

A black and white close-up photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. He is looking slightly to the left of the camera with a serious expression. His mouth is open as if he is speaking. He is wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a patterned tie. In the foreground, there are several microphones on stands, some with foam covers. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

**Martin Luther
King, Jr. Day
Writing Awards
Honorable Mentions**

**Carnegie Mellon University
January 19, 2015**

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Jim Daniels, Thomas Stockham Baker University Professor of English

Carnegie Mellon

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

**Honorable Mentions
January 19th, 2015**

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

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Poetry

War

Nini Duong

Men and women, young and old.
People of color, they protest.
Peacefully lined up on the streets,
Marching for the justice they deserve.
Shot down by heavily armed policemen;
The ones who “protect” and “serve” us
Bleeding from German shepherd bites and
Suffocating in the fog of tear gas.
The real question is,
Did I describe the daily life
Of a Civil Rights activist?
Or of the civilians of Ferguson on this present day?

We are at war.
The protective with the protected,
Now the abuser against the abused.
The injustice against the yet-to-be justified.
The oppression against the oppressed.
The racism against the victims.
We are at war again,
And we won't stop fighting back.

That Girl

Elena Xiong

I flow into the room
Wearing the color
Of the mountains,
Of the rivers, and
Of the cherry blossoms

I sit next to my American friends
And they ask me,
“Are you Japanese? Who are you?”
I am Chinese
“What are you eating? That's gross...”
What are you talking about?
Only tomatoes with scrambled eggs

They pretend to be nice to me
“I can speak Chinese. Niiiii-hao.”
And they laugh and cover their mouths
I stay silent and poke at my food
Ignore them, ignore them

At recess, I ease into one of the swings
And look at all of my classmates,
Giggling and playing
All melting into one
I am on the outside
They are the yolk
And I will forever be the egg whites

There is one girl in a yellow sweater
Who comes up to me when I am alone
She is actually nice
After eating in the bathroom
To escape the Americans' probing

Questions,
I bump into her
She looks at my tiny lunchbox
Packed with only small crackers,
Sesame chicken, and of course
Scrambled eggs with tomatoes
Then she gives me an apple
"Hey, wanna come play with me?"
"Okay."
We play ball,
Kicking it until it
Soars into the air, towards the sun

The girl turns to me
"I wanna fly like that ball!"
I want to fly out of here
"Do you like school?"
I shake my head
"Why not?"
I just shrug
"You don't talk much, do you?"
I clasp her hands
"You know, I like eggs! And my mom loves growing tomatoes."
Slowly I form a smile
"Wanna come over to my house later?"
I look at her face
No, I look into her face
And see the sun reflected in her
She is nice
"Yeah," I say
"Good. We can play Scrabble."

Walking home

I spot a carload of boys
They yell
"Hey china doll!"
And laugh
My face burns
Running home
I tell my mother
Mother replies
"That's how they treat you here in America.
Just ignore them."

But *that* girl was nice

Loss of Innocence

Jessica Wittig

PART 1

I was 12
headstrong and stubborn
My friends and I were walking around
the neighborhood
It was getting dark; time to go home
My one friend and I were going back to her house
like we always do
We start walking down an alley
but we are stopped
by the guys we are with
They say we cannot go that way
By ourselves
that we cannot go down that way since we are girls
The same way we walk daily
past the dentist
the giant old tree
cross a road, and we are home
They tell us it is not safe
but don't have a solid reason why
We are outraged, who are they
to tell us we cannot simply
walk down an alley?
We can handle anything that comes our way.
We are fast; we are strong.
but they do not give in and we go
walking home on main streets
with them by our sides.

...

I am 16
and I cannot walk down the street
without fear of a man walking too close behind me

and deciding that he is bored
and that I am the lucky girl
To cure his boredom
I am 16
and cannot walk into a party
without automatically
being on my guard
for any boy who decides to look at me for too long.
It is the simple fact that
I cannot go anywhere
by myself without
fear creeping into my bloodstream
and never leaving
until I am safely in my bed again.
When I am 17
I want to be able
to walk down that alley
that I wanted to
When I was 12
and not shake with fear the entire way home.

PART 2

Before I decided I was
old enough to become
an adult
I didn't have to think twice
about walking
down a street alone
Before you decided to make me a woman
in ways that I didn't
want to be
I wasn't afraid

of a boy;
because they are not men;
Who gripped my hand too hard
or who simply looked at me
for a second too long

Prose

I Hate Public Restrooms

Clara Dregalla

There are two doors.

I have to make a choice, and I have to make it quickly. I shift my weight from foot to foot, looking down at my plain T-shirt, my baggy jeans. I feel a terrible vertigo at such a mundane task, and no matter what I do, my choice will be wrong.

There are two doors, and I really have to pee.

