2012 COLFA Research Paper Competition:

Black is an Underrepresented Color in Suburban Homes

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Headlights

I lay in bed with my eyes open, breathing heavily through my mouth to imitate the sound of sleeping. I watched the shadows on the ceiling swell and retract from headlights spilling through the small spaces where a draft pushed the curtains from the window. A stray headlight slid its way across a mountain of down, fell behind the sleeping body next to me, and climbed the white bedroom wall. I slipped a leg out from the worn white comforter. Heat flew out to be replaced by cold, a biting chill that would have drained my body of tiredness if any part of me was tired.

I shifted my body towards the center of the bed, turned my head over on the pillow. The bright red hair tangled on the pillow next to mine was stained black in the dark. “Are you awake?” I whispered into the folds of his black teeshirt, just quietly enough that I couldn’t be heard. His wide chest undulated in his sleep but otherwise remained still. I had always found watching people sleep, their jaws slack and eyes twitching, to be more peaceful and restoring than sleeping myself. Watching his long fingers, the thin stretch of bum on his left hand, the crooked nose broken in childhood, made my own eyelids fall lazily.

Lazily, but never sleepily; my eyes made the distinction clear. Within seconds they were open again, staring once more at a black teeshirt, my mind clear and alert and unforgiving. I waited for the besiege of harmful thoughts. Fuck-ups, grievances, bad dreams, violent thoughts pommelled my consciousness until they were in the spotlight. I had reached that part of the night when I could no longer grasp at the reassurances that sometimes restrained my fears. They overwhelmed me, emptied and refilled me until I was composed of nothing but the fears that kept me from sleeping. The empty sound of silence rushed into my ears, muting the wind and the
soft constant buzzing of electricity. My arms and legs felt endless and heavy. I tried to remember
what it felt like to sleep.

The black teeshirt next to me stirred as he tried to stretch but listlessly relaxed back into
the bed. Freckled arms stretched across my stomach and curled around my waist, tugging me
closer. “Nightmares keeping you up again?” said a drowsy voice close to my ear.

I considered answering, but I was tired of talking about my nightmares. At least I was
tired of something. I closed my eyes at the same moment he turned towards me, checking to see
if I was awake. He watched for a moment, then turned back over; my eyes snapped open. I
watched a headlight glide across the ceiling.
Machine

Over the last five years I have singlehandedly proven true the theory of evolution by evolving my mind into a machine. I have exchanged my brain for a motherboard, powered by integrated circuits instead of neurons; I have replaced my frontal lobe with a CPU, a BIOS in place of my brainstem. I am able to function in society on a lithium-ion battery for fifteen hours before my power supply automatically lowers input voltage to hibernation mode. One of my only remaining human flaws is my heart, still cardiac muscle and connective tissue. Until evidence proves otherwise, I must assume by default that I am the only human-machine compound in existence, concluding that I am also the sole sane person on Earth.

I live alone. I have one bed and one chair in a South Brooklyn apartment. At 5:50 AM each morning my systems reboot. I move from my one bed to my one chair, where I face a window that opens to a limestone wall of an adjacent apartment building. I prepare myself for the fifteen hours I will spend among humans. On the limestone screen, I project a list of possible occurrences that can happen that day: a car accident, four dead; a house fire, one dead; an armed robbery, two dead. I file these away in my hard drive, marked with the appropriate expected reactions. I must never allow humans to catch me off guard. This is how I achieve sanity.

I catch the 2 train at 6:27 AM, gaining access to the red line at the Hoyt Street station. My human body still requires fluids to process; I drink water from a coffee thermos to resemble the other passengers. I observe their distended skin beneath their bloodshot eyes, and try to make my eyelids droop drowsily like theirs. One morning, a small baby cries in the arms of its mother. She readjusts its yellow blanket, rocks it until it falls asleep. I wonder why the tired adult humans don’t use this method. I cry aloud for a few seconds to see if I am offered the same comfort. Nine
humans afford me looks of uncertainty, four others remain still; thirteen in total offer no assistance. A related file surfaces to the forefront of my CPU: 1964. Thirty-eight witnesses to a twenty-eight year old woman stabbed to death in Queens. Another: 2010. A twenty-six year old woman raped in daylight in Toledo, in front of passing drivers. Another: Two weeks ago. An elderly man is beaten by a gang of teenagers three blocks from my apartment at two in the afternoon. I look out through the subway doors and take a drink from my thermos.

