

# Acknowledgments

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Jim Daniels, Thomas Stockham Baker University Professor of English



**Carnegie Mellon**

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

**January 19th, 2015**

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

# Table of Contents

## College

### Poetry

- 8 *First Place* / Michael Mingo, "Rural Vandalism"
- 9 *Second Place* / Siriana Abboud, "To Lebanon"
- 11 *Third Place* / Joshua Brown, "When I Was Born, I Came Out Swinging"

### Prose

- 14 *First Place* / Sophie Rose Zucker, "The Washing"
- 19 *Second Place* / Ellie Liu, "On Language"
- 25 *Third Place* / Michelle Mathew, "Fair and Lovely"

## **High School**

### **Poetry**

- 32 *First Place* / Alexis Payne, "Strange Fruit"
- 34 *Second Place* / Isaac Monroe, "I Have it Hard (That's a Lie)"
- 36 *Third Place (tie)* / Siraji Hassan, "I Am Different"
- 39 *Third Place (tie)* / Drew Praskovich, "Angelic"

### **Prose**

- 42 *First Place* / Amma Ababio, "The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning"
- 46 *Second Place* / Alexis Payne, "Being Human"
- 49 *Third Place (tie)* / Amanda Talbot, "Grandmothers Have Favorites"
- 51 *Third Place (tie)* / Harrison Smith, "How Understanding Race Relations Reformed My Worldview"

### **Honorable Mentions**

- Nini Duong, "War"
- Elena Xiong, "That Girl"
- Jessica Wittig, "Loss of Innocence"
- Clara Dregalla, "I Hate Public Restrooms"
- Carrie Mannino, "A Negative Peace"
- Elsa Eckenrode, "not your babe"

To read both college and high school honorable mentions, visit:  
<http://www.cmu.edu/hss/english/courses/writing-awards/mlk>



# College Poetry

# Rural Vandalism

**Michael Mingo**

**First Place**

My hometown's demographic data  
is a punch-line: ninety-five percent white,

five percent black bear. The cedar trees  
outnumber the residents seven-to-one.

The mountains are an empty set. According  
to my folks, they—the understood they—

will never move to our neck of the woods;  
the jobs are in Paterson and Kearny.

"We moved out, and they moved in." It's easy  
to feel secluded, on guard, as shadows

branch out over the roof. The other night  
someone dropped a stone through our windshield.

The glass fragments gathered on the dashboard  
will not reflect the culprit's face. We all,

I'm sure, have our kneejerk suspicions.  
The laws of probability say otherwise.

# To Lebanon

**Siriana Abboud**

**Second Place**

I was born in a village between two mountains  
in a house built on cedar-scented soil,  
where yellow stones and olive trees stood proud  
under the sun and bowed beneath the stars to sleep.

You, my land, have raised me.

Every night, we broke your silence  
and fed the soft sound of the flute  
into our waiting ears.

You are my father's voice  
singing melodies of Arabic  
aged forty-five years.

He was my translator  
and you my scribe.

You traced the old Arabic onto  
your black soil in gardens of  
blood red pomegranates and white pears,  
through vineyards of purple grapes,  
and beneath the cool leaves of  
blackberries swollen with a sweet juice  
that stained my eager palms and tongue.

You are the cricket song in the calm of the mountain night,  
in those young hours when crackles of burning wood could be heard.

You are the humble hours spent in country vineyards  
nestled well beyond the black lake and deep into the valley.

And in that sacred hour before dawn breaks,

you tell hushed stories of fallen empires  
in the white fog that shrouds the town.

And there we sat, my father and I,  
every night before the bonfire  
between two mountains, hued purple in the dark,  
perfumed with the smoky scent of pine.

And now I, lost in a land that is not my father's,  
am equally lost in your splendor,  
imprisoned in the dream of you.

And my father is haunted by the ghost  
of his own father, a proud man whose  
last breath of air filled his lungs with  
the air of a foreign land. And my father lives  
in fear of having his own marble  
gravestone in this same, distant land.

This yearning to return to you is stubborn,  
like your embers that blaze and linger  
in the fire's last breath.

# When I was Born, I came out Swinging

**Joshua Brown**

**Third Place**

When I was born, I came out swinging.  
I spanked the nurse, and he tried wringing  
My little neck.  
I spanked the doctor, and she cried while bringing  
My bassinet.

When I was born, I came out singing.  
I tried harmonizing, desperately clinging  
To the hope that I would emerge to find  
A world willing to embrace the differing  
Pitch of my discordant heart strings.

When I was born, I came out swinging,  
Prepared to beat back the savage stinging  
Of this world's brutal preoccupation  
With my private passions.

When I was born, I came out singing  
The praises of doves, gracefully winging  
Across my future's love-torn horizon,  
Rebuking Cardinals for their bloody  
Prejudice.

My heart never stops tingling  
With love for lovely men and women,  
This part of me, ceaselessly ringing  
With rage for mankind's withheld  
Kindness.

When I was born, I came out.  
Wasn't once enough?



# College Prose

# The Washing

**Sophie Rose Zucker**

**First Place**

Every two months, my mother goes to our hairstylist, Joanne, and sits under a hairdryer for four hours. The Brazilian Blowout, or, as my mother calls it, “hair-o-rama,” involves the application of a chemical mixture to the whole head and heating as the hair is brushed straight. She sits there, reading magazines, and waits for her hair to straighten itself. I’m a pretty pro-chemical person—I drink a lot of diet soda and use a lot of prescription medicine. But every article and research study on the Brazilian Blowout has indicated that, despite the company’s public statements, the method relies on formaldehyde that is released into my mother’s hair, into Joanne’s air.

Formaldehyde is in household cleaning products, building materials, and synthetic fabrics. If it touches your skin, it can cause hives. If you breathe it in, it can cause nasal cancer, brain cancer, or leukemia. If you sit with the solution on your hair as the solution is heated under a hairdryer or flatiron, well, you breathe it in.

The Brazilian Blowout originated in Brazil. Legend has it that the method was discovered by an embalmer. As she carefully preserved the bodies of the deceased, tracing embalming fluid over their scalps, she noticed their hair, no longer in its natural state, became straight and shiny, and that texture lasted, even after washing.

The embalmer probably touched her own hair, looked at herself in the mirror, frizzy curls tied back in a knot. She tested it on herself first, probably. She knew the proper process: gloves, mask, ventilation. She would have coated her hair and waited, then washed. Surreal elation must have washed over her as she touched her new hair, silken and smooth.

In March of 2007, a woman in Brazil died from the Brazilian Blowout. This prompted a worldwide enforcement of a ban on formaldehyde, restricting the amount of formaldehyde allowed in the product to less than 0.2%. But there were ways around it.

An *Allure* article in 2007, “Scared Straight,” described a reporter who, desperate for the inside scoop, called several beauty salons posing as a customer. She asked for the Brazilian Blowout and requested “the real thing from Brazil, not the US one.” Salon owners referred her to outside sources. One said, “Wait by your phone. I know someone who’s got what you need.” Others encouraged her to come in during off hours or private homes, where they could dispense the goods. It sounded like she was buying illegal drugs.