I shouldn't have to weigh my safety every time I have to use the goddamn bathroom, but every time I'm forced into this terrible situation I have to pop my eyes out of my head and look back at myself as if I'm a stranger. Do I look too much like a boy for the women's room? Will I be yelled at again, will someone pull on my shirt and try to throw me out again? It's understandable to be upset if someone who looks like a boy tries to get into the girl's bathroom. Will I be making other people feel unsafe? Do I have the right to do that? Alternatively, if I go into the men's room, will I be safe? In my experience, men are too busy avoiding eye contact to notice anyone else's bathroom habits enough to make conjectures about their genital configuration, but what if my chest isn't as flat as I thought it was and everyone notices? What if someone decides I need to be punished for my gender transgressions?

I've been fortunate enough to never be seriously harmed in either bathroom, but it becomes a symbol of so much shame. Two choices, neither of them comfortable or safe. Two choices, and I don't fit in either place. It feels like the world is split in two, and I have to live my life at the bottom of a ravine, some strange chimera unfit to live on the surface. It feels like I have to slice myself into pieces, as if male and female can't coexist peacefully in the same body.

I've tried to just be a girl. I've tried to just be a boy. I've tried to slice myself up into small pieces and sew the mess back together into something easier for other people to understand. I've tried and tried, but I can't. I can't be one or the other. I can't kill the parts of myself that my Health teacher says can't be real. In the words of the beatific goddess Dana Scully, "nothing happens in contradiction to nature, only in contradiction to what we know of it." My body is my body, and my gender is my gender, and I am *real*.

A Negative Peace

Carrie Mannino

It began when they told us it was Pride weekend. I had to stop myself from laughing at the irony, knowing their politics and knowing mine. But after the first day it stopped being funny. We walked down to dinner, into Balboa Park, where preparations for the parade were already being made. It was the kind of day we rarely get in Pittsburgh but that is commonplace in San Diego, where there's enough breeze that it isn't sticky, and the warmth envelops you at every step. I could tell that my aunt was on edge, but I chalked it up to anxiety caused by having houseguests. We were discussing something trivial, like the nice weather, or what food we'd order; it's dangerous to discuss much else with this part of my family.

I could see the People for the American Way volunteer once we turned the corner, recognizing the logo on her clipboard from the note pads strewn around my house. As we passed, she asked us if we'd be willing to support marriage equality. Before anyone else could speak, my aunt, without looking at the woman, responded, "Definitely not," and brushed past her, all of the agitation I had sensed earlier morphing into what it really was: anger. I felt like I should say something, even quietly, to indicate to the volunteer that I did not share the same views. But then we'd walked on, and it was too late.

My parents and I stayed at my aunt and uncle's for nearly a week, and, unfortunately, that was enough time for the situation to get progressively worse. After the petition incident, my aunt announced that gay people had equal rights in this country and that they should stop attempting to gain attention. Neither my parents nor I responded. We did not wish to start a fight with our hosts, because they were our family, and we wanted our short visit to be pleasant and amiable.

One night, my uncle took my father and me on a drive, and we began talking. First, it was about school: am I looking at colleges, what extracurriculars am I doing, do I have any idea of a major? Then, somehow, we got to the subject of Pride and, more generally, homosexuality. My uncle began to explain to us, using an unequivocal tone, that there are increasing numbers of AIDS cases among "the gays" because AIDS is considered a "chronic disease." He told us that now that there are affordable drugs used for treatment, it is no longer seen as a problem. He also linked his argument back to ObamaCare, stating that the rest of the country now had to pay for this "irresponsibility". My dad had argued with him, in the loving-yet-firm way that he could because they were brothers, and succeeded in nothing more than changing the subject. I honestly do not remember contributing anything to the conversation; I felt out of place and feared that I could never look forward to a family visit here again.

These callous statements filled with uninformed medical assertions shocked me. My

uncle is a doctor, a technically retired neonatologist who loves working with babies so much that he continues to go into the hospital to help out. There is no doubt in my mind that he is an intelligent and nurturing man. My aunt, also, has always been nothing but kind to me; I've received cards for every holiday since I was little, including Valentine's Day and Halloween. She's even made my Christmas cards Hanukkah-inclusive, since she knows that I identify with my mom's Judaism. Whenever my aunt calls, she asks to talk to me, and shows interest in my life and well-being. Both my aunt and uncle express care, and attempt to maintain a degree of closeness despite our disparate locations. I love them, and I recognize that I should treat them with respect and kindness. One night while staying with my relatives, I thought about my relationship with them and my silence in response to what they'd said. I told myself that I should have pointed out to my uncle that very few schools offer non-hetero sex-ed, which is a much more logical (and factual) reason that the STI numbers are going up in gay teenagers. I was upset with myself for not having said this at the time. Some of my closest friends are members of the LGBT community, and every one of my aunt and uncle's comments made me protective not only of them but also of every other person my relatives flippantly insulted. I had been so insulated, living in a relatively liberal neighborhood, that homophobia seemed like a distant threat, something to discuss ardently with other people who shared my views. When faced with actual bigotry, and bigotry coming from my own family, I had no idea how to respond.