The 2 train brings me to Manhattan, where I will spend eight hours in an eleven-story cement building. My desk is on the third floor. It is a gray cubicle with a gray chair and a gray computer. I pass forty-one other desks where humans are already beginning their work. Glowing screens are reflected in the eyes of their stoic faces. The only sound is that of typing. On most days, I input numbers on the computer from 7:30 AM to 11:30 AM. Then I am allowed one hour to sit at my gray desk and eat. Other humans in the office like to leave for this break. They buy pizza and sandwiches and talk about the man on the eighth floor that is on his fourth marriage. No one comes to my cubicle and I spend my break in silence. On most days, the typing resumes at 12:30 PM and continues until 4:30 PM, when there is a rush for the elevator. I take the stairs and catch the 2 train at 4:41 PM.

On one day, shortly after lunch break has concluded, an unfamiliar sound interrupts the typing: a soft, rhythmic thud on the adjacent side of my cubicle. I ignore the sound because I cannot place it, and to be unfamiliar is to be unprepared. I continue my typing until 12:57 PM, when I am interrupted again. It occurs because the sound has stopped and a small red ball has rolled into my cubicle. Its trajectory ends when it comes in contact with a wheel on my chair. I look down at the ball. It is bright against the gray carpet.

"Can I please have my ball?"
I look up from the red ball and see a girl. She is standing at the perimeter of my cubicle, held at bay by an invisible boundary. Her dress is pink and her hair brown and long. She is looking up at me, her hand nervously hovering around the edge of her mouth. A human hand contains one-hundred and fifty different species of bacteria at any given time.

“That’s my ball,” says the girl. She smiles. Her mouth is full of small, delicate white teeth.

I look over the short wall of my cubicle. I can see the tops of forty-one heads, bent over keyboards and not looking for a child. I look down at the ball, then back at the girl. She is still smiling. Her eyes are very large for a human. “Hello,” I say.

The girl seems pleased that I am communicating. I am aware of my human heart beating in my chest. “I’m Lilly. Do you like my ball?” She stares up at me. One of her pink shoes moves hesitantly over the invisible boundary, testing my reaction.

Ball. She wants her ball. I pick up her toy from the floor by my chair and hand it to her. Lilly looks at it and stops smiling. “You don’t like to play ball,” she states. “Do you like to play any games?”

Games. I search my files for anything including the keyword games. An old folder stirs. It has been a while. “Yes, sometimes,” I say. My brain recovers the file and brings it to surface in my CPU. Inside is another girl with brown hair. “I knew a little girl like you. She loved to play hide and seek with me.”

I hear a whirring. A fan is turning on in my CPU. Some part of me is overheating.

Lilly shyly puts a dirty finger in her mouth. I think of the thousands of bacteria crawling into her body. “I like hide and seek, too. It’s my favorite.”
Two fans are now humming loudly in my ear. Lilly’s small voice is hard to hear over the sound. How long has she been standing here? Who should be watching her?

“Today is my birthday,” Lilly offers when I remain silent. She shows me five dirty pink fingers, her pointer wet from the inside of her mouth. I wonder why her mother or father would not wash her hands. Her fragile human body is susceptible to disease. “I am five.”

Lilly is five. “I know a little girl who is five.” Hannah is five. Did I speak aloud? The office is hot. That must be why the fans are so loud. Where is Lilly’s parent? She has been in my cubicle for a very long time. It has been five minutes. No. It has been five hours. It has been five years. Hannah is five. “She loved to play hide and seek.”

Lilly’s hands are back in her mouth. She looks behind the wall of my cubicle at something that I cannot see.

“Lilly, please do not put your hands in your mouth,” I say.