That's what it's like, though, when your hair is straightened for the first time, really, properly, blown out. It's addictive. With curly hair, you can never touch it; brushing your hands through it will break up the curl, and there are always mats of tangles at the nape of your neck, threatening to surface. With straight hair, though, you let your fingers trail through your hair. You can comb it; rake your fingers through it. It is a river of endless liquid.

Two years ago, my mother began volunteering for the Chevra Kadisha. The Chevra Kadisha prepares the bodies of the deceased for proper Jewish burial. The dead must be pure— removed of any blood or dirt, without makeup or jewelry. She washes their bodies first with water, then she submerges them in the mikvah, a ceremonial bath, their final rinse and return to purity. When my mother returns from performing taharah, she tells me how enlightening it is to acknowledge the human body, away from society's obsession with perfection. She reminds me that every body is imperfect—everyone dies with boogers and unclipped toenails. Then, she says, winking conspiratorially, "You have to be a part of the Chevra, so you can straighten my hair before I am buried." Jews rarely have open caskets.

A strand of hair has two parts. Hair's outer shell is protective, hard scales. The scales of straight hair lie flat and even, like ducks in a row, like barrettes in an even line. Curly hair, though, has scales that partially stick up, never lying truly flat. It's why curly hair is often described as "dull"; it never distributes an even shine like straight, flat hair, but gets big and rough. The true difference between curly hair and straight hair, however, is the shape of the cuticle. The cuticles of straight hair are even circles, and the strands of straight hair are even cylinders that lie flat and fall straight. The curlier your hair is, the flatter the cuticle, the less like a circle and more like an oval, the more it wraps around itself, uneven scales curling into each other as they attempt to create even circles.

The Brazilian Blowout goes deep into the cuticle of the hair, into its soft center. Formaldehyde is a small organic molecule, capable of penetrating the outer shell of the hair, and is very reactive and volatile. It binds to the fibers in hair and reforms their structure, causing a semi-permanent change to the way hair curls, getting between the hydrogen bonds and polymers and evening out the structure.

Flat ironing, the easier option, never touches the inner core of hair. Flat ironing relies on heat to

bend the hair's tertiary structure, releasing it from its natural bonds. An iron breaks down the natural hydrogen bonding in the hair's cortex, forcing the bonds into a system of higher energy, of greater steric tension, of straightness. Upon washing, hair is introduced to the polar system of water, and the ironing wears off— until, after the shower, you do it again.

I don't know when my mother started straightening her hair. There are pictures of me as a baby, in her lap, playing with curls that stretched down to her stomach. Her hairs were springs that you could knot or braid and never need a hair tie to keep together. I do know, via oft-repeated maxim in my home, that my father decided to ask my mother on a date when he saw her hair straight for the first time. He said this to me when I straightened my hair for the first day of eighth grade, when I decided to cut off all of my hair during my senior year of high school, and when I started gelling my hair, making it curlier, attempting to force the waves of my hair into proper curls.

When my father tells this story, he says he'd known her for months. She was flirting with his roommate. He had considered her a friendly acquaintance, but when he saw her with her hair straight, a dark waterfall down her back, he was sold. Each time, my mother laughs, says, "It's true," and moves on. She wore her hair curly again later, but during those key first months of the relationship, her hair was blown straight every other day, flat ironed within an inch of its life. Every girl in the country was teasing her hair big in the 1980's, but my mother was flattening her hair, crushing the curls, because she knew its magic worked. It got her the date.

In *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Malcolm X describes hair conking, a method of straightening. Hair conking burns the scalp when it is brushed on. It is a test in resilience; the longer you are able to withstand the eye-stinging, skin-irritating reaction of the lye on your hair, the smoother your hair. About his first hair conking, Malcolm X writes:

*How ridiculous I was!... This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man's hair. I had joined that multitude... they will even violate and mutilate their God- created bodies to try to look "pretty" by white standards.*

When I first read Malcolm X in a high school history class, I pointed out that passage to my mother. She told me she had read it before. She told me that was the whole point. "We're all just trying

to look whiter," she said, typing as she talked. She had signed a lease for her own legal office and was working as a defense attorney. "People think curly hair looks exotic or sexy or crazy. Why do you think black women get weaves? Why do you think I straighten my hair? It's not because it's cheap or easy."

In eighth grade, I had straightened my hair once every couple of weeks. My hair was thinner than my mother's, and it fell flat against my head, clinging to the sides. It was glossy, and I could run my fingers through it without catching knots or messing it up. I didn't think I looked any different, but when I dressed up for synagogue, I noticed the way straight hair looks against a blazer, smooth the way my real hair never was.

There's a theory that temporary bonds make up most of our body's memory. The epigenetics that cause genes to act or remain inactive are all in hydrogen bonds, deep in our cells. They can break or be reformed with simple heat, or a catalyst, or an oxidizer like formaldehyde, which, heedlessly, reacts with everything it touches.

"There are no curly-haired newscasters," my mother would say at the dinner table, looking at the tiny television that sat on the counter, nursing the last glass of wine after Shabbat dinner, "or CEO's. The curly-haired lawyers get no jobs."

My father would joke that showing her natural hair would allow her a level of camaraderie with her legal clients, most of whom were black and low-income, who did not have the funds or time for four hours under a hairdryer. My mother would roll her eyes and point at newscasters.

"Look at her," she would say. "Do you see the way her roots don't lie flat against her head? She straightens it." My father would get up close to the old TV, a few inches away, and examine her.

"I don't see it," he would say. "How can you tell?"

"How can you not?" my mother would reply, always on the lookout.

Most of my mother's friends don't know she straightens her hair. She never lets us put up pictures from vacation on Facebook, and instead keeps them in drawers, where her hair, uninhibited, springs out from her head as she stands in the waves. No matter how much she tried, my mother's hair always reverts to its natural state by the end of a week at the beach. The harsh salt of the waves

always stripped away any straightening treatments. She would keep her hair tight in a bun, but it would always spring out.

I've read the ocean is the original mikvah. It, like the water in which we bathe the deceased, scrubs our skin and hair clean of any impurities. The waves push you to the ground, stripping you of civilized dignity and reverting you to your roots.

When the *Allure* article on the Brazilian Blowout, "Scared Straight," came out, I brought in the magazine to the hair salon and held it close to my face as Joanne, our hairdresser, snipped my layers. I read aloud, "The person most at risk is the beautician because she is using the product regularly, and thus has more exposure. She should consider at least wearing a mask." Joanne replied that she always wore gloves. I told her to only do my mother's hair next to an open window. "I know the risks, sweetie. If I'm putting it on your mom's head, I think it's safe."

That night, I sat in my bedroom with my mother, pointing at numbers on a page. "Twenty-two percent formaldehyde!" I pushed the magazine at her feet.

"That's just the one from Brazil, Joanne doesn't use anything like that. It's FDA certified." My mother continued filing her nails, hair up in a cloth scrunchie.

"Many salon owners have been told it is FDA certified but it actually hasn't been!"

"I'll take the risk." *It's worth it, she meant.*

# On Language

**Ellie Liu**

**Second Place**

When I was six, I had a friend who lived two doors down in the same apartment building. Like me, she was a recent transplant from China. We shared a mutual fondness for drawing and reading books, and I can still remember the stacks of library hard-covers she kept piled in the corner of her bedroom, always diverse in content and length, and, in general, possessing only two constant qualities: they were always good books, and they were always English books.

