

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day **Writing Awards**



January 16, 2012

Celebrating creative writing from Pittsburgh
area high school and college students

Carnegie Mellon University

Acknowledgments

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Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Writing Awards

Celebrating Excellence in
Creative Writing and the Spirit of
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

January 16, 2012

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First Place Prose: College

On Being Black

by Jordan Stephenson

“It had something to do with his blackness, I think—he was very black—with his blackness and his beauty, and with the fact that he knew he was black but did not know that he was beautiful.”

-James Baldwin

Ernest Green came to Carnegie Mellon University as the keynote speaker for the Living Legacies series in honor of Black History Month. You might not know him by his name, but you probably know of him as one of the students in the Little Rock Nine. He was the oldest of the nine African-American students who were chosen to be the first African-American students to attend Little Rock Central High School in 1957. Four years before, the Supreme Court had ruled that “separate but equal” was unconstitutional. The African-American community was desperate for change, and these nine, brave students were willing to be pioneers of this change. On their first day of school, the Arkansas National Guard denied them admittance into the school as ordered by the governor. Federal troops were sent by President Eisenhower to escort and protect the nine students at all times while they were at the school. The happenings in Little Rock became national news, and these nine students’ difficulties were captured on camera and broadcasted for the whole country to witness. This was the beginning of the integration of schools, and this was only a little over fifty years ago. I can’t articulate how much this blows my mind—how quickly things have changed.

My dad grew up in Brooklyn, New York, and was one of the black students bused out of his school district to a predominantly white school district for the purpose of desegregating schools. My dad was part of this—he was in elementary school and part of the Civil Rights Movement. Once, my sisters and I stayed with my dad’s mother while my parents were away for their anniversary. My grandma has a lot of photo albums, and she delights in showing us all her pictures. We were flipping through an album that had all of my dad’s class photos from elementary school and junior high. My youngest

sister Alyssa who was a toddler at the time innocently asked, “Where’s Daddy?” We all laughed, because my dad was the only black kid in most of his classes and his dark skin made him easy to spot. This happened in my dad’s lifetime—the fight to end racism in America. How crazy is that? When people talk about the Civil Rights Movement, they talk about it like it was ages ago and that everyone who was part of it is dead and gone. No! It’s amazing how fast things changed, and I thank God for it. It scares me to think that it could have been me. I could have been one of the students in the Little Rock Nine, ridiculed and threatened every day of my high school career. I’m so glad I wasn’t, because I am not strong enough to fight that kind of opposition. I couldn’t even handle being bullied in elementary school, and that bullying was much tamer than the hate the Little Rock Nine walked the halls with every day. Hate is a hard thing to fight.

Ernest Green stood in front of his audience of Carnegie Mellon students and professors and gave an inspiring speech about how things are still changing for African-Americans. However, he didn’t downplay the fact that in some areas, things haven’t changed that much. He talked about schools that are basically still segregated, and how even though the percentage of African-Americans who go on to receive higher education has considerably increased since he was in high school, it is still a really low percentage (here at CMU, only ten percent of the student body is Black, Hispanic, or Native American). Ernest Green was the oldest of the Little Rock Nine, and the first black student to graduate from Little Rock Central High. Martin Luther King sat with his family at the graduation and clapped with them through the silence that fell when his name was called.

“But suppose God is black? What if we go to Heaven and we, all our lives, have treated the Negro as an inferior, and God is there, and we look up and He is not white? What then is our response?”

-Robert Kennedy

Martin Luther King said, “Change does not roll in on the wheels of inevitability, but comes through continuous struggle. And so we must straighten our backs and work for our freedom. A man can’t ride you unless your back is bent.” I’m so thankful for the men and women, and boys and girls, who agreed with him and straightened their backs. How do you stand proud when people are shouting obscene things at you and threatening to lynch you? I have no idea how, but the Little Rock Nine did. They went in that school every day and listened to the insults and threats, but still went into the school every day. How can we take this for granted? I have always wanted to do the best and be

the best to make sure the work of those before me was worth it.

I am black. I never used to like being classified as black—I always wanted to be called African-American. I looked at my skin and didn't understand why people thought I was black. My skin is brown. I have brown eyes and brown hair. But people persisted in classifying me as black, and forms and applications always ask me to identify myself as "Black." So, black I am. I have always had a hard time with being black. When I was younger I used to pray every night for beautiful, white-girl hair. I had basically no hair when I was a kid, and I was so jealous of my white friends' hair. It didn't seem fair to me that they got to have nice, silky hair just because they had white skin. When we learned about slavery in elementary school, I wanted so desperately to be white so that I could feel safe. I always felt so scared because I knew that if I lived during that time in American history I would have been a slave. I wouldn't have been considered a human-being, but as something a little lower than an animal. I wanted to be white.

Unfortunately, where I grew up, being in advanced or honors classes meant that most of my classmates were white. Not unfortunately because I don't like white people, but unfortunately because the others who looked like me were behind, perpetuating the stereotype. I received straight A's all throughout elementary school. Even then, I knew I needed to work hard to prove myself. I still feel that it is necessary for me to prove myself as worthy of being a CMU student. In high school, I had a white acquaintance who really wanted to be accepted into CMU—it was his first choice and all he ever talked about. When he found out that he didn't get accepted and that I did, he made it a point to make sure I knew that CMU is an affirmative action school. He told everyone that affirmative action was the reason I got into CMU and he didn't, even though I had a perfect GPA and was second in my class. Yes, I still have a need to prove myself.

In the eighth grade, I received the NAACP Achievement Award for having the highest GPA out of any of the African-American students in my middle school. At the time, I wasn't aware of what the NAACP was, and I smiled so big when I got the award. I'm the best, I thought. I can't explain how I felt when I realized the award meant that I was only the best black student. It shouldn't have upset me so much, but I didn't understand why it had to be a big deal that I was a hard-working and high-achieving black student. Why couldn't I just be a hard working and high achieving student? I didn't want to be recognized for being black. So I worked even harder, and at the promotion ceremony I was recognized for being the highest achieving girl in my class. That made me much happier than the NAACP award did, but now I realize that is

because I didn't fully appreciate the NAACP then—what it was and what a great role it played in the reality that I went to an integrated school.

My mom grew up in Tacoma, Washington, a predominantly white area. She was the one black girl in her group of friends and didn't fit in with the other black girls. They didn't like her because she liked white people. They taunted her and called her white. It's funny how some things don't change. When I was in high school, I was called the Oreo—black on the outside, white on the inside. All of my friends were white because I was in classes with all white students. It wasn't that I was actively searching for white friends and refusing to associate with my fellow black students, but some people liked to look at it that way. It's sad, looking back and remembering how segregated the lunch room was. It isn't okay that people are choosing segregation when the Civil Rights activists of the past fought for integration and our right to be treated fairly. I just don't get it. So much has been sacrificed so that African-Americans can have basic freedoms, and so many people refuse to take advantage of it.

People tell me that I “don't act black” all the time. I think this is silly and offensive—they're basically saying that because I speak correct English and get good grades I am not truly African-American. I am black, and I act black because I am black. Since when is success white?

My dad went to CMU for graduate school. He worked just as hard as all the other students and he excelled. Even so, he was called the “N” word by a drunk, white girl while walking home to his apartment one night. My dad said he laughed it off because she was acting much more like the “N” word than he ever had in his life. There are not any behaviors that are specific to one race and one race only.

Once, my sisters and I went into an accessories store in our mall in Waldorf, Maryland, and we were watched like criminals by one of the employees. I was so humiliated and angry. Does the color of my skin make it okay for people to single me out? I wanted to yell at her, to tell her that I was my class's salutatorian and prom queen, that my parents both have master's degrees, that both of my grandmothers went to college, that my oldest sister graduated in the top of her class, that my youngest sister scored very high on her standardized test and received an award, and so many other similar things. But instead, we just walked out of the store. Until that day, I didn't believe that people really did those kinds of things. When they dealt with it on the sitcom *Smart Guy*, I figured they just wanted to make good TV. We aren't done changing the world. Racism still exists. We have to remember that the Civil Rights Movement was not even a lifetime ago, and that we need to continue the efforts of those that came before us in our

own lifetime. That's the only way change can continue—the only way progress can continue.