Lilly turns to me again, quickly, so that her brown hair moves lightly around her shoulders. Her face is confused. She is wondering why a stranger is giving her a command.

“Your hands are very dirty,” I tell her. Her hand does not move. At this moment a virus is spreading from her fingernails to her mouth, from her mouth to her respiratory tract, from her tract to her lungs; a virus strong enough to kill her. “It can kill you,” I say. “It can kill you, Hannah.”

“My name is Lilly,” she corrects me. The sounds are jumbled as they are forced through her fingers, persistent in her mouth. She is being stubborn now. She doesn’t understand the virus will hurt her.

“Take your fingers out of your mouth right now,” I say, my voice loud in an effort to speak over the clamoring fans.
“Lilly?”

It is a woman’s voice and it is coming towards us. I see the top half of a woman with brown hair like Lilly’s moving over the walls, stopping periodically to look into cubicles. She comes down my row and sighs when she finds Lilly. “Please do not run off like that again,” she says sternly.

I recognize Lilly’s mother trying to protect her. I recognize her failure to do so. “Please wash her hands,” I say. Pay more attention. She will get sick. You could have saved her.

Lilly’s mother takes notice of me then. She turns her attention from Lilly to me. “Can I help you?” she asks. She pulls Lilly close to her side, once again insufficiently trying to protect her. What she does not know is that right at this moment there is a disease coursing through Lilly’s body, ravaging her immune system, pummeling her organs. Lilly is past being protected. Somewhere in her small body, death hides in a dark, hidden corner, gaining momentum.

“Please wash your daughter’s hands,” I tell her again. Her face is blank as though calm. To be calm is to be unprepared.

“I don’t need you telling me how to take care of my daughter—”

She doesn’t understand. This is my chance. “Ma’am, your daughter is dying.”

The look on the mother’s face changes instantly from apprehension to anger. She pulls Lilly roughly in a direction away from me. I reach out a hand, trying to stop them. “You don’t understand. She is very sick, let me help her—”

“Get away from me!” her mother screams at me. Spit flies angrily from her mouth. My own mouth is hot and dry.

The cubicles are stirring. I see wide human eyes and hear hushed voices. I am suddenly the man on his fourth marriage. I am the name that the people are whispering.
“Listen to me!” I scream the words. The elevator dings. Someone has gained the attention of a man in a black suit. He is filed in my system as “boss.” He is walking towards me. “Ma’am, your daughter is going to die, I need to save her, do you understand? Let me save her. I can save her—”

I do not recognize my voice. It sounds strangled, warped like the gargle of a failing machine.

Lilly is crying and her mother is trying to push her way through the maze of cubicles. The boss nears me and I hear him tell the room of forty-one standing bodies to call security.

I feel something unfamiliar tightly grip my human heart. I feel the fans trying to cool down my hot machine. I feel my legs suddenly start to move, and I am running in the opposite direction of the boss. No one moves to stop me as I run past the cubicles. This is the appropriate response: offer no comfort. I run down the stairs and onto the sidewalk. People stare. I do not stop running. I am halfway home before I board the 2 train. I am sweating and breathing heavily, but no one offers help. I feel a long forgotten ache in my legs and my lungs as I drop into a plastic seat and swallow a sour taste in my throat. The train starts with a jerk and climbs underground. I realize I left my coffee thermos in the office building.

Ten minutes later I am in my apartment in South Brooklyn. I sit down in my one chair and rest my arms on the worn navy armrests. I stare at the limestone wall. The sun is setting and barely manages to touch the upper eastern corner. The rest is in shade. I stare at the diagonal line where dark abruptly meets light. My chest is still heaving from the run, but another unfamiliar feeling is quickly rising to replace overclocking. It feels as if a balloon is expanding in place of my human heart. It grows larger and larger until it hits the back of my throat. I am choking. I search my CPU for related files to explain what is happening to my body. Old files, always more
old files: shame, anger, fear, another mass so dark and endless that it has no name, but something tells me it was once titled “loss.” Inside is a girl with brown hair and she is very sick. “One more game of hide and seek, Daddy?” a faint voice says. Five years ago she was five years old.