At the time, this latter detail didn't strike me as being strange. I myself read no Chinese; for many years, I'd assumed that my friend hadn't either. As it turns out, this had been a false assumption. When she'd first arrived in the U.S., my friend had actually read remarkably well. She'd clung to the books she'd brought from China. She'd sit in her tiny apartment in Minnesota, with the T.V. spitting unintelligible noise in her ears, and read them incessantly—and they were *all* she read. She'd look at nothing else.

So, eventually, her father collected her books. He carried them down the stairs and out of the back door. He lifted them up, one by one, and tossed them in the dumpster behind our apartment building with the rubbish bags and debris. This was his way of forcing her to learn English. It was not a wholly ridiculous idea, perhaps, because it might have worked: she learned English admirably well and skipped a grade in school.

I suppose the carcasses of the books are still out there somewhere, wind-stripped and ragged in a landfill near St. Paul. In my more fanciful moments, I imagine finding them and exhuming them like mummies—but, of course, I couldn't read them, even if I did.

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In English, on paper, I consider myself to be fairly eloquent. In Mandarin, I'm pathetic. Sixteen years of accumulated language facility—of ridiculous *bon mots*, of neatly assembled vocabulary—is stripped away, and then I'm four years old again, stumbling along like an idiot, painfully aware of the fact that, without his epigrams, even Oscar Wilde was just a fat man with mercury-blackened teeth. On my last phone call to Qiqihar, my aunt listened for ten minutes as I tripped and stuttered (the “tsu” sound in 去 is quite definitely *not* the same as the double-z in ‘pizza’, no matter how my clumsy mouth insists on equating the two). Then she laughed.

Apparently, I'd developed an accent in my own birth language. "Aiya," she said, amused, "You sound like an American."

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My mother had gone to a lot of trouble forcing me to go to Mandarin classes as a child. They were held in a church basement; every Sunday, I'd be tossed in with a group of other halfling kids, and we'd try to memorize picture-words while the adults shared food and language upstairs. We rarely spoke Mandarin to each other—only English. I'm not sure why, as we never actually discussed it, but I've lived in many different places since then, and, in my experience, this unnamed agreement holds true for all of the halfling kids in all of the multicultural little Chinese enclaves in America. I was the only one in the class who had not yet acquired, through birth or nicknaming, an Anglicized name. Sometimes, I enjoyed this exceptionality very much. Other times, I didn't. I loathed when teachers would inevitably stumble over me during roll call during the first few days of class, and all of the eyes would turn to me—I loathed and still loathe attention. I'd sit and wait as the teacher went down the attendance list. I'd anticipate them opening their mouths hesitantly and getting stuck there, so that, in the brief space of their silence, I'd hear my name.

As I got older, I dropped the useless Mandarin classes, that musty church basement, those dreary little gatherings of displaced Chinese people and their potlucks of rice and red cooked meat. I also made vague plans of dropping my name.

The moniker I tried as a replacement was a penname from a penname: *Eliot*—after George Eliot. It had a dreamy, European ring to it that appealed to me very much.

My mother was less impressed. She had not read George Eliot, or T.S. Eliot, or all of the other illustrious 'Eliots' that populate the great pantheon of Western literature. To her, the name—stripped bare of meaning—was only a noise, and she thus drew the most reasonable phonological comparison:

"It sounds," she said doubtfully, "like 'idiot'."

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As I was losing a language, my mom was gaining one. She graduated university and got a job as a dentist when I was fifteen, and so the matter of her crippled English was one of great concern to her. She paid a lovely American woman—who spoke much better Mandarin than I did—fifty dollars an hour to help her exterminate her accent. Every Saturday, they’d sit across from each other at the dining room table and spread out diphthongs and vowels between them.

“Who,” my mom would try. “*Who.*”

“No. H-ew.”

“*Who.*”

“*Heeeew.*”

“Wh-oooh.”

When dissected in this way, the English seemed peculiar to my own ears. The vowels were ugly—nasally. I wondered, *Is this how English sounds to Chinese people?*

Then, conversely, *Is this how Chinese sounds to Americans?*

I was secure in my own mastery of English, so my mother’s attempts at accent-eradication seemed futile and unnecessary. Didn’t she know that after the age of twelve, people will always have accents? Couldn’t she just accept it?

Though usually tolerant of my pessimism towards most things, my mom would actually become quite angry with me when I said such things. I wouldn’t understand why until my parents’ Chinese friend came to Illinois to go to university.

We met her at a restaurant. Besides my parents and their middle-aged friends, she was the first real foreign-born Chinese person I’d met before. She was very nice. In a dim quest to see how my own brain might have developed in her place, I questioned her incessantly as to her thoughts and

goals: Why did she come to America? Did she like it? Did she want to stay? When would she go back?

The poor girl answered all of my questions with cheery grace, but later, in the car going home, my mom said, "Don't ask foreigners why they've come, and when they're going."

Her hands were loose and relaxed on the wheel. I wasn't sure if she was serious.

"Why?" I said.

"Because when some people say things like that"—she glanced sideways at me—"you can tell that what they're really trying to tell you is: *You're not welcome.*"

Sitting in the car beside her, I was struck quite suddenly with a realization, and it was this: that my mom was speaking from experience. That she had been made to feel like an outsider. That she'd been hurt by it.

For some reason, this was a possibility that had never occurred to me before. It was shocking. It meant that there were people out there who must have done something: conveyed to her an impression of distaste, treated her differently, laughed at the taut, choppy forms of her speech—or, worse, implied that she was un-American. That, in her years here, she must have been barbed many times in this manner, and carried those barbs still. That her attempts at learning English—the same attempts I had dismissed so thoroughly as pointless—must have been at least partly fueled by this knowledge of outsider-dom, and that there existed, somewhere in the world, at least one American who looked at my mother—my mother who laughs inappropriately, and forgives people too easily if she loves them; who asked me frantically, "Should I take you to the hospital?" when I fell off my bike and scraped my ankle, and then said a Catholic prayer over the cut; who went to school alone in New York for three years in a tiny garret so that she could afford to pay for my college tuition one day—and told her that they wished she were not here.

And I never knew. She never told me. Just like I never told her about the time I heard three kids in the computer lab in high school laughing about 'my people'—putting on that fake little mocking-babbling thing Americans are so fond of: "ching chong ling long", you know the type—and how

I'd sat very still so they didn't see me, and waited for them to go away, and—rendered childish and petty in my distaste—thought: 1) “There are *thousands* of years of unbroken heritage in that language, you gigantic douche-canoes”, and 2) “I'll bet I know your language better than you; I'll bet I do”; understanding at the same time that neither of these facts would have mattered very much to those kids anyway.

We sat in the car in silence, my mother and I.

We're an undemonstrative family. Chinese people of my parents' generation are pros at tolerant assimilation, and I'm a solitary weirdo who embraces detachment as my philosophy of life. After a moment, I simply said, “Oh, OK,” and the time passed on, and we've never spoken about it again. My mom may not remember it. She definitely doesn't know how, on the nights I can't sleep, I prod this memory, the way morbid children prod their bruises. I just lay awake, and stare at the ceiling, and fixate, obsessively, on all of the possible ways that someone could have hurt my mother.

