

# 2013

Martin Luther King, Jr. Day

Writing Awards

Presented by Carnegie Mellon University

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## Acknowledgments

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Jim Daniels and Richard Purcell,  
English Department faculty members

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## College Poetry, 1st Place

### One Shade Too Many

To all the girls who ever judged me  
By: Kristen Swanson

Brown, brown, brown,  
why are they always trying to pull me  
down, down down?

Spanish girls thought because we all had brown  
eyes, that we share Latina pride.  
My father left when I was almost two.  
Maybe he went back to Mexico—  
nobody knew. They thought I  
was trying to act tough and bold  
because I was Mexican like them.

They thought because we all had brown  
hair that looked black when the light  
hit just right, that the root of our hair  
was longer than the square root  
of any number created out of thin air.  
We were sistas, homies, tighter  
than the braids gripping their scalps—  
immigrant children, bilingual beauties.

They thought because we all had brown  
skin—they said calling it that is almost a sin.  
“We aren’t brown, girl—we’re tan”,  
we’re the caramel light mocha that melts  
in your mouth. The sun-kissed chicas  
all the boys dream about. A tan that  
never fades—we don’t need the sun  
to make our complexion a perfection.

Brown, brown, brown,  
why are they always trying to pull me  
down, down down?

White girls thought because we all had brown  
eyes that I grew up in the same suburban  
neighborhood. They thought  
I was Italian and that it was ironic  
I hated pasta—I thought their attitudes  
smelled like sour garlic bread.  
My mom had speckled freckles around  
her light green eyes—they assumed all my brown,  
brown genes came from my dad's side.

They thought because we all had brown  
hair, wavy when it rains,  
that the same blood ran through our veins.  
That the root of our bond could be explored  
like that math problem in third grade  
we could never figure out, but found  
the answer to by cheating.

They thought because we all had brown  
skin, excuse me—tan, not brown—I was  
cool enough to have around. Tanning-bed  
skin that that wasn't just a trend, it was  
a marker, a true sign of fitting in.

To all the girls who ever judged me:  
I'm Mexican, I'm white, I'm brown,  
I'm pale, I'm yellow, I'm sick of being down.  
I'm all the shades you ever painted me as.  
If the world was painted  
using a box of crayons,  
we'd run out of all the  
brown, brown, browns.

College Poetry, 2nd Place

## Those Known Present and Past

By: Iman Mazloum

These are the people I know  
Born equal, raised different  
Eat different, excrete the same  
Live diversely, Die similarly.

These are the people I know,  
Born in Mexico, Catholic  
Crossed the border to Texas  
Married Iraqi, Muslim

42 working on a GED,  
42 working in people's houses  
42 and discriminated by those  
24 employers who claim to love G-O-D.

These are the people I know,  
Born in Sri Lanka, poor  
Moved to Lebanon  
Labors in a household, poorly treated

Sri Lankan and working on providing for a family  
Sri Lankan and working in a luxury apartment  
Sri Lankan and spit upon by those who aren't  
Sri Lankan, but Lebanese, who claim to know hard labor.

These are the people I know,  
Born in Canada, Middle Class  
Moved to Texas, Visited Lebanon  
Living in Pittsburgh, Financially Assisted

Working on a bachelor's degree  
Working to combat hate  
Working to dissipate misconceptions  
Working hard at something that should be a given.

White, Yellow, Tan, Brown, Red,  
Black, Blue, Dead  
Born, Living, Working, Discriminated, Saddened,  
These are the people I know,  
and those are the people MLK knew.

College Poetry, 3rd Place

## Children's Crusade

By: Kellie Brickner

*Daughter*

I'm going to the march.  
If I don't go,  
Who else will?

Who will stand up for our  
rights?  
There is no other way.  
Oh, Reverend Bevel  
What a novel idea!  
Us children can fight!

We'll do what we must.  
Oh, Lord, protect us all.

I'm going to the march  
And sister's coming too.  
She wants to do this.

The march starts tomorrow.  
We have to go.

MLK has been jailed!  
We can set him free!

Oh, Lord, protect us all.

*Mother*

You can't go to the march.

Someone else will,  
Certainly not children.  
Who will stand up for our  
rights?  
There must be another way.  
Oh, Reverend Bevel  
What a novel idea!

Sending children to fight!  
Don't you know what will hap-  
pen?

Oh, Lord, protect them all.

You can't go to the march

She wants to do this?  
Both of my babies  
In the march tomorrow...  
You don't have to go.

MLK has been jailed.

You'll be joining him first  
And what will I do?  
Oh, Lord, protect them all.

High School Poetry, 1st Place

## Maggi Cubes with My Stepfather

By: Alexis Payne

Igbo words bouncing off tongues  
and over walls and down stairs.  
music dancing through hallways and fried  
plantain sizzling on plates, in kitchens, next to beef  
and goat and fish eyes plucked from the head.  
my mother dreams of Africa,  
my mother dreams of her in-laws with their  
bodies screaming of culture and home,  
and my mother dances in long dresses wrapped  
around her body and each year she says she is going.  
but years pass and my mother dances with empty rhythm  
years pass and her in-laws die one by one  
and my stepfather cries and tries to hide his tears  
because real men don't cry.  
and they pound fufu with wooden spoons  
and cook egusi soup and garri and  
pepper soup that is much too spicy for me to eat  
and they break kola nut in our living room  
and cook jollof rice on our stove  
and I learn to make eggs with maggi cubes  
and curry  
and we eat indomie instead of ramen  
noodles because it's better...somehow  
and my cousin, she tries to teach me  
how to cook and I hide in my attic  
and read and I don't want to learn  
and we serve chin chin in silver pans,  
let the fried sugar run over our tongues.  
and it's too late to return now,  
because its rainy season  
in Nigeria  
and the living must bury the dead  
before caskets float.

High School Poetry, 2nd Place

## Letters

By: Leo Johnson

J, I never learned to spell your name,  
To write the Hindi in Latin letters.  
It seems an appalling omission now:  
Three years of friendship,  
A fourth of obsession and  
I never learned to spell your name.

Then again, I was younger then.  
I couldn't spell 'cinnamon.'  
While you were learning to write formal essays,  
I couldn't spell the words to make you  
Look at me again,  
Draw for me again,  
Write for me again,  
Play four square with me again.  
Two years seems like such a small difference now.  
We were younger then.  
You were the first girl I fell in love with.

It seems silly now:  
Chinese Checkers in the afterschool program  
(I wonder now if it's wrong to call it that)  
And my mother was late to pick me up.  
I don't remember what I saw in you then.  
Maybe it was just that you were nice.  
You played with me; most people wouldn't.  
I was so often too shy to speak.

You, the only dark-skinned student in your grade,  
You, one of five non-white kids in the six hundred,  
A fraction: one over one hundred and twelve,  
Less than one percentage point.

You must have known what it was to be an outsider.  
I never knew how to have a friend before you.  
You taught me holding hands,  
Sharing favorite books or websites or foods,  
Play dates not arranged by parents.

Two outsiders don't make one friendship,  
Two unmatched halves don't make one whole.  
I didn't know what was different about me then,  
I'm only beginning to understand now.  
You couldn't not know what was different about you.

You were the first girl I fell in love with.  
Trapped in this girl's body, this wrong body,  
I didn't realize it for years, but I fell in love with you:  
You whose mother put a bindi on my head,  
You whose kitchen I ate meatloaf in for the first time.  
I fell in love with you in your dark living room,  
Watching you as you watched Teen Titans.

You gave me a nickname,  
You chose my first name after my birth name,  
My much despised birth name, now traded in.  
Those first nicknames, love names:  
I was Chandni, in Hindi, moon.  
You were Tara, in Hindi, star.

I begged you to draw pictures for me  
I begged you to write stories for me  
I begged you to play tag with me  
Later I begged you not to leave me.  
My first break up: fourth grade.  
You were never cruel, but again and again,  
You weren't there when I looked for you in the halls.  
Did you ever read those desperate, cursive letters,  
The ones I left folded for you on the counter  
Of the afterschool day care program?

I hope you didn't.  
My desperation seems embarrassing in retrospect,  
Your eagerness to grow up all too understandable.  
I think that maybe, if we were older,  
These things could have been handled.  
But what others would have risen in their places?

Lesbo. Psycho. Bulldyke. Creepy.  
Those were the next names others gave me.  
I don't know what they called you,  
If they ever called you names.  
You never told me.

I don't know if you called me those yourself,  
When you grew up,  
When you moved on,  
When you made friends who weren't  
Desperate alone queer younger scared crazy.  
I want to think you never called me names.  
It might be too much to ask.  
(I don't think I'd blame you if you did.)

If I knew how to spell your name  
Maybe I could send you a letter,  
Not this one, but a letter.  
J: the one letter I am sure of.  
One J isn't enough to find someone.  
Would you want to be found if I could?  
This poem is the last letter  
That I will ever write to you.