My face is wet; more cooling processes. The file is too large for my CPU. My system is not strong enough to open it. It is not meant to be opened.

I close the file. I delete it.
The beaches found in Wildwood, New Jersey are among the widest in the world. The white-gray sand stretches like a long, torpid cat from boardwalk to ocean. As a child, standing under the cool shade of the pier and looking out at the hot, hazy beach, it felt like a dangerous and barren desert to cross. The decaying pine-wood planks of the boardwalk groaned above me as people walked past the food vendors and tattoo shops, shifting the sunlight that fell between the cracks. A mesh bag of plastic sand toys scraped roughly against my bare back.

"Let's go, let's go!" my brothers shouted, their towels tied around their necks like capes. The swish-swish of their nylon swim trunks echoed in our cocoon of shade, sounding not unlike the ocean waves that waited at the other end of the beach. They took off into the sunlight, their small brown bodies and golden hair reflecting the sun so brightly that they could only be seen through half closed eyes. Their capes flew out behind them, revealing Power Rangers characters in fighting poses. I could hear the boys shouting. The burning sand shoved its way into their sandals with each leap they took, scorching the soft skin of their feet, then sprayed up from their heels and hit their backs like a fiery whip.

I placed a tentative foot onto the beach, careful to keep the sand from spilling onto my flip-flops. I could still feel the insatiable heat beneath the foam soles. Far ahead, the Atlantic Ocean was a tumultuous whirl of gray-blue water and white crests. Little doll-like people bobbed up and down between its waves. A striped beach ball was carried away in the wind and landed in clear shallow water. Grown-ups crowded around a volleyball net, more interested in their cooler of beer and string bikinis than the volleyball that was abandoned in the sand. Tan, lithe teenagers in red swimsuits manned white lifeguard chairs so tall that built-in ladders were used to climb
them. Green wooden huts rented out multicolored umbrellas and polyester beach chairs to unprepared visitors. A young girl with a floppy sunhat walked between groups of people, a camera around her neck, offering photographic memories to those who could afford them. “Only $3.99 for a keychain, if you want to come on down to Moe’s Photos after five P.M. to pick up your picture,” I knew she was saying. Walking in the opposite direction of the photographer was a man in khaki pushing a cooler on wheels with faded paintings of ice cream cones on the side. He would stretch out his words, so that his voice faded and grew with the vowels as he yelled, “l-i-i-ice cre-e-e-eam, get your i-i-i-ice cre-e-e-eam!” Gray and white seagulls stalked towels and coolers with the confidence of practiced thieves, sometimes plucking french fries and homemade sandwiches straight from the hands of the young or unsuspecting. The ocean was too far away to hear, but my mind supplied the echoing crashes and breaking of the water made familiar by memory. I could smell the heat, a mixture of warm skin and hot plastic. I could smell the waiting salty water.

My brothers had reached the relief of the wet sand that was borne of that morning’s high tide. They were nearly indistinguishable among the citizens of the desert world that separated us. I hiked my towel up over my shoulders and kept a firm grip on the bag of toys. I bent my knees and told my feet that the white-hot needling of the baking sand would be temporary. I felt my body leaning towards the seductive ocean. My brothers waved their hands, and I knew their silent mouths were yelling my name. I took a deep breath, inhaling the smell of sunblock on my skin, and began running.
Barney and the Robot

When Barney shaved his head he said it was because everybody was doing it; but no one in the town had seen Everybody in weeks, so the story was never confirmed. The pile of his shorn identity was found on the tiled floor of the powder room by his mother, who used a fly swatter to coax the blond tufts into a sandwich baggie. When Barney crawled in through the living room window that night, having forsaken front door entrances as being too antiquated, his mother waved the bag in his face like a flag.

“Wait until your father sees this!” she whispered. Barney’s mother suffered from persistent migraines. Over a decade ago she had unscrewed every lightbulb in the house, and all the brass sockets had been empty since. A radio whose volume knob had been superglued in place at notch two out of ten was one indication of the degree of noise allowed within the household.