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Though I was always the one who loved names, it's my mom who's recently had hers changed. She did it when she got her citizenship. It's pretty, and it doesn't sound at all like ‘idiot’, and sometimes I call her by it, and sometimes I call her by her Chinese one, but mostly I just call her *mama*, as I've always done.

Her English is quite good now too. In her last email, she wrote dramatically, “I have to bitterly bear it”, to refer to her epic and generally unnecessary attempts at weight loss. I remember looking at her alliteration and admiring it. I remember thinking, in the unbearably twee way that I think about language: That's a wonderfully textured phrase.

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Mostly, I like English. I like the smooth flow of a neatly formed sentence, and the polish of the articles in prestigious magazines. I like the feel of certain words, which strike me as being very lovely, completely independent of meaning or context: *slick*, *brassy*, *morsel*, *tender*. For years, I figured that these were all the words—and all the language—that I'd ever need.

Lately, though, I've been conflicted.

Lately, I've been going on Youku and watching Chinese videos and playing them with my eyes closed to let the peculiar sounds bounce around. I've been digging out the old Chinese primers, and trying to remember the pictograms. When I call my parents, I speak to them in Chinese, though I do a pretty poor job of it, because lacking the words to accompany your thoughts can make it seem like you have no thoughts at all. I've even considered taking another stab at learning Mandarin someday. Maybe I'll end up in another musty church basement, bowed over the characters. I imagine that it'll be something like the process my mother went through, in reverse: while she built up her English, I'll momentarily forget mine, peel away the layers until I'm left with whatever childhood language I've managed to retain. Hopefully, there'll be more than I expect.

# Fair and Lovely

**Michelle Mathew**

**Third Place**

I never had that racist encounter as a child that I've read many people of color write about in their memoirs, where some mean white kid you barely know says something awful about your skin color. The first time I remember my dark skin being a problem was in my family's own native country, in India. I can't say I remember all of it clearly, but I remember enough. I remember what mattered: I'm eleven years old. My aunt is brushing my hair. She's going to brush it all the way back and tie it up in a ponytail. The brush pulls hard at my hair and I know it's probably going to hurt when she ties it up tight at the end. I don't like the way my forehead looks when she brushes the hair back. Now I can clearly see my eyebrows – bushy, like my mom's, who at least gets to pluck hers into nice, clean arches. I always hated having my hair tied up in a ponytail.

When my aunt finishes brushing my hair I want to run away - I've been standing here for half an hour. I want to go downstairs and play with my cousins before we have to go to church. I'll bet the ceremony will be like the one at my last uncle's wedding. They're always long, but I never know exactly how long because the priest speaks like he's shouting, into a microphone, in Malayalam, and I don't speak much Malayalam, so I can never tell what part of the ceremony we're at.

But I'm not allowed to leave yet. She takes out a plastic container of powder, the same kind she's been putting on her face. The powder is sort of pinkish. I didn't know I had to wear it too.

"Close your eyes." She tells me. I close my eyes and pinch my mouth shut while she rubs the powder all over my face. She rubs it so hard that for a second I'm scared I can't breathe. When I open my eyes she turns me around to the mirror and smiles.

"There. Now your skin looks nice and fair."

Fair. She doesn't mean it the way teachers say it at school, when they talk about treating other people like you would want to be treated. When she says "fair", she means "not tanned". Downstairs, the rest of my cousins are waiting to leave. Mithun, who is three years younger than me, takes one look at me and starts laughing like I'm the funniest thing he's seen all day. "Meesha penna!" he yells. Mustache girl.

I run all the way back to my grandmother's room with my hand covering my mouth, crying. I beg my aunt to let me take the powder off. It's making the fine hair on my upper lip show through. I don't

want to go to church looking like this.

"You look beautiful." She tells me.

"No I don't." I sob, "I have a mustache."

I can't remember if we argue over this in English or Malayalam. I would like to think it was in Malayalam, because her English is sort of choppy - not broken, but not fluent either. Maybe I spoke in English and she responded in Malayalam. That's the way a lot of dialogue between me and my relatives goes. I go to church with my face still pinkish. I look fair. My other aunts tell me I look lovely. They think I look better, in a country where so many people are naturally tanned and wishing they weren't. I'm eleven years old and I don't understand.

People in America often think it's weird when I tell them that being light-skinned is generally considered attractive in India ("But you're all naturally tanned!"). One woman laughed and told me, "Well, here everyone is trying is to get a tan and over there you all want to look lighter. It makes sense."

It's not that simple, though. For many people in India, the desire to be light-skinned isn't a casual thing, the way wanting to be tanned in America is. Having light, or "fair", skin in India is a lot more like being thin in America. In America you can be told you're "not thin enough" to model or be on T.V., or that you'd have an easier time finding a partner if you lost some weight. In India they could tell you the same thing about your skin – that you're "too dark" to model or be on T.V., or that you're going to have a hard time finding a wife or a husband (more often a husband - the pressure to be "fair" is generally higher on women than it is on men, like most beauty ideals in the world), because you're "not fair enough". I once overheard my parents and their friend discussing this one particular arranged marriage: "The woman had a mustache, but the man's parents loved her anyways because she was fair. All they care about is whether or not a woman is fair. If she had been dark, but beautiful, they wouldn't have wanted her."

Another thing many people often don't realize is that tanning is a relatively recent thing in America. It didn't really become popular until the 1950's. For many years before that, most upper-class Americans would wear long-sleeved clothing in the summer or stay indoors to avoid getting tanned

like working-class people. In fact, up until the 20th century, many societies in the world valued light skin as a sign of high social status and racial superiority.

In Indian society the light-skinned ideal was introduced through the caste system. In this system, the naturally lighter-skinned people who introduced the system put themselves in the higher castes and categorized darker-skinned people into lower castes. This discrimination was only made worse during the era of British colonialism, where people often strived to have lighter skin to look more like the Brits and move up in social status. Skin colorism is still rooted deep in Indian society. When I went to visit India as a child, I would see what I didn't know at the time were the remnants of colonialism and the caste system. Billboards advertising furniture and saris by the side of the road, magazine ads for cars and soup mixes, and movie posters all featured light-skinned people. A lot of them were so pale I couldn't tell if they were Indian or white. Some of them were actually white (evident by their blond or red hair), hired from Europe when the advertisers couldn't find anyone in India who was "fair" enough. Even the children in commercials for juices and toys were pale and too photogenic, with slightly fat cheeks and high-pitched cutesy voices, very unlike most of the actual children I met there.

I'm not sure I fully understood how big of a deal skin color was back then, but I'm sure I had started to notice some discrepancy between these light-skinned people in advertisements and my conception of what Indian people were supposed to look like. I remember my aunt buying me an Indian Barbie doll at the local toy store. I didn't really like Barbies, but I had never seen an Indian Barbie doll before, so I picked her to take back home and show her to my friends. I think she was supposed to be some kind of dancer. Her head was slightly tilted to the side and she didn't smile like the American Barbies. Instead of a care-free, happy smile, she had a wide grin, teeth and all. I suppose this was her dancing pose (many classical Indian dancers use facial expressions as well as body movement in dance). She also had a long, gold-embroidered, flare-skirted dress and bangles on her arms and bare ankles. Her face seemed to be done up with some sort of white foundation makeup and bright red lipstick. At night I thought she looked like a vampire, so I hid her under the rest of the toys in my closet. I didn't want her looking at me while I was trying to sleep. I wondered why she had pink skin as well. She didn't look like the Indians I had seen on T.V. in America: Apu from *The Simpsons*, Mowgli from *The Jungle Book*. She didn't look like any of the Indian people I had seen in real life. And she didn't look like me. Wasn't she supposed to be tanned?

But the skin-lightening cream commercials were the most absurd. I remember watching this one particular ad on T.V. when I was about twelve: there's a woman sitting in the dark corner of a stage in a crumpled-up dress, crying. She's narrating her life story in Hindi, a language I don't speak a word of. Then someone tells her about a cream called "Fair & Lovely". When she rubs it on her face, her skin turns three shades whiter. In the next scene she's stepping out of a limo and on to red-carpeted steps while a mob of photographers chase her. This scene is all flashing lights. By the end, I start to understand what she was saying: nobody noticed her when she was dark-skinned, but now, thanks to the Fair & Lovely skin-lightening cream, she's beautiful and famous.

I thought this ad was incredibly stupid at the time. I groaned and rolled my eyes every time one of my relatives went off about someone being "too dark" or marveled at "how fair" someone looked. I didn't get why this was a big deal to them, to everyone I met in India, not to be tanned.

But then we moved to my parent's hometown in India, just before I started high school. My dad had recently quit his job and our eighty-year old south Floridian house was becoming too expensive to maintain. Living in India would be cheaper, and give my sister and me "a chance to learn more about our culture", as my dad put it.

My new Indian classmates were more modern than I had expected, with their cell phones and brand-name jeans. Despite this, they still believed that fair skin was attractive. Once, during freshman year, I remember walking to lunch when I overheard three of my girl classmates giggling about a boy named Anshu. Anshu was a skinny kid with fat lips. When he smiled, you could see his braces. I never really noticed him. I thought he looked like a dork, but these girls were crazy about him. "He's so fair . . ." one of them gushed. She said "fair" like some people would say "dreamy", with the word dragged out like it was five syllables long. I laughed about it while I went to get lunch.

Ninth grade went by, and then tenth and eleventh grade, and nobody had ever asked me out. Once or twice I had the nerve to go up and ask a boy out myself, but it never ended well. One of the boys actually ran away screaming, probably because he felt emasculated having a girl ask him out in front of his friends. I took his reaction to believe that something was wrong with me. With all the constant advertisements for skin lightening products - and even outside the world of advertisements, at school and in people's homes, where everyone talked about how unattractive

dark skin looked and how important it was to stay out of the sun – I started to wonder if I was unattractive because I wasn't light-skinned. I started avoiding direct sunlight when I could. It pleased me when my skin started to look less tanned than usual. Sometimes I would turn on the fluorescent light in the bathroom and admire how much lighter my face looked in the light, even though my slightly whiter-looking face probably looked sickly against the hospital-colored mint-green tiles in the bathroom. Once, I casually asked my mom if I could pick up some Fair & Lovely facial cream on our next trip to the grocery store. I told her that I would look better in black clothes if my skin were lighter. I really liked wearing black clothes, even though most days were about ninety degrees Fahrenheit in that part of India. Mom told me that no, I couldn't, Fair & Lovely would probably damage my skin. It's true: the bleaching component in many skin-lightening creams can cause skin to become thin and bruise easily. Often times, the bleaching comes out uneven and looks more like a skin disease than the smooth, porcelain Snow White skin the ads promise. According to some studies, Fair & Lovely even contains small amounts of mercury.

Maybe I could just get some white foundation then? Or keep staying out of the sun? I envied Sameena, the moon-faced girl with the chubby cheeks, and Kiran, the skinny girl whose skin stretched out over her cheekbones, whose ears stuck out, who looked like a mouse when she smiled, because I thought they were prettier than me. I thought all the boys would want them more because they were naturally fair. I think I even developed a bit of a crush on Anshu. I didn't think about his braces or his fat lips anymore. Just his light skin.

I've been back in the U.S. for five years now, but I don't think I've really managed to shake off the "Fair & Lovely" ideal. I'm away from the advertisements and from my relatives, so it's not something I think about obsessively. Most of the time, I'd like to think I've gotten over it, but sometimes I'll see photos of myself where the lighting is kind of dim and my immediate reaction is to cringe and think, "Oh no, I look too dark." It's funny that no one has to tell me this, and that my friends will say it's ridiculous that I would feel less pretty because of what color my skin looked. The ideal is still stuck there in the back of my head. And that's just me, with three years of exposure. What must it be like for the people who have spent their whole lives in India listening to people tell them that they're not "fair" enough to find a husband or a wife, or to get a good job?



# High School Poetry

# Strange Fruit

**Alexis Payne**

**First Place**

You wonder what *strange fruit* tastes like  
as you swing ashy legs from the hips of your father's  
reclining chair. When you ask, his face  
contorts into a shadow, cheeks press air  
from the edges of his jawbones,  
eyes hollow.

You watch his hands curve  
into fists—red blisters, stitches,  
hard knuckles press into working skin.

In the place beneath your tongue,  
you imagine the soft flesh of a mango,  
pulp of an orange,  
tart bursting body of a strawberry.

He imagines asphyxiation,  
suffocation, toes dangling and shadows  
in woods.

You are not his daughter here.  
Here you are Emmet's sister,  
Evers' daughter, little brown  
church girl lifting her skirt  
to use the bathroom,  
the face of Jesus,  
a hollow, jagged shadow.

He swallows and searches  
for what strange fruit tastes  
like in the back of his throat.  
For maybe he can recall from his tastebuds,  
or pull it out from the silence  
between his lips.  
Maybe it has been caught  
between his teeth

or is hiding, resting on his gums.

Wherever it is, you decide  
he hasn't swallowed it yet.  
You imagine it sputtering onto the carpet  
in a burst of ebony vomit.

Years later, when it dries and you've grown,  
you scrape it up with your nails and you watch  
as the black turns to  
red,  
then white,  
then blue.

# I Have it Hard (That's a Lie)

**Isaac Monroe**

**Second Place**

1

My friend is enthralled with the idea of colorblindness,  
He holds it above me as a looming example of his own tolerance.  
His skin is peachy white and it tells a story  
he would prefer to drown out.  
We have both been taught when the right time to cross the street is  
Or when it's time to put the new phone away  
Based on who is walking down the sidewalk.  
A color-coded story of good and bad.  
A subliminal conditioning that sticks  
Even after you fall in love with the black girl with the words that  
Tear down civilizations.  
I understand how wrong this is.  
I have it hard,  
But that is a lie.

2

The story of my skin is lost to me.  
I have never gathered the strength to understand  
The connotations of pinkish olive undertones.  
I have left myself ignorant of my  
skin's roots in my soul.  
I shelter myself from stories of  
insidious ancestry.  
My history has been neglected  
And has festered.  
I wonder if I can rightfully say  
That I have overcome it.

3

The sun has sunk  
Neath Braddock Avenue like a bottle in the dirty river.  
My white skin is immersed in black night

in a black neighborhood.  
Dilapidated houses, statuesque on the side of the road.  
Tonight not even the blight is colorblind.  
My privilege lights my path home,  
I come in and lock the door behind me  
And rush off to bed in a lightless house.  
I sob in my sheets for the people's stories  
that I have so far neglected to read.  
I sob for everyone I have stolen a room from.  
I sob because I can't let the world treat everyone  
as it will treat me.