Is it not anger that drove the black leaders of the past to make change happen? Anger at being watched, singled out, and treated as an inferior. If you read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, you will see the anger dripping off of every page, turning into a pool of hate. I do not agree with many of Malcolm X's beliefs—for example, he believed that true integration could never be achieved—but I do understand how anger led him to this conclusion. My anger is not this passionate, but it does drive me to hate the stereotypes and to strongly dislike the people who keep them alive. My anger motivates me to prove people wrong whenever I can.

“To me, the black black woman is our essential mother,
the blacker she is the more us she is and to see the hatred that
is turned on her is enough to make me despair, almost entirely,
of our future as a people.”

—Alice Walker

The “Black is Beautiful” movement has recently been revived because people are beginning to realize more work needs to be done. The movie *Good Hair* was the beginning of it. Chris Rock created the documentary because his young daughter came to him crying and asked, “Daddy, why don't I have good hair?” The documentary explores the reasons why black women go through so much to make their hair as white-looking as possible. On *The Tyra Show*, a woman described it as, “achieving the white-girl flow.” Reverend Al Sharpton was one of the people interviewed in *Good Hair*, and I remember laughing when he said something along the lines of “black women and girls are wearing the sign of oppression on their heads.” This was mostly funny because of how dramatic it sounded, but also because Al Sharpton has a full head of permed, styled hair.

I never believed I was pretty growing up. I was so jealous of people who were mixed (one black parent and one white parent) and slightly resented my parents for both being black. Light skinned black girls are generally considered to be more beautiful than darker skinned black girls. Until very recently, I had never seen any black person on a commercial who had skin as dark as mine. It is always the pretty, caramel-colored woman with the lovely, curly hair. It is kind of hard to think you're beautiful when you watch TV, or flip through a catalogue and don't see anyone who looks like you. And I hated my hair. Honestly, I still do. It's so much work. I have to get it permed once every six weeks, and if it gets wet it's ruined. Recently, *Sesame Street*

introduced an African-American girl puppet who sings a song called “I Love My Hair.” Even *Sesame Street* realized that African-American girls need help believing that they are beautiful and accepting themselves the way they are.

I’ve learned to love my skin color over the years. It’s the color of milk chocolate, and I love milk chocolate. Also, I never have to tan—my skin has color year-round, so I do not have urges to risk skin cancer in a tanning booth. I am also very thankful that my face doesn’t turn red when I am embarrassed or flustered because my face would be red all the time. Plus, “black don’t crack,” meaning I don’t have to worry about aging noticeably or harshly (my parents are both around 50 and neither one has yet to see a wrinkle).

“It isn’t a matter of black is beautiful as much as it is white
is not all that’s beautiful.”

-Bill Cosby

When I was ten, I received the Addy American Girl Doll for Christmas. Addy was the escaped slave girl who overcame oppression and received an education. My aunt came to visit soon after, and I proudly showed her my doll and the catalogue with the other American Girl dolls in it. My aunt flipped through the catalogue, and then asked me why Addy was the only black American Girl doll. I said, very matter-of-factly, that it was because black people only had one period of historical significance in American history—I was ten, so not in those exact words of course. My aunt got really upset about that, and told me that I was wrong, that black people were important throughout American history. I didn’t mean it the way she took it, but still I had gotten myself in trouble. The next week I got a huge box of non-fiction books about famous African-Americans, all of which I refused to read. I thought non-fiction was boring, and at that time I was uneasy about discussing and recognizing my blackness. My aunt also sent me an expensive book about black models. When she realized I wasn’t taking advantage of these resources, she organized a visit to the Black Wax Museum in Baltimore. I went reluctantly, but ended up enjoying it initially. The wax figures of MLK and Langston Hughes and others were very well done and I admired them for a while. When we had exhausted the first floor, we went down to the basement, not knowing which exhibit was on display. It was a lynching exhibit. I will never forget the wax figure of the burning pregnant women being beaten, the baby falling out of her slit stomach. I immediately began to feel sick and stumbled around looking for my dad. Seeing my face, he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me up the stairs and out of the museum.

I will never forget that—it’s one of my most vivid memories.

That's the day I learned what lynching was. I remember once watching a special on TV about the KKK and listening to the narrator talk about how the KKK had recently hanged a young, black boy from a tree because they were mad that a black man got away with killing a white police officer in self defense. I remember being so disgusted and wanting to cry but not being able to. I didn't and I still don't understand why they hated us so much. Okay, our skin is darker, so what? Our brains work the same way, our bodies work the same way, our hearts beat and we breathe in the same way. We are human too. I grew up in an area known for hate crimes against blacks. People always said that there was an active KKK chapter in our area. I didn't understand how something that was supposed to be buried with the rubbish of the past was making its way into my present.

Twenty-five years ago, my parents met at Harvard during a summer fellowship program. Boston was still a very racist city then. They told me that people would yell horrible, racist things at them from their cars and treat them as if they were nothing. I'm so glad that I can't identify with this. I've been so blessed, and I try to never take it for granted. If I lived fifty years ago, my best friends wouldn't have been allowed to speak to me. I would have had to drink from a water fountain labeled "Coloreds" and sit in the back of the bus. Last year, my sister texted me explaining that her roommate was saying how she thinks Black History Month is stupid because there is no White History Month. I think that argument shows her ignorance. I actually used to think this too, but I was a kid. I thought it was unfair that black people had a month but white people didn't. As I got older, I recognized that every month is white history month, and that the reason there are these specialized months is so that there is a time when minority groups can remember the deeds of those that came before them.

"History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be lived again."

—Maya Angelou

I really hope people realize how quickly progress was made in the last fifty years, and how much more progress still needs to be made. Yes, we now have our first black president ever in office, and yes, the first African-American Disney princess came out recently. But even more than this can change. Segregation can be completely wiped out. Black children can be taught that they are beautiful and valuable at an early age. We can stop perpetuating the stereotypes—stop telling black children that if they do not act a certain way they are not black. Times are changing, so mindsets need to change too.

Second Place Prose: College

Dusty Memories

by Lauren Hirata

A dry desert wind whipped at the low-lying brush at our feet. There wasn't shade for miles and sweat was starting to bead on my nose. In the distance, the Sierra Nevadas taunted us with their snow preserved by high altitude.

We were only two-thirds through our journey to June Mountain—230 miles away from our home in Los Angeles—for our annual fishing trip. Usually, my father drives the 345-mile journey to June Mountain in one straight shot—other than two allotted bathroom breaks—but this time he wanted to make an extra stop at Manzanar National Historic Site. Every other time we've driven past, a simple, "There's Manzanar. That's where Grandma was" sufficed.

Manzanar War Relocation Center was one of ten camps where Japanese Americans were interned during World War II. My grandmother was interned at Manzanar for two years before she asked for permission to leave and move to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she stayed until the end of the war.

This particular trip to June Mountain was different from the start. My grandmother was riding with us—she usually drove up separately—and my father decided that this new passenger would be a good segue into a field trip—especially since it's 2002, 60 years since my grandmother was at Manzanar.

Up until this point, my grandmother rarely talked about her experience, and no one in the family wanted to pry. My grandmother hadn't been back since she left in 1944. Since then, the Manzanar National Historic Site was established to preserve the stories of World War II internees, "and to serve as a reminder to this and future generations of the fragility of American civil liberties."¹

"We lived somewhere around here," says my grandmother, who fidgets with her beaded bracelet and shuffles ahead of the rest of the family. Everybody surveys the desolate landscape around us: small signposts mark distances of 50 yards down the dusty clearing, depicting where wooden barracks would have been. We hurry after my grandmother before the dust can swallow her petite frame.

1 National Park Service U.S. Department of the Interior, "Manzanar National Historic Site History and Culture," 18 Sept 2006, 15 Nov 2011 <<http://www.nps.gov/manz/historyculture/index.htm>>

President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 in 1942 called for the relocation of over 110,000 Japanese Americans that lived along the Pacific Coast, and at the time, my grandmother Tomoe (Carole) Kuse was 17 years old. She had just recently finished high school and was living and working as a housekeeper and nanny in Sacramento, California, trying to save enough money to put herself through beauty school.

However, with the internment authorization, she was given a ten-day warning and had to return to the rest of her family, who lived in a small town outside the city called Elk Grove. My grandmother, her parents, and her four siblings were not given the full ten days to prepare, and instead were evacuated to Manzanar War Relocation Camp within three days.

“We were told to pack up our stuff and get ready to go,” my grandmother says.² “So in three days, my mother—you know, Bachan—packed up everything and everyone had a suitcase full of our clothes and whatever else we mainly needed. We boarded the train and headed to Manzanar.”

My grandmother sits quietly on a footstool in her kitchen, surrounded by the mix of awkward school portraits of unfortunate haircuts and braces, homemade birthday cards, and family pictures that litter the typical American grandparent’s house.

Over 10,000 people made similar trips to Manzanar and, like my grandmother’s family, had to sell off their entire lives—furniture, houses, and businesses—as well as leave their friends behind. Some families were split up, including my grandmother’s. Her recently married sister and husband were not sent to Manzanar and didn’t see the rest of the family until after World War II was over. Despite these unfortunate circumstances and having to put her college aspirations on hold, my grandmother explains that it wasn’t she who suffered.

“It was the Issei who lost everything when we were put in camp,” she says. “I had just finished school, so it didn’t matter too much for me. But it was the older people who really suffered. They lost everything twice: once to emigrate from Japan to America, and again when the war started.”

Growing up, my father never asked about my grandmother’s experiences at Manzanar. It was always a touchy subject that was just ignored. But when asked now, my grandmother speaks more openly about her experiences at Manzanar. My father thinks it’s because her parents—the Issei generation that suffered the most—are long gone. “In a sense, she’s now able to bury the pain away,” he says.³

2 Carole Hirata, Personal Interview, 26 Oct 2011

3 David Hirata, Personal Interview, 25 Oct 2011

“She’s less haunted by her parents’ struggles and hardships now.” She has distanced herself from the past with decades of silence, and can now joke about her experience.

“When we got to camp, I had never seen so many Japanese [people],” she laughs. “I was really surprised—I guess I never realized how many of us were in America. But the thing was, we were all there for the same reason and that brought us all together.”

As a Yonsei, the Japanese term for the Issei’s great-grandchildren, I often feel similar to how my grandmother felt as a teenager—that I am often surprised to meet another Japanese-American. Unlike my grandmother though, I feel distanced from the hardships that my relatives had to endure during and after World War II and racial discrimination—at least at this level—is a thing of the past. My friends are colorblind to my ethnicity, as am I sometimes. I consider myself more American than Japanese and my friends are often taken aback with my skilled use of chopsticks. The one thing that reminds me of my Japanese background is my grandmother and her stories.

“That’s not to say that we didn’t have problems [in camp] though. I remember there were the people called ‘Kibei,’ people that were born here but their folks sent them to Japan to study, and then they came back and were put in camp. They were about my age and they started a riot. I wanted to go down there to see what was going on, but my father wouldn’t let me—he said it was too dangerous.”

Though my grandmother was never interested in learning the details to this event, it turns that this riot was the most serious incident at Manzanar. It occurred at the beginning of December in 1942 and is known as the Manzanar Riot. It raised tensions between prisoners and military guards, and two people were killed.

My grandmother, with her silvery hair in perfect, short pin curls, sits in silence, lost in thought for a brief moment. I watch her think and my eyes wander to the assortment of crayon-colored papers that are taped to the pantry, and although her kitchen looks like a typical grandmother’s, I start to see the Japanese culture seeping into the mix: a ceramic Maneki Neko, or lucky cat, sits perched on a shelf between other knick-knacks, origami koi fish hang from the ceiling, and a painting with indecipherable Japanese characters hangs above the sink.

My whole life, I have taken these Japanese symbols for granted and they have blended in with the rest of my environment. Similar to how my family would drive past Manzanar without a second thought, I often found myself celebrating New Year’s with Japanese traditions, like eating kuromame—black soybeans—and ozoni—rice cake soup—

for good luck, without asking the story behind each tradition.

As we stood in front of a post that says “Block 31,” I looked around for the block that this sign represented but there’s nothing. The only reminders that this empty clearing used to house over 10,000 people are piles of large white rocks that mark where the doors of the barracks would have been.

“Mom, you lived here?” my father asked, joining me in a search for anything other than brush and dirt. Although he has toured Manzanar once before, he has never been back with his mother. My grandmother nods her head, lost in thought. “Two long years,” she answers.

Third Place Prose: College

Building a Brave New World

by Coleman Lamb

On a cold gray morning last March, I visited Mt. Ararat Baptist Church with a good friend and former teacher who had returned to Pittsburgh for the weekend. Brother Ernest was the first black person I ever knew on any real, personal level. He introduced me to philosophy and theology, to Chekhov and Baldwin, to jazz and NPR; he beat the phrase *le mot juste* so soundly into my head that I now can't help but pursue the right word, the just word—quotes are not quotes, they are quotations, gentlemen; slaves are not slaves, they are enslaved persons. He is a LaSallian Christian Brother, as were many of the teachers at my high school, but only he would attend a three-hour Baptist service that didn't satisfy the forty-five minute Roman Catholic obligation.

“Have you recovered?” he asked, as we arrived at Mt. Ararat a full hour early, to ensure close parking and good seats.

“From what?”

“From the shock, my brother. I know it pains you to leave the precious bubble of your vanilla-white suburb. Have you recovered?”

I laughed and said I was more worried about the fact that I hadn't been to church in a while—since Christmas, and before that, an even longer while.

He gasped and shook his head, scolding me with a clicking tongue. “Well, I can assure you, this is not ‘church’ the way you do it in your suburb. This is worship, brother. Come along, and let us hope you are not smited upon the threshold.”

As we entered the church and took our seats, I was surprised to find that we weren't the first to arrive—an hour early, and already people were trickling in by the dozens, greeting each other with laughter and hugs and handshakes. Brother Ernest sat back in the pew and crossed his legs.

“So tell me, brother. How goeth your faith journey?”

When I could think of nothing better to say, I finally sighed and told the truth. “It stalleth, Brother.”

I quickly changed the subject by telling him I was going down to Mardi Gras the following week, which set him off for the next half hour in praise of his hometown.

By the time the pews filled up around us, I had received hugs from two women I didn’t know, plus handshakes and warm welcomes from a dozen other folks. When the service began, the pastor invited any newcomers to stand up and introduce themselves, and, when I hesitated, Brother Ernest forced my hand—he physically raised my arm into the air until I had no choice. There were hundreds of people inside the church, all of them staring at me as I self-consciously stood and gave my name, and then even more people came over to hug and shake hands and welcome me to the celebration. That’s what they called it: the celebration. The last time I went to mass in my “vanilla-white suburb,” I slipped in late through the back corner door, blessed myself without actually dipping my fingers deep enough to touch the holy water, took exactly two steps and sat down in the very last folding chair along the side wall. I spoke to no one, made eye contact with no one except an alcoholic in dark sunglasses, mumbled inaudible prayers when everyone else did, and finally ducked out before Communion. It seemed to satisfy my obligation, but, as I recall, it did not feel like much of a celebration.

