



# THREE RIVERS REVIEW

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OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

VOLUME XIV

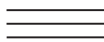
2009  
DIGITAL EDITION





THREE  
RIVERS  
REVIEW  
OF UNDERGRADUATE LITERATURE

VOLUME XIV



UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH HONORS COLLEGE



In Memory of  
Montgomery Culver  
*English Professor Emeritus*  
University of Pittsburgh  
1929-2009

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Issue 1 | Digital Edition

Three Rivers Review of Undergraduate Literature is an annual student-run publication of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. It seeks to enliven, foster and publish the best undergraduate fiction and poetry in the greater Pittsburgh area. It accepts submissions from September 15 to January 15 of each academic year, from undergraduate students at the University of Pittsburgh, all University of Pittsburgh Branch Campuses and all institutions of post-secondary, undergraduate education in the Pittsburgh area. Inquiry and submissions can be sent by post to: Editor, Three Rivers Review, 3500 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260. Submissions can also be e-mailed as attachments in Microsoft Word (.doc compatible) files to: [ThreeRiversReview@gmail.com](mailto:ThreeRiversReview@gmail.com). Submission requirements are: a maximum of 15 pages fiction or 5 poems. All submissions must be accompanied by a cover sheet including name, academic year, academic institution, mailing address, e-mail address, submission titles and a press-ready biographical statement. Submitted work is not guaranteed to be returned. Authors will be contacted as to the status of their work no later than two (2) months following current Volume's submission deadline.

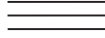
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# THREE RIVERS REVIEW

## VOLUME XIV



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# CONTENTS

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## POETRY

### 2008 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

#### WINNER: Madeleine Barnes

Diagnosis	17
The Ownership of Snow	18
The Kite	19
Translations of Worry	20
Explanations to a Daughter	21

#### RUNNER-UP: Katelyn Litterer

Black	22
Stacking Stones	23
Monsoons Season	24
Prima Facie	25
Little Pieces	26

#### STAFF SELECTION: Ryan Rydzewski

The World's Most Important Muralist	28
Local Empires	30

#### David Bodarky

The Gift between Two Ghost Lