

Penguin  
Random  
House

In partnership with

WNDB®

weneeddiversebooks.org

# Creative Writing Awards



2019  
Selected  
Poems,  
Stories &  
Memoirs

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## INTRODUCTION

### **A Company With Creativity at Its Core**

Penguin Random House's commitment to individuality and artistic expression has led to unparalleled success in publishing the best literature by writers in the United States and worldwide. Our company philosophy and dedication to creativity, education, and innovation are the cornerstones of our publishing mission as well as our corporate philanthropic activities. Penguin Random House is passionate about fostering the freedom to create for our authors and our employees. This freedom to create is at the very heart of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards.

### **The Mission**

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards wants to know what young adults have to say. Our mantra is that we are looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while encouraging student writers throughout the writing process.

### **The History**

In 1993, immediately after establishing its world headquarters in New York City, Bertelsmann sought innovative ways to give back to the city that offered such a wealth of creative talent. Among its many philanthropic ventures was the Bertelsmann Foundation's World of Expression Scholarship Program, designed to encourage, support, and reward young writers and musicians growing up in this cultural capital.

The program began with scholarship awards for excellence in literary and musical expression and then quickly expanded to include programs that would foster that expression. Fall workshops in public high schools across the city offered a jolt of creativity to high school seniors, jumpstarting students to create original work. Classroom

teachers clamored for materials that would help them infuse creative writing into the classroom; World of Expression teaching artists responded with a booklet of lesson plans and staff development workshops for teachers and administrators. A summer writing program for juniors offered an intensive course for developing writers. The World of Expression website provided access to writing- and music-related resources for teachers and students year-round.

Twenty-six years later, and now known as the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards, the commitment is apparent. Program winners have gone on to study at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the country, from City University of New York to Harvard. Many have also continued their education at trade or technical schools. To date, the program has awarded more than \$2.7 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction, drama, and graphic novel compositions. In addition, the program brings together educators, teaching artists, community leaders, authors, and industry professionals (including Penguin Random House executives) to inspire, guide, read, judge, and celebrate the work of hundreds of diverse writers each year.

## The Program Today

Starting in 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children's literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in a variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of \$50,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up.

## About WNDB

We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. It is our mission to put more books featuring diverse characters in the hands of all children. You can learn more about our programs at [www.diversebooks.org](http://www.diversebooks.org).

# 2019 Scholarship Winners

## FIRST PLACE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry .....	Katherine Sanchez, <i>Red-White-and-Brown Skin</i> Stuyvesant High School, NY
\$10,000 Fiction & Drama .....	Samantha Kirschman, <i>Blood Moon</i> Kenston High School, OH
\$10,000 Personal Memoir .....	Siobhan Cohen, <i>American Jew</i> Hunter College High School, NY

## MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD POEM

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word .....	Kiora Brooks, <i>The Misinterpretation of Dark Skin</i> Topeka West High School, KS

## NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Personal Memoir .....	Nora Carrier, <i>Stories My Mother Tells Me</i> Edward R. Murrow High School, NY

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
A. Phillip Randolph High School, NY.....	Kylie Gil, <i>Titties</i> , Poetry
Albuquerque High School, NM .....	Sophia Jaramillo, <i>Why I Stand</i> , Poetry
Amador Valley High School, CA .....	Sandra Chen, <i>The Dancing Body</i> , Personal Memoir
Bard High School Early College, NY .....	Saide Singh, <i>Sticky American Words</i> , Poetry
Brooklyn Technical High School, NY.....	Ronald Cheung, <i>It's Not You, It's Me</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Mathew Flics, <i>Bias, Dust, and Dirt</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Anna Kinlock, <i>Biting on a Bullet</i> , Poetry
	Stephanie Ortiz, <i>That Day</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Anjum Suchita, <i>Saturday Morning</i> , Poetry
	Jason Wang, <i>For the Sake of Time</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Camille Willson, <i>Liberation at the Local Discotheque</i> , Poetry
Carman Ainsworth High School, MI .....	Adaycia Johnson, <i>The Teenagers Burden</i> , Poetry

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Edward R. Murrow High School, NY . . . . .	Reagan Hockenberry, <i>Places to Be</i> , Spoken Word
	Zachary Hockenberry, <i>Aziz and Babor</i> , Poetry
	Jordan Mangi, <i>Letters to Frances</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Daphne Parkhill, <i>Bird's Eye</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Jaali Michael Phillips, <i>Get Lifted</i> , Personal Memoir
	Ariba Zehra, <i>Fake</i> , Personal Memoir
Fiorello H. La Guardia High School, NY . . . .	Eryn Harris, <i>Please Place Your Items in the Tray</i> , Personal Memoir
Francis Lewis High School, NY . . . . .	Maria Caceres, <i>Last Serenade</i> , Personal Memoir
Greenwich High School, CT . . . . .	Mayo Hirai, <i>Remembering Dan</i> , Fiction & Drama
High School of American Studies, NY . . . . .	Sarah Alpert, <i>The Boy Crushes of a Lesbian</i> , Personal Memoir
High Tech High Media Arts, CA. . . . .	Sophia Kerr Davis, <i>Velvet Lining</i> , Poetry
Hostos Lincoln Academy, NY . . . . .	Maria Grijalva, <i>First Generation</i> , Personal Memoir
Hunter College High School, NY . . . . .	Paloma Aguirre, <i>What Does Not Smolder Must Burn</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Maude Lechner, <i>Goodbye to a World</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Bellamy Richardson, <i>The Third Grade, 1980</i> , Fiction & Drama
	Cheyenne Willis, <i>An Odyssey Towards Queerness</i> , Personal Memoir
	Serena Yang, <i>How Long Does a Wildfire Last?</i> Fiction & Drama
	Eric Zhou, <i>Thoughts</i> , Poetry
J. Sterling Morton East High School, IL . . . .	Michelle Castaneda, <i>A Different Model</i> , Personal Memoir
La Jolla High School, CA . . . . .	Daria Macausan, <i>The Problem with Faith</i> , Personal Memoir
Lake Braddock Secondary School, VA . . . . .	Tin Ho, <i>The Misfortunate Tales of Xeus</i> , Fiction & Drama
Lone Grove High School, OK . . . . .	Sydnye Dormire, <i>Disfluency</i> , Spoken Word
Manhattan Center for Science and Mathematics, NY . . . . .	Lysandra Vasquez, <i>My View</i> , Poetry
Marriotts Ridge High School, MD . . . . .	Jasmine N. Orozco, <i>The Walls that Built a Home</i> , Fiction & Drama

## HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Marriotts Ridge High School, MD . . . . .	Victoria Zang, <i>Atlas of Dead Ends</i> , Personal Memoir
	Eric Zhu, <i>Flyby</i> , Fiction & Drama
Mayo High School, MN . . . . .	Julia Hintermeister, <i>Storms Beneath the Skin</i> , Personal Memoir
Midwood High School, NY . . . . .	Saima Rahman, <i>Existential Colors</i> , Poetry
Montclair High School, NJ . . . . .	Keneane Ejigu, <i>Dear Sister</i> , Personal Memoir
Oak Park & River Forest High School, IL . . .	Morgan Varnado, <i>Time Capsule Woman</i> , Fiction & Drama
Olympia High School, WA . . . . .	Liliane Nguyen, <i>In Which I Bind Books of All the</i> , Poetry
	Kameko Lashlee Gaul, <i>Ode to the Future</i> , Spoken Word
Sandra Day O'Connor High School, TX . . . .	Amaya Larralde, <i>Watercolors in the Rain</i> , Poetry
Shenendehowa High School East, NY . . . .	Lauren Dicocco, <i>Penny</i> , Fiction & Drama
Spring Creek Community School, NY . . . . .	Natalya Gammon, <i>Altered Fate</i> , Spoken Word
Staten Island Technical High School, NY . .	Deniz Denizer, <i>Oximetry</i> , Poetry
Stuyvesant High School, NY . . . . .	Stacy Xue, <i>Dream of Fire</i> , Personal Memoir
	Berna Da'Costa, <i>You're Just Like Him</i> , Personal Memoir
Townsend Harris High School, NY . . . . .	Safiatu Diagana, <i>How to be Like Me</i> , Spoken Word
Troy High School, MI . . . . .	Mikalyla Anderson, <i>The Swing Set</i> , Poetry
Valley High School, IA . . . . .	Hailey Amro, <i>Letter to Grandpa</i> , Personal Memoir
Watsonville High School, CA . . . . .	Alina Aguilar, <i>Resonate Worth</i> , Personal Memoir
Weston High School, MA . . . . .	Echezona Onwuama, <i>What's Your Perception</i> , Poetry



## *Katherine Sanchez*

POETRY

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*“Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.” This one is by Mary Oliver, tutelary poet of everything and anything ordinary. Her philosophy on writing (and life, thusly) has inspired many unwritten stories in me. This guiding force of hers—unabashed gratitude—is what guides me, too, in my most reclusive moments to paper and pen.*

### **My Hobbies:**

Taking long walks, drawing little people, watching documentaries, reading (and forgetting to bookmark) cool blogs, and solving puzzles.

**College I Packed Up For:** CUNY, Queens College



## *Samantha Kirschman*

FICTION & DRAMA

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Write, then edit, then edit again;  
there is always something to improve.*

### **My Hobbies:**

My hobbies include reading, writing, drawing, analyzing dumb TV shows, and putting glitter on my face.

