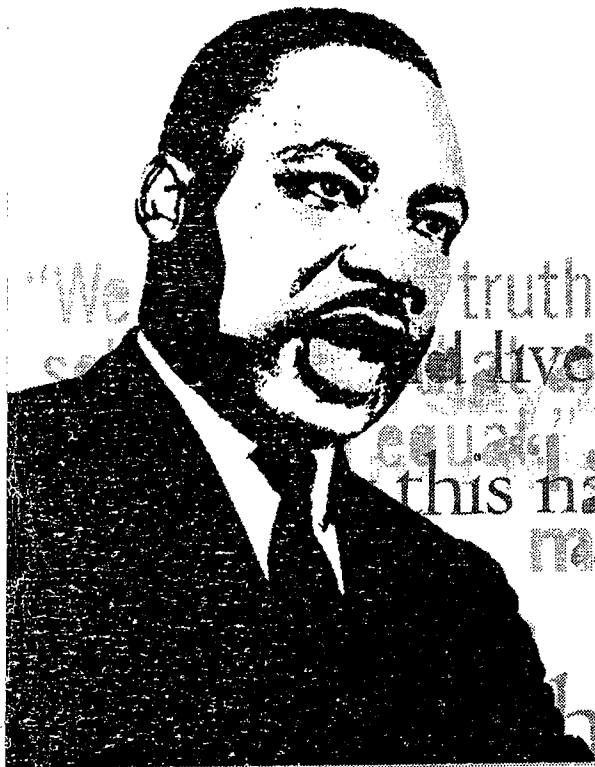


"I have a dream that

The Martin Luther King Jr. Day Writing Awards

January 16, 2006

at Carnegie Mellon



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I say to you
this nation will rise
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The Martin Luther King Jr. Day
Writing Awards 2006

2006 Writing Awards

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Poems from
Carnegie Mellon University

Winter Fable

by Sally Mao

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Africa needs us

by Lillian Bertram

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dear Dad/Sperm Donor:

by Rebecca Bortman

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hey, am I black?

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

It's better that way.

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

That was wrong. Then I guessed right.

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

So I hope that's working out for you.

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

by Chris Davis

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grocery Shopping

by Ben Pelhan

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

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

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

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

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

Now since we all know

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

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

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

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

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

Prose from
Carnegie Mellon University

One Person Wonder

by Ashley Birt

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Untitled

by Isabel Garadocki

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

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

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

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

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

