enough.

"How long are you staying, Sarah?"

"Five days," I mumbled.

"You should be careful not to ruin that white coat while you're up here," he said.

"Lots of dirt floating around."

"I'll be careful, thanks." I lifted the hand he shook up to my nose. Trying to be casual, I smelled it.

"Okay. Well, Pat, it was nice to see you again." Jonah nodded to my aunt and headed back to the cluster of other Amish people on the other side of the level. I let out the audible breath I didn't know I was holding.

"I don't like to mingle with them either," the old man sitting in the chair Jenny was leaning on said. He turned himself around and took off his trucker hat and put it in the pocket of his oversized flannel coat. "They just dirty to me."

Aunt Pat opened her mouth to speak, but stopped. Jenny stared at me, flicking a piece of her blonde hair out of her eyes.

"I especially wouldn't want to touch them wearing white either. Never seen an Amish that didn't ruin everything they touched."

"Ruin?"

"When my father was building our fence line-I live on Rycole Road-he had some Amish from down the road help with the lumber. Those men wasted more wire and wood than my father could afford! Had to sell off some of the horses because they wouldn't stay in without a good fence."

"I'm sure that it wasn't just the Amish's fault," my aunt said.

"You'd be surprised what them Amish can do. Can't trust a single one of them.

Always wanting rides in the car, borrow a telephone."

"Sarah," Jenny cocked her head back to the side, "let's go."

I stumbled over my Aunt Pat's foot as we headed down the dusty hallway to the balcony over looking the incoming animals. She walked quickly, so that I had the skip to keep up with her. She stopped short as she came to the walkway. She walked carefully, slowly over the animals.

"I didn't want to hear anymore of that bull." Jenny rested her hands on the wooden railing. The cows below us shuffled in the dirt and mooed loudly.

"Yeah," I said, only half-heartedly. I didn't see what that man was so wrong about. Even my aunt had said that they didn't do the best job on her barn. I didn't like the Amish, either.

"I don't know where those old guys get off putting other people down like that. Just because they are a little different. At least they aren't screwing around with other people's wives like that guy." She unzipped

her outer jacket. "They might have different beliefs than us, but you know what I mean. They're still people."

"I guess so." They were too different, though. People or not they were like a whole other species, native to Germany, but raised in captivity around the Pennsylvania area.

"Animals," I mumbled.

I kicked a pebble into the crack between the wood planks. It hit a pig and it squealed. I looked over the railing to the mass of bodies moving below me like a churning sea. All the pigs were trapped in a wooden crate, pushing their snouts into each other's bodies, eating each others' tails. They squealed like the last scene in a horror film, like animals. I thought to Jonah, calling him an animal, thinking that he wore clothes and he spoke English and he made art. Pigs didn't do that; they ate their own tails. They were the animals. They were.

"Sarah, don't do that." Jenny tapped the top of my shoe. I looked up, startled.

"Nobody wants to hear them cry. You know, I heard that pig skin is just as sensitive as a human's."

I looked up at her, my hands in my pockets.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I won't do it again."

"Oh, I don't care, I just don't want us to get yelled at." She flashed a smile that I recognized in her mother. "Let's go back to the auction. My mom might buy something this time."

She started to shuffle along the walkway. I pulled my hands out of my pocket and touched the railing.

"Jenny, is it true that the skin is as sensitive as a human's?"

"No." She turned around and laughed. "But I thought it sounded nice."

# Dancing Around Color: A Story about Mixed Perceptions

by Lindsay Machen

As the reigning model on the big Island (Kingston, Jamaica), she received a full scholarship to the program to represent her nation. I met Umrada on the third day of the three-week international summer dance program. Six of my best friends had attended this program for three years running. We entered the classroom with an air of certainty; we were old pros. Class placement auditions had lost their terrifying affect and the idea of spending eight and half hours' a day dancing was no longer daunting. As I stood amongst my white friends, Umrada and her fellow Jamaicans approached our little clique. Her austere stance, gliding gait, and dark skin awed my peers establishing Umrada as an apparent superior. Her advance silenced our jabber and we looked up to the dark figure in front of us. Mine was the first offer of friendship.

"Hello."

"How are you?" she asked in affected English.

"Great, excited to be back. This is my third year; what country are you from?" I questioned.

"Jamaica. Where do you come from?"

I didn't board at the college because I lived a mere twenty minutes away from the campus.

"Oh, I am from here, America; Pittsburgh specifically."

"You don't look American."

I wouldn't say that my appearance is exotic but frequently I am mistaken for an Israeli or an Italian. My dark skin tone and copious amounts of curly, black hair deceive for both of my parents are white and my heritage mainly Austrian-American. Class was called into session just after her statement and I didn't have time to ponder the declaration. Her accent and unfamiliarity intrigued my friends and I and we encouraged her to sit with us at lunch and invite her friends. Suddenly, our coterie had expanded. Our group was en route to becoming a mass organization. Umrada and her friends were welcomed and immediately inculcated with knowledge necessary for the successful completion and survival of the program. Tips were exchanged and we decided that the far end of the recently remodeled cafeteria was to be our lunch haunt for the remainder of the program. Umrada and her friends focused their energy on myself and my friend Pamela, an African-American girl, and ignored my other white friends. At the time, I didn't understand her dismissal and focused more on her incredible culture and unique ethnicities.

"So, like, what is an average day like for a teenager in Jamaica,"

asked Pamela.

"We are like all you, see? We have beaches at our disposal though and that makes warm days awesome" Umrada implied.

My fascination with cultures and customs dates back to my early childhood when I first met my good friend Emmanuel. Her family hailed from Africa and her skin interested me beyond comprehension. My elementary school had little diversity and Emmanuel was one of the few girls of color. My questions were endless and, know that I reflect on them, slightly intrusive. I saw Emmanuel as my friend, but chiefly my Black friend. As Pamela queried Umrada, this memory flashed before me; a different time but the same interest and fixation.

It was the second to last day of the program. Umrada and I met up early, skipping the last half-hour ballet class prior to lunch, to celebrate our success and drown out the cries of our aching limbs with cool frappuchino's. As I selected my usual Mint Chocolate Chip frappuchino and savored the layers of whipped cream adorning the mountain of caloric goodness, Umrada asked me a question.

"Are you mixed?"

"Hmm..." I said; my mouth filled with an unprocessed ice chip.

"Are you mixed?"

After three weeks of Umrada's company and endless conversations, I still had trouble understanding her accent. What sounded to me like "Peatsboor" was her way of articulating Pittsburgh. Communication wasn't our strong point; a principal made even clearer in those following minutes. It took me several more pardons before I could understand her query.

"Oh, no. Just White."

With a confused look, she asked, "Your dad isn't Black?"

"No. I am just tan, "I explained.

"Ah, I just thought you were," she said.

The light bulb went off. As I finished the last slurp of my frappuchino, I realized why Umrada had ever ventured over to my corner of the room that first day. She thought I as Black. As we wove our way through the busy downtown streets back to the college, Umrada walked ahead of me and never glanced back to see if I was keeping up with her stride; I wasn't; we weren't in sync anymore. Something had changed and I was the one left behind. It wasn't that Umrada didn't want to be my friend; she just didn't need to be my friend. When she believed that one of my relatives was African-American, we had something in common; something tangible that both she and I could relate to. The realization that I wasn't took away our similarity and ultimately, our friendship. Her demeanor after the "answer" was neither harsh nor terse. She treated me like she had treated my other friends throughout the term. I had dismissed her previous blithe attitude towards them as incompatibility. What I didn't realize was the aforementioned inharmonious existence prevailed through-