For six days, I did not say a word about my beliefs. I bit my lip and folded into myself in anger, but I did not say anything to refute any of their claims. I felt that doing so would result in nothing but severed ties and walls of hurt and misunderstanding. I screamed at my parents when we were out of the house, twisted my frustration onto them when it was actually towards myself. I claim to be so liberal, so active, so involved and so passionate; and yet, in the real world, I was unable to refute intolerant statements because I feared that I would upset my relatives. I felt like a hypocrite; I felt like a fraud. I wanted to know where the line was between respect for family and respect for moral values. Was it wrong to believe that my aunt and uncle's opinions were unjust? Would it be wrong to tell them so? Would it be worth risking familial love for the sake of human justice? And, honestly, could I have said anything that made a difference?

In Letter From Birmingham Jail, Martin Luther King Jr. states that he has "almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block. . . . toward freedom is not the White citizens' 'Councilor' or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice." In modern society, the "white moderate"

becomes synonymous with the bystander; the one who signs online petitions and claims to support the cause, but, when faced with anything that affects her or his own life, quietly walks away. It is not just the ignorant, angry people professing hatred and intolerance in our world who prevent justice; it is also all those around who allow it to happen. I was too afraid of hurting my relatives' feelings to speak up for my beliefs and to protect the rights of my friends and all those in the LGBT community. Why? Because the comments did not directly attack me, and I convinced myself that nothing I could say would change my relatives' minds. Perhaps it was true; perhaps my words could not have had lasting effect. But at least I could have made them justify their beliefs to me and to themselves, and hopefully find fallacy, whether they were willing to accept it or not.

A "negative peace" seems civil and respectful, but it carries the weight of ignored injustice. Tension is a necessary point of change. The unifying factor of all civil rights leaders is their courage; their willingness to push the boundaries and to face that tension in order to bring justice, even if only in small amounts, to the world. I should have said something to my relatives. Whether or not I shaped their opinions, at least they would know the facts. By ignoring their comments, I allowed my comfort to dictate my actions. By staying silent when I should have spoken up, I became an accomplice in their discrimination. And yet, if placed in the same situation today, I cannot promise that I would act differently.

not your babe

Elsa Eckenrode

i.

What my mom will tell me—

Standing over the sink: do the dishes. for once. you're no good.

Folding laundry: no man will want you. you can't do anything.

Cleaning the house: how will we ever marry you off?

and I'm sorry, I tell her I'm sorry and I don't know if I am. She is asking too much and honest to God I hate confrontation but she won't stop looking at me like that, like I mean nothing to her.

When I told my mom I was gay I felt guilty. There is no other word. She gave me the same look but now it was different. She looked at me like I was unfamiliar. I am comfortable being gay. I don't think it's a phase. I didn't mean to let you down.

ii.

"You know, Elsa, at my high school I had a few lesbian friends. They're all married to men now."

My dad told me this and I don't think I ever hated him more for saying anything to me. I am valid. I am legitimate. I didn't ask.

iii.

How I came out to my parents: I didn't.

It's Tuesday and my dad tells me he is coming home late. I'm in my room with a girl I tell him is my friend. She's catching a bus at 8.30. He texts me at 8.20 and says he'll be home soon. We leave. I take her to the bus and I kiss her goodbye and my parents will never know because this is a secret, and I don't want to let them down again.

8.35, I'm home: he won't make eye contact. He goes to his room and he is making a hurried phone call.

An hour later he finds me and tells me he knows my friend and I were kissing, and I know it's not

a secret anymore. He tells me he walked in and then left the house because he didn't know what to do. He couldn't comprehend it. He texted me he was coming home after already being home. He tells me that he got off the phone with my mom a few minutes ago.

Everything slows down and I know it's real because this is confrontation and I hate it, and he's giving me that look, and I wish my parents weren't so disappointed in me.

I tell him I'm sorry and he says it's okay, but he still has the nerve to mention teen pregnancy.

iv.

He asked, "You have a girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean girl friend?"

"No, actually, I mean I am dating a girl."

"But you guys are just friends, right?"

"No, we're dating, girlfriend and girlfriend. Like girlfriend and boyfriend"

The questions are flooding me—

"Who's the guy?"

"Can I watch?"

"Are you sure you're gay?"

"I thought you had a boyfriend?"

But now I can't answer. I don't want to. I can't.

v.

She isn't just my friend.

vi.

"Fag."

"Dyke."

"Lipstick lesbian."

When did my sexuality become my definition?

vii.

A man will ask me “Hey, baby, where you goin’?” and it makes me shutter, he is so casual, I feel so sick that he will approach me like this and expect a warm welcome. Sorry, I’m not an object, I’m not eye candy, and I am not your babe.