“Dad paid me ten bucks to do it,” Barney said quietly. He grabbed a candle from the dining room table and lit it with the match he kept behind his ear, striking it on his black jeans. The light reflected in his thick-framed glasses that occupied the space between the top of his brow and the deep groove that bridged his nose and mouth. “Said it reminds him of ’Nam.”

“It is better than when your hair was purple,” his mother admitted in hushed tones, shifting her small candelabra from one hand to the other. “And, I really have to say, your piercing looks lovely with your bare head.”

Barney used his tongue to fiddle with the piercing his mother was referring to, a silver stud beneath the center of his bottom lip. The stud made him seem “fresh,” as Everybody called it, and that was the look he was going for.
“Thanks, Ma,” Barney whispered. He grabbed a match from the communal box that rested on the fireplace mantel, replacing the one he had used from behind his right ear. The burgundy phosphorous of the match head against his pale scalp made him look “fly,” another look he wouldn’t mind achieving. “I gotta clean up for dinner.”

Barney danced the Robot up the flight of stairs to his bedroom, a move he practiced often to keep it sharp. The hallway candles weren’t lit, so he used his own to ignite each wick. The yellow glow lit the upstairs landing, revealing Barney’s brother sitting cross-legged at the end of the hall. Barney’s hand flew to his chest with a “Jeez, Donny!” but it was all for show, because more often than not Donny sat in darkness at the end of halls. “Why you gotta sit in the dark like that?”

Donny didn’t move from his spot on the wooden chest where their mother kept all of the discarded lightbulbs, in case of an emergency. He didn’t even open his eyes as he whispered, “The dark is a natural state. I am a city between its borders.”

Barney shook his head and skirted around Donny to get to his bedroom. Donny hadn’t been the same ever since rehab, but the family was just grateful he’d kicked his stamp addiction. “Sure, Don. Get ready for dinner, will ya?”

Barney closed the door behind him. His bedroom walls were purple, the last color he had dyed his hair. He couldn’t decide what color would correlate with bald, so for the meantime he was stuck with what the paint can called “Royal Eggplant.” Barney didn’t know what made one color more aristocratic than another, but he liked it okay, and more so at night when it looked no different from black. Barney had always felt that black was an underrepresented color in suburban homes.
Barney opened his closet and changed out of his street clothes, because his mother didn’t like him to sit at the dinner table in his leather jacket. “Who knows what’s hiding in all those pockets,” she’d say, shaking her head as if Who had shared the foul secret with her. Barney exchanged his leather boots for a pair of his mother’s famous homespun slippers and sat down at his desk to read rock’n’roll magazines. He highlighted the parts he thought might make good conversation starters.

At quarter to eleven a soft knock on the door announced dinner. Barney put down his highlighter and crept into the hall, where his mother was waiting with her candelabra. “Did you knock for Donny?” he asked, lightly rapping on the door across the hall from his. There was no answer.

Barney followed his mother down the stairs and into the dining room, where a hot pork roast waited on the oak table. He crossed to the other side of the room and opened the door that led to the basement, calling quietly into the darkness, “Get outta there, Donny, it’s dinnertime.”

Barney’s father walked in just as Donny slipped through the door and sat down quietly in his chair. Their father used the front door; unlike Barney, he felt too old to dismiss something for its age. “Hello, hello,” he greeted them quietly, hanging his canvas mailbag beside the door. He sat down at the table with a sigh, still in his blue uniform.

“’Sup, Pops,” Barney said, exaggerating his Ps with a pop. He took his place across from Donny and grimaced when he saw his baggie of hair laying behind the bowl of peas. “What, Ma, you don’t believe me? Dad, will you back me up here?”

“Your hair looks slick. Didn’t I tell ya?” Barney’s father handed Barney a tenner with a wink. Then he turned to his sons’ mother and whispered, “I thought it’d be a nice change of pace, and you know how the kid feels about his hair. Had to work him down from a fifty.”
“Hush, both of you,” his mother murmured. “I’m keeping the bag so I can make you a new pair of slippers.”

Barney looked down at his current pair. The hair lining was green, the color of Barney’s hair from before his last cut. He nodded in approval, thinking the blond might be easier to match with his clothes. “Not a bad idea,” he said. “Mine are getting pretty worn.”

“Speaking of worn,” Barney’s father groaned quietly, stretching out his legs. “These double shifts are really wearing me out.”

Barney’s mother tutted sympathetically while she cut the roast. “I don’t know why you don’t tell your boss to give the nightshift to someone else,” she whispered. “That neighborhood isn’t even on your route.”

Her husband swallowed a forkful of potatoes. “My boss can’t give it to anyone else because no one will take it. They’re scared of the Nocturnals. Don’t understand ‘em.”

The Nocturnals, as Everybody was calling them, had moved into town last month, appearing overnight in the campgrounds beside the lake. They claimed that they were just like normal people, except for their night-favoring circadian rhythms. Barney had gone down with the gang the morning after their arrival to get the inside scoop, picking their way among the common reed and cattails. “’69 was definitely the best year for rock,” Barney had said as they peered into the windows of the huddled trailers, looking for signs of coffins or blood. Barney wasn’t buying the phony stories the Nocturnals were spreading to cover up their real identities.

“And don’t they have reason to be scared?” Barney asked encouragingly over his dinner plate. Neither him nor the gang had found anything, but Barney had a suspicion the Nocturnals had known they were coming and hid all the good stuff.
“Not at all.” Barney sighed audibly, and his father continued, “They’re a real nice group, actually. Same as us, except they sleep during the day and work at night. Might be a little weird, but who’s to say what’s normal.”

“I, for one, would not mind you taking up a job elsewhere,” Barney’s mother said. “No more late dinners, and it’d be easier on Donny without all of that——” her voice became even quieter than normal “--mail around.”

Barney and his parents looked at Donny warily, who ate his food with a humming sound interrupted only by swallowing. Donny’s therapist said that this was normal; Donny was simply readjusting to his body without the influx of stamp glue.

After dinner Barney went back to his room and did some homework; but not too much, because it might ruin his rep. Just to be safe, he erased some of the answers to his math problems and scribbled in the wrong numbers. He polished his glasses and picked out a sweater to wear underneath his leather jacket the next day. He was halfway through rubbing his head for twenty minutes, like the magazines said he should to keep his hair from growing back too fast, when he heard a dull thump from the hallway.

Barney sighed and walked towards his bedroom door. “Donny, get out of the hall and go to bed——” He threw open the door and found Donny in the dark corridor. The light from Barney’s bedroom candles dimly lit the carpeted floor, where Donny was laying spread-eagle. “What’re you doing down there?”

Donny didn’t respond, but continued to stare at the ceiling with a dreamy look. Barney recognized that look. “Get up and turn out your pockets, Don,” Barney said, nudging his brother with his slippered foot.
It took a few nudges to get Donny off the floor. Eventually he stood up and turned out his pockets, and Barney carefully shook each wad of fabric, checking for stamps. “There isn’t even anything here! What’re you trying to play at?” Barney asked suspiciously.

Donny twisted his lips like he was thinking. Barney was grateful the humming had stopped. “I was thinking,” Donny whispered, “that if I try to act like I did when I was happy, maybe I will feel like I did when I was happy.”

“Happiness, shmapiness. That was just the stamp glue,” Barney said with a dismissive wave of his hand. “Just don’t let Dad or Ma catch you actin’ all funny, you hear?”

Donny silently pirouetted into his bedroom (Donny was more into classical dancing), and Barney shook his head, which reminded him to keep rubbing it. When he felt satisfied with his lack of hair growth, he brushed his teeth with baking soda and got ready for bed. Barney blew out the candles in his bedroom while dancing the Robot again, a nightly ritual to keep his dance skills fresh. The moves made getting into bed more difficult, but he looked “dope,” and Everybody said that’s what’s most important.