As I sat back down beside Brother Ernest I tried to imagine what would happen if a twenty-one year old black man ever came to my church. I think many in the all-white congregation would act as if there was nothing unusual about his presence. Perhaps they would force their eyes to sweep past him in the pew, pretending not to notice his blackness. Isn’t this what we consider “P.C.?” Aren’t we told “not to see color?” But, of course, we do see color—we all do; we know that we do, and that we always will. So, one might say that what we consider P.C. is merely to pretend that we do not see color—to act as if. And thus we maintain the appearance of progress and reconciliation, while we avoid the real problem. The real problem is not color itself, but how we perceive it, what we associate with it: the bankrupt notions of inferiority and otherness, which still survive somewhere in the bowels of our consciousness, hidden miles below the P.C. surface. We try to act as if we no longer see color, and thus hide from ourselves and from each other the fact that we still see race. We see a white man and immediately recognize him as “one of us”—not because he is white, but because he is a human being—and then maybe we see him as an Irishman or an Italian or a Pole. But we see a black man and still, on the level of immediate, unconscious reaction, may first

recognize him as black—as “the other”; as “one of them,” not “one of us”—and then we must quickly correct ourselves, remember that he is first and foremost a human being; that, by some fundamental criteria ages older than color, culture, or creed, he is “one of us” no more or less so than any white man. Whether or not one acknowledges this first-glance, split-second misperception of reality determines whether one accepts or denies the shame that comes with it.

We only deceive ourselves by suggesting that we do not see color, or that we can somehow learn not to see color by acting as if. Suppose that all the white suburban churchgoers do, in fact, pretend not to notice that there is one lone young black man among them. By consciously acting as if they do not see his color, they fail to see him as he is—they probably fail to see him at all. For fear of outing themselves as racists, they might willfully look past him as if he were invisible, as if he did not exist. But imagine what he thinks. P.C. doesn't fool anyone; we never succeed when we act as if—we maintain plausible deniability. He knows he is the only black person in the church, and he knows everyone else knows it, just as everyone knew I was the only white person in Mt. Ararat. But at Mt. Ararat they didn't try to hide it, because if you see things as they truly are—if you plainly perceive color as color, and human beings as human beings—then you have nothing to hide. I cannot say whether or not this young black man would prefer to be invited to stand up and introduce himself, or to have white strangers walk right up and hug him—I am reluctant to hug my own mother, let alone a few black women I have never met. But Brother Ernest got me to stand up and say my name, and those women hugged me whether I liked it or not, and all the hundreds of people in that church actually made me feel welcome every single moment I was with them—almost as if they really meant it, and were not simply maintaining the obligatory appearance of inclusion. Somehow, it might not have felt so genuine if they had all stared straight ahead and pretended not to notice that I was the one lone, awkward, inhibited white guy in a church full of singing, dancing black folks.

A few years ago I had the opportunity to hear the theologian James Cone speak on Martin Luther King Day. He mentioned that he had heard a television commentator talking about how proud Dr. King would be if he were alive to see how far we have come. Mr. Cone then paused and faced the audience with a look I have never forgotten—a look that said he need not even comment on the absurdity of such a suggestion. That's what stuck with me when I left that room, what hounded me as I lay in bed that night. Not the fact

that American society remains grossly unjust—but the fact that it was a fact; the fact that it was so obvious; the fact that, if I didn't see it as plainly as James Cone did, I must be trapped in a thick web of denial, feed for the spider of self-deceit.

Someone recently told me that self-deceit should have been included as the eighth deadly sin. The more I thought about it, the more certain I became that self-deceit could constitute a class all its own, a class from which flows not just the seven deadly sins, but sin itself. Because it is self-deceit which allows the ego to construct its own vision of reality and truth, in order to justify the departure from what the unconscious knows to be real and true. It is self-deceit which has paved the roads of racial injustice in America, allowing whites to pretend that blacks are something less, something worse—or even something different—to justify the spirit of privilege and entitlement white Americans have created for themselves by subjugating one portion of the population. And it is self-deceit—a willful denial of objective reality—which allows us to pretend that this is no longer the case.

To see why Dr. King would not be satisfied with the state of American society, one needs only think of his dream. Think of what might be the most recognizable image in his dream: little black children and little white children joining hands as brothers and sisters. Is this reality as we know it today? For some, perhaps, in some neighborhoods and some schools. But those are the exception, not the rule. The rule--the reality--is that we remain starkly segregated--not lawfully, but geographically, interpersonally, and spiritually. I did not really know a black person until I met Brother Ernest, the lone black teacher at a school with a ninety-percent white student body. Like many children, I was taught that we are all equals, that black people are human beings whom I should love and respect just as I would any other. But we must consider how children actually learn, and how abstract such lessons seem to a child who has never had more than a passing conversation with a black person. A child learns more from what he himself sees than from what he is told. A child who is taught to love and respect black people as equals does not fail to notice when his mother frantically locks the car doors while driving through a black neighborhood, nor the tension that seems to grip her when the loud voices of young black men rip through the quiet of some public space without regard for her standards of propriety—the same standards which her own child likely finds over-bearing, unnatural, wildly inconsistent and circumstantial.

People often ask why the child must pay for the sins of his parents—“My great-grandfather was an immigrant, not a slave-owner. So how am I to blame for racial injustice in America?” But the truth,

if we care to see it, is that we are guilty of our own crimes. I never whipped a man on a Southern plantation, but I have whipped many men in the fields of my own mind. I whip a man every time the quick trigger of my unconscious reactions equates blackness with otherness. I whip a man when I choose to take the long way home to avoid driving through the black neighborhood. I whip a man when I'm surprised to see black hands steering the wheel of a car with Ivy League bumper stickers. It may have been history that drove this spike of fear and self-deceit so deep into my mind, but it is I who lets it live there still.

Removing that spike is the individual's responsibility—if for no one's sake but his own. When I whip those men in my mind, really I whip myself: I chain myself to a misperception of humanity. In America, an argument for empathy might get you spare change, but an argument for self-interest brings in the big bucks. So here it is: we need this, white America. Imagining that racial progress is some favor we're doing for black people only deepens the disease of white supremacy; it allows us to go only halfway, to meet the P.C. standard while still protecting the status quo of our illusory white world. The wrong that must be corrected is not merely the marginalization of black folks, but the self-deceit used to justify the marginalization of anyone. If you see a black person as “the other,” then you see him as something other than who he is: a human being. You see him through the eyes of an ignorant intellect and an impoverished spirit. If, intellectually, you know that a black person is a human being, your equal, your human brother just the same as any white person—if you know this, and yet even for a fraction of a second you see him as anything else, then you do not see what you know to be real and true.

We, as individuals and as a group, must now strive for a future in which we see no “us and them,” but only “us.” That is reality—the reality that existed before the borders were drawn, before continents and nations, before religion and ideology, before any notion of a color line. That is reality—the only question is when we will choose to accept it. We cannot get rid of all worldly divisions and clear the way for the unrestricted brotherhood of man, but we can do precisely that within the lines of our own country. We can and we must. The future of mankind starts with the marriage of white and black America. It is one thing to coexist, but it is another and far greater thing to join together as one—one body comprised of two distinct, autonomous entities. That cannot happen while whites cling to the patriarchal fiction that suggests we are accepting “them” into “our” world. The white world exists only in our minds. And we must now, collectively and as individuals, destroy it, for it only obstructs our view of truth and beauty. We must destroy the white world so that we can build

right here, right now in America a new world, a better world, which is as black as it is white. We need it that way, so we better start to want it. Because that is humanity: black and white and every shade in between. That is reality and that is truth and that is beauty. That is the only world in which we can know and love each other for who we truly are: the world in which we see color in all its beauty, but see no “other.” Where once we saw an “other,” we will only see a brother. Where once we saw “us and them,” we will only see “us.”

This is our task. This is our duty to ourselves, to each other, to our country, and to all of humanity. It starts in the heart and mind of each individual—that is where it must start, if we want it to be real. I want it to be real. I don’t want to have to tell myself how I should think and feel and act around black people. I want to be like the folks at Mt. Ararat. I want to see the brave new world Miranda sees in *The Tempest*; I want to recognize humanity in the face of any stranger, and feel the bond we should have felt all along: “O wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is!”

First Place Poetry: High School

Squint

by Claire Matway

And it's Uncle Steve's house with the rough blue couches and bright lamps
and deer heads on the walls and sandwich materials
piled on the long low table in the kitchen;
it's three dogs and a view of wintry hills and red-lit radio towers;
Christmas Eve means
five cousins sprawled on the wooden floor amidst
crumpled wrapping paper and gift cards for T.J. Maxx,
a semicircle of aunts, uncles, grandparents
leaning in from folding chairs, cycling
by age through piles of gifts. Christmas Eve means
my uncle's best friend is standing by the tree, beer in hand,
gray stubble and plaid shirt and manly as ever
(and you will not know it by watching,
but he and my uncle are best friends in the sense that
they will never leave each other their whole lives,
that they are each other's
arms). They will not live together
because this is rural Pennsylvania and
they would just be fags—

my uncle's lover stands by the Christmas tree,
squinty-eyed and chuckling and then
he is next-oldest in the age cycle of
gift-unwrapping (I am picking at the tag of
a magenta velour hoodie I will never wear)
and Mama hands him a calendar for the new year,
pictures of skylines planted in its gloss and

he is surprised and brandishing his beer and laughing and
“Twenty years I’ve been coming to Christmas! This
is the first damn present I ever got!” and his squinty eyes
could almost be watery, but the room is too even or soft
with the rumble of my family talking and
“First present I get in twenty freakin’ years!” and
Christmas Eve means
my grandmother’s on the couch laughing,
picking at a candy wrapper; I am
blinking at the wrong none of us ever saw and at
the plastic-wrapped square of cardboard and skylines
that forms a different story, tucked gently
under a plaid-clad arm. Christmas Eve means
the little pile of presents that forms by his chair the following year
and the sense of “Yeah, you dumb or something? Those are yours!”

Second Place Poetry (Tie): High School

Blasian

by Taylor Johnson

When I was in
4th grade, I
liked to be alone.
Hugging my knees
tight, pretending.
The boys,
wrestling on the brick,
the girls, in their corners
giggling and blushing
behind tight hands.
Me, the observer.
Legs dangling from the
stone.
I noticed that, all
the black girls
were huddled together.
Then I look to the other side
of the playground.
All the white girls were
also together, playing with
sidewalk chalk.
This was the first time
I became aware of
the difference between
little black
girls &
little white
girls.

They taught us in school,
that Martin Luther King
saved us. That he
 stopped
segregation. As much as I want to believe
that, I couldn't.

In art class, later that
day,
we were learning our
warm
and
cool colors.
A new girl came in our class,
the principal by her side,
and her head held high.
Her skin was brown like
a toasted almond.

They put her right
next to me.
She had no supplies,
she just listened that period.

As the bell was ringing,
I was putting my things into my Bratz
backpack,
she came over to me and asked,
"Are you Chinese or something?"
I thought Chinese people didn't go here."
My little heart pounded
in my chest.
I shook my head so
hard at her.
Every bone in me
wanted to not be Chinese.
I felt myself on the verge of
tears, washing out of my

Chinese eyes.
I tried opening them bigger,
as big as they could go
just to prove to her.
I would not be Chinese.

I was always told I had
lighter skin than most people.
I asked my friend,
if I looked Chinese, and she told me
“You aren’t Chinese? I thought you
were Blasian!”

What is Blasian?
Was that a real race?
I didn’t want to be Blasian.
I wanted to be black,
like all the other
little black
girls.

Second Place Poetry (Tie): High School

Skin

by Lynell Tomlin

Alexis said,
“I’m light skinned.
I’m pretty because I’m light skinned.
You’re dark skinned.
You’re ugly because you dark skinned.”
How about we run away.
How about we not worry about our skin.
How about we just are us.
How about we do our work and worry about pretty later.
How about we pay attention to the pros and not the cons.
How about we are ourselves.

Third Place Poetry: High School

Back to Black

by Teireik Williams

I work at a movie theater. I see hundreds
of people a day, from countries all over the world.
Each day these people come and pay hard earned American
money to view a movie of their choice.
My manager, George, calls me over and tells me to take my break.
I leave.
He is a white
man and he refers to me as
“Hey you,”
but I don’t think too much into it
because all I know is that I am hungry.
I rush out of the theater and find
a small pizza shop on the South Side.
I walk
in freezing and grab a menu.
The man working cashier quickly
takes the menu from my hand and hands me a different menu.
It is visibly and physically lighter than the original menu,
it has dark grease stains and finger prints
from perhaps the other people he has snatched menus off of.
I don’t think too much into this
because all I know, is that I am hungry.
I place my order for sit-down and I take a seat in the bright, red, plastic booth.
Waiting for my food, time passes quickly and now, I am late.
Still, I wait.
45 minutes passes and out comes the cashier laughing.
He is holding my order in his hand but it is wrapped in paper and in a plastic
bag.
For take-out.

He brings it to my table and sternly and casually says,
I put your food in bags, just in case, you want to leave.
I look around and see the other booths filled with people eating
on trays and paper plates.
I don't think too much into this
because all I know is that I am no longer hungry.

Honorable Mention, Poetry: High School

Coloring Paper

by Shanquae Parker

I thought I could slither my slender hands
across the black and white keys
and they would hear my pain,
trying to clear a path for hope with vibrations.
But no, their deaf ear didn't listen to me.
I prayed the night before, for a miracle,
for them to hear again.
But they didn't want to hear.
Because my hands weren't to their liking?
They were black,
my hands were black.
So when I sat at the piano and brushed my hand
against the black and white keys they didn't hear
me, and their blind eyes didn't want to see me.
So, I will stain my brittle black words
onto this white frigid sheet of paper,
and maybe they will feel me.
They will feel how cold and weak my heart is
when I write with my black hands.
And just maybe, one day when I get the courage,
they can see how I look when I read these words
that I colored on this here paper.

Honorable Mention, Poetry: High School

My Brothers

by Madeline Smith

The big coffee-colored hands
of my brother ruffled my
dark brown hair, pulled back
into a knot of a ponytail, the
best a girl of six could do. I
smiled up at them, jumping as the
chain net rattled when the ball
smacked the faded backboard.

My blue basketball shorts
matched Carl's and swished
around my legs as I dodged Flay
dribbling a basketball out of
his reach. They let me win.
I patted their warm backs,
not noticing how my hand
seemed to appear whiter than
a seashell tossed about rough
waves, sanded down and drained
of color, against their
cocoa skin.

Gilbert grinned, his teeth
white as snow against his
mocha skin. I leaned
against the stone wall with
blue paint peeling, and I
screamed his name. Sweat
dripped from his face,
soaking his shirt and he was
gasping for breath. My brothers
played hard.

We ate greens and
fried chicken; they let
the grease stain my white
T-shirt that hung down to
my knees. We laughed and
talked loud, smashed next
to each other on an old sagging
couch like mashed potatoes,
as the football game played
like thunder into the night. Hot
Cheetos were dipped in
ranch along with pizza as
fries found hot sauce,
again and again.

Duct tape held
our sneakers together
that were piled at the
door and tripped on every
time someone entered.
No one moved them,
it wasn't something to
get rid of, but something to
add to.

As my Dad added to the
pile of shoes, someone
laughed, "Pastor Matt,
you the blackest white
man." He laughed and
slapped skin with
them all. It was said in love,
that I knew. But what
did it mean?

I am white.
My brothers are black.

Honorable Mention, Poetry: High School

Not My Brother

by Antwaunai Gurley

Growing up in the hood, you wanna be a dope boy.
Carrying around nothing but negativity.
Not a care in the world; school ain't for you.
You got a job—it the streets.
Won't ever join the basketball team or participate in swim meets.
3 baby mamas.
1 on the way.
Got like 2 sidelines, but call both of them 'bae' .
Not my brother.
He won't be another
Black man from the hood.
On the news, found shot or dead.
Cuz' upon those shoulders, you got a good head.
You're gonna finish school.
Better get it straight!
Play some sports.
Boy, you're gonna be great!
Yeah, you grew up in the hood, but the hood ain't you.
Your life ain't based around Red and Blue.
Bump the stereotypes. You're going to college.
Best believe you're gonna gain that knowledge!
Little black boy.
Nothing to do with the streets.
You're gonna prove yourself worthy,
Just wait and see!