**College I Packed Up For:** University of Pittsburgh





## *Siobhan Cohen*

PERSONAL MEMOIR

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*For me, it's important to listen to the voice in your head as you write.  
The best way to keep the voice of your piece authentic is to  
write the way you think.*

### **My Big Plans:**

I am planning on getting my Bachelor of Science in biochemistry and then going to law school. Eventually, I want to work in bioethics law.

**College I Packed Up For:** Stony Brook University



## *Kiara Brooks*

SPOKEN WORD

### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*Honestly, I don't really have a mantra for Creative Writing, but as I answered this question one came to mind that really describes how I go about writing something. That being: "It's easy to articulate my emotions on a page. All I need to do is let my pen fly."*

### **My Big Plans:**

I plan to become a successful Poet, Writer, and Psychologist. I'm in college now getting my Psychology degree and I'm working on poetry project at the moment.

**College I Packed Up For:** Baker University

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### *Nora Carrier*

PERSONAL MEMOIR

#### **Creative Writing Mantra:**

*My creative writing mantra is keep writing! The more time you can find in each week to write, the more meaningful it will become and the better your writing will be!*

#### **My Big Plans:**

My big plan for the future is to work in New York government and politics and to change the city and help as many people as I can.

**College I Packed Up For:** Mount Holyoke College

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

POETRY

## Red-White-and-Brown Skin

*By Katherine Sanchez*

STUYVESANT HIGH SCHOOL

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“She trained her love, like the muscle it is,  
into submission”

—Katherine Sanchez

My Dominican mother holds up her fingers in the American sun  
Stained with red spices and the smell of *adobo*  
Ripe with village songs, psalms, and prayers for alms,  
Her contortionist tongue fumbles over foreign syllables

Stained with red spices and the smell of *adobo*,  
All of the clothes in her home had bleach stains and holes  
Her contortionist tongue fumbles over foreign syllables  
Though *Español* is “too quick, too loud” to fit in American mouths

All of the clothes in our home have bleach stains and holes  
Countless weekends spent cleaning the house or dying our hair  
Though *Español* is “too quick, too loud” to fit in American mouths  
We train our tongues, like the muscles they are, into submission

Countless weekends spent cleaning the house or dying our hair  
I know she didn’t intend for it to end up this way, but  
We train our bodies, like the muscles they are, into submission  
In this moment, my mother, fingers spread in the American sun, says  
nothing



I know my mother didn't intend for it to end up this way, but  
She trained her love, like the muscle it is, into submission  
In this moment, my mother, fingers spread across my cheek, says  
nothing  
A red stinging seizes my face: it goes from caramel to American white

She trained her love, like the muscle it is, into submission  
But my mother has knots in her back: I know how hard it is to  
loosen up  
A red stinging seizes her face: it goes from caramel to fiery red  
She says, "*Mija*, I'm sorry," stares at her palm, says nothing

But my mother has knots in her tongue: I know how hard it is to  
loosen up  
Ripe with village songs, psalms, and prayers for alms  
She says, "*Mija*, I'm sorry," stares at her palm, says nothing  
As though she were there again, holding up her fingers in the  
Dominican sun

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FICTION & DRAMA

## Blood Moon

*By Samantha Kirschman*

KENSTON HIGH SCHOOL

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“I had dreams where my whole body  
purpled and blue and ached”

—Samantha Kirschman

Most folks don't want an explanation. They think it's too hard to look at. That they've spent an eternity squinting. Some people in town blame it on the blood moon, but I don't think it had anything to do with that. I think it was just whatever runs in the water around here, whatever hums through the veins of this town and the people that live in it. Or maybe it was that feeling that all the kids get, near the end of summer, like time is itching at your ankles. Like the world is about to burst open on your skin.

I don't know how it started. Nobody does. A lot of people think that when Leigh's nose started bleeding in third block, that was it. The beginning. But Leigh gets nose bleeds all the time and I also heard that Damien's little brother Kyle getting his knee all scratched up was the real start. The point is it started with the kids. This may not sound so bad so far. Nobody ever died from a nosebleed, a scraped knee. The point is that once it started, it wouldn't stop. Not spilling out or anything like that. Just seeping.

So nobody noticed at first, 'cause Leigh's mom just took her out of town for some kind of special doctor and we all thought it was just Leigh's nose bleed thing going to its natural extreme and she didn't have that many friends here anyway. And Damien always says Kyle is super whiny so it was probably nothing. It was hard at first, trying to figure out how nobody noticed until it got really bad. It took me awhile, but then then I got it. Nobody really sees blood until it's their own.

Except the doctors. I think they really saw it first, the full brunt of it.

Their patients' stitches wouldn't heal over and none of the wounds would stay closed. They said it looked and acted a bit like hemophilia. But that's a genetic thing; they'd never seen it in this town before. They stammered out all the information they had on the local news channel. Grandma shook her head.

"This doesn't have anything to do with science. This place has always been strange. Always. It's just usually strange in smaller pieces." She paused. "I still remember when that group of kids went missing. Came back different, you know, these wild-haired children, all red-eyed, all not right in the head." She trailed off. "Some things God don't see fit to explain." She clasped her hands tightly, wouldn't say anything else.

The sheriff closed off the roads. Told us it was our duty as citizens not to spread it—whatever it was—anywhere else. We tried to keep living our lives. That's the kind of people we are. We lick our wounds and keep moving. Even if those wounds don't stop bleeding.

My older sister got a paper cut and it slowly overwhelmed every Band-Aid she placed on it, one by one. I tripped and fell and the bruise on my elbow refused to fade. It seemed to grow instead. I had dreams where my whole body purpled and blued and ached. After school, Sara and I were sprawled across the couch, our bodies resting in the same contours we started forming in third grade. She told me about how every time she injected her insulin, the mark stretched itself from needle-fine point to dime. She told me, "Look," and lifted up her shirt, her stomach a collage of dark red against white bandage against dark skin. I didn't say anything. I couldn't. I took her hand in mine and watched the people in the sitcom talk as if anything they said mattered.

We stopped going to school. It got worse. Mom coughed a little too hard, and from then on, there was red on all her tissues. Ally bumped her head, couldn't quite think right after. It started flowing faster, an acceleration of blood. Everything tasting of iron. Everyone with chapped lips, in shades of red that models would die for. Everyone pale and tired, like they hadn't seen sun nor sleep in weeks. People were getting desperate. So desperate they'd have done anything to stop it. No bones about that.

Sometimes I wonder if what happened to Stanley could have happened to us.

I wasn't there when the thing with Stanley happened. Thank God, or the universe, or whatever made this whole thing happen. The main thing to know about Stanley was that he was the one to avoid around school. You know the type. Like if anybody was to bring a gun in, he'd be the first suspect. Type of kid to piss off the teachers on purpose, and not in a funny way, either. Greasy hair. Bad haircut. The same sweatshirt, over and over. Always looking for fights he couldn't win. He wasn't really a Satanist but he liked to say he was.

The town had been meeting in the big hall, over and over again, trying to figure something, anything, out. None of the cures they tried worked, none of the local medicines, none of the prayers or laying-on-of-hands. Stanley had somehow remained unscathed. He wasn't the only one, but there weren't many of them. No one knew what made them different. Stanley wouldn't let the scientists near him, but that wasn't the problem. Sara went to all the town meetings and said she thinks the turning point was he started mouthing off. Her memory wasn't working so good at that point. She remembers the way it felt in the crammed hall, though. Humid and hot, sweat-slicked skin against skin. Remembers the way agitation started crawling under everyone's skin. The way the air felt heavy and taut, like a breath waiting to be released, like the muscles in a finger resting on the trigger.

Sara said it was dead quiet in the town hall two days prior when Mrs. Rosen's phone rang to tell her that her baby girl was dead. Mrs. Rosen wasn't herself after that. No one was themselves. At least we have to hope so. The body count didn't stop with little Ava Rosen either. It just kept going.

So when Stanley started running his mouth about how this is just people getting what they deserve, in a room with parents torn up with grief, with people looking over the edge at death, everybody scared out of their wits, it didn't go so good. Mrs. Rosen started it first. She screamed in his face, first that it was his fault, he brought this on them, he did this somehow, and then it turned unintelligible, a long, keening wail. He yelled at her to shut up, and when she didn't, he slapped her, watched the blood well up in her cheek. Laughed at her open-mouthed shock.

She's a small woman, but Sara said she hit him like a five-foot-two god of wrath. Said after Mr. Rosen joined in, the crowd surrounded

Stanley like flies on a corpse. Took him outside, under the blood moon that looked like it was close enough to shoot. Sara likes metaphors.

She looked me in the eyes, said, "Kate, I don't know why they did that. I don't know why they thought that—that would save them." Later, some whispers would call it a sacrifice. A prayer of petition. An act of penance. The sheriff would rule it an accident, but we all knew that wasn't the right word for it. Sara smoked, hands shaking, the whole time she was telling the story and normally I'd take her cigarettes and throw them away, but I couldn't begrudge her them then.

Maybe Stanley knew it was the river all along. Maybe. Sara said they only realized that it was the river a little later, standing under the lights buzzing above the town hall door. A couple of them had put the body on something, she couldn't remember, it was dark, but it was something that floated. And they got in the river to light it on fire and push it downstream. And they got out, and once under the lights, realized it was all gone. Everything healed up. Every open sore closed. Every weeping wound, like it was never there at all.

The rest of the story I know. The rest of the story I lived. And it goes like this: all of us down in the river, open-blooded. Baptizing the litany of hurts off our aching bodies. Viking funeral floating by. Water-washed. Moon-bathed. Human and animal, all at once.

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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

PERSONAL MEMOIR

## American Jew

*By Siobhan Cohen*

HUNTER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

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“I sit in synagogue and listen to them tell  
their stories”

—Siobhan Cohen

### Oujda

When I ask my father about his childhood, he doesn't remember. He is the seventh oldest child out of 11, and he was young when they left, maybe seven or eight, although he doesn't know exactly. His six older siblings remember everything. They went to boarding school in the city, learning in French and classical Arabic. They spoke Moroccan at home, Hebrew at synagogue: a total of four languages.

My father brags about his mom incessantly—when she left eighth grade to get married, her teacher begged her to finish out the year because she was so smart. No one told me until I was 16, but she couldn't get pregnant for a whole year after getting married because she hadn't hit puberty yet. In my mind, this was sad and barbaric, but my father reminded me that it was a long time ago and everything turned out beautifully for her in the end.

— —

I sat down at Shabbat dinner one night, angry, armed with a long list of questions.

“Did you have electricity?”

“Did you have running water?”

“Did you have a fridge?”

He's offended by my questions. It was a long time ago, he tells me. Obviously they didn't have a fridge—no one did back then. My mom



reminds him it was the 1960s and everyone here had a fridge. He doesn't want to hear it.

— —

I've never gotten a straight answer on why they had to leave Oujda, just bits and pieces. Broken windows, looted stores, swastikas, unwarranted beatings from the police. His cousin Itzhak's family left first. Something bad happened to Itzhak's father and his mother remarried in Israel, but no one talks about it. My father's immediate family left next with two days' notice. The police gave them an ultimatum: they could leave as long as they left all of their belongings and valuables behind. We don't have any photos from Morocco. The photo albums start in Kiryat Gat, 1968.

### Kiryat Gat

We can't drink water on Shabbat because the filter is electronic. It's sacrilegious to push the button. We prepare food in advance, keep it warm in the Shabbat oven. We pre-rip toilet paper and leave it in stacks on the bathroom counter so we don't anger God with the tearing. It would be easy to just get a couple big pitchers and fill them with water in advance, like we do with everything else, but we don't. We drink soda and sugary juice, Nestea if you're really thirsty. Everything's Coca-Cola brand because my uncle Shalom drives a delivery truck for them and gets a good discount. It's special for Shabbat, like the Wonder Bread we buy after the sun goes down on Saturday. Every other day we have homemade bread, but the Wonder Bread is store-bought, name-brand, expensive, only for Shabbat.

— —

Our plane to Israel almost crashed one summer because it was time to pray. All the Hasids stood up and ran to one side of the plane, the side closest to Jerusalem. Hat on over the kippah, tefillin out, muttering begins. The plane shifted hard under their collective weight. They couldn't move until the prayers were over, no matter how hard the pilots and flight attendants pleaded. They were all quite calm because if they finished their prayers, then the plane couldn't crash because God would save us.

That same summer, Hamas shot missiles that landed right outside

Kiryat Gat. When the emergency alarms went off, I screamed. As each blast shook the ground, I cried harder. My cousin grabbed my arm hard and whispered, between the deafening booms of missiles hitting nearby homes, "God will protect us."

— —

My cousin Naama is twenty-eight and a brilliant lawyer. The first time she came to Mémé's house wearing slacks instead of a loose, long skirt, her mother almost cried.

"Naama, how will you ever get married if you wear pants?"

"But Mom, Aunt Sophie wears pants and she's married!"

"Sophie married a Kurd! Do you want to marry a Kurd?"

— —

Every Yom Kippur since my Bat Mitzvah, I've read the second Aliyah during the evening service. It's the holiest part of the holiest day of the year, a huge honor. My dad is so proud; he tells everyone who will listen—except our family in Kiryat Gat. It's too much for Mémé to hear about her non-Jew granddaughter reading Torah on Kippur, breaking the rules on such an important day. Naama found out I was reading and when no one else was around, she whispered to me that it's all just tradition—there's technically nothing in the Torah preventing women from reading.

### Upper West Side

Yom Hashoah recognizes some collective tragedy that brings us together. I sit in synagogue and listen to them tell their stories, fewer and fewer every year. When I was young, they were first person stories. Later, stories about her mother, her father. Soon it will be far removed—not her Sabba and Safta, but her paternal grandmother who survived. I am an invader in this space; this is not my trauma. The Holocaust skipped over the Atlas Mountains. There is no Yom Hashoah for what happened to my family.

— —

For Elana's 14th birthday, we went to 5 Napkin Burger. I had never eaten a cheeseburger before. In fact, up until that point I had never

eaten meat and dairy on the same plate. I wasn't crazy religious like my family; I would eat at non-kosher restaurants and I wouldn't bring my own utensils to friends' homes. But I wasn't like my Upper West Side third-generation Ashkenazi friends who had grown up eating bacon and matzo ball soup and cheese on their burgers. I ordered my first cheeseburger that night, an accident at first, but I decided to eat it. It was incredible and delicious. I cried after two bites. I had let down my family and I had let down God. I never told my parents—one of my biggest secrets to date. But God knew right away. I didn't even believe in my grandparents' God, so why was I so afraid? It's not that I thought God would smite me, but I knew someone was disappointed.

I cooked dinner in a rush last weekend, no time for the elaborate dishes Mémé taught me. I made a hamburger, no cheese. I put butter in a bowl of peas and stuck it in the microwave. I realized what I had done immediately—the microwave had just starting counting down: 57, 56. I could've thrown out the peas, no harm done. But I watched the microwave countdown and when it was finished, I ate my hamburger, I ate my peas with butter, and nothing happened.

— —

My teacher's husband's last name is Cohen. Not a real Cohen, she tells me. The Ellis Island officials saw a Jew and figured Cohen was as good a name as any. She asks if I'm a Cohen because of Ellis Island too. No, I say. We're not Ellis Island Jews. We're the kind of Jews that flew over in the '90s and overstayed their tourist visas. She doesn't laugh.

— —

My ex-best friend liked to talk about Jewish culture. She grew up atheist, ethnically Jewish on her mother's side, she separated her Jewish culture from my Jewish religion. I'm technically not Jewish. It's passed down on your maternal side and my mom never had the time or money to officially convert. My ex-best friend loved being culturally Jewish: bagels and lox, klezmer music, Yiddish, the Upper West Side. She was directing the Jewish cultural show, made these experiences central, and no one said shit because it was their experience too. They laughed about their coddling grandmothers, warnings in Yiddish, and I laughed too.

I worked up the courage to confront her one day about the show and she told me in her matter-of-fact voice that it just wasn't possible to represent everyone's experience. Mine was the odd one out, mine had to go. So I left.

That night, I told my father what she said to me.

"Fucking Ashkenazis," he muttered. "Nothing's changed."

Their holidays weren't mine, their food wasn't mine, their history wasn't mine. The only thing we had in common was our Torah and maybe our God, although they are all reform Jews and their God seems to be much more understanding.

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### First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

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“With your skin baked to a perfect shade”

—Kiora Brooks

## The Misinterpretation of Dark Skin

*By Kiora Brooks*

TOPEKA WEST HIGH SCHOOL

Melanin.

Rich melanin.

My rich dark skin.

To love it or to hate it is the question,

One I never asked yet I get answers.

My skin seems like a trap as they hunt me down because of it

Armed with “playful” words, comparisons, and blatant disrespect.

My life it seems to start to shift when the reality of my dark skin hits.

Mauled perspectives drop me down a bit, my hopes and dreams no longer seem to fit into the reality others forced upon me.

Media feeds into this corruption connecting black skin with all kinds of ugliness.

To them we define that word while incorporating violence and a lack of intelligence.

The masses take this as a solid truth.

They're taught that dark-skinned people are lazy, always acting crazy,  
Sitting in a hole they can easily get out of if they try.  
Stereotypes like this continue to persist.  
But we're different than these lies being sold as truth.

I represent people with skin like me.  
I strive to create a name, that'll trigger a chain  
of positive images of me and others with skin the same.  
I'll have no need to hide in shame or try to change.

I come from my mother.

What a beauty, whose brain is like no other.  
She has rich skin like mine that people try to smother.  
They pack the negatives atop our skin as if being dark is a sin.  
As if our melanin causes them offense.  
Makes them go on defense  
And their defensive goal is to tear the color off our skin.  
Of course that's not literal, but imaginations have gone far.  
Death and life are in the power of the tongue

*Light is right*, gets whispered in our ears.  
Our melanin-dipped children repeat the phrase.  
When they're out playing they stick to an area of shade saying,  
*They're dark enough already*, why make it worse.

The sun which gives us energy, makes our skin glow, is now the enemy  
For bringing our skin to its true hue.

In the summer black girls would rather swim in bleach than in a pool.  
*If only you were lighter,*  
*No one's gonna like a girl with dark skin,*

These are the things being said to our little dark girls.

Images of pretty light-skinned women on the TV, yet no one to  
positively represent the little dark girl's shade.

How is she left to think of herself? Who's going to show her that her  
melanin isn't a mistake?

She isn't old enough to understand that her mother is the only  
positive image she needs.

But even if she is, her mother might be fighting demons in her skin  
as well.

Where does that lead the little dark girl?

Back to the TV to images that don't positively represent her shade.

Making her play hide and seek with the sun when it's recess because  
*She's dark enough already why make it worse.*

These words always trap us in, a cycle of negativity smothering our  
skin:

*Them dark skin girls they ain't feminine.*

*When the lights dim, where did the dark skins go? I can't see you?*

*We don't have that in your shade.*

*You'd be pretty if you weren't so dark.*

*You've been in the sun too long.*

*I hope I don't get as dark as you.*

*Getting stuck in this can take us to the brink of madness. We need it to  
break.*

*Dark skin is...*

*Dark skin is ugly*

*Dark skin is...*

*Dark skin is weird*

*Dark skin is...*

*Dark skin is gross*

*Dark skin is ... to you always something negative*

*Dark skin is not what you say it is*

*My skin is not what you make of it*

*Dark skin is magnificent.*

*Dark skin holds beauty.*

The statement:

*"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"*

is true.

Looking in the mirror is beauty what you see?

Do you behold magnificence?

A confidence that you're created how our Creator made you to be?

With your skin baked to a

Perfect shade.

That's what I see. Beauty.

I recognize I'm designed by someone who doesn't make mistakes.

Knowing that I can freely say without doubt as a weight.

My skin is black of this I'm proud

And I'll say this for the millions feeling trapped inside their black  
feeling down.

Cursing the sun and our Creator. For what?

Our skin is black on this be proud.

Our melanin's a blessing.

Let them hunt us down for it.

Just realize that our skin is not a trap, but

A prize only we can win.



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## First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

PERSONAL MEMOIR

# Stories My Mother Tells Me

*By Nora Carrier*

EDWARD R. MURROW HIGH SCHOOL

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“Every year I mumble through the  
Apostles’ Creed”

—Nora Carrier

1.

My mother is a storyteller, especially when she’s drunk. After three glasses of red wine and a hot toddy in the “Cat Mom” mug we got her for Christmas because she’s coming down with a cold, we are sitting at our dinner table losing track of which aunt she was talking about.

My mother is the youngest of four, her mother one of thirteen. My great-grandmother, Nora, took a boat to Boston from Galway when she was sixteen to become a maid or a seamstress—my mother can’t remember which. She met Jerome O’Connell, who was not a drunk at the time, who came from a good Catholic family that made Irish lace. They married at Saint Ann’s church in Dorchester with the yellow walls, the same church where my grandmother got married, the same church where my mother swears my uncle was molested, the same church where we hold memorial services for him every five years, for the body we never fully got.

Nora O’Connell, Coyne before that, spent the first dollar she made in America on a pair of silver teaspoons that now sit in my mother’s china cabinet next to the good Christmas plates and the salt and pepper shakers. My mother says that Nora never talked about Ireland, that the eleven aunts and uncles, the cousins, the cousins’ cousins, all assumed that she had left because she was poor, left because of the famine like every other grandmother in Dorchester. It wasn’t until Nora was ninety, her brain eating itself, that she started to scream for her stolen baby, that she threw my mother’s hand-me-down baby doll across the second-floor kitchen in the two-family house on Lawley

Street. The aunts and the uncles assumed it was the ramblings of a disappearing mother of thirteen children, assumed it was maybe about Louise, the thirteenth, who had died of pneumonia when she was nine. It wasn't until Nora was wheelchair bound, unable to leave the house, that she would ramble on about the traveling priests in Ballybrit and berate my mother for not setting up the altar correctly. It wasn't until my uncle Danny went to Ireland in the eighties, after Nora had died, that he met John Coyne, Daniel Coyne, Edward Coyne, all grandchildren of Ruth, sister of Nora, Nora who everyone thought had died in the Atlantic Ocean, who no one had heard from after she left their family of sheep farmers—no, cattle farmers, my mother says—after she left their family of cattle farmers when she was sixteen to avoid getting married to an older man of a neighboring farm.

My great-grandmother's family were cattle farmers, which is why my mother started buying Kerrygold butter from Fairway, because she trusts it, because it's Irish. My great-grandmother Nora left Ballybrit, now part of Galway, when she was sixteen—younger than I am now—because her father was marrying her off to one of six middle-aged brothers who owned the next farm over. Nora's father, more than anything, wanted to leave a legacy. Nora left, leaving her younger sister Ruth, fourteen at the time, to marry the farmer. Almost immediately they had a baby, though it was rumored across Ballybrit that they had a celibate marriage, though it was rumored across Ballybrit that Nora had a beau before leaving, a boy who worked at the Coyne cattle farm, a boy who was too poor for Nora's father's legacy, a boy who was rumored to spend hours on end with Nora behind closed barn doors. Almost immediately Ruth and her new husband had a baby, though my mother swears that when she went to Ireland to meet him, Ruth's son, father of John Coyne, Edward Coyne, Daniel Coyne, nearly ninety at the time, was the spitting image of her grandmother Nora: grayed, blind, shrinking in the corner of the room.

My mother swears that Nora had a baby before Boston. My mother swears that Nora left him in Ireland for silver teaspoons, for Jerome O'Connell, who was not a drunk at the time, for Saint Ann's and Lawley Street and Dorchester and thirteen more babies and for Louise's pneumonia and Helen and Katherine and Danny's deaths.

## 2.

My mother jokes that Danny, her closest sibling, was late to everything, including his own funeral. It wasn't until last year she told me this was because they didn't think they would find any semblance of a body, and held the memorial at Saint Ann's anyway.

There is an intersection in Dorchester dedicated to this uncle I never met, forty copies of the same photograph of him are spread in the drawers of the bedside tables of my two aunts and my mother, stuck in rims of mirrors. My grandmother Helen commissioned a drawing of him that hangs on the beige plaster walls above the television in her assisted-living apartment in Quincy.

Thirty years ago my mother's brother died, and still every December 21st weekend we drive up to Dorchester to go to church on a Saturday, Saint Ann's still dedicating a vigil. Still, my mother cries. She tells us of that December 1989, the worst week of her life, of visiting Dorchester from Manhattan for her birthday, the 16th, her then-new boyfriend planning to come up the following weekend to meet her family over Christmas. Every year she talks about her father surviving a heart attack, her mother slipping on ice and breaking both her arms on the way to Massachusetts General to visit him. She says that Danny had called that morning, saying he missed his flight from Frankfurt to Logan, and he was booking a new one to JFK instead, asking if maybe I could ride up with your boyfriend? My mother says she saw the report on TV, the red banner, breaking news, and knew that it was Danny's plane, reduced to strips of metal and bone sprawled across the Scottish countryside. She remembers making eye contact with her sister Mary Lou, both unable to tell their father.

Every year on the drive up to Dorchester, my mother jokes that Danny was late to everything, including his own funeral. Every year Mary Lou hosts a dinner, my grandmother and my aunts and the older cousins all drink scotch, toasting to the Scottish countryside, to the town of Lockerbie where my uncle's plane collapsed. Every year I sit in the front of Saint Ann's, the strangely yellow church with the history-worn wooden pews and the painful kneelers. The only people ever at Saint Ann's on that Saturday in December are my family, the New Young Priest, the tiny wrinkled women with patterned walkers and their sons, thick-bearded, Patriots windbreakers, Bruins caps folded in their

cracked hands. They always take off their hats in church. Every year I gaze up at curly-dark-haired, thorn-crowned Jesus bleeding on the cross overhead, distracting me from the sermon. Every year I listen to my mother lie and tell my grandmother we go to church every Sunday. Every year I mumble through the Apostles' Creed.

My father was three days away from meeting Danny; my younger brother bears his middle name. In 2011 when I was ten, I did not know why my mother was so invested in the Libyan Revolution. I was terrified of her when she celebrated Muammar Gaddafi's death, bracing herself against our countertops, screaming. I did not know that it was Danny's plane that made her beam as she showed me the photo of Gaddafi, dead, blood falling from his forehead, soaking his curly dark hair.

### 3.

My mother scolds my sister and me when we argue with our father, and my sister and I fight with our father a lot. My father grew up poor and got rich on Wall Street in such a way that it stripped him of his empathy for poor people, especially for poor black people and poor people of color and poor women, especially for those who are all three: poor, people of color, women. My father doesn't think about other people's pain, my father doesn't think about his daughters' opinions, or at least he doesn't listen to them. He storms off when we disagree with him, back to his hideaway and his Facebook page and his ego. My mother sits, frozen.

My mother was the youngest of four, her oldest sister Mary Lou was eleven when she was born. My mother was six when Mary Lou was seventeen, as I am now. She and my grandfather would fight about Vietnam in the same dark dining room he died in in 2005. My grandfather, a World War II vet, a Boston Police Officer who didn't like black people, an extra in the *Make Way for Ducklings* movie, had ulcers, or stomach problems, or something. My mother doesn't know how to explain it. Mary Lou would yell about the boys bloodied in Vietnam, they would fight over the war's merits, debating separate histories. My grandfather would reel over and puke, my grandmother scolding Mary Lou, my mother frozen, watching.

My mother and my grandmother both grew up in that same pale yellow house, one of the hundreds lined up on Lawley Street, just off

of Neponset Avenue, in Dorchester, overlooking the National Grid gas tank my mother says looks like Ho Chi Min. My grandmother sold the house in 2012 when she became too old to live alone, after my grandfather died in the dining room in a hospital bed, taking the space of the dark wooden dining room table, perpetually coated with Irish lace. My grandmother sold her car to the young man next door, Mrs. O'Malley's son; sold the house to a young Vietnamese couple, whom my grandmother always has opinions on when the house is brought up. That house still stands there, an image on Google Maps; the address is my mother's computer password. The new owners have exterminated the tiny red bugs that would crawl across the pavement on the warm Easters when I visited.

I no longer know what the insides of that house look like. The portraits of Jesus and JFK are surely gone. The twin beds are gone, the brown leather recliner is gone, my great-grandmother's china cabinet, filled with silver teaspoons, gone, the Acorn stairlift my siblings would take turns riding, the clock we broke, gone. My great-grandmother Nora no longer sits in the corner on the top floor, my dead Uncle Danny's pictures are no longer stuck in the rims of mirrors, my grandfather and my aunt no longer fight. There is no Irish lace, no curlers, no pressure cooker. All that remains are the creaks in the floorboards, the aging linoleum.

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## Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

### Flyby

*By Eric Zhu*

MARRIOTTS RIDGE HIGH SCHOOL

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“Ryan tracked the Nova squadron on her radar”

—Eric Zhu

Isla Ryan knew a few things about war.

As a human being, she knew it was hell. That was clear from the thousands she had seen die, inside blazing fireballs, collapsing buildings, and everything in between.

As a soldier, she knew it was unfair. Most of those who died had little to do with the greater struggle at hand between the United Nations and the American Empire. Now into their second year of world war, the frequent stalemates ensured that no matter who was winning, tens of millions of people were always within *something's* iron sights.

And as a mercenary ace, known worldwide as the “Demoness” for her massive kill tally, she knew it was an excellent way to make a living. As she was paid for every confirmed kill, her annual pay averaged around a thousand times that of a foot soldier. The UN was a generous employer, and she was a hardworking employee.

Alas, the war against the Empire was slowing down. After concentrated global surprise attacks by the resurgent Empire, the UN had launched a retaliatory invasion of the North American East Coast. While they were able to take over the region, Empire guerilla harassment proved seriously debilitating, slowing down the advance into the Empire heartland. That meant fewer missions, less money, and one very disappointed soldier of fortune.

Now, lying on her bed back on base, Ryan wondered what was next. Maybe—

Her personal communicator, propped up on her nightstand a meter

away, beeped. The high pitched *ding-ding-ding* sound would normally excite her, but it was already ten p.m., and the damn thing was so far away ... *ding-ding-ding! ding-ding-ding!*

"Hello?!" she yawned directly into the speaker.

"I have some news for you," came the heavy accent of her handler, General Savchenko.

"Okay," Ryan replied tiredly.

"Are you familiar with Colonel Gregory Allen?"

"That old man?" Ryan thought out loud. "Former flight instructor for all of the other aces, and current Nova pilot?"

"Yes, him. The most dangerous ace left. His bounty has just been doubled by UN Command to three million. Do I have your attention, Commander Ryan?"

"No," Ryan murmured, still trying to stay awake. "Why tell me this now?"

"Because we know exactly where he is, and want you to kill him. Tomorrow."

\*\*\*

The next day Ryan was shoving her leftover lunch into a trashcan when the intercom crackled. "All pilots report to the briefing room. We have a mission tonight."

Ryan practically leaped up from her desk. It hardly mattered that it was her regular naptime. After fitting into her flight uniform, Ryan jogged toward the base's command center. Situated two hundred kilometers from the frontline, Hamerkop Air Force Base housed the 67th Special Air Force Unit, home to Ryan and her fellow mercenary pilots. It was a rather small place, but the 67th had acquired an outsized reputation as ruthless and extremely competent—something Isla believed she, more than anyone else, contributed to.

The guard directed her to the briefing room, resembling a small movie theater with the same amenities—including a popcorn machine. Ryan settled herself in, her heart pounding even as her fellow pilots steadily filled in the seats. Their commander came shortly after the last seat was filled, and looked over his audience. With a slow nod, he turned on the screen.

"Listen up, pilots. We got a new mission." The 67th's commander, nicknamed Optic for reasons Isla couldn't remember, opened a map projection of the Southeast coast, focusing on their base's location first before shifting west. "There's a small Empire air base near the city of Augusta. The 67th is to approach and destroy as many hostile aircraft as possible. There will be simultaneous operations across the rest of the East Coast. Command intends to break the Empire Air Force today."

"Any task for me?" came a familiar voice. There was Ryan's younger sister and fellow ace Ava, her hand raised. Since the start of the war, the two had flown every mission together.

"Ifrit 2 ..." Optic thought. The call sign, with Ryan being Ifrit 1, was from a demon in Islamic mythology. Ryan had to smile every time she heard herself over the radio as Ifrit, the Demoness of the skies. Every note of admiration and every cry of fear, from friend and foe alike, reminded her that she had earned the title.

After the last few questions were answered, the pilots filed back outside. The mission would begin in seven hours—sundown.

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A few wailing alarms amidst the steadily fading sunlight signaled the start of the mission.

"All pilots, prepare for takeoff!" Optic, already up in his command aircraft, called to the base. Ryan could just barely make out his sleek four-engine jet circling above Hamerkop.

Most were already inside their aircraft the moment the order was issued. Ryan and Ava, stuck in the back of the takeoff queue, were among the few pilots that were not. As the first jets roared down the runway, Ryan gave a fresh look at her cockpit.

*It's go time*, Ryan thought.

She climbed inside the Armageddon, looking over its systems again. The Armageddon, patterned bright blue and white in honor of Isla's employer, was easily her favorite plane that she'd ever flown. Based on captured Empire jets, the Armageddon combined outstanding engines, top-tier avionics, and a variety of weapons into the world's single best fighter plane.



Flight crew had just finished loading the jet with Ryan's standard loadout—six short-range Decimator and two long-range Ravager missiles under the wings, plus eight hypersonic rockets locked inside the weapons bay. One man hurriedly trucked away an empty carton of ammo, its contents now inside the supersonic jet's twin 25mm cannons. With that much firepower at her disposal, Ryan wouldn't ever run out of options to take someone down. Ryan taxied her plane down the runway, awaiting her turn. In the gloom of twilight the orange-red afterburners of the mercenary squadrons stood out more than anything else. Some empty trees next to the concrete shuddered as the warplanes rumbled down and lifted off.

"Flight control to Ifrit 1 and 2, you are cleared for takeoff."

They pushed their jets to full throttle, charging one thousand meters down the runway. At full power Ryan's Armageddon rose in the sky, followed by Ava's Landslide.

In moments the sisters had joined the forty-plane formation heading for the target city. The group quickly organized itself, and Optic kept them continually updated on the count and type of enemy craft that were scrambling to meet their assault.

Below, endless green farms and forests passed by while Ryan quietly pondered her mission. Allen was undoubtedly an excellent pilot with an excellent plane. But Ryan had faced many aces before. If she could keep the fight one on one, she reckoned she could take him down. Easier said than done with dozens of jets already in the air, though.

"You should be able to see the city now," Optic reported after an hour.

The bright city began to materialize, multicolored skyscrapers punctuating the skyline. Patterns of smaller lights—enemy fighters—began to swirl around, awaiting battle.

"Any Novas among the defenders, Optic?" Ryan called in.

"Four, currently in formation together. Isn't one of them your target, Ifrit 1?"

"Yep. An enemy ace."

"Good luck, Ifrit. Sixty-seventh Special Air Force Unit ... engage all targets!" Optic finished.

The fireworks display started instantly as the first fireballs of missile

impacts and laser hits came in rolling waves, each side trading accurate volleys.

Ryan tracked the Nova squadron on her radar, but they split off from each other, each plane going in different directions. She picked the nearest one and pursued it, quickly maneuvering into a favorable position. With two Decimator missiles, she blew it out of the sky.

*Probably not him*, Isla thought. *Three more to go.*

Gunfire streaked by, forcing Ryan into a series of barrel rolls. An enemy was on to her—a Comet fighter judging from the ferocious stream of plasma bolts.

Ryan quickly banked and flipped her jet, putting her into the attacker position. She tore into the Comet with her cannons, quickly chewing through its layer of energy shielding.

"Where the hell are you, Allen?" Ryan openly wondered. She didn't realize her communicator was set to "public"—meaning everyone could hear her.

"So they sent a hunter for me," came an extremely gravelly voice marked as "UNKNOWN" by Ryan's flight computer. "Why so?"

*Might as well talk. Let's see what this fossil has to say.*

"You've got a high number for your head," Ryan started. "And I intend to take it."

"Mercenary, I fight for a nation. And you fight for a profit."

"That doesn't matter. Because I fight better," Ryan said as her Armageddon finished the enemy fighter with a rocket, sending it into a death spiral. "Now where are you?"

Just as Ryan looked up, the enemy roared by. Their jets, one blue and diamond white, the other a shining maroon and violet, came within inches of each other, burning a path through the darkness as the ruined Comet blew up, illuminating the aces' warplanes all the better.

Ryan instantly slowed down and pulled up to face him. She checked her radar, and realized that he too was rapidly turning and slowing down. *Oh, perfect*, she thought. *He's probably about to laser me.*

Two laser beams melted a nearby building as the Armageddon rolled to the side. He was right behind her, and Ryan didn't like that one bit.

She looped through the widened top of a building, using her thrust vectoring to almost completely stop ... before accelerating the instant Allen failed to notice her move and flew into Ryan's sights. She fired a burst from her guns, and seemed to strike a few hits. But he shook her off in seconds, his Nova proving every bit as agile as her Armageddon.

"You're the Demoness, aren't you?" came the enemy again. Perhaps he recognized her Ifrit emblem, a fiery blue demon painted across the Armageddon. Or perhaps he recognized her extreme lethality. Both were acceptable to Ryan.

"That's me," she cheerily replied, chasing him farther into the city center, the two barely ten meters above the main street.

"Demon bitch," Allen cursed. "You don't belong in the Empire's heavens."

"We'll see," Ryan said as she tried to track Allen with her missiles. He responded to her every maneuver, sending their jets roaring through the packed metropolis. Neither could hit the other; every rocket from Ryan and every laser from Allen missed by the slimmest of margins.

This was growing untenable. The sooner Ryan could knock him out, the sooner she could rejoin the main battle and, of course, earn a little extra tonight.

A quick check of her remaining arsenal indicated that her two long-range missiles were left, but they were intended for beyond visual range combat. She could see the Nova perfectly fine as Allen perfectly dodged an extended burst from her cannons. Still ...

"Enjoy!" Ryan cracked as she let off her first Ravager. The missile left a bright white trail as it sailed straight towards its target. With a satisfying *BOOM*, the projectile turned into a spherical explosion right next to the Nova.

"You think that'll stop me?" came Allen. His plane zoomed away, but Ryan thought she saw a smoke trail emanating from his leftmost engine.

"Guess so. I hit you," she chirped back.

"Insolent fool."

Ryan continued to follow Allen, darting through the shining city. Like a wolf going in for the kill, she focused entirely on her prey.

Suddenly, volleys of energy blasts forced Ryan to stop her pursuit. An opportunistic enemy Comet was taking potshots at her. Hundreds of shots whizzed by, leaving Ryan momentarily distracted trying to evade the new threat.

That was all it took for a single laser blast to blow off most of her tail. The wreckage fell to earth, and there was no doubt the jet would soon follow.

Ryan fought to regain control of her aircraft, but there was no recovering from this wound. Virtually every single alarm went off as the Armageddon lost speed and altitude.

"Ifrit 1, report!" Optic shouted. She'd heard her commander scared before. His present tone was a lot more than scared. "Are you all right?"

"Down so soon?" her enemy jeered.

With growing horror, Ryan saw Allen pull up to her crippled plane, waving his delta wings as a taunting gesture. His Nova was trailing smoke, but was still very much intact.

"Don't you know that every demon is eventually thrown into the lake of fire?" he gloated. "You need much more to stop fate, Demoness."

"Really? I think I need one more shot."

Ryan hit a switch, and the second Ravager hanging off her wing dropped off and fired.

The missile detonated inches away from both jets, sending Ryan crashing into the side and the Nova into the darkness. The Armageddon's left wing was a blackened skeleton, barely intact from the point-blank blast. With any luck, Allen's plane would be in the same condition.

"Good try," his distorted voice came through. "But not good enough."

"Ifrit...?" Optic uttered.

Ryan hit the eject right when all three lasers from Allen ripped into the jet. She rocketed out, her seat rapidly deploying a parachute as she saw the Armageddon completely disintegrate, bits of blue and white ashes fluttering downwards.

"You got me," she murmured.

There was no response. Her helmet had all the communications

equipment of her plane. It was quite unlike Allen not to speak in a moment like this.

And then she saw why.

His Nova was spinning wildly, a sizeable object impaled in its body.

With a blink Ryan recognized that “object” as her Armageddon’s right wing, still loaded with several missiles. They promptly blew up, nothing left to save the Empire ace.

Except a little parachute that popped open, above the silhouette of an ejection seat.

*He’s still alive?!*

Ryan couldn’t ask for help, as then she’d lose her reward. Thinking desperately, she closed her eyes and let pure instinct make the decision.

Her right hand curled around her automatic pistol. She pulled it out, gauged the range, and realized how painfully far away she was. Not even a trained sniper could make the shot. She was simply too high up. But he had to die. And Ryan remembered one final detail.

Her own survival pack contained another parachute, one she hadn’t deployed yet. Grabbing her knife she cut the straps of her seat and jumped off into the darkness. Ryan hurtled through the dark, her velocity skyrocketing.

*Why’d I do this again?, she thought. Right. Three million.*

There was the colonel, now suddenly getting much closer, and Ryan pulled her backup parachute handle. It opened with a *swoosh*, setting her only a few meters from her nemesis.

She aimed her gun. He turned around, still in his ejection seat.

She fired until the mechanisms clicked empty.

Allen’s body slumped over, his seat gently falling in the wind. Mission accomplished.

“Ava, I did it,” Ryan called.

“Sis?” replied Ava. “You got him?”

“I did, but I had to bail out.”

“Shit. How are you going to get home?”

Ryan could plainly see the glowing city beneath her. If she landed in that kind of hostile territory, there would be no way she could possibly escape and reach friendly lines.

“Your jet. Can’t it hover in place?”

“The Landslide ...? Oh,” Ava realized. “You need me now?”

“Can you pick me up?”

“With a battle raging all around us?” Ava laughed out loud. “Of course I can, sis.”

The silvery Landslide came over, slowing down and hovering right underneath Ryan. She hit the plane with a slight *thump*, landing on the smooth curved top.

“Airborne taxi, at your service,” Ava announced. “What’s the destination?”

“Home.”

“That can be arranged.”

Ryan took hold of the fuselage brakes and Ava took off into the glorious dawn, one whose value could be precisely estimated at three million.

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## Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

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“The Japanese word for dirty cleaves its way  
out of Jun’s mouth”

—Serena Yang

## How Long Does a Wildfire Last?

*By Serena Yang*

HUNTER COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOL

Jun is doing that thing again, the one where she wonders out loud about stuff that most people are too careful to say. This time it’s about the chances of her house burning down with her grandfather in it.

I dig my heels into the sand and watch as Jun paces the shoreline looking for shells. I know she isn’t really looking for anything. We’ve been on the beach for ten minutes and she hasn’t told me what’s wrong yet. I feel very small like this, sitting with my knees tucked into my chest as Jun paces across the horizon, her body blotting out the sun every so often.

“—and yesterday the news lady said that the fires could spread here if someone just sneezed too hard, you know?”

“She didn’t say that.”

“She didn’t, but you know what she should have said?” Jun kicks something, hard, and her bare foot leaves a deep furrow in the sand. “Fucking California won’t stop setting itself on fire and we should all just light ourselves up too. Before the end of the world can take us.”

I laugh. It’s not really that funny, but she’s stopped talking about her grandfather. “It’s not the end of the world though. It’s just wildfires,” I say, watching Jun crouch down to scoop sand back into the rut her foot had made. She presses her palms over it until the sand is smooth.

“It makes you think about the end of the world though, right?” Jun jumps up, spreading her arms wide and spinning to face the gray horizon. Sunsets are gray in a burning California. Jun pitches her voice and, in the affected tones of an evening news anchor, says, “THE YEAR

IS 2012. Tomorrow, the world ends. Why? Cause the Mayans said so.”

I let myself laugh out loud. This is one of the things I both love and hate about Jun: she cheers herself up faster than anyone can. The part I hate is that she does it by distracting herself with trying to make me laugh.

Jun crouches down in front of me and mimics holding a microphone. “Miss Lily Qiu, are you ready for the world to end tomorrow?”

I tilt my head and pretend to think. “Some say the world will end in fire, Some say in ice. From what I’ve tasted of desire I hold with those who favor fire.”

“Ooh, Rob Frost.” Jun grins, all teeth and gums. “And if it had to perish twice, I hope it burns a second time.”

I knock Jun’s ankle out from under her, and she sprawls out on the sand, laughing. She looks a little happier now, so I grin back. “You know that’s not how it goes.”

“That’s how it *should* go.” Jun sits up and rests her chin on her knee. Her smile a sharp curve of shadow in the quickly fading light. Angry gashes of orange tearing open the gray sky behind her. “Looks like those who favor fire are in luck.”

The sun has dipped far below the horizon by the time Jun tells me what happened. She doesn’t look at me when she says, *Gramps threw me out. He thinks I’m crazy.* Jun’s long limbs are all folded up, and she’s curling into herself like my mom’s Costco air mattress with all the air let out. *You’re sick, he said. There’s something wrong in your head. Never say dirty words like that ever again.* The Japanese word for *dirty* cleaves its way out of Jun’s mouth.

Jun grits her teeth. “I like girls. Okay? I like girls and I’m going to say that as many times as I fucking want.” Even Jun’s anger feels burnt out, choked full of exhaust.

School has been cancelled for a week because of air quality concerns. It’s the end of the year, and we didn’t have much school left anyway. Jun needs somewhere to go. I tell her she can stay with me, and it scares me that that’s all I can do. Jun looks like she might shake right out of her skin.

I’m a lot luckier than Jun. My parents aren’t that much younger than Jun’s grandpa and they’re Asian immigrants too, but they’ve always been okay with most things. Even with their only daughter being gay. They’ve known about me for a long time, and I think they always suspected about Jun. Either way, my mom lets Jun in with a warm smile and tells her that she can stay as long as she wants.

Jun follows me into my room. She’s been here thousands of times, but it’s never been like this—too quiet, neither of us knowing what to say.

Jun sets her jaw and turns away. Being vulnerable has always exhausted her. She’s all sharp raw edges now. When she speaks I can hear the barbs in her voice, the way she’s making herself bleed. “Don’t worry, I’ll sleep on the floor. Look away when you change. All that. Does your mom want us to leave the door open?”

“Jun,” I say.

She falls backward onto my bed, turning onto her side and tucking her knees in. “Dumb joke. I’m sorry.”

I sit down next to her. For a second I think I might cry. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. You know how I am. I’m sorry.”

Stop saying you’re sorry. I do know how you am. I bite my lip until it stings. “It’s really okay. It’s not the end of the world, remember? Just wildfires.”

Jun knows that I’m moving to Chicago at the end of the month. She’s heard my mom complain about California nearly as much as I have over the past few years. She doesn’t want to ask me what she will do after I leave, and I don’t want to ask her to come with us. Between the two of us, I’ve never been the braver one. In the end, my mom does it for us.

“Jun, please don’t take this the wrong way, but I want you to know that we’d be happy to take you with us to Chicago.” Jun’s helping my mom chop vegetables in the kitchen. I’m frozen halfway down the stairs, my foot hovering above the creaky sixth step. Hope clutches me by the throat, and I’m afraid that if I breathe too loud Jun might hear me listening and then—

“I can’t do that,” Jun says, voice barely audible over the dull, methodi-



cal thump of knife against cutting board. My heart sinks. “Thank you, Mrs. Qiu, but I really can’t.”

It’s not just Jun being prickly. With me Jun likes to cover herself in spines, like a cactus. She likes it when I’m careful with her. But around my mom Jun’s always been softer, more readily honest. I think it’s because she can’t remember her own mother. I want so badly to go downstairs and shake Jun by the shoulders, hard. Come with us to Chicago.

My mom sets down her knife. “Will you have somewhere to go?”

Jun shrugs.

Soon, it’s the week before we leave for Chicago. The house smells like cardboard boxes and Jun’s tonkatsu, the only dish she knows how to make. At the beach we slip off our shoes and stand where the sand feels warm and dry under our heels but our toes sink into wet sand.

Jun gestures to our shoes lined up neatly just beyond reach of the waves. “Did you know that in Japan this means suicide? Gramps says that’s how he knew his sister had killed herself. He went home one day and found her shoes lined up by the balcony.”

I draw a line in the sand with my big toe and watch Jun’s hair tangle itself into sailor’s knots. She’s standing ankle deep in the water, and when the waves roll back in they swallow her up to her knees. I can’t see her face.

“Wouldn’t want to track dirt into the afterlife, right? Jun, stop getting dirt in the house. Jun, why can’t you be more clean? Clean clean clean. Be careful of dirt when entering the house. Be careful of dirt when jumping off the sixth floor balcony.”

I flinch. Jun’s voice is sharp enough to cut through the thick, choking air. The snapping wind twists Jun’s dress up around her waist, and I notice for the first time that she’s wearing my old running shorts underneath.

“I’m going back to Gramps’ house tomorrow. I’ll apologize. Whatever. I’ll never mention it again. I can’t leave him in that stupid clean house all by himself, his sister dead and his daughter who the hell knows where.”

Jun has only mentioned her mother one other time, years and years

ago. All I know is: Jun’s mother, at eighteen, left her newborn baby behind to run away with a white man. Gramps, too proud to ever admit to wanting a troublesome daughter like that to come home. And Jun—the bitter twist of her mouth as she says her mother’s name. The easy, honest way she talks to mine.

Jun is so still that I worry she might get swallowed up by the water, the waves skimming over the top of her head, tugging her towards the horizon. I reach for Jun and I realize that she’s shivering. I wrap my arms around her as if I can keep her from being pulled away.

I write Jun a letter from Chicago. I tell her about how I can’t wait for it to snow. I tell her about how much I hate the smell of cardboard boxes, and how much I miss her *tonkatsu*. Right in the middle of the letter, cowering between lines of my narrow handwriting, I tell her that she can stay in Chicago for the summer if she wants. *I can take you to the Bean. We can eat deep dish! Anyway, I think the snow is going to be really beautiful. It snows really early here in Chicago, you know?* I worry over my words for so long that I write a second letter too, this one without any mention of Jun in Chicago in summer, the two of us craning our necks beneath the Bean, splitting deep dish pizza exactly down the middle because Jun is adamant about things like that. I put both letters in envelopes, address them neatly and give each a stamp. In the end, I only send the first one.

*Dear Lily, Jun writes back. It’s already snowing here in California. I looked outside today and a thin white layer of ash had crept over the hood of the car, like frost. When you get frost in Chicago, remember to send me a picture of the real thing. Love, Jun.*

## Dear Sister

*By Keneane Ejigu*

MONTCLAIR HIGH SCHOOL

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“That she proudly embodies the history  
that differentiates ”

—Keneane Ejigu

I worry about my younger sister often—about how she chooses her friends, how she perceives herself, and who she decides to be.

Having experienced much of my childhood elsewhere, there is a disconnect between my understanding of a 13-year-old girl and hers. She consults me on things I struggle to relate to, like which of her photo edits will look best on her Instagram feed or, which over-priced Brandy Melville shirt owned by every other girl at her school she should buy. I sometimes feel like a mediator; it is my duty to guide her into adulthood and bridge the cultural disconnect between her and my parents.

I worry that she'll forget where she's from, the journey that started way before her own.

My older sister and I share the burden of imparting upon her what we have been lucky enough to experience. We were born and raised in Ethiopia, then moved to Massachusetts, Texas, Kenya, and now New Jersey; we value the complexity of our journey, each stop a chance to embrace our African roots, break down stereotypes, and honor the sacrifices of our parents.

I pray that she understands her responsibilities to those who lack her

opportunities, and that she proudly embodies the history that differentiates her.

I used to complain about the little things my mother asks for my help with—writing emails, paying bills, editing and rewriting essays for her online classes, additional tasks that I knew none of my peers had to take on in addition to their personal workloads. My mother, however—fierce, quick to sacrifice, and authentic—has taught me to continually delight in the intricacies of my life, beginning with my name. I once dreaded having substitute teachers butcher its pronunciation and strictly introduced myself to others as Ken. My name is “Keneane,” meaning a land flowing with milk and honey, promise-filled and prosperous. My mother named me after the biblical Canaan, the land promised to the Israelites after their liberation from Egypt. Today, I choose to embrace both names.

I have grown up among contradictions, striving to succeed in environments that have given me so much yet robbed me of what I once had: security in who I am and where I belong. I take pride in the complexities of my identity, in the battle I fight daily to balance where I’m from, where I am, and where I strive to be. I am a confluence of multiple identities shaped by the contrasting cultures I have experienced at four different elementary schools, two different middle schools, and high school in an entirely new country. I have witnessed the stark differences between cold, collegiate Boston and the strength of small-town College Station, Texas, as well as the camaraderie and diversity of Nairobi, Kenya. My Ethiopian roots eclipse all that I have seen and are increasingly evident in all that I do, from the peculiar way that my friends point out I pronounce specific words to the isolation I feel when they discuss certain childhood TV shows I have never watched or games I have never played. My heritage influences me daily from the perspective with which I analyze books in English class to how I form new friendships.

In the midst of this confusion, however, I have learned to derive power from uncertainty, to blossom under the warmth of different suns. I appreciate each chapter of my life that constitutes who I am today,

from times of trial and discovery to moments of faithlessness and wandering, every new period an extension of the last, my friends a testament to my shift from the indifferent new girl to one defined by her empathy, humor, and compassion for others, my name a reminder of what is yet to come.

## First Generation

*By Maria Grijalva*

HOSTOS LINCOLN ACADEMY

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“More time to make more memories”

—Maria Grijalva

Back in fall of 2016 was when it all started. That was also the downfall of America’s government. I was sitting at a pizza shop with my boyfriend and my best friend; we were discussing President Trump’s campaign, specifically his plans and beliefs on immigration. As first generation Americans we feared for our parents’ future. I specifically remember one of them saying, “Bro, your parents not gonna get deported, they’re white.” I stood there quiet, but with so much to say.

A couple months later, my parents’ case finally reached court. The process had begun and it was all becoming real to us. My parents were going to court and seeing their lawyer, Thomas T. Hecht; facing the possibility of not returning home when going to court. The fear grew as each day went by. Their final date was scheduled, but luckily it was postponed until January 15th, 2019, months before my high school graduation.

Spring of 2018 came and allegations about Thomas T. Hecht surfaced in which immigrants claimed that Hecht and his team defrauded them and they were now facing deportation.

It felt like my world came crashing down.

How could it be that the man that my parents trusted and invested so much money in was defrauding people like my parents? How dare he?

My father went searching for a new lawyer and was able to find another one. My parents, my little brother, and I met with her in August of 2018.

We walked into a building with multiple offices. When we got to the lawyer’s office, we walked into this small waiting room with four seats.

It was my first time in a law firm and this was not what I had expected. But it is New York and everything is cramped up. After waiting a while, the receptionist welcomed us to read magazines and informed us when the lawyer would arrive. The receptionist seemed young and fresh out of college.

The lawyer came out to greet us. She was tall, young, and white. She spoke Spanish which made my parents and me comfortable. Her assistant began to discuss with my parents everything that they have done thus far so that they could get an understanding of their situation. The lawyer was going through my parents' files; I could sense the panic settling in on her as she went through them. She interrupts my parents' conversation with the assistant and asks, "*Ustedes están aplicando para asilo?*" My parents responded with yes. She begins to tell her assistant that nothing in their files indicates that they qualify for asylum.

My legs began to shake.

My heart began to race.

I wanted to run out of her office because I knew that what was going to happen next wasn't going to be pretty.

She began to explain to my parents that they don't qualify for asylum because they aren't being personally attacked in Guatemala, and there's no evidence for their reasoning to not get deported. She then says, "This man was setting them up for deportation."

Once again, my heart drops.