# I am Different

**Siraji Hassan**

**Third Place (tie)**

What are we doing here? And where are we going to go? It's like we just woke up from a nightmare and now it's time for the show. Don't ask any questions just go with the flow.

Make as much money as you can, try your best not to get broke, copy everything you see from the TV; like the music style to the clothes.

Because I am Somalian, but I am not just a boy from Somalia nor am I a pirate. I am Bantu, but I do not talk in clicks. I am Somali-Bantu, but that does not mean that I am not also American. I live in a world where my skin color, my income, my religion, and my style dictates what my life will become, but I am more than all of that.

I once lived in a refugee camp... Kakuma.  
Now I live in the United States... Pittsburgh.

There was no school in Kakuma.  
Now I am proud to say that I am an Allerdice Dragon.

There were no jobs in Kakuma.  
Now I work proudly for the SCA.

We struggled for food in Kakuma.  
Now we have plenty every day.

I was a refugee in Kakuma.  
When I return someday to visit, I will return as a citizen of the United States of America.

Today I am discriminated against because I am quote "different," but as 2 Chainz says, "Middle finger to the competition, yeah I'm different."

I am proud of who I am.  
I should be embarrassed because I was forced to drink my mom's urine to survive.  
But I survived. I am proud of who I am.

I should be embarrassed because I listen to what many consider “gangster” rap.  
But I am surviving. I am proud of who I am.

I should be embarrassed because English is my fourth language.  
But knowing Somali, Swahili, Mai-Mai, and Kizigwa has kept me alive. I am proud of who I am.

I should be embarrassed because my parents have a hard time understanding English.  
But they have kept me alive. I am proud of who I am.

I should be embarrassed because I live in Northview Heights.  
But the roof on my head allows me to survive. I am proud of who I am.

I am proud of who I am.

I am neither full Somali, full Bantu, nor full American, but a mix of all.  
I am who I am because of an assortment of all.

A mixture that I am proud to say has made me different.  
I was one of the lucky few that made it, so yes. I’m different.

Now I live in Northview Heights, where shots are heard and bodies are found more often than fish  
are found in the sea.  
And yet, I am still here. Here I am.

So let people judge me by my outside appearance; by the camo-clothes I wear, the headphones,  
hats, and gang signs that I may throw... because I am more than that.

I am the definition of a survivor.  
And I am the definition of “different.”

I am Somali, Bantu, American, and above all, I am alive.  
I am alive to tell my story.

So before you judge me based on the color of my skin, the music I listen to, the traditions I follow  
or the ones I don't, the people I talk to, or the religion I practice...  
Just think, without these things, I would not be me.  
So how do I express who it is that I, THAT I, really be?

In their eyes I see the sun.  
In their smile I see the moon.  
And I wonder, only wonder,  
Who is the weak?  
Who is the strong?  
Who is right?  
And who is wrong?  
And I wish, only wish,  
That MY truth could have a tongue!

I am proud of who I am. I am different.

# Angelic

**Drew Praskovich**

**Third Place (tie)**

Eartha Kitt asks  
Me why there aren't any black  
Angels at my church.  
And I want to tell her  
It's all a mistake! They just ran  
Out of paint or they forgot.

We have a painting of two  
Angels in my living room.  
They look up towards our ceiling  
And I've spent half my life  
Trying to figure out what they are gazing  
At, what they are thinking of.  
They have white chubby skin  
And it's hard to tell which is a boy  
Which is a girl.

Eartha, there are black angels  
There are, there are. She asks me  
Where they're suddenly coming from.  
And I tell her,  
Ask the police.



# High School Prose

# The Ink that Gives the White Page a Meaning

**Amma Ababio**

**First Place**

I was born in the heart of the Ashanti region in Ghana during the second term of Jerry Rawling's reign. I was sheltered from the violence and corruption that occurred around me. I was a privileged child. I did not live in a shack made of mud and sticks. I did not have to beg on the street in order to provide money for my family. I did not have to walk miles to collect water from a stream in a clay pot to drink. I did not have to cry myself to sleep because I was hungry. I lived in a lavish apartment with my parents, and two sisters. My parents both had successful businesses. There was running water to drink when I was thirsty. I had housekeepers that would make me food when I was hungry. I was surrounded by loving people that looked and sounded like me.

When I was four my father won visas in the lottery. I remember my mother telling me that I could not shave my hair anymore, because little girls in America did not have bald heads. That meant that I could not take the monthly trip with my father to the barbershop to get my hair cut; instead, I went to the hair salon with my mother to get my hair braided. In what seemed like just days I went from playing soccer with my cousins to the Ghanaian embassy. I held tightly to my mother's hand until we were in the German airport. In an instant, I lost her hand. I walked aimlessly around the airport for half an hour. I was overwhelmed by the sea of white faces I saw. I began to think that I would never see my family again. One of the police officers that saw me projected my face on the various screens around the airport. I saw those same whitefaces finally stop to look at me. They looked at me with pity then asked me a series of questions. I cried even harder, because I did not know what they were saying. A wave of relief came over me when I saw my father's face among a crowd of police officers. He held me close, and I did not let go of my mother's hand again.

For seven months we lived in the basement of my eldest uncle until my parents found employment. In the first day alone I realized that I was no longer in Ghana. I was accustomed to eating my meals with my hands, but my aunt called me a bush girl every time she saw me eat with my hands. My favorite dish was fufu: it gave me comfort, and reminded me of home. However, my cousin called me various names until I convinced myself that fufu was disgusting. I began to eat rice like her to stop her from taunting me. One evening my uncle made Jell-O for my sister and me to try. I did not want to try it, but my uncle insisted. He took a spoonful and tried to feed it to me; I refused. He grabbed my arm, then forced the red Jell-O into my mouth. I felt the spoon clink on my teeth as the Jell-O stuck to my throat. I gasped for air, and wriggled free

from his grip. I ran away from him as quickly as I could; I did not want him to see me cry. When my parents were able to make enough money to rent our own apartment I was relieved that I did not have to be in that house for another day.

We moved into our new apartment in the spring of 2003. It was cramped, reeked of a concoction of different illegal drugs, but it was ours. I was comforted by the three families nearby that were also recent Ghanaian immigrants. I was able to help my parents decorate the apartment to resemble the one we had back home. Since I moved from Penn Hills to East Liberty I had to change schools. Fulton Traditional Academy was a short walk away. I held on to my father and eldest sister's hands as we walked into school every morning. First grade was not as difficult as kindergarten, because I knew how to speak English well. The English language no longer segregated me from my peers.

My parents did not speak English around my sister and me. When they picked us up from school they spoke our native Twi. I responded to them in English; I did not want my friends to know that I was not born in the United States. I had a slight accent, but no one picked up on it. My name was the only clue to my Ghanaian roots. My kindergarten teacher Americanized my name by calling me Uh-Mah, and only Uh-Mah. She did not even attempt my last name. At the tender age of six I was no longer Amma Beniwaa Nyarko Ababio, but Uh-Mah. I was repulsed by the sight and sound of my name.

As I went through middle school, and my freshman year of high school my name was not the only aspect of my identity that repulsed me. I was disgusted by the coarseness of my hair, the hand-me-down clothes I wore, and especially the color of my skin. I caked my face with harsh skin lightening formula, and prayed that my skin would be as light as my friends. I wore heavy, black jackets in the summer to avoid the sun's rays on my skin. However, the lightening formula worked slowly, so I resulted to baby powder. I mixed baby powder with water then smeared it on to my face. I could only apply the powder in the darkness, because I was scared that the light would darken my skin. Over time I changed myself to the point that I could not bear to look at myself in the mirror. I was afraid of the person that would look back at me. I only wanted to look like the American teenage girl: white skinned with blonde hair, and blue eyes.

During one of the classroom discussions in my sophomore year English class one of my

peers denounced the Igbo culture in the novel *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe as barbaric and uncivilized. My World History textbook devoted a measly two pages to ancient African History. I scoffed at their ignorance, and cultural incompetence. Over a plate of jolf rice I told my eldest sister about my textbook, and my peer's comments. She laughed, "I don't know why you care. Ain't like you know anything about Ghana either."

I rattled off the main imports and exports of the country. Then she asked me, "What you know that ain't from Wikipedia?"

I was silent.

She was right, I knew nothing about the country that I left behind in elementary school. I knew nothing of the Ashanti region that I was born in, or the rich culture of the Ashanti people. I knew nothing about who I was, but I knew everything about who I could not become.

I took it upon myself to do what my textbook could not: write a thorough history of the Ashanti people. It began as a project to fulfill a requirement for World History class, but it ultimately became my redemption. I conducted research online, then the library, but I was dissatisfied by the information they gave me. My father was delighted when he read the description of my project. Over dinner one night he told me about my paternal grandmother that I was named after, Amma Nyarko. My grandmother was one of the main advisors to the King of my father's village, *Akrofuom*. Before her, four of my grandmothers founded four cities: *Huntaitai*, *Sikaman*, *Amankyim*, and *Akrofuom*. My grandmothers who founded the first city were slaves that were able to escape from their shackles. I could not find any written documentation of my grandmothers in either the library or on the Internet. When I wrote down their stories I felt the essence of my grandmothers inside of me.

I presented my research to my peers in my World History class. I attempted to educate them about my culture, but they did not understand the significance of my culture. Eight days after my presentation my peers asked me if I lived in a shack made of mud and sticks, if I had to beg on the street in order to provide money for my family, if I had running water to drink, and if I had to go to bed hungry. Their questions filled me with rage, but then I realized that it was not their fault that they had those misconceptions. My presentation was not enough to erase the countless

misconceptions they had about my country and my continent as a whole. Their fatal misconceptions were shaped by the cultural incompetency of American culture. I could present to them a hundred times, but my attempts would be futile, because my presentation was overshadowed by their fatal misconceptions. I finally saw that my culture was a speck of dust in their eyes that they will continuously wipe away.

As a poor, young, black woman in the polarized White - Supremacist - Capitalist - Patriarchy—as Gloria Watkins names it—I have only two options. I can either be a subordinate to my white counterparts or assimilate into a society that is lethal to my developing mind. In the words of Jean Genet in his memoir *Prisoner of Love*, “In white America the Blacks...are the ink that gives the white page a meaning.” My grandmothers were not the ink that gave the white page a meaning in Ghana. Like my grandmothers, I refuse to be the ink that gives the white page a meaning. I refuse to lose my dignity, self-respect, and identity to assimilate in a society that does not respect who I am and the culture that I embody.

# Being Human

Alexis Payne

Second Place

## Part One—Hair

Little dark girls with naps. Little dark girls with naps play on the street corner at midnight while little dark boys shoot craps in the hallway, whisper to each other about the politics of survival. Little dark girls with naps make sandwiches with bologna and twist hips on the sidewalk, tumble in heels too big for small feet. Little dark girl, little dark girls...

You don't see me in magazines. Hair thick like a brillo pad, short mini fro like the way I came out of the womb womb womb. I lie. I was bald when my mother birthed me, my head like the shiny back of a new penny. What is hair anyway? You don't see me in magazines.

Sometimes you see girls with curls that run down their shoulders in ringlets, exploding from their heads in long long tresses. Mixed Chicks product line like being black is a crime of sorts, praising the girl whose hair feels like hair. Mine reminds you of wool you say. Some days I wish I had hair like yours. Some days I don't. These days I more often am grateful for me. Those days I wished everyday that I was you you you.

In elementary school, I thought there were more white people in the world. The Flats look like beer cans and Hillbillies and people who are broken and...have...no...class. What's that mean anyway? Have no class? We went swimming in a pool down the road from our school and I didn't wanna get my hair wet because it was straight and I loved it and it made me look like you you you. You were beautiful.

Little dark girls with naps.

This woman walks up to me and she says...*Is that all your real hair really?* I say no. I should say yes. I should say...*is that all your hair really?* I should lean forward like she does, petting at my scalp like I am something to be gaped at. I don't say anything. Does that make me weak? *I used to do hair you know? I used to do hair but I never did hair like yours.* Yours. Yours. Little dark girl with naps. Her hand still rests there, trying to figure out the maze of braids that confuses her. She must solve the mystery that is me. I smile wide at her, tight-lipped. I am fake. I am weak. I don't say anything...*Oh I see. I could tell. I could tell it wasn't real, I just wasn't so sure.* I pack up my things and she moves her hands. I am still smiling. Am I weak for this? For not knowing what to say? She

doesn't know. She grins at me and shrugs. *Mhm. Mhm. Mhm.*

Hips and hair. Little dark girl with naps. Celebrated naps. Look at her hair. She's a proud black woman who don't need no man. Afrocentric! Making statements that bounce of societal expectations and stick to the places that burn the most.

I am not making a statement. I am not making a statement. I like naps. I like naps like the ones my grandmother had when she came out of the womb womb womb. My hair is in curls too thick to see. I like weave sometimes. I like straight hair and big hair. I like hair. I like my hair. In so many shades of black, I am tumbling. I just want to float away, to be a human...human, human.

## Part Two: Purpose

At a church retreat we discuss what the word purpose means to people of the world. I say that for a lot of people, purpose simply means to survive. My church doesn't understand that: "Maybe in West Africa, where people are fighting Ebola. But not here."

*Not here. Not here.* Like we are some grand and holy nation. Like we all have never been to prison, never felt hopeless, never had the lights shut off because we couldn't pay the bill.

I want to tell them of the boy who got shot on Saturday night. The boy who went to prom with us. The boy who graduated. He was 18. 18. 18. The news says that he died very matter-of-factly, dryly, like there's nothing particularly remarkable about a black boy getting shot in the head head head:

*"Mr. Turner had been found in the stairwell, shot in the head, and was taken to UPMC Presbyterian where he died Sunday"*

He died Sunday. The Lord's Day. The holy day. We pick apples on Sunday. We sing songs about Jesus with a guitar, smile at the little boy who runs across the carpet in bare feet. Chandeliers dangle above our heads and we are warm. We sleep in this mansion in Ohio with room and rooms and rooms. A tree house and a lake sit out back with a dock for paddleboats, and a cute statue of a little white dog.