Honorable Mention, Poetry: High School

Captain

by Jilliam Root

Unnoticed by the captain of the basketball team,
As he talks to the other girls
With long blonde hair,
Pale skin and beautiful eyes.
Then there's me.
What is so different about us?
The attitude of a queen
The sass in my looks
Unfortunately
Popularity is not in my curriculum.
Is it because I'm not of the same skin color,
Because I have
Tan skin and curly hair?
Real color,
Not fake, but real.
In my genes runs a string
Of different cultures
Intertwining with one another
Labeling me "different."
I'm not white,
A part of me begs for it,
For him to treat me the same.
But until my true beauty is noticed,
The one with color,
I'll just have to move on.

First Place Prose (Tie): High School

Fighting a Forbidden Battle: How I Stopped Covering up for a Hidden Wrong

by Jesse Lieberfeld

I once belonged to a wonderful religion. I belonged to a religion that allows those of us who believe in it to feel that we are the greatest people in the world—and feel sorry for ourselves at the same time. Once, I thought that I truly belonged in this world of security, self-pity, self-proclaimed intelligence, and perfect moral aesthetic. I thought myself to be somewhat privileged early on. It was soon revealed to me, however, that my fellow believers and I were not part of anything so flattering.

Although I was fortunate enough to have parents who did not try to force me into any one set of beliefs, being Jewish was in no way possible to escape growing up. It was constantly reinforced at every holiday, every service, and every encounter with the rest of my relatives. I was forever reminded how intelligent my family was, how important it was to remember where we had come from, and to be proud of all the suffering our people had overcome in order to finally achieve their dream in the perfect society of Israel.

This last mandatory belief was one which I never fully understood, but I always kept the doubts I had about Israel's spotless reputation to the back of my mind. "Our people" were fighting a war, one I did not fully comprehend, but I naturally assumed that it must be justified. We would never be so amoral as to fight an unjust war. Yet as I came to learn more about our so-called "conflict" with the Palestinians, I grew more concerned. I routinely heard about unexplained mass killings, attacks on medical bases, and other alarmingly violent actions for which I could see no possible reason. "Genocide" almost seemed the more appropriate term, yet no one I knew would have ever dreamed of portraying the war in that manner; they always described the situation in shockingly neutral terms. Whenever I brought up the subject, I was always given the answer that

there were faults on both sides, that no one was really to blame, or simply that it was a “difficult situation.” It was not until eighth grade that I fully understood what I was on the side of. One afternoon, after a fresh round of killings was announced on our bus ride home, I asked two of my friends who actively supported Israel what they thought. “We need to defend our race,” they told me. “It’s our right.”

“We need to defend our race.”

Where had I heard that before? Wasn’t it the same excuse our own country had used to justify its abuses of African-Americans sixty years ago? In that moment, I realized how similar the two struggles were—like the white radicals of that era, we controlled the lives of another people whom we abused daily, and no one could speak out against us. It was too politically incorrect to do so. We had suffered too much, endured too many hardships, and overcome too many losses to be criticized. I realized then that I was in no way part of a “conflict”—the term “Israeli/Palestinian Conflict” was no more accurate than calling the Civil Rights Movement the “Caucasian/African-American Conflict.” In both cases, the expression was a blatant euphemism: it gave the impression that this was a dispute among equals and that both held an equal share of the blame. However, in both, there was clearly an oppressor and an oppressed, and I felt horrified at the realization that I was by nature on the side of the oppressors. I was grouped with the racial supremacists. I was part of a group that killed while praising its own intelligence and reason. I was part of a delusion.

I thought of the leader of the other oppressed side of years ago, Martin Luther King. He too had been part of a struggle that had been hidden and glossed over for the convenience of those against whom he fought. What would his reaction have been? As it turned out, it was precisely the same as mine. As he wrote in his letter from Birmingham Jail, he believed the greatest enemy of his cause to be “Not the White Citizen’s Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who...lives by a mythical concept of time.... Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.” When I first read those words, I felt as if I were staring at myself in a mirror. All my life I had been conditioned to simply treat the so-called conflict with the same apathy which King had so forcefully condemned. I, too, held the role of an accepting moderate. I, too, “lived by a mythical concept of time,” shrouded in my own surreal world and the set of beliefs that had been assigned to me. I had never before felt so trapped.

I decided to make one last appeal to my religion. If it could not answer my misgivings, no one could. The next time I attended a service, there was an open question-and-answer session about any

point of our religion. I wanted to place my dilemma in as clear and simple terms as I knew how. I thought out my exact question over the course of the seventeen-minute cello solo that was routinely played during service. Previously, I had always accepted this solo as just another part of the program, yet now it seemed to capture the whole essence of our religion: intelligent and well-crafted on paper, yet completely oblivious to the outside world (the soloist did not have the faintest idea of how masterfully he was putting us all to sleep). When I was finally given the chance to ask a question, I asked, “I want to support Israel. But how can I when it lets its army commit so many killings?” I was met with a few angry glares from some of the older men, but the rabbi answered me. “It is a terrible thing, isn’t it?” he said. “But there’s nothing we can do. It’s just a fact of life.” I knew, of course, that the war was no simple matter and that we did not by any means commit murder for its own sake, but to portray our thousands of killings as a “fact of life” was simply too much for me to accept. I thanked him and walked out shortly afterward. I never went back. I thought about what I could do. If nothing else, I could at least try to free myself from the burden of being saddled with a belief I could not hold with a clear conscience. I could not live the rest of my life as one of the pathetic moderates whom King had rightfully portrayed as the worst part of the problem. I did not intend to go on being one of the Self-Chosen People, identifying myself as part of a group to which I did not belong.

It was different not being the ideal nice Jewish boy. The difference was subtle, yet by no means unaffectioning. Whenever it came to the attention of any of our more religious family friends that I did not share their beliefs, I was met with either a disapproving stare and a quick change of the subject or an alarmed cry of, “What? Doesn’t Israel matter to you?” Relatives talked down to me more afterward, but eventually I stopped noticing the way adults around me perceived me. It was worth it to no longer feel as though I were just another apathetic part of the machine.

I can obviously never know what it must have been like to be an African-American in the 1950s. I do feel, however, as though I know exactly what it must have been like to be white during that time, to live under an aura of moral invincibility, to hold unchallengeable beliefs, and to contrive illusions of superiority to avoid having to face simple everyday truths. That illusion was nice while it lasted, but I decided to pass it up. I have never been happier.

First Place Prose (Tie): High School

Anomalies: My Struggle for an Identity

by Erika Drain

Everyone desires to stand out. No matter the profession they wish to pursue, the effort they put into their reputation, or the reasons that motivate them to do so, succeeding is always the main goal. When I was young, I loved the idea of being someone unique. A girl who stands out against the crowd, and whose work and ideas can count for something in the future. I studied, I researched, I experienced the world as best as I could, and yet, there was a barrier. I never thought about my race as something that defined me. With every standardized test, I marked the clear bubble “Black/African-American” without a second thought. I actually thought of it as impractical; why in the world would they need to know that? It’s not like it changes my score, I thought. I had eventually achieved my lifelong goal of individualism, and realized it was much harder than I believed. It wasn’t until I had begun accomplishing something with my knowledge and skills that I realized how much that bubble on that page actually meant.

I’ve been labeled and categorized as a variety of titles throughout my lifetime. “Silly,” I could agree with; “weird,” I could live with; “black,” I was forced to accept. However, I don’t endure the projected hatred that was so prevalent during Dr. King’s time. I have friends of every different shade, and every origin. I’ve gone to two schools: one being a public school with the majority of the students being African-American, now currently a private school that has more diversity in its student body. The transition was odd, as I’ve never been a minority—as defined by the color of my skin at least. With my final goodbyes to my elementary school memories, I realized how out of place I’ve really been. As a straight-A student at the time, I was constantly criticized as “too smart.” Being described as a person who is “not black enough” shocked me even more. I can’t remember what scared me more: the idea that there was ever a thing as too smart

or the air of inferiority my friends had towards me. In my mind, I was just as “black” as the rest of them. Metaphorically speaking, I was the black sheep in my class. In my entire school. I was singled out among my many friends.

But to many, I was not black.

“What does this mean?” I thought to myself. What does black actually mean, and why doesn’t it seem to fit with my identity, according to so many people I identify with? Since when did my character determine who I was supposed to represent on the outside? Dr. Martin Luther King once said that he hoped to “look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” What would he say if the same people are, in fact, being judged by their character, but are being compared and discriminated against because it may not “fit” with the stereotypes attached to the color of their skin? Since when is intelligence a personality trait of Caucasians? When did the diverse genres of music I listen to—I’ve recently gained an obsession with Korean pop—make me an anomaly in the black community? All of these questions swirled around in my head, and I started to believe what people were actually saying about me: I’m just not black enough.

About two years later, I was a rising sophomore at Winchester Thurston. I pursued the same goal of developing my character, but I still questioned the definition of black. I shied away from most of the students, hoping that they would just make a label for me that I could live with. Despite this, my personality shone through, and I made friends, like any other high school student. However, there were very few African-American students, compared to my old school, who really accepted me. I was fine with this; I had friends, and that’s all that mattered. By then, I was a competitive rower for my school’s crew team, I was a major trumpet player in Winchester Thurston’s jazz band, and I had pretty decent grades. I was finally happy, and I thought I had found a place where I belonged. I didn’t think I was seen as “not black enough.”

During that Thanksgiving break, I was headed over to my other grandparents’ (my father’s parents’) house—it’s been a tradition in my family that we visit as many relatives as we can during winter holidays. I always thought it was a great idea. Everyone was included in the “Drain community.” As soon as I stepped in the door, I expected that everyone would be excited to hear about the new things I’ve been accomplishing at school, as my older brothers and I were the only people in our family to attend a private school. I guess I actually was unique, in my own special way. Among the questions, “What are the students like?” was in the top 10. I gave bromides as responses, and

they usually accepted them. At one point, my grandfather asked about my rowing career:

“What in the hell kind of a sport is crew for a person like you?”

“What are you trying to say? I love rowing,” I replied.

“Rowing? That’s not like you. You’re too big anyway, and when’s the last time you’ve seen a black girl in a boat? I guess you aren’t that black after all. I knew those white people would change you.”

And just like that, my hopes were dashed. Besides my self-esteem about my weight being crushed into the dirt, everything I believed about the “Drain community” became a lie at that point. From the words of my grandfather, I’m not black. How could I give up something I was so passionate about in order to be accepted in my own family? I recognized that no matter what I do, the color of my skin would scream black to a person of any other color, and to blacks, I am just a mistake. A failure to uphold the current black stereotypes that everyone knows about. An anomaly.

Two months ago, I watched the documentary *Black Is... Black Ain't* by Marlon Riggs, and it inspired me to truly think about who I am as an African-American—or, who I thought I was. According to Riggs, because one’s black identity was so often limited, distorted and made shameful by whites, asserting a new black identity became important to many African-Americans. His camera traverses the country, coming face to face with black people young and old, rich and poor, rural and urban, gay and straight, who are grappling with the paradox of several, often contested definitions of “blackness”—just like me. Additionally, generalizations were being imposed upon African-Americans not only by those outside the race but by black people themselves. I was surprised that I wasn’t the only one enduring this discrimination and relieved as well. Furthermore, every skin color has a set of beliefs portrayed by the media or just word-of-mouth to the public. How could I protest my lack of inclusion in the black community, when those of other races are undergoing the same struggle? Maybe anomalies aren’t the issue: labels based on appearance are. No one should feel discriminated against because their personality doesn’t fit these labels.

The war that Dr. Martin Luther King fought against discrimination is by no means over; the battle of white vs. black may have been won, but not the battle of an individual versus his/her corresponding stereotypes, which is a battle that I have been fighting for my entire life. A battle for many individuals whose complexion, class, speech, intellect, religion, gender or sexual orientation have made them feel like anomalies to the stereotypes they have been fighting

against. To this day, I realize that these labels aren't leaving anytime soon; this doesn't require that I, or anyone else, must live with them either. I am me, the hard-working woman that I've aspired to become, and no label can take that away.

Untitled

by Chelsea Humphries

Imagine waking up at 6:00 in the morning in order to get ready for your long day at school. Once taking 45 minutes to pick out your outfit, worrying that somebody will judge you or better yet beat you up because of what you have on, getting to your bus stop and waiting for the bus to come, constantly checking the time on your phone because the bus is running late. Then once the bus gets there 15 minutes late, you have to find a seat with only one other person because the rules were two to a seat. Arriving at your school you only see shell casings on the ground and a playground set rusting and falling apart piece by piece. Then you walk to your locker that you have to share with another person because the school doesn't have enough money to have a locker for every student. Getting to class you find there are at least 29 other people sitting in their seats talking loudly over the teacher and throwing things back and forth while the teacher tries to gain control over the whole class.

These are only some of the problems that kids in the Pittsburgh Public School system have to face due to the social injustices in the school systems. These are the problems that contribute to the cycle of the decline of our school systems. The system starts when these students are placed into classrooms with a minimum of 25 students with only one teacher and often no aide. This one teacher only has these kids for 50 minutes a day and gives them assignments expecting them to do the work but not really caring if they actually do it or not. This causes students to not do their work and not learn the necessary material, which is something that the teacher can't realize because they can't give the students individual attention due to the time, and also they probably have 100 other students they have to pay attention to. At times the teachers also don't care about these kids because they often look at their job as a high paying babysitting job. Due to lack of personal attention these students receive, they perform poorly on the standardized test which then causes the schools to lose their federal funding. This then leads to the schools not being able to buy the necessary class materials for the students, as well as maintain the school building, which then causes the city to close the school. Once the school is closed, students from the newly closed school and another open school are merged together. This often doesn't work

because the students don't have a choice to go to a school where they aren't comfortable, and now they really aren't able to focus because they have to worry about their safety around the new students. More times than not there are more fights due to the fact that these kids from different conflicting areas are put into one place with limited security. So once again we are at the beginning of the cycle, with too many students in a small, barely maintained building with limited resources and teachers.

Imagine having to go through this during your childhood, being judged on your academic history or lack thereof because of issues that you or your parents don't have control over. Due to the fact that the issue at hand is one that is often brushed under the rug and not talked about but now is the time to talk about it. A lot of kids fall victim to this system and yet they are being judged on what the city is doing to them. Not only are they failing them in the school system, they are failing their parents by not further educating them. These parents 9 times out of 10 went through this system and they also fell victim to the system which means that they weren't able to get a career that would allow them a nice income each year causing them to stay stuck in the same area and the kids are swept back into it. It's not that the cities are discriminating against people of different races. It's that they are discriminating against the people who are in low-income areas in which it just happens that the majority is minority.

I had the personal experience that some of these students have had. I used to go to a school which was located in a low income area because my parents didn't like my home school. At the school I wasn't really challenged to do more, I made straight A's and I wanted to do more and get involved in higher classes but due to location of the school I couldn't. They didn't have the resources or offer the classes that would provide me what I wanted. The best that they could do was send me along with a couple of others to the gifted program and that wasn't much help because it was something that was only once a week. There were times when we would get textbooks that were used from years before with missing pages, and drawings all over the pages because they couldn't afford to buy new ones or ones that were in better condition.

I feel as if Dr. King would be strongly against this because people are being discriminated against, something that they don't know how to break or something that they aren't being educated about, and he would like to fix it. I feel as if a way we can fix these problems or at least attempt to fix them is by informing the parents because the longer that they stay quiet about it the longer it will continue and the cycle won't ever end unless we speak up.