I couldn't believe my ears. This man was really setting my parents up to get taken away from my siblings and me. I looked over at my little brother who was sitting on my mother's lap. I began to imagine his life without my parents. I started planning what I'll do if my parents got deported. I began to think about how it would be best if I only applied to schools within the city so that I can get a job and still go to school and raise my siblings. I began to think of many places where I could apply for jobs and began to narrow my list of colleges.

The lawyer told my parents that it really seems like there's no beating this case due to the lack of evidence. Suddenly everything becomes foggy because of the tears building up in my eyes. My throat hurts from holding back the tears. I can feel myself on the verge of sobbing

and crying my eyes out to them. But I don't want to let my parents see the pain in my eyes. Instead I open my bag and get my water bottle and sip it until I'm able to swallow back my tears.

She goes on to tell my parents that if they hire her, she will do her best but that they'll have to pay \$2,000 cash as soon as possible in order for her to get started. My dad told her that we would go to the nearest Bank of America and come back to pay her and sign all the paper work. By this point we were all hungry as hell, so we went to get food after getting the money from the bank. Everything seems to taste better when you're hungry because I had a beef pastelito which didn't compare to ones I've had.

When we got back to the office, my dad gave her the money and the assistant printed out the contract that my parents needed to sign. I was feeling a bit more hopeful now that we knew the truth and were on to a better path.

But the fear only seemed to grow as the months went by and January approached. In October of 2018 I was diagnosed with chronic depression and was told to go see a therapist. This was around the same time that I was applying to college and studying to retake my SAT. I was beyond stressed. The idea of applying to college seemed so pointless to me because I truly believed that my parents were going to lose their case and I was going to have to go back to Guatemala. Yet something kept me striving in each SAT practice test that I took.

I did apply to college, a majority of them being schools in the city so that I wouldn't even get my hopes up about going away. I made sure to apply to schools that had majors I was interested in. But I lost so much hope and interest while doing all of this. It felt pointless. I distanced myself from everybody who I was close to. I was crying almost every night. But the more I thought about being away from my parents, the bigger my plans grew. By the time January came around, I had already planned out what I would do if my parents were to get deported and what I would do to make sure my siblings didn't lose their opportunities in this country.

Eventually I met with a psychologist at my local hospital and was told that a therapist would soon call me to schedule days to start my sessions. But up until this date, I haven't heard back. At least I can say I tried right?

In December of 2018, President Trump shut down the government. My parents' court date came around and the shutdown was not lifted. Although they showed up to court, their case wasn't taken in because they were only taking in detainees' cases.

A sigh of relief came through my family and home. My parents' immigration status remained the same, but we have more time. More time to make more memories. The thought and fear of my parents missing my high school graduation was put to the side. The possibility of me attending a private or away college was now there for me.

This wasn't the outcome we wanted, but it sure wasn't the outcome we feared. I am hopeful that my parents won't get deported and hopefully they will be able to stay in this country until I turn 21, so that I can ask for their residency. Although 21 is very far from now, I have to stay hopeful and appreciate every moment I have with my parents and cherish them.

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## Honorable Mention

SPOKEN WORD

## How to Be Like Me

*By Safiatu Diagana*

TOWNSEND HARRIS HIGH SCHOOL

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“30 seconds is not enough time to explain  
300 years of rage”

—Safiatu Diagana

How to be like me, a black woman in America, in three easy steps ...

you

can

not

You see, America is the white girl in my math class who says she loves  
me

because I’m not one of the “ghetto” girls

You know, flaming hot Cheetos and Arizona Ice Tea for breakfast type  
girls

America is the Asian boy who said my beauty can brighten an entire  
room

but he would never take me to meet his parents

since my darkness is louder than his ignorance

America is the person I call for justice

but she places me on hold for 18 years as I leave voicemail

after voicemail

but I’m always getting cut off

I mean, 30 seconds is not enough time to explain 300 years of rage  
but I'll hold

so the silence becomes my best friend in the shadows of my society  
and then you have the audacity to question how I lost my dignity?

My self-respect

My confidence?

My humility?

Why question when you can take a closer look at how America  
"appreciates" me?

White America tells me laughter is the best medicine  
as they dip their skin in black paint and mock me  
so why do I feel sick to my stomach?

You recognize blackness is nine letters but when it's on my skin, it is a  
life sentence

as Rachel Dolezal wears it as a costume,

peels it off the next,

encouraging Kylie to cherry pick my culture.

New weave, gold hoops, now white girl gets to flex?

In the complexion

Ya Allah made for me?

Is this why you silenced me so long?

Is this why you hated me for so long?

Because even though you might have some drip,  
deep down, you know I am the inspiration for the sauce  
but you could not follow the recipe

where the ingredients include:

Sturdy milly rocking

Lip gloss popping

On beat clapping

and now suddenly, I realized you had the audacity to question how I  
lost my dignity

my self-respect

my confidence

my humility

when you drowned it with white noise

when you made the house white

The education white

Yet I'm not white enough to be human?

Yeah, alright!

I will not apologize for being in this body

Ya Allah has carved into with his Almighty Hands

He has instilled in my brain that I am worth more  
than others might think

so I don't need to flaunt it to the world

that copied and pasted my culture

into their closet and communication

I just realized you had the audacity to question my dignity  
my self-respect



my confidence

my humility

when I forgot to ask you:

how can you ever question my humility when you had to

steal from my culture to build yours boo?

---

## Honorable Mention

### POETRY

## Why I Stand

*By Sophia Jaramillo*

ALBUQUERQUE HIGH SCHOOL

I am lucky

I am not the girl

Who is forced to sit and wait

A broken record playing the same three notes

Over and over.

Generation after generation,

Taught to color within the lines

To sing a song with no words.

Background music

Repeating

Over and over

It's a tune I am told to play

To love

To live by

Forced to wait in the shadows

Afraid that we will be too loud

Too strong

---

“Afraid that we will be too loud”

—Sophia Jaramillo

Too smart

Too brave

Better

Every whisper

Every fight

Every woman

before me

Is now

Why I stand

---

## Honorable Mention

### POETRY

## What's Your Perception?

*By Echezona Onwuama*

WESTON HIGH SCHOOL

---

“When opportunity comes, and her  
confidence ain’t around”

—Echezona Onwuama

Little black boy, raised in the ghetto

School in the suburbs, he a part of METCO

Intelligent dude, but his friends label him a certain way to the point  
where he forgets that he is special

Claim that he ain't black enough if he ain't good at hoops

If he speak smart, then he's as white as Elmer's glue

Since he from the hood, they ask if he hears gunshots or, if what they  
say about fried chicken is

true

And if this young boy finds a girl he really like

From a white family, it's the dust that he bites

Deep inside, he feel like he won't even get no love

Cause all she gon' see him as is just another thug

Across the board, all his fears and concerns

Lead me to ask you all today, when we will learn?

When we will we learn?

Somebody please tell me now!

Little black girl

Beauty like magic

Honor roll student, she got A's in her classes  
To the rest of the school, she's loud and obnoxious  
Uncivilized and her attitude is ratchet  
You know that she can do better, young queen  
Surrounded by her friends, then she switch up her routine  
And you know that it ain't the real her by any means  
But you can't tell if she's nice, rude, or in between  
Shorty got a hard upbringing that you don't know about  
Parents split up and her struggles nothing to joke about  
She's insecure, trying to unlock her full potential  
You feel the latter me off me preaching with no instrumental  
She only feels shot down  
When opportunity comes, and her confidence ain't around  
So I promise I will sing about her forever  
I promise I will sing about her forever  
She only feels shot down  
When opportunity comes, and her confidence ain't around  
So I promise I will sing about her forever  
I promise I will sing about her forever

What's your perception?  
Let's address the elephant in the room  
'Bout how everyone got opinions and they assume  
You don't know my identity off of your first glance  
I'm not your enemy, you ain't even give me a chance  
I'm black, and I'm proud to be  
Even when society had ousted me, from the fruits that were bound me  
I work as hard as the next man, you label me as a peasant  
Racism ain't in the past, I see it in the present

I'm trying to stop this feeling that I had in middle school  
Feeling like girls would not accept me for my skin  
Maybe they think I'm a criminal, or just another imbecile  
Black is beautiful, let me give you the visuals  
Stuck to our roots when the hatred approached us  
How you listen to Migos, but you don't respect the culture?  
You pick and choose with how you rock with us  
You know there ain't no stoppin' us  
Disrespectful words comin' out of your esophagus  
As a people we should watch our speakin'  
You can't say the N word because I shouldn't either  
These words hold us back but we lookin' for hope to free us  
To mold a generation, and turn us into leaders  
Black history month, they only give us February  
This for all my ancestors, my talent hereditary  
They told me to speak the truth, I know that's necessary  
I'ma be a scholar, all-time, simply legendary  
This is not only for blacks, everybody understand it  
White, Caribbean, Asian, even Hispanic  
Talk down on our names, you only doin' self-damage  
On the face of the earth, self-love is the advantage  
I scream to the top of my lungs, prayin' to God that he don't invite me  
home by no gun  
'Cause when your confidence leads you to know that you are the one  
Nobody wants you to reign when you shine like the sun

I tell 'em, black is royalty, black is loyalty  
I know this in my heart, so they'll never foil me  
Black is royalty, black is loyalty

I know this in my heart, so they'll never foil me  
black is royalty, black is loyalty  
I know this in my heart, so they'll never foil me  
Black is royalty, black is loyalty  
I know this in my heart, so they'll never foil me  
~ ECHEZONA

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