High School Poetry, 3rd Place

**Star**

By: Laura Condon

Jenny,  
The Chinese girl,  
Whose parents owned a restaurant,  
Brought duck feet on a field trip,  
And dared us each to eat one.  
Anna,  
The Filipino,  
Cringed and shook her head.  
I,  
The American,  
Said, "God, that's disgusting!"  
Teresa,  
The Italian,  
Nearly threw up.  
Nelly,  
The Pole,  
Squared her shoulders and choked it down.  
She actually liked it despite how awful it looked.  
And Maria,  
The Venezuelan,  
Scoffed and rolled her eyes at us,  
Like she always did.

When our teacher came over  
And told us to quiet down,  
Because the squealing was a bit much,  
His eyes trailed from one to the next.  
From one difference to another.  
First to Jenny's smaller eyes,  
As she held another duck foot out to Nelly  
And Anna's thicker hair,  
Falling down to hide her embarrassed blush.

And Teresa's olive skin,  
Slowing turning red under his scrutinizing gaze.  
And Maria's angular face,  
Uncaring, arrogant, and contemptuous as always.  
And Nelly and I,  
Trying not to laugh.

We knew each other though.  
We didn't see our differences.  
To each other,  
We weren't Chinese  
Or Filipino  
Or American  
Or Italian  
Or Polish  
Or Venezuelan.  
And later, when we were sitting there on the school bus,  
Arranging our fingers into a star  
So Jenny could take a picture,  
We didn't notice that Jenny's fingers  
Were so pale,  
Or that Anna's, Maria's, and Teresa's  
Were darker,  
Or that mine and Nelly's  
Were red from being in the sun.

## High School Poetry, Honorable Mention

### **Stranger**

By: Maya Best

Her skin,  
An olive brown.  
With long wispy strands of black hair,  
Clinging to the back of her knitted sweater.  
Her brown eyes,  
Fixed to the ground,  
Avoid eye contact.  
They're all looking,  
Whispering,  
Wondering.  
Who is the new girl?  
With the mysterious eyes,  
And dark long hair.  
She looks foreign.  
Where could she come from?  
I'm Indian.  
Her voice heavily accented.  
Eyebrows shoot up.  
Could she be  
Like the people from history class?  
The ones who lived in America?  
She squirms in her seat,  
Sweaty palms clinging together  
Her head shakes no,  
That's Native-American.  
Her whisper,  
Barely audible in the classroom.  
Another girl, superior,  
Claims she understands.  
The new girl finally relaxes.  
Indians have red things on their foreheads, right?  
Her face, now red,

I don't know what you mean...  
But she does  
The "bindis" worn on special occasions,  
A type of jewelry,  
Not a feature,  
Like black hair,  
Or a brown birthmark under a chin.  
They'd never understand,  
Her family going to the temple,  
Bright festivals,  
Shrines with flower offerings,  
Singing and dancing,  
If only they knew  
The Bengali she spoke.  
They'd ask her to say a few words,  
And then mimic them.  
She doesn't answer,  
Letting her cheeks redden,  
Two hot chili peppers.  
Dreaming of disappearing,  
From the whispers and stares,  
Into the cool air,  
With the trees that never seem to care  
Where she came from,  
Or the color of her hands.

## **We are Still Fighting**

By: Josie Griffith

One

He had a dream.  
We had a dream.  
They had a dream,  
but we are all still dreaming.

And we fight until our hands are red and raw and still,  
we only seek freedom when the time is right, when there is time at  
all.

When the night air gets cold and my hands freeze beneath me  
and the city looks like an outline  
I only want to beat my body against the pale ground and let it be  
known that I am still thinking,

I am still wrapping my mind around the insides of their dream.

The dream that he pulled into their souls all those many years ago  
with a preacher's hand and a leader's heart.

Black over white,  
man over beast.  
However we put two words together,  
it is still a dream.  
And I still have his dream  
their dream,  
our dream.

Two

I want to know.

18

I want to know why I am still white and you are still black.

What has changed?

In the years since our grandparents sat on the front steps with  
paper fans in their hands and another day on their laps.

What has really moved?

The world is at a standstill.

Silent and easy,

I try and break away because I do not want to be white and I do not  
want you to be black.

I only want to be a person,

undefined and untouched by boxes built for us as children,  
before we could talk or stand or even breathe,

I was white and you were black.

Three:

There is no way that I can tell you sorry. I'm sorry that my family  
is from another place. I'm sorry that I was born in the backwoods  
and the town where my father lives has the kind of people that are  
scared rather than smart. I can tell you I'm sorry that my father  
hates you. I can tell you I'm sorry my mother will never accept you.  
I'm sorry that our worlds aren't really as peaceful as we pretended  
in our own heads. But then if I say it you have to say it too. Are you  
sorry that your sister has to bite her tongue and hold her breathe  
to keep from knocking me to the ground. She does and you don't  
have to tell me. Are you sorry that your hand in mine isn't the right  
way to do things. From your mother's lip to your brother's hand, I  
already know that we are doomed. Two directions, stick to the lines  
that were drawn. Over and under we always try and avoid it. But  
we can both say sorry and be sorry and try to make sorry another  
excuse. Truth is, we cannot escape the world that was laid down  
and painted in before we met. There is no way I can tell you how  
sorry I am.

19

## Does Blackness Kill Beauty?

By: Chantell Taliaferro

i'm different  
i'm different because of my skin  
the skin that I'm in that went through sin,  
told you I hated you then hated me again  
they say beauty is in the eye of the beholder,  
not in the eye of a scolder,  
that breaks you down then is brave enough to mold ya  
i stand for those who want their pride,  
only to be pushed aside  
getting beat because someone lied  
racism will never die  
being all different colors and no one knows why  
except for the big man in the sky  
my president is black and you can't respect that  
what if God was black would you miss heaven for that

## Tight Lips

By: Tyra Jamison

I've been told that I was observant.  
That must be the reason I go red-faced when  
I observe  
That I was the only one in math with brown skin.  
They said I was gifted,  
Advanced.

Mommy said,  
"Don't let people play in your hair"  
But I let my friends do it.  
Why can't I touch her hair?  
You said.  
Because she didn't want you to.  
I said.

That should have been enough.  
I didn't want to see the confusion in your eyes,  
In your blue eyes.  
I thought you would get it.  
Not everybody wants to be petted.  
I explained  
In the same voice I used when explaining simple math.

Your hair is so nice, I love it.  
I bristle when the fingers touch my 'fro.  
I wish my hair could be like this.  
I feel the same way when wavy-haired girls complain about "un-  
manageable hair".  
They've probably never had to worry about a hot comb.  
Or gel.  
Never been called "chicken head".

I lock my feelings shut.  
And don't say anything.

College Prose, 1st Place

## True Love

By: Laura Stiles

“You have a lot of lesbian friends.”

My roommate Kayla pointed this out, almost in a tone of surprise but completely without malice, as the two of us loaded the dishwasher in our apartment. She pre-washed her dishes in the sink as I whisked around the living room collecting mine.

She had just met my friend Sophia who was up from D.C. for the weekend. Sophia had talked to Kayla openly about her girlfriend Julie, to whom she is engaged. While I had been in the bathroom getting ready to go out to lunch with Sophia, I overheard them talking, and I wondered if Kayla was surprised by the easy way Sophia discussed Julie, the way she referenced “my girlfriend” in conversation. Because even though I’ve known Sophia for several years, sometimes I still am.

I stacked my dishes and threw away some dirty napkins.

“Yeah, I do seem to have an oddly high number of gay and lesbian friends,” I said, laughing. “I wonder why that is.”

“Well, I knew gay guys from when I danced,” Kayla said.

“But the only lesbians I know are through you.”

I wasn't sure what to make of this.

\* \* \*

I don't know how often people have friends or acquaintances “come out” to them, but since high school, I can remember four or five friends very clearly. The first I remember is Sophia, who I met my junior year (her senior year) in my school's honors chamber choir. She mentioned being bi several times in conversation, never making a big deal out of it, never explicitly saying anything like, “Laura, I have something to tell you: I'm bi.”

Looking back, I laugh at how clueless I was. I had had so little exposure to gays or lesbians that when she made these casual mentions in our conversations, the information glanced off of me like a pebble hitting a helmet, never reaching my brain.

I don't remember when I realized it explicitly. But at some

point during that year, we discussed people's sexuality. I said hesitantly, "I'm not sure when I realized about you...I think at some point, I just kind of figured it out..."

"Figured it out?" she said in disbelief. "I told you like three times!"

I didn't answer, instead sitting there in silent, embarrassed horror. I realized that she had, indeed, told me several times. But for some reason those times just hadn't registered.

Looking back now, I think I know what happened. One day, I had just finally realized that she wasn't saying meaningless things like other friends of mine had to get attention, or because they didn't know what they were talking about. That she really meant it.

\* \* \*

Sophia's coming out prepared me mentally for other friends' disclosures—or at least, made me more aware of what to expect. One friend came out to me at an anime and manga convention, telling me in a way I'm sure she thought was subtle: "Yeah, I like stories with kick-ass female characters...because those are the types of women I go for... Yup." One friend came out to me in very casual conversation: she was driving me and several other friends to one of our houses, and she mentioned someone's name I didn't recognize.

"Is that your roommate?" I asked.

"Oh, it's my girlfriend," she answered. She said it casually, but I could tell she knew this would be new information to me. I handled these particular instances better than I had handled Sophia's, but nothing could have prepared me for the shock of hearing from my friend Kendra.

\* \* \*

It was in the spring of my freshman year of college. I was at home over Carnival, not going to booth or buggy, instead staying home for those few days off because my dad was losing himself to brain cancer. He had reached a point where he was having trouble distinguishing between reality and the images in his mind—when he talked, it was gibberish. He made no sense. He seemed terrified whenever we would leave his side. One day when he started crying and screaming at us for help, my mom took him to the hospital.

That's where my parents were one night when I was at home with my brother and sister. Kendra had come to visit. We were telling her the abbreviated version of why my sister, Michelle, was so preoccupied (besides the obvious reason). Her boyfriend had just broken up with her. He had been terrified, but he had cornered her at school and told her in person: he explained that he liked a boy, that he was gay. That he couldn't be her boyfriend anymore. She had assured him that it was fine, comforting him more than he had comforted her. But she was still shaken.

Kendra didn't really know who this boy was, and had only ever seen him and my sister together once, but she was still sympathetic. "Oh no!" she said, giving Michelle a hug. Her five foot one-and-three-quarters, comically short next to my sister's five foot four, wrapped around her protectively, feet sturdy on the carpet, arms reassuringly tight around my sister's arms and back.

We moved on to other topics as the evening went on: how school was going; what was going on with my dad and how we were holding up; how close Kendra had become with her two roommates, especially her roommate Leah. But eventually, when there was about an hour left before Kendra had to leave, she suddenly said to me, "Let's go for a drive. I want to talk to you."

"All right," I said, a little surprised but willing. We got our coats and hurried down the front steps to her car. The night was clear and chilly so we slammed the doors and cranked up the heat. We shivered, both trying to get warm.

She backed out of my driveway and started driving down the hill, her gloved hands clutching the steering wheel. Her long, curly brown hair fell over the hood and shoulders of her dark pink, puffy coat.

"So," she began. "First, I just want to start by saying: what I'm about to tell you isn't a joke."

"Okay," I said, curious, yet cautious.

"Well," she said, as she slowed the car to follow the curve in the road. "You know how you guys were telling me about Michelle's boyfriend? Well, ex-boyfriend, now, I guess..."

And suddenly I knew.

"Yeah?" I said. My voice sounded distant from my body.

My ears processed her next words with an intense clarity, like time had stopped and it was only Now and would only ever be Now in her car with the soft sounds of the engine and the cold and the shivering and the dark.

“Well,” she began, her voice almost cracking at its high pitch.

Kendra’s voice has never been gentle. Its medium-loud volume is laced with an undercurrent grating that surfaces when her voice is tight with stress.

“Well,” Kendra said. “Leah and I...are dating.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay. Wow.”

\* \* \*

Kendra and I hadn’t always been good friends. I had met her in middle school because she was friends with a few of my friends—I seemed to meet all of my friends in middle school through a domino chain of acquaintances. At that point, I just knew her as the girl who had said that my hair looked almost blonde in the lighting on our school stage. And also that her parents didn’t want her reading Harry Potter.

\* \* \*

Kendra is the oldest of four girls. Her family proudly calls themselves Christians. Kendra went with her family to church every weekend—the same church at which her parents had met. They knew their pastors and youth pastors well. They had family friends from church, which is how Kendra met her first “boyfriend”—as far as I know, the most they ever did was sit together on the couch and hold hands when their families got together. Poor Kendra is embarrassed by that story now and prefers not to think about it.

Kendra’s parents had never read Harry Potter, but they thought it was evil and didn’t want Kendra reading it. Kendra agreed with her parents on almost all of their beliefs, but not this one. Even then, Kendra read much more than her parents did, and she was always much more interested in learning. She read the books in secret, borrowing them from friends or checking them out from the library, covering them in book-socks so they looked like textbooks, hiding them in her room so her parents would never find them.

I remember discussing this with her when we were in eighth grade, before we were really friends. She was telling me about how her parents didn’t understand, how they were wrong about this.

“Well,” I said hesitantly. “Maybe if they’re wrong about this, they’re wrong about some other things, too.”

“Eh, no,” she said, easily dismissing the idea.

Sometimes Kendra has a great memory. In high school, she could reel off fifty-some digits of pi, and she never had trouble memorizing math or physics formulas for exams. But other times, it takes our entire circle of friends to convince her that a certain conversation did or didn’t happen.

If I were to remind her of this conversation, I know she would have no memory of it. The idea of blindly trusting her parents’ beliefs is too foreign to her now.

\* \* \*

It’s hard for me to remember exactly how Kendra and I became friends when our families’ beliefs and backgrounds were so drastically different. Kendra’s parents always supported conservative political candidates; my parents’ beliefs nearly always lined up with liberal candidates’ positions. Her family supported her going with her youth group every year to the annual March for Life held in Washington D.C.—a pro-life event petitioning against legalizing abortions and against past decisions to legalize abortions. My family believes in allowing women to have safe access to abortions, and for women to make their own choices regarding their bodies and health.

Another difference between our families is how we either accept or don’t accept differences in sexuality. My parents have gay and lesbian friends, and I remember them speaking honestly about a member of our own extended family whom they knew to be gay. They were fine with it, and saddened that he even had to hide it at all.

Kendra once told me how her parents felt about gays and lesbians. One day, her family had been watching T.V. when *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* came on. One of the contestants had clearly been gay, his voice and mannerisms making it obvious—and when they had showed his family member in the audience, it had

been his partner. Kendra's mother had watched him for a minute, and then had said: "People like that should be shot." That's a memory Kendra will never forget.

\* \* \*

I think it was books that brought Kendra and me together. Books, and her slowly opening mind. We had English class together in both sophomore year and junior year of high school, and we collaborated on many other homework assignments. She and I talked a lot more as we took more of the same classes: we complained about the same teachers, got enthusiastic about the same things. Junior year, AP English was our favorite class (probably ever, at least in high school), and was taught by our favorite teacher (probably ever, at least in high school). We would compare our reactions to *Oedipus the King*, to *Macbeth*, to 1984. We compared our improvements in writing. We gushed about our teacher—almost all the girls in his classes admired him to an embarrassing degree.

The more I got to know Kendra, the more she started helping me with bigger problems in my life than just homework. After I told a guy who was scaring me to leave me alone and stop talking to me, he cursed and raged at me, reducing me to terrified tears. I called Kendra that night and she came over and hugged me as I cried, talking me through it. She even came to school early the following morning to make sure there was no chance I'd be alone. That was the first time she left her house early in the morning for my sake, but not the last. When my dad became ill enough from his brain tumor that he couldn't drive me to school anymore, she drove me every morning for the rest of the school year.

She came over to my house often enough that we called her a sister, that she called my dad "daddy number two." By then, her ideas about many things were drastically different than her parents'. She was frustrated with their illogical reasons for believing what they did; she was frustrated with her mother's controlling personality and irrational rages; she was frustrated with their ignorance, and their ignorance of their ignorance. "They don't even know what they don't know," she would say. "That's the worst part." My house became her escape, a kind of second home. She would come over and we would sit on the floor in my room and just talk for hours—

about all the serious stuff, but about all the silly stuff, too.

"I'm so frustrated with the guys at our school," I said one day as we sipped our water and munched on popcorn. "One of Michelle's friends came over and flipped through our yearbook, and you know what we realized? Not one of the guys in our grade is attractive!"

"Yeah!" she said, putting some popcorn in her mouth. "And the ones who are, are always jerks!"

"Exactly," I said. "And even if they're good looking, once I find out that they're jerks, they're not attractive anymore. I want to date a guy that can be my friend. I hope we'll meet some better guys in college."

"Me too," she said.

And then we'd discuss fictional characters or celebrities because that was just so much better. Kendra's favorites were Shia LeBeouf, Taylor Lautner, and Darren Criss. I would always roll my eyes at how obsessed she was. When we pulled up photos of Taylor Lautner on my family's wheezing old laptop, she would lie forward on her elbows and gasp, "He is just so attractive." And when her Darren Criss phase began, she sheepishly told me that she had drawn a picture of him. "Don't laugh," she said, as she held out her phone so I could inspect the grainy photo of her drawing. But before I could laugh, she had already started laughing at herself.

Except for the fact that she had very little experience dealing with boys in real life, I had no reason to ever guess that she would end up dating a girl. Frankly, I'm still not sure how or why it happened. Maybe she wasn't able to accept who she was until she was out of her parents' intolerant, immediate grasp. Or maybe she saw something in Leah that she was desperately lacking at home: unconditional love and acceptance. The whole thing still puzzles me, but it's okay: I'm glad she's happy.

But that happiness does come at a price.

\* \* \*

Kendra goes to a small Christian college that is a "dry" campus—supposedly, no one there drinks, or is supposed to, anyway. The school also keeps girls and boys in separate dorms, and has visiting hours for when boys are allowed into girls' dorms, and vice

versa. It has the rule: “If you have a member of the opposite sex in your room, you must put a shoe in the door.”

There is no “official” position against gays and lesbians, but it is generally known that they do not hold a position of tolerance. Kendra and her girlfriend have to be extremely careful that their relationship remains secret, for fear of getting kicked out of school. And there’s also the very strong probability that if Kendra’s parents knew about her relationship with Leah, they would disown her.

\* \* \*

The problem is, Kendra is a very open, honest person. She doesn’t have any pretensions, and she doesn’t try to interpret or manipulate people or social situations. While others are more cautious about how they act in various situations, Kendra is just always herself. She moves through life with a purpose, a directness, a matter-of-factness that leads her to speak and act similarly in front of everyone, regardless of whether or not they know her secret—(for example, play-wrestling with Leah in front of friends’ relatives, or cuddling close beside her on couches at parties.) My sister and I agree that she doesn’t always realize that to those who are observant, some actions come across as extremely obvious. That kind of unawareness has gotten Kendra into trouble.

Kendra wrote a paper her sophomore year of college for one of her classes. The prompt was to choose a current issue, and then defend one side or the other of that issue with passages from the Bible. Kendra chose to defend homosexuality in her paper.

Several days after she turned in the paper, she was sitting in the back of her public speaking class—(a different class than the one she’d submitted her paper to)—doodling idly in her notebook. As groggy, yawning students wandered in, her professor came to the back of the room to adjust the camcorder so they’d be ready for presentations. She chatted with Kendra absent-mindedly as she pushed buttons and adjusted the focus.

After asking about the weather and other idle topics, her professor suddenly said, “Oh, and I talked to your religious studies professor. You wrote about homosexuality, right?” She stooped down and peered into the camera. “She was worried about your paper and thought you were really just ‘wrong.’ But it’s okay, I told

her there are lots of Christians who believe in the side you presented.”

Kendra was shocked that they had discussed her paper with each other. And even though she was somewhat comforted that her public speaking professor had defended her, she was worried that her religious studies professor might still think she was “wrong,” and would want to discuss her paper with her—or might just give her a bad grade. But fortunately, neither of those things happened—there were no awkward conversations, and she ended up getting an A.

But then Kendra got curious. What would her family think if they were to see a well-researched, cohesive argument defending homosexuality? Would she be able to make them question their assumptions, or at least open some dialogue with them? She knew it would be risky to send it to her mom, but she decided to send it to her dad to get his opinion.

It was a safer bet to send it to her dad, no question: but soon after she sent it to him, she discovered that anything her dad sees, her mom sees.

Big mistake.

\* \* \*

The paper opened dialogue all right, but not the kind Kendra had hoped for. It started with a phone call.

“So...” her dad began hesitantly. “I got your paper.”

“Yeah?” Kendra asked. “What did you think?”

“Well, your mom and I have some concerns about it...”

And then her mom had gotten on the phone and started shouting.

“Kendra, what are you thinking?!” she screamed, her voice loud and shrill. Her voice sounded much like Kendra’s, and yet was so much harsher.

After they had debated back and forth for a while, there was a pause. Nobody spoke. And then after a few seconds, her mom said, “Kendra...are you trying to tell us that you’re gay?”

“What? No!” Kendra lied. “Of course not!”

“Well we’ve noticed that you don’t have any guy friends, and you and Leah are practically joined at the hip—”

“MOM. I am not gay.”

“Well it’s just that you’ve never sent us a paper before, and now all of a sudden...”

“All my other papers are about books you haven’t read. I thought you and dad might have an opinion on this one.”

“Well why would you ask our opinion after you’ve already made up your mind, what good does that do?? I can put you in touch with Pastor Scott, he’s studied the Bible for years, and knows a lot more than you do. You shouldn’t just go deciding things on your own, you should listen to people who are older than you, who have studied these things!”

\* \* \*

There were frantic emails sent, Facebook chats exchanged, shouting matches on the phone. For two parents and a daughter who had barely spoken to each other since Kendra had left for college, there were suddenly a lot of very tense, very unpleasant exchanges.

That first phone call was followed by a Facebook chat. Kendra sent it to me in an email. The email’s subject line was, “my life is ridiculous.”

It was a very long message, but there were some key quotes from her mother:

Good morning Kendra, I wanted to share some thoughts with you...

...Ok, what you are debating here is LAW VS. DESIGN. You CAN NOT debate the two, they are totally different... We do not change, the stars and universe do not change, because they were DESIGNED, but that is not true of laws...

Go ahead and try to put pieces together that WERE NOT MEANT TO GO TOGETHER AND SEE WHAT A MESS YOU MAKE! Men and women fit together physically by design because that is what was intended by God! You don’t mess with God’s perfection!

The Bible is VERY CLEAR that your twisted thinking is EXACTLY what will happen among Christians in the last days! I’ll be honest, your thinking concerns me.

I believe this is twisted thinking and Satan is loving it.

As far as proving homosexuality increases in animal species facing overpopulation, that is a MAN MADE STATEMENT! They also THINK they can prove evolution, THEY CAN NOT! God’s statements are FACT!

God has made it clear that He detests homosexuality! So why all of a sudden would he NOT detest it? GOD DOESN’T CHANGE! If He said He detests it then, that means He detests it NOW!

\* \* \*

After I read the messages they exchanged, Kendra and I talked for a very long time on Skype.

“What are you going to do?” I asked her. I could see her pixelated image sigh. “Will she want to talk to you about this more?”

“They want to discuss it more once I come home,” she said, groaning. “They also want to see the paper and the grade I got.”

“What do you think will happen?” I asked.

“I’m worried,” she admitted, sitting back in her chair, her forehead wrinkling in anxiety. “But I’m hoping that they’ll feel too awkward to actually discuss it and it’ll just blow over.”

“You need to be careful, Kendra,” I said. I hoped she could hear the concern in my voice.

“God, I know,” she said, putting her head in her hand. “That was such a big mistake.”

\* \* \*

Kendra went home for Christmas break. As she predicted, her parents never brought it up again. But I assume they suspect, and are choosing to pretend that nothing happened, that nothing is happening. Like maybe if they never discuss it, the issue will never arise. Like if they don’t acknowledge it, it doesn’t exist.

Kendra still goes to the same church. She and Leah still work at her church’s camp in the summers. But she’s less comfortable with it now: if one of the camp kids asks about homosexuality, she has to tell them, “Homosexuality is a sin,” in order to keep her job.

She goes to church physically, but I don’t know how much she believes anymore.

Last summer, Kendra and another friend, Olivia, came to visit me while I was pet-sitting for a family that was on vacation. After dinner, as the summer light disappeared and we sat in the den surrounded by pillows and blankets, two cats, and two dogs, one of which hogged a spot on the couch, we started discussing many different topics. Somehow, religion came up.

“I just don’t believe what I used to,” Kendra began, cradling her glass in her hands. “I can’t. There are so many contradictions in the Bible. We’re supposed to use the Bible to judge that homosexuality is wrong, but then ignore things like owning slaves is okay, and eating shellfish is an abomination, and that we’re not allowed to wear garments made from two different kinds of thread? I just can’t believe something like that. It doesn’t make sense.”

Olivia and I nodded our assent.

“I believe that I’m right, in believing that,” Kendra said.

“But there’s still a part of me that’s...terrified.”

“Terrified?” I asked. “Of what?”

“Of going to Hell.”

And suddenly I felt so sad. And then suddenly angry—murderously angry on her behalf.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, my voice tight with suppressed rage. “Religion should be something that helps people, that comforts people, that makes them feel safe and protected and loved. Reassured that they won’t just disappear into oblivion when they die. All this guilt-tripping and fear was created by people who seek power. They are the ones who have twisted the true meaning of religion. You don’t need to be afraid, Kendra. You’re a good person. Anyone who says you’re going to Hell is reducing God to the level of men: petty and narrow-minded. And even though I don’t go to church—and frankly, this is a perfect example of why—I believe firmly in God, and I don’t believe that He is petty or narrow-minded. I believe He is all-loving. Kendra, you don’t have to be afraid.” Kendra nodded, twisting her glass nervously in her hands. “I know,” she said. “But when you’ve been raised to believe that your whole life...it’s impossible to just forget.”

## College Prose, 2nd Place

### White

By: (Paul) Victor Nunez

What does it mean to have white skin in America? To some it means that you are privileged. It means that your family has more money and opportunities than my family. That because you’re white, you have an inherent advantage over your dark-skinned peers due to biased social norms. To others it means that you are the social norm. So normal in fact that Crayola and Band Aid use to design their “skin colored” products with the pinkish hue that most white people are born with. More often than not though, it means nothing. To have white skin just means you burn more easily than others on a sunny day. To me it means that I will always have to explain to future employers/recruiters/professors/friends/acquaintances/DMV desk clerks/“that guy” at the cash register that “Yes, I am, in fact, Hispanic. No, I’m not half anything just a whole bunch-a-Latin thrown into one bag. No seriously, dude, stop laughing.”

My name is Paul Victor Núñez and I am a second generation American citizen who was born with brown eyes, brown hair, a Mayan nose, a Guaraní’s build, and thanks to some ancestors from Europe – white skin. Despite being the son of a father who is half Argentinean/half Puerto Rican and a mother who is full blooded Guatemalan, most people don’t get past my last trait. My Mayan nose often becomes a Jewish nose and my native-Argentinean physique just makes me look “short and stocky”. I have been confused for Isreali, Russian, Polish, and (my personal favorite) half Chinese... That last one came from a Chinese girl I met once at a bowling alley. True story.

It doesn’t help that I am not fluent in any form of Spanish. Trust me, it’s not for lack of trying. I have studied it since I was in the third grade. It’s just that my parents never passed it on when I was a kid so I never got to practice it at home. It doesn’t help that I also really stink with languages in general. It’s a miracle that I can communicate with anyone in English since “my English” is

a hodgepodge of quirky idioms and random phrases that I have picked up while moving around the country with my parents. Who, I might add, met while proudly serving their country in the U.S. Marine Corps. (USA! USA! USA!).

But I digress. Throughout all of the moves and school transfers one thing remained constant and that was my family. My wholly Hispanic and totally-not-white-washed-ok-maybe-just-a-little family. No matter what home we lived in we kept the same traditions, ate the same food, and visited the same extended family members. I grew up on “arroz amarillo”, “frijoles negros”, “pollo,” and my personal favorite, flan. My grandparents spoke mainly Spanish. Thankfully, like most Hispanics, they also spoke a lot with their hands. “What’s that grandma? You want that glass of water across the room? I’m on it!” Family gathering were always filled with a lot of talking and hand waving. There was always time made for family. Even when my parents and I live all the way out in Hawaii, we made sure to visit “la familia”.

Funny thing about Hawaii, it was the first place that I experienced any sort of negative treatment due to my skin color. You read that right – it’s not always great to look white. In Hawaii, white people are called “Haole’s”. Sometimes “Haole” is just a playful jab a native Hawaiian makes to his white friend. Other times it’s a blatant racial slur. Either way I was on the receiving end of it quite often. It turns out that the boys that I would wrestle with after school (Pee wee leagues, baby. Where boys became men!) picked up some hateful thinking from their parents. Because of this, I was constantly subjugated to taunts, insults, and slurs. They would only wrestle with themselves and never helped me out when we were learning the rules. It didn’t help that there wasn’t anyone to relate to. There were no other Hispanic boys in my entire neighborhood let alone on my wrestling team. Luckily, I only had to suffer through this for one season before I got to move to Virginia.

Here we are going to fast forward through eight years of Catholic middle school and a science and technology focused high school and look at my time at CMU in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Hispanic central, man! It was here that I joined the Spanish and Latin Student Association (SALSA). SALSA gave me my first real

chance to hang out with Hispanics outside of my family. FINALLY, a chance to hang out with people who understood my upbringing. FINALLY, people who understood what life is all about! They knew that it’s about personal pride. That it’s about providing for your family. That it’s about biting into that first piece of flan... Ok I’m getting carried away here. Anyway, so what if I didn’t speak Spanish or have an accent or have dark skin, there was no way that I’d be the only one like that, right? Wrong! It turns out a lot of Hispanics tie their identity closely to their ability to speak “la lengua de tus padres”, the language of your fathers – Spanish – and unless you can make par for the course on this the next thing that they would look for was skin color. Let me tell ya, I had a rough couple of semesters convincing my Hispanic brethren that I was in fact one of them. Luckily, I was able to make friends with some awesome folks who were able to get past my language deficiencies and lack of melanin. It wasn’t until I became president of this club that others outside of my close circle actually started taking me claims seriously though. So what else could I do to convince people that I was in fact Hispanic? “I know! I’ll join another club!”

The Society of Hispanic and Professional Engineers (SHPE) was the second club that I joined in the hopes of spreading my Hispanic roots on campus. Their biggest pull was a job conference that was hosted by the professional SHPE organization every year. It was at these conferences that I got the chance to meet and hang out with other Hispanics like me – young college students trying to obtain a technical degree while enjoying the wonders of good rice and a tall glass of “jugo de guayaba”. I’ve had so much fun at these conferences that to date I have gone four times. Unfortunately like a broken record, every time that I have gone I have had to explain to my fellow Latin engineers that I am in fact fully Hispanic. Most were kind enough to assume that there was some form of Spanish heritage in me, but they always assumed I was at most a “halfie” (half Hispanic-half Caucasian). Great...so where do I go from here? I guess that I am just going to have to resign myself to my pasty skinned fate.

Well with all this talk about how people haven’t recognized me for who I am there is one person in particular who stands out

in my mind for going against the grain. A true humanitarian of sorts. A man whose work has touched hundreds, if not thousands, of people across the United States. I am of course talking about the cashier at the café of the International Spy Museum in Washington DC. This man is the only man in my entire life that has approached me as a fellow Hispanic in a random public setting. His first words to me were “¿De cuál país?,” “What country are you from?” I was so surprised by this flash of Spanish I didn’t immediately respond. Eventually, like an idiot, I responded that I was from America. He laughed at this and asked “No your heritage. What country are your parents from because I know that you are Hispanic?” The smile on my face must have been a mile wide as I explained to him that I was predominantly Guatemalan. We chatted for a few minutes and after we were done he stated “Have a good one, brother.” With this experience there is hope! And I will probably cherish this experience until the day that I die, sad as it is.

So how does all of this relate back to Dr. King? I hope that my light hearted style hasn’t detracted from the point that I have been trying to get across here and that is skin color and presumptions about skin color affect everyone. In his “I Have a Dream” Speech, Dr. King states “I have a dream that...[we] will one day live in a nation where [we] will not be judged by the color of [our] skin but by the content of [our] character”. Dr. King was a brilliant and compassionate man and with this quote it is easy to see that he wanted his words and ideas to apply to everyone – not just to African Americans, not just to Caucasians, everyone. No one should have insults or slurs thrown at them just because they look like a certain race. No one should have to validate themselves or their heritage to their ethnic brothers just because they don’t look the same. We should all be like that great humanitarian, the cashier at the International Spy Museum – blind to skin color but at the same time sensitive to each other’s heritage.

College Prose, 3rd Place

## American Jeans

By: Connie Chan

*Kindergarten - 1997*

In Marysville Elementary School’s cafeteria, I stared at the unfamiliar, layered food item in front of me: a tan domed piece of bread atop a slice of slippery pink meat, a perfect square of vibrant yellow cheese, and another piece of bread (except this one was flat). That day’s lunch menu read “turkey sandwich.”

The simple entrée was exotic compared to the foods I was used to in San Jose, California, my birthplace and home until my parents decided to load up our 1992 Honda Civic and migrate to Dorothy’s land—Marysville, Kansas to be exact.

I looked around at the other kids, trying to gauge how to eat my food. Most grabbed this “sandwich” by two hands, with their thumbs on the bottom and other fingers digging into the top. They passed around a red bottle and a yellow bottle, squirting large globs of sauce on the turkey. Some were more creative and traced designs onto the edible canvas. By the time they were done, the sauce fell over the sides of the sandwich, plopping like paint on a palette on their food trays.

American cuisine was still quite foreign to me, growing up in my parent’s yet-to-be-assimilated home, which smelled of ginger and sesame oil rather than vanilla and butter. I immersed myself in American culture the only way I knew how: through imitation. Assuming my neighbor’s condiment waterfall was the typical portion, I placed a generous dollop of red in the center of my sandwich, topped by another heavy dollop of yellow.

The lunch lady on duty saw our well-dressed burgers and frowned in disapproval. “Don’t play with your food,” she said. Play? Several of my peers giggled at their exploited sandwiches, which they never planned on eating; the sandwiches were nothing more than amusement for kindergarten children. I had been duped. Embarrassed at my misunderstanding of their entertainment as normalcy, I pushed down on the spongy top bread to hide my sauce of

shame. I ended up throwing my sandwich away without ever taking a bite.

*Second Grade - 1999*

Marysville High School was hosting its annual field day for the local elementary students as well as those from a few neighboring towns. The high school's signature red track and field area had been transformed into stations for tire-rolling contests, Frisbee tosses, and many other simple athletic games. After the adult volunteers blew their whistles, I rotated to my next station — the potato sack race. The children lined up behind the burlap sacks that lay on the scratchy grass. One by one, clumsy children took turns crawling into the stiff sacks to participate in this strange game of handicapped hop frog. The race progressed at a slow and sloppy rate, so the children waiting in line had time to kill. I was familiar with most the kids that surrounded me, except for a few from Beattie, which was a 15-minute drive from Marysville. From a short distance across the football field, two of the Beattie girls stared at me. I wasn't compelled to say anything because I hated breaking the comfortable silence that always surrounded me. I figured if I didn't interact with my peers, then negative interaction was impossible. Besides, my aunt always told me, "do not talk if unnecessary," — and from what I had heard over the years from my classmates, almost everything was unnecessary. As a result, my quiet personality made me difficult to approach and easy to overlook.

Yet for some reason, the girls decided to look at me, of all things on that eventful day. Once I made eye contact with the shorter one, she taunted me.

"Chinese girl can't jump!" She giggled, which prompted second-in-command to laugh as well. Though they were just two girls — neither taller than a miniature Christmas tree — I felt like they great power over me. They initiated an attack, and the best I could hope for was a good defense. But, I said nothing. The comment came and went, and whistles and joyful whoops from the field drowned out the girl's comment. The expression on her face did not reflect the severity of what she had just said. It was nothing to her; she continued to kick up dirt from the field. I was numb.

When I thought the humiliating experience was over after a

matter of seconds, a blonde boy in my class piped up.

"She can jump!" I turned around to face David. He looked at me with eyes like gleaming blue marbles and gave me a sweet smile.

"You can do it, Connie." Though I wasn't particularly close to David at the time, I felt safer. He had the reputation of being a smart aleck, but he could be a sweetheart nonetheless.

Even to David's kind words, I said nothing. I thanked him the only way I knew how — I potato sacked. Not wanting to let David down, I hopped as hard as gravity would let me. With each bound across the field, I felt the burlap sack taut across the bottom of my shoes — a force that both stunted my stride and pulled me up off the ground, kind of like the mix of peers I left behind as I leapt across the finish line.

*Fourth Grade - 2001*

Tiffany had sparse mousy hair the color of dirty parchment. Her face was sunken in and lacked the jovial youth of most fourth graders. Tiffany's uniformly dull skin stretched over her rigid features and begged for a splash of color — even her lips were only half a shade darker, a muted brown. But if I had the choice, I would rather look at Tiffany than talk to her. My conversations with Tiffany were never stimulating; we chatted while waiting in line at the water fountain or in the few minutes before recess was over. Day after day, I would have to pretend to be stumped by the dense questions she posed. But, I gave Tiffany some credit; she at least noticed that I looked different from everyone else — which prompted her to ask me if I could speak Spanish.

But one day, Tiffany's curious personality caught me off guard. Staring between my eyes, Tiffany pinched the bridge of her own nose and said, "why is right here so short?" I remembered feeling an uncomfortable surge of heat to my head. Why did she have to ask me why I looked different? It was like asking why her hair was lighter than mine or why she was taller than me. That's just how things were. My fourth grade self wished to be more educated at the time, to express my annoyance and frustration in a respectable way. Even so, I wasn't about to synthesize the concept of genetics to some nincompoop like Tiffany. There was too much anger in me

that couldn't be settled, but I only replied, "I don't know."

Looking back, I knew it was an innocent question on Tiffany's part. My rage was fueled by her direct address to something I didn't want to acknowledge: I looked drastically different from everyone else. That day, I surreptitiously stared at the noses of all my classmates. Sure enough, they all had nice and tall bridges, like skyscrapers or the Statue of Liberty; this is what America looked like — not like me. My eyes were the shape of sunflower seeds and my strands of strikingly dark hair fell in small locks across my face like dangling vanilla beans. My classmates had light and fluffy hair, blinding in the sun. My skin had a sharp yellow tint that contrasted with their peachy hues. I stood out like a stain on white sheets. Luckily, I was half a head shorter than most my peers, and that was the only way I could be lost in a crowd.

*Fifth grade – 2002*

As a child, I always hated shopping with my mom. She liked to dress me in pretty patterns and monochromatic outfit sets, reminiscent of vibrant Chinese opera costumes. Though the darling getup and glittery butterfly hairpins drew compliments from my teachers, the dresses and skirts were impractical for a tomboy, and inhibited full play during recess. I was paranoid the wind would catch my velvet bejeweled skirt while I ran or swung on the monkey bars, so on those days, I sat on the shallow curb by the basketball hoops. I watched my classmates run around in their Nike shorts, blue jeans, and T-shirts from summer camps and sports clinics. I always admired the casual attire of the "jocks." Even if they weren't actually good at sports, I assumed they were skilled because they looked the part. Only a true athlete had the right to walk around in that uniform.

I would have been grateful for the small downgrade to jeans; my legs had never touched denim until the fifth grade. I had asked my mom for jeans before, but she claimed cotton pants and leggings were better because they stretched and easily fit my petite Asian frame. But in fifth grade — by some hand-me-down miracle or lapse in judgment on my mother's part—I received my first pair of jeans. It felt like a rite of passage, though they were not the least bit flattering: baggy, straight-legged, and a few inches short. I

paired it with a grey T-shirt sponsored by our local bank that read "think big, be big" in bold black lettering on the front; the back was tattooed with logos of other local businesses. These two frumpy articles of clothing constituted my favorite outfit, to the disgust of my mom. I didn't look as adorable as my pastel legging-clad self or adorable at all for that matter. I looked like an all-American, run-of-the-mill kid — and that's exactly what I liked about it.

On my first day of sporting the jeans, I received many comments about how I looked older, yet nobody could figure out why. It was the first day that I was not my mother's dress-up doll, not adorned with fruity velvet vests or pants with intricate stitching. I played dumb about the comments, refusing to point out my first pair of jeans — a milestone everyone else reached years ago. It was curious how the faded blue jeans, which were identical to everyone else's, attracted more attention than my old wardrobe. I stood out more when I tried to look like everyone else.

## What Will Be Done When the Sun Sets Red

By: Kyle Droppa

There's nothing quite like watching a sunset in the countryside. Fiery light burns down on fruitful landscapes of blues and purples and lapis and gold. Little droplets of the metallic rain pour down and caress me with warm embraces as I lie calm on my back. I can see crimson dragons fighting violet knights, Tuscan-orange travelers who've just found glowing treasure, and the tiny silhouettes of turquoise dolphins playing in a sea of cobalt. I'm in a tepid pool of serene bliss. But what if there's a person off to the side? They're staring at me; a detestable scowl mars their face as their eyes nearly bleed with fury. Before I can muster a question I'm greeted with a low, guttural growl. Lurid, caustic, cruel condemnations weave their way into a suffocating diatribe about my mouth. I had never seen this person before. Maybe they didn't like the way I dress or how I looked—black sweatshirt, jeans, and a ponytail—I guess it couldn't be that. Why are they so infuriated with me? I can't ask a single question; I can only listen with pounding ears to the roaring and raging derogatory stabs thrust into my terrified expression. It's hard to believe that in a matter of seconds, such a beautiful paradise could be torn asunder and replaced with a raging bout of chaos. Such is the world we live in.

As it stands right now, I haven't told you much about my identity: my name, my home, my social class, not even my gender. I actually wanted to ask you a favor. I'll introduce myself more and more as the story progresses, but for now would you mind hearing me out and holding onto your questions? I can't tell you how many people have just pushed me aside because of my age or my appearance or my voice or my social class. Would you mind? I know it's annoying when a person just leads you on like this and I'll say from experience that after a while it kind of pisses me off. How about we make a deal? I'll tell you as much as I can about myself as we go along and you'll hear me out all the way. Deal? If you just left this essay as is and didn't continue reading, I guess I it wasn't that good

of a deal to begin with. If you are still reading this, I really appreciate it and I promise to tell you as much as I can.

For as long as I've lived I've always seen hatred. Maybe hatred isn't the right word—Malice. Regardless of where it comes from, spite seems to relentlessly make its way into our lives on a regular basis, and is hardly ever justified. I'm no exception. The problem is I rarely know why. Seldom do people give their reasons for being spiteful, usually because the justification is either implied or too arguable. In either case, neither is often just and such is the world we live in.

To be honest I'm not sure what the qualities are that separate me. I'm a standard Caucasian looking teenager who consistently says "I'm Cuban" and still manages to give Steve Urkel a run for his money. Honestly, I don't do it for the sake of ethnic pride, or the sake of my identity, I do it so I can have a protective shield against those who would judge me for what I don't understand. In my case, I'm half Hungarian, one quarter Cuban and one quarter black. Unfortunately, I can't really use either or those in my description. In the case of black the reason is fairly straightforward. I don't exactly look white, more like I have a very faded adobe color on my body. I can still remember my experience from a trip I took roughly eight months ago. Springtime had just inched its ways out of a hollow and begun to blossom into a beautiful season. Unlike most high-school sophomores, I was attending a college tour that would occupy my two-week spring break. Nothing would be out-of-the-ordinary, but it was the FAME college tour. FAME is the Fund for the Advancement of Minority Education, namely black kids. The excursion was originally my parents' idea. "You'll get so much experience from this trip! This is what colleges are looking for; young high-schoolers willing to take the initiative and visit colleges and universities early." It was all true. I was going to and I did benefit immensely from the college experiences. Thanks to that I was able to become a much more critical analyst for what colleges I would or wouldn't want to apply to. What worried me was that I would be ostracized from the group. It sounded clichéd and stereotypical, and I mustered the logic to convince myself that it would work out differently. Within the first few days, I had made the acquaintance

of six or seven students and I started to raise my hopes.

I shouldn't have raised my hopes.