*...he had been found in the stairwell, shot in the head.*

What is your purpose in life when you've seen twenty of your friends shot in the head head head? What is your purpose in life when no one will give you a job because you had to sell drugs because you didn't know how to do anything else because public education never felt like teaching you how to read because politicians are rich people who can't see beyond their own noses...what what what. Your purpose is to survive. To pay bills. To find food. To take care of the people you love. It is not to change the world. Some people simply don't have that luxury.

When I go back home, I tell my best friend to be safe. I tell him not to go to places where he might die. That sounds ridiculous because he could die anywhere. He could die in the middle of a church. I don't understand why some lives mean more than others.

"He was a thug."

"He chose to live that life."

"The boy was asking for it."

"You hear they found weed in his back pocket?"

"You hear they found weed?"

My best friend tells me that he's going to get himself a gun: "It's crazy out here. That way nothing can happen to me." I want to tell him not to. But I don't want him to die. I don't say anything. Guns scare me. Scare me.

Maybe you haven't even begun to ask the right question:

"You hear he was a human being?" ...a human being...a human being...

# Grandmothers Have Favorites

**Amanda Talbot**

**Third Place (tie)**

“Are you really gonna eat that?” my grandmother asked me for the 50th time that week. I’d practiced mimicking her at school during lunch when she wasn’t there to hover over my plate, inspecting the extra sugar in my fruit cups and the excessive bread I ate with my pasta. It’s all carbs.

“Well, yeah. I’m hungry.” I’d been caught again with a 200 cal Pop-Tart. Cinnamon. Toasted.

“My grandmother used to tell me to take everything in moderation.”

“Right.” I walked to the trashcan to save myself from a calorie-induced apocalypse, but Grandma spoke up again.

“You can’t go around wasting food here. Go on and eat, don’t deprive yourself if you’re hungry. Just remember that there are other options next time.” She turned away to finish watching her western movies. She never quite grew out of them.

My little sister entered the room and I offered her the rest of my Pop-Tart. Grandma watched the exchange and my sister’s mouth as her lips separated and her teeth came down, biting off 20 calories at once.

She said nothing and I know why. Violet is lighter than me. Violet is shorter than me. Violet has longer hair than me and it brushes the middle of her back when she sits up straight. Violet is younger than me. Grandma has long hair reaching the middle of her back, silver from wisdom and gray from age. She has eyebrows with no definite arch, making her innocent and curious. Violet looks exactly like her. So much that they call her Little Vivienne.

My father sat on the porch, safely out of the sun with his eyes closed, not that it made much of a difference. He hummed a 70’s tune to himself with his hands crossed over his bulging beer gut.

I stretched out on the porch carpet, cracking my back and elongating my spine to release some of the tension I held from rowing practice. Stacy sat in a chair, listening to a new rap song while texting her 14-year-old friends.

“That’s all you’re gonna do?” Grandma chuckles once, keeping a targeted grin on her face. “You kids have an hour before you go off with your father and you just lie here? Your cousins have so much energy. They bounce off the walls and I can hardly get them to stop.”

“They’re 4 and 7, Grandma. I’m 16.”

“I still get up and garden and Lord, I’m almost 86.”

I remembered how she told me she never had any “fat kids”. They walked to school instead of riding the bus, were adamant about cleaning their rooms on a biweekly schedule, had enough responsibility to control their eating. It wasn’t until they grew up and began to eat what they wanted or in some cases, excessively drink what they wanted.

“Valery,” Dad said to me, “why don’t you go walk around the block a couple of times. Go up to Estella and back around.”

“What about Violet?” I wanted so badly to ask him how he knows I need to exercise more when he can’t even see me. He’s legally blind. And I felt guilty for thinking about his physical eyes and not his paternal pair. I felt stupid for judging him on something he couldn’t control after questioning my grandmother’s judgments on something that I could.

Violet looked up at me and smirked because she knew they wouldn’t make her do anything that required any more energy or thought process than that of a growing flower.

My grandmother told me, “He asked you, not her.”

And I know why. Violet is lighter than me. She has beautiful long hair that has never been chemically colored red or blond except for “the one time”. With Violet, there are always special exceptions and with me, it is not enough or it is too much and “buts” are always prohibited.

I am not lighter than them. I have shorter, curlier hair. I have eyebrows that look nothing alike and I’d thought none of this would matter, but oddly enough, it does.

# How Understanding Race Relations Reformed My Worldview

**Harrison Smith**

**Third Place (tie)**

Although my family is mixed-race, we live in a predominantly white neighborhood, and until high school I attended predominantly white schools. As a result I am comfortable in entirely white settings, and the majority of my friends are white. Despite this, and despite being equally black and white, I have always been viewed as black. While considering this perception, and learning about the racism of pre-civil rights America, I became hyper-aware of race. I found myself constantly noticing sideways glances at restaurants and country clubs rarely frequented by blacks, and began to view myself as a black ambassador to the whites I was surrounded by. This conclusion was not the result of feeling excessively black in a whitewashed world, but of my realization that for many of my friends and extended family I was one of the few “black” people they knew, or had ever known well. Understanding that they would likely base their attitude towards blacks on me, I considered holding myself to a higher standard a racially rooted civic duty.

Assuming this role, and knowing that my conduct would inform their standard of black behavior, I became more conscious of my actions and would alter them to portray blacks in the best possible light. I would avoid perpetuating the most trivial stereotype, and as a result, I often became somewhat anxious in public social settings. This behavior undoubtedly made me a better person, but it became so extreme that I would rather stay home than go out to dinner at predominantly white restaurants. My hypersensitivity also induced excessive passivity; at school with friends I would bite my tongue when race was mentioned for fear they would dismiss me as an oversensitive person of color, and claim I had no right to take offense at off-hand racist jokes because I was never beaten by police or sold into slavery.

Acknowledging that the kind disposition had given way to a self-conscious one, I reassessed my situation. I realized, as is evidenced by my unwillingness to speak out against racism, that my hypersensitive race-oriented societal perspective had reached the tipping point, and begun making me an objectively worse person. I focused more on the personal benefit of my silence than the favorable representation of a race. Furthermore, I understood that viewing myself as a racial ambassador had caused me to form the same stereotypes I wanted to help others avoid. Though I began my struggle to understand race believing it was little more than a color, I had allowed myself to stray from this mindset into one of paranoia-driven assumptions.

I still find myself navigating the confusing maze of racism and race relations in our society, but my struggle to understand the role of race in my life has led me to one sound conclusion: It is

not wrong to be conscious of race and the way others may perceive me, for it has encouraged me to strive to be as morally sound and socially aware as I can. But this acute awareness is only positive in its ability to make me a more conscientious person, and I must actively avoid forming assumptions about others and allowing these assumptions to make me more socially self-conscious. In discovering that it was widely beneficial to be conscious of race, but wrong to view myself as a racial ambassador, I stumbled upon a greater truth: the value of analytical contemplation. By considering race, and specifically how my views on race affected my behavior, I was able to step back and use the issue of race to make myself a better person. Applying this thoughtful approach to other aspects of my life, I have found it universally helpful in developing a healthy and complete understanding of myself and the world around me. I now consider this analytical mindset my most defining characteristic, and contribute much of my intellectual maturity to my struggle to understand race.