Buddies

by Rosalie Daniels

As a second grader, I kept most of my thinking squarely within the metaphysical “box.” Submitting, “Roses are red, violets are blue, sugar is sweet, and so are you,” as a piece of original poetry, basing my year-end creative composition less-than-loosely around the plot of *Shrek*, and asking a mime the question “Why don’t you talk?”—I liked to play it safe. The same thing held true for my introductions. “Hello, this is Rosalie D. speaking,” began every single phone conversation I had for three years. Meeting new people comprised of a name exchange followed by a series of standard questions: What’s your favorite color? How old are you? Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are you Christian or Jewish? For a long time, these questions meant nothing to me. I doubt I even listened to the answers. I began to listen when they stopped making sense.

A new person entering the second grade is a big deal. A subject of interest and wonder, their first few weeks are miserable for them and fascinating to everyone else. In second grade, I’m assigned to “buddy” with a new person, helping her adjust to the unfamiliar environment. I’ve been a buddy before, but this case is particularly interesting: the girl is from Kuwait. What? Kuwait. With the help of Google, I find it on the map. At home, we venture guesses at her name, with my brother’s “Cheeseball” taking the cake. Finally, I meet her at the welcome-to-school picnic, excited and interested (and disappointed at finding my brother’s prediction false). Putting out feelers for a new friend, I approach her, armed with my question set. The first few go okay. She’s my age, with a brother my brother’s age: best friend potential. “Are you Christian or Jewish?” No answer. “Do you celebrate Christmas?” Her head shakes. “Then you’re Jewish,” I conclude, pleased that I can sort her. Wait—no. Her head shakes again. “Do you celebrate Easter?” She nods—sort of. “Then you’re Christian,” I pronounce, tone verging on condescending. She shakes her head again. I give up. We tire swing.

Second and third grade pass as we make friendship bracelets, watch Disney Channel, and share books. Our families eat dinner

together, and my mother hastily stows the wine she brought without thinking (they don't even have a corkscrew). I forget about the ambiguity surrounding her religion until our music teacher decides to do songs from every holiday for the winter concert. Third grade does Ramadan. An elementary music teacher somewhere figured out how to write a song about Ramadan without describing the holiday itself; what it specified instead were the names of "our friends" who celebrated Ramadan. A line of the song left blanks for choral groups to insert names, and I soon understand why the third graders are doing Ramadan. Our music teacher pauses the class to ask two Middle Eastern girls if they celebrate Ramadan. It's awkward. My friend does not want her name in the song but is guilted into it, because the music teacher is counting on her. This is Mrs. K's "diverse" class, and we alone can fill the blanks of the Ramadan song. The diversity of our holiday programming did not necessarily broaden my cultural perspective, but it did answer my long-forgotten, unanswered question. My buddy was Muslim—Christian and Jewish were not the only two religions that third graders could be. Weird.

Six years later, the roles are reversed. I stick out like a sore thumb in Kuwait with my blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin. I follow my buddy as her driver chauffeurs us between her multiple houses and around Kuwait City. I hear about the land mines her family paid to have detonated so that they could build on their beach property. The kids speak about it nonchalantly; the parents are graver. They remember Desert Storm.

I'm introduced to friends, family, and servants, and taken to parties, museums, and restaurants. Everyone I meet speaks impeccable English, and I begin to wonder why I am not bilingual. We're driving from the beach house to the go-kart track: my buddy, myself, a driver, a handful of babbling girls. We converse easily as I field questions about my life and my country—"Is high school really like *Mean Girls*? How do you like Obama?" We laugh and gossip, and I reflect on our casual rapport, the universal nature of girl talk. The conversation switches to Arabic, and I gaze out the window at passing condos. English diverts my attention back: "Do people in America think we're terrorists?"

My mouth is frozen. I study their faces in my slow-motion world of panic. I wish Obama was here. What would Obama do? What is the politically correct, culturally sensitive, nuanced answer containing just enough truth to answer the question without making all Americans sound like bigots; what is the diplomatic answer? I am representing my country by myself, and I am suddenly aware of how alone I am. How many Americans make the trek to Kuwait? Mine is the

only answer these girls will probably hear for a while—it needs to be good. I have no one to turn to: my well-spoken parents and brother are on the other side of the city. My friends are left with a stumbling, politically unaware, flustered fourteen-year-old's take on American racism. I perspire and my cheeks flush. These girls know their answer already—they would not have asked the question otherwise. My buddy is consistently subjected to random airport security checks. There are many Americans that would defend this practice, and I know that my answer must account for their perspective, too. I settle for a stuttered, apologetic, disconnected, rambling response, reiterating, “I don't think you're terrorists” an absurd number of times.

Ever since that car ride, I have tried to construct a clearer response in my head. If the Census asked every American if they thought Middle Eastern people were terrorists, I doubt a large proportion would respond in the affirmative. Ask them if the Bush, Jr. administration's invasion of Iraq was justified, despite the lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction, and the proportion will be larger, with people defending their position with citations of lives lost in the Twin Towers. What I tried to express in my ineloquent, clumsy reply was that America was a nation in shock. 9/11 left us shattered, shaken, mourning. Fear, loss, and tragedy blurred our vision, and sometimes made us blind. We struck wildly at the hazy enemy, and in some cases Americans still find it hard to pinpoint blame, to differentiate between the people who murdered their loved ones and the part of the world that produced them.

Does that mean that this racism is justified? Is it still racism? Forget Obama—what would Martin Luther King, Jr. think? My Kuwaiti friends don't want the presidential answer—they can hear that on the news. Dr. King was never interested in protecting people's feelings—he knew we had politicians for that. How would Dr. King view the war on terror? He would condemn the actions of Al Qaeda and other terrorist organizations, I am sure. “Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred,” he once preached to his followers in the Civil Rights Movement. Violence was never a practice Dr. King advocated or defended. In response to this threat, however, Martin Luther King, Jr. would have called for unity. Middle Easterners he would have seen as our brothers and sisters. “Their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom,” he declared to supporters, “We cannot walk alone.” I believe that he would have reiterated this sentiment today. Terrorists are not products of a Middle Eastern heritage—they are products of hate, ill spirit, and asperity. Americans fear terrorist attacks; Afghans live in the presence of the Taliban. We

cannot fight terrorism by alienating our allies and fellow victims. We must “work together, pray together, and struggle together” to “transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood,” united against evil instead of proliferating it.

The threat of terrorism changed America. It made us both more aware and more fearful of the rest of the world. In second grade, no one made an effort to educate me about Islam. As third graders we sang about Ramadan, without actually understanding its meaning. America today must remember the words of Dr. King, so that racism isn't planted and cultivated in children, tainting minds born free from prejudice. To combat a force as powerful as terrorism we must put aside this prejudice, which weakens and divides us. Do people in America think Middle Easterners are terrorists? They shouldn't, which a growing number of people are beginning to comprehend. America is changing once again; universities open campuses in the Middle East, high school history classes differentiate between Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, the Andy Warhol Museum shows an exhibit on the Qur'an—and protests are minimal. We as a nation are beginning to view Middle Easterners as fellow victims of terrorism, not proponents of it. Terrorism is growing to be understood as a global, not a national problem. Instead of feeding the growth of hate, the fight against terrorism should be breaking down boundaries and fostering greater cooperation among the world's nations. Ending terrorism worldwide is in everyone's best interest; could you really say the same for patting down a Kuwaiti girl at airport security?

Honorable Mentions: Prose

Prose: College

“Untitled”

by Kachun Mao

Prose: High School

“Amreeka (America)”

by Amrita Singh

“My Friend”

by Paige Malezi

“Unlike Me”

by Noa Wolff-Fineout

“Untitled”

by Justin Hill

“Parallel”

by Olivia Belitsky

“My Life Revolves Around Stereotypes”

by Rachelle Conner

“A Dream Approaching”

by Erica Lange

“A Letter from My Bedroom”

by Michael Curry

“Maybe What You Heard Was Not What They Meant”

by MinJoon So

“True Acceptance”

by Anna Petek

These pieces can be read on-line at:

www.cmu.edu/hss/english/courses/writing-awards/mlk/index.html