As time progressed, I was able to feel closer to my circle of friends. We chatted, we philosophized, we joked we gossiped. In the end though, none of it really broke the "race barrier". As we travelled to colleges, historically black or otherwise, I never found how to be comfortable. As the speakers qualified "how to improve the black community" and "how students like us could be the first minorities in our families to go to college," I felt the burrowing stares of my fellow students. No one directly confronted me about it, and I can always be thankful for that, but I knew what the message was, and I honestly couldn't argue with it. I didn't look black, and thus I didn't have the right to call myself black, let alone be there; heritage and culture meant nothing. In hindsight, I could have spoken up, or asked if there was anything I could do. I still know why I didn't ask. Who wants to hear a white kid complain about being ostracized by other black kids, when he's claiming to be black? It sounded more like a shallow and potentially racist argument. Apart from the kids who attended my school (and three very dear others) I was still the black sheep, or the white sheep, or just ugly mangled cat-off-the-street no one wanted at the pet store. To be honest I've never confided in anyone about this. Maybe it's because I already knew how it felt not to be wanted, and even hated for it. Such is the world I've lived in.

From the age of seven, I had a split visitation schedule. I spent Friday through Tuesday with my maternal grandparents—whom I live very happily with full time now—and Wednesday through Friday with my biological father. As a toddler and grade-school child, I didn't mind the schedule. When I was seven though, my biological father finally married. (He wasn't married in the first place, and I became my biological mother's bastard child, whom she eventually gave up to my grandparents. It wasn't until I was two that my biological father interrupted us.) For the next six years, I was the pinnacle of my stepmother's contempt. I never was able to identify what it was she disliked so much about me. All I knew for certain was that it had something to do with my Mum and Dad (my maternal grandparents, but in truth, I'll always know them as my

parents. My "biologicals" didn't exactly work out that well). Though she seldom came up, my stepmother entered an erratic state of rage whenever my biological mother came up. I didn't see her that often and hardly referred to her as my actual mother (those seldom times when I addressed her as "Mom" in an act of respect for giving me up for my Mum and Dad when it was clear that she couldn't raise me.); Nonetheless, whenever she was mentioned my stepmother went ballistic. As far as I could think, the only clear difference between the two of them was that my biological mother was half black and half Cuban, while my biological father was Hungarian. On various occasions, my biological father tried to force down every bit of Hungarian tradition into my mind. Unfortunately, he never continued with that venture in a consistent fashion, so I never really learned anything from him; even if I didn't learn anything, he resented any notion of me embracing the "other side" of my heritage. Aside from that, they were doing about the same paying work, they weren't around or were unreliable to equal degrees, and they had both made major mistakes in their youths that jeopardized their chances at succeeding further in life. Regardless I was the whipping boy. Being neurotic about how others would view my actions and words and crying at a second's glance became parts of my everyday life. Even when I was home with my mum and dad I barely slept every Tuesday night out a fear of what would be waiting for me the following day.

I never stood up to her after learning from experience that it only exacerbated the situation. As time progressed I grew detached from her jeers, learning that they would always hurt, but they were worth enduring, because I would eventually either go home to parents who didn't think of me as "it" or "that one" or the trademarked "little f\*\*\*er". I soon stopped crying and I haven't been able to muster tears since. I never contemplated suicide or drugs or alcohol, because my biologicals had embodied the drastic effects of nearly every one and then some.

In short, I know how it feels to be hated. I dealt with it until I was able to have that hellish world behind me when I entered high school. After dealing with that experience for so many years, I couldn't honestly feel any worse about being the odd kid out. I had

dealt with it for so long that I just shrugged it off.

But this isn't my problem.

This is a problem that affects countless children and teens across the board. I had a positive influence that kept me on a better path. Most kids don't.

Ostracization and abuse in the home are some of the most common causes of young suicide, drug use and alcohol addiction. They drive us to feel detached and less important. Self-worth goes out the window. Virtue and Scruples follow suit. Albeit this is not always the case, but it is usually the case that leads to death, disownment, abandonment and ultimately more hatred. I often wonder what would have happened if someone looked blindly at a teenager before they ended up in the obituaries, if they ignored their race, previous actions, social class etc. and looked at their character. Nothing more and nothing less. That defines us as human beings. We can talk about race and parenting and claim that they are what identify us. For that and that alone I call bullcrap. Our upbringings and our intellects and our ethics and our religions and our ethnicities and our passions and our disabilities and our talents all boil together and produce one thing: they produce character; they produce hearts. We can judge and jeer and love and praise as much as we want, but they matter for less than nothing if we cannot do so justly. Character defines, and any other attributes merely help. The next time you see someone looking at a sunset, make a decision. How will I judge or praise or love or despise this person? Will it be based on the body or will it be based on the heart; the world we live in, or the world we want to live in?

High School Prose, 1st Place

## My Soul and I

By: Sarah Ryan

She looked at me and said, "You're black."

Then she turned to my soul and said, "You're black."

"Yeah, I know" I said.

My soul nodded, "yeah," it said, "I know."

My soul and I had stumbled over what to fill out on the application in the ethnicity category.

There was no category for half black-half white. I didn't want to be the pedantic kid who checked other, refusing to define herself as one ethnicity, righteously protesting categorization. Because I don't care. I know I'm black; when you mix two colors together, the darker one wins out.

My soul, however, tried to mask its surprise. It didn't know it was black. But why? It wasn't that it thought it was white. It thought it was self. It thought it was special, different, unique, indefinable. Obviously not. It was black. How could it go this long without knowing?

I had grown up in a very diverse environment. Everyone had labels like, black, white, Hispanic, Indian or Asian. On our first day of school we had tags to tell people our names. My sticker said, "Hello, My name is Sarah." My skin said, "Hello, I'm black." We didn't wear our name tags the second day and everyone forgot, but we kept our ethnicity on, so that no one would have to ask. I knew people saw that I was black and because of it, knew things about me. They knew my ancestors we slaves. They knew they struggled and fought for freedom. They also assumed things about me. At first, the assumptions could shove me down. I would trip, their words like gravel, tearing into my palms and knees and peeling my skin back until it began to sting and foam blood. Eventually I grew calluses, hardly feeling it at all.

My soul never grew calluses. It did not know that everything being said applied to it. Not that everything was offensive, but it meant that people would rather group all black souls togeth-

er than get to know my soul personally. Up until now, my soul thought it was being judged on merit. My soul wondered why the application readers needed to know it at all. The application had sections for grades, extracurricular activities, recommendations, a personal statement, and finances, for aid, but what would race tell it? How do skin color and heritage weigh in to the decision? These were neither accomplished nor earned.

Marking down black on an application could be to my advantage when I apply to college. If there are two students with identical applications applying they will often go with the minority, or so I'm told. I do see that there is some unfairness to this, but when I apply to school I will do anything to make myself look better. If they pick me to boost their minority numbers, that's fine. I can show schools my talents once I am already there.

My soul does not like to ask for help or to be given an unfair advantage. When its fortitude and determination pay off, my soul is reassured of its abilities and feels talented. Thinking that it did not earn all of its opportunities crushes it. Did people see its talent? Its hard work? All its life my soul had thought it was given opportunities because of its effort. My soul lost confidence.

I saw my soul on the ground nursing its skinned knee, sipping air, trying to keep composure. I helped it up. I told it that time heals all wounds; my soul just needed some time to adjust to its new label, to being defined. After all, my soul and I live in a very diverse and accepting community. On my dad's side I have first cousins that are red haired Irish and others that are half Korean. We all look alike still with the same nose and face shape. We are family. In my life it is rare that my ethnicity is ever even discussed, except, of course, on applications. However, I am occasionally confronted by prejudiced people and remarks. When this happens, I use my thicker skin to protect myself. I've gotten strong. My soul would learn eventually, but right then, in that moment, my soul could only think about how it was not going to cry.

I checked the box labeled African-American nonetheless. I can't protect my soul's feelings forever. At some point it has to learn how the world works. My soul will have to grow calluses too.

High School Prose, 2nd Place

## **Living the Dream**

By: Elijah Dumaine-Schutz

The morning dew was still sticking to each blade of grass as I passed my neighbor's yard. My bike was straining against the effort I put in to slowly struggle my way up the hill. Today just felt like a normal North Carolina day. I woke up to the sound of my dog scratching at my door, I walked downstairs to find my parents talking in whispers to each other, and yet I was too tired to care. The radio was on and I remember hearing the familiar sound of National Public Radio like I always did in our small kitchen.

As my school slowly crept into view and my eyes adjusted to the new light, two cars sped past my brother and I. Our friends waved at us from inside blackened windows as their parents hurriedly got them to school. We slowly made our way down through the entrance of our school after putting our bikes away; every step felt like a relief from the uncomfortable ride there. Smiling teachers and cheerful students passed us in bundles as we made our way to our cubbies. A friend jumped out from behind the corner of the stairwell and startled my brother and I, here too we all loved to scare each other and make every one jump. We talked about our weekends, who we hung out with, and what mischief we could get into without our parents knowing. Our conversation lasted until we sat down for homeroom and began taking attendance. Every student sat quietly as our teacher explained to us what we had to do this morning. I heard the teacher say, "Tell us what you did with your mom and dad this weekend" and began to lose focus on her words. The first student was three seconds in to his story before he began stuttering and getting nervous. Eventually I ignored the chain of students that were called up to present to everyone. I could hear the chirping of the birds outside the window as the morning breeze shook the branches of the trees outside our classroom windows. I was slowly picking the knots out of the linen in the carpet, tugging with my fingernails. I hadn't realized it, but our teacher had been calling me over and over again before I finally heard her.

