

# ENGAGE Writing Contest

## Lambert Shekanena, 1<sup>st</sup> Place Winner

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“A Bucket of Fried Chicken” written for EN 101

Growing up, I was a good little Congolese boy. I never spoke unless I was spoken to and I only ever addressed adults with their proper titles. Everything changed with the introduction of Yahoo music and dial up internet. On the internet, I was able to explore worlds that my staunchly Apostolic parents would have never allowed me to see. With Yahoo music I discovered secular music and my soul exploded into color. When Beyonce told 12 year old me to put my ‘freakum dress’ on, I donned my armor with reckless abandon and ever since, I’ve been nothing but vocal about the consumption of me.

High school was a nightmare. My parents believed I would be protected from the flames of sin and evil that burned bright in the public schools of urban Grand Rapids, MI by attending a christian private school, so they sent me to one. Little did they know, they had released me from the pan and delivered me into the direct heat of the proverbial fire.

Freshman year, I divinely met two seniors who changed my life. They taught me snark and subtlety and how to wield secrets, but like all good teachers in life, the time came when there was nothing else for me to learn from them and they had to go, (aka graduation). So to the wolves I was thrust.

Alone I battled through years of homophobia, ignorance and taunts. Alone, I walked through the open flame and any semblance of gentility or meekness I had left was seared in that orange embrace. I emerged highschool skin thick and patience thin, but what is not to be neglected is the simple fact that I emerged.

With this history, one would think that I would run as far as possible from anything that even slightly resembled my personal hell for four years, and I did. I joined a theater program in Brooklyn for a month and it was great. When the workshop ended, I moved back to Grand Rapids, slept with interesting men, ate primarily at dive restaurants and read good books. Even though I was having the time of my life, something still felt off. I realized, much to my heathen surprise, that I missed church. However, instead of finding a church and attending services regularly like a normal person would, I made the decision to not just attend church, but to become church. I decided to go to bible college; and not just a christian college, but a girls-wear-skirts-everyday-bible-app-on-my-ipad bona fide bible college. The enrollment process was insultingly easy on an academic front, but the strictures put in place everywhere else where far and wide enough to trip up the Virgin Mother herself.

I zipped off to Indianapolis with my pastoral references, two thousand self earned dollars and a packet of jumbled nerves. I settled back into the swing of school and quickly learned how to navigate the strict precepts of my new environment. In high school, the flames burned bright and hard on my porcelain skin, but in my new fire pit, my scales kept me safe and secure from all alarm. It was easy to sit in my dorm and listen to my classmates hurl ‘faggot’ from person to person. It was easy for me to be labeled a pariah for being the only one who openly supported minority groups. The ease I felt in these situations was a little upsetting, but the idiosyncratic conceit it revealed didn’t fully hit me until the Sadie Hawkins Valentine’s Day banquet.

One of the asinine rules of conduct was that dancing outside of church was strictly prohibited. So instead of dances, the school held 3 major banquets as a pitiful attempt to offer a form of recreation that

couldn't be deemed sinful. The Winter Banquet had come and gone and as a way to shake things up for Valentines, the student council decided to make the banquet a Sadie Hawkins affair. I made it very clear to the girls that were planning to ask me (with a student body of two hundred you hear everything) to not bother. I was already lying about my sexuality by omission and I had no desire to physically lie. Videos of girls asking their dates to the banquet were exploding all over social media and it seemed there was an immense pressure on the girls to one up each other.

One Tuesday after chapel service had concluded, a young brown haired girl dashed up to the pulpit as we were exiting, snatched the mic out of the dean's hand and called us all to attention. She reached under the pulpit and pulled out a small, mustard yellow, woven basket filled to the brim with a mini watermelon, packets of grape Kool Aide, and a bucket of fried chicken. My eyes widened in terror as she proceeded to ask a young Black man to the banquet with her basket of microaggressions and they nearly burst out of their sockets when the brother said yes. The young man was consistently the butt of every joke in almost all social circles at that school. From his poorly executed S-curl to his narrow and effeminate mannerisms there was lot of material for students to pick on. So it wasn't a shock when the entire student body, including the staff, began cackling loudly and aggressively but I internally felt something snap into place. I had reached my tipping point.

I stood up, looked her right her blue-green eyes and rebuked her. I then proceeded to drag the rest of the student body for laughing; and in the midst of my righteous tirade, I realized something: I realized that a piece of me was comfortable being the martyr. A tiny piece of me liked being oppressed. And not just because I liked being right. Not just because I liked knowing that I had something to fight for but because I had become so used to being abused, it had actually become gratifying.

That's why something felt amiss in New York and back home. I didn't have a cause. Life was too easy. It wasn't a battle. Like a lizard in the sun, I had acclimated to heat and I had actually grown to like it. I had turned hell into a toasty parlor and had made the flames my home. With that terrifying realization in place, I threw a final searing look to my classmates, gathered my backpack and stomped out of that sleek chapel. A trail of smoke behind me.