I walked up to the front of the class while all the other kids dozed off or spaced out.

“Well this Saturday my brother and my mom went to my grandma’s house to help build a shed. As my little brother stayed home with a friend, my mom and I went to Home Depot for more wood,” I slowly stated.

Almost immediately the kids in my class began to regain focus and acquired a puzzled look on their face.

“Wait, how did you go with your mom to Home Depot if she was at your grandma’s house with your brother?” someone from the class asked.

“Well I have two moms, Stephanie and Marcia,” I calmly answered.

“What about your dad?”

“I don’t have a dad, my parents are gay.”

Unlike Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was well known and a good speaker, I was an awkward 8 year old boy standing in front of his 2nd grade class trying to explain how he didn’t have a father. I did not know how to react to my class, my friends, asking me and pestering me on how my family functioned and worked with two gay people. When it came to these issues, there was, and still is, an endless combination of rude behavior and inappropriate questions that apparently come naturally to curious people, but like Dr. King, I had to deal with this head on.

Even before hearing about my parental predicament, kids would constantly toss around the words “fag” and “gay” like it was no big deal. I would have to watch what I say around people to make sure someone didn’t say “that’s gay” or simply scream out “gay!” The idea that homosexuality is something to be made fun of and used as a clever prop to a joke has dominated the minds of the adolescent recently. Children are committing suicide across the United States because they are afraid that they will not be accepted, either by their friends, or even their own parents. And still, the idea that homosexuality is something to joke about is continuously brought up in everyday conversation.

Was it not decided years ago that equality is part of this nation’s foundation? Why should one man, woman, or child be

subjected to certain rights and privileges that another is not? Maybe we still live in the day and age where equality is too scary a thought. However I believe differently. I believe that each person deserves exactly what the next person deserves.

Before, being white and being black was disputed as being right vs. being wrong. And still, despite the enormous steps we have made towards becoming a fair and equal society, that goal eludes us. As Martin Luther King Jr. put it, “This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Dr. King was speaking not only for the rights of African Americans, but also for the rights, equality, and freedom of every man, woman, and child to grace this land of ours. Except his dream has not been fulfilled and that promise has not been kept. How can it be when people continue to oppress and discriminate against struggles like homosexuality? Until people realize that the struggle for equality is the struggle for a nation built around its people, and not its superstition, we cannot and never will be a free people. Homosexuality is not a sin and should not be talked about with hushed tones and worried looks. Allow the freedom of self-expression and freedom to be take its full effect by treating every one as your equal, and no one as your lesser.

## He Had a Nightmare

By: Nathaniel Brodsky

I am upset, perturbed, agitated, dismayed, cut up, discomfited, by guilt, self-delusion, self-righteousness, pretension, and moralizing. You know what? Martin would be, too.

Martin wouldn't like you considering your personal vote for Barack Obama as an apology by the entire Caucasian race for the entire era of oppression that they imposed on blacks. Nor would Martin like overly-earnest Northern liberals feeling so awful for something that someone in Alabama's ancestors did. You didn't own slaves, you didn't keep blacks from using good schools and drinking fountains, and your ancestors probably didn't either. So stop being unproductive. Martin would not approve. Martin would want you to address problems, not wax wide-eyed about the addressing of problems in 1964.

I don't know this, of course. I never met the man. My interpretation of his beliefs comes solely from my own innate biases. And yours do, too.

People talk about Martin like he's the second coming because they want him to be. After all, if our post-racial messiah truly has come down from on high, or Atlanta, it means everyone's sins are redeemed. Secretly think something even remotely derogatory when reading about urban crime? It's okay, Martin knows that you really do adore African-Americans, which, by the way, was a term he never used, opting for the now-panned 'Negro.' Enjoy a racially-tinged joke on Family Guy? It's okay, because as long as you sit down your child for a profound, mind-altering discussion on a Monday in January, say five Hail Rosa Parks, and roll your eyes whenever South Carolina comes up in conversation, Our Martin who art in Heaven will forgive you. After all, you're so mind-blowingly tolerant, how couldn't he?

But Martin wouldn't care about your sanctimoniousness. He'd look at your comfortable lifestyle in your racially segregated city, where by some measures only 4.8% of whites live on integrated

blocks, a rate that is worse than Atlanta, Birmingham, or Memphis, and just shake his head. Maybe he'd pronounce a majestic metaphor in his booming baritone, if he was especially livid. The big problem with our epidemic of Martin-veneration is that we don't understand him and what he wanted and believed. He wasn't just passionate about racial equality, he cared about economic equality, and most of his most vocal idolaters among the white-college-graduate clique would probably be horrified by that idea, if they got into the nitty-gritty details of it. He doesn't want a memorial, certainly not one reminiscent of Maoist China, he doesn't want a holiday, he doesn't even want inner-city boulevards and junior highs. He just wants you to do something. Anything.

You won't though, and he knows that. Do you know why you won't? Because we, as a culture, haven't arrived at Martin. We have been born to him. Martin looks at our fanboyish adoration, arrived at not through soul-searching and philosophy but through rote instruction in school and constant reminders throughout life to feel guilty, and he laughs at it. Because he knows, dear reader, that we are not worthy of him. We don't fight for causes anymore; heck, we don't have causes anymore, and if we do, we are verbally maligned as tree-huggers, tea-baggers, and some names for gays that don't belong in a family essay.

We are not brave enough as a society to embrace anyone or anything, let alone someone as, let's face it, radical as Martin was. We may not be as evil as Bull Connor and the others who turned fire hoses on innocent adolescents, but I don't think it's right to flatter ourselves into believing that we'd be right there singing "We Shall Overcome," because we simply wouldn't. Most of us would be the white moderates that he so virulently lambasted in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" for preferring order to justice and providing "lukewarm acceptance," which he viewed as worse than "outright rejection." If there is a Martin out there today, we, as a nation, are probably criticizing him for the same reasons that our wishy-washy forefathers did in the 1960's.

I wish to say, though, that just because he was too militant for our current bland culture does not mean that you should dislike him or disrespect him. There's been hardly a more likable or re-

spectable figure in our nation's history. Just give the man his due. He was not a stained-glass window; he was a real, living being, with a real personality. He liked Tolstoy novels. He sang in a choir as a teenager. He won a Grammy. He's not a polysyllabic name on the top of a page in your household Bible, he's a real martyr. And he probably would not appreciate sheep-people who only care about bus boycotts and "I Have a Dream" using him as a password to try and gain access to the sociopolitical equivalent of the cool table, when they have no appreciation for the things he was most proud of, namely, his opposition to the Vietnam War and his desire to "feed the hungry [and] clothe the naked."

When he was killed, he was not trying to desegregate something or inspire white liberals, he was speaking on behalf of striking sanitation workers, the type of unionized public-sector workers who are loathed by most of contemporary America for their pensions and collective-bargaining agreements. In his last speeches, foremost among them "I've Been to the Mountaintop" and "Where Do We Go From Here," equality between the races took a backseat to the concept of equality in the classes. In fact, Bobby Kennedy ordered the FBI to wiretap him because he was suspected of having communistic leanings. Any society in which even the relatively tame ideology of socialism has turned into a curse word is clearly not one in which he would thrive.

The same goes for warfare. During his last few years, Martin saw his credibility among white Democrats and other similar groups plummet due to his avowed opposition to what he perceived as a classist and racist war. LBJ, the great lion of the Civil Rights Movement, completely cut him off as a punishment for his pacifist unorthodoxy. In a world where nuclear war seems less like a nightmare and more like a real-life tragedy, and respectable politicians encourage having every option on the table viz. Iran, I really find it hard to believe that Martin would be listened to, unless it was as a conservative propaganda piece to paint liberals as soft on terrorism.

This MLK Day, we should try a novel approach. Instead of having elementary schoolers reenact the arrest of Rosa Parks or posting clips of "I Have a Dream" on Facebook, we should actually talk about what he thought. And if that means his vehement op-

position to the aspects of inequality that we like, along with those aspects that make us feel guilty, so be it. Who knows, if everything works out, we might become so comfortable with the blessed feeling of ambivalence that we'll be physically able to say the name 'Malcolm X' by this time next year. And wouldn't that be something.

# Prose Honorable Mentions

## **College:**

“More Than That”  
by Lurnie Wilson

## **High School:**

“Assumptions”  
by Madeline Schmiedeknecht

“Ending Hatred: My Struggle with Reverse Racism”  
by Bill Fox

“Discrimination in a Changing World”  
by Naeem Davis

To read the prose honorable mentions, visit:  
<http://www.cmu.edu/hss/english/courses/writing-awards/mlk/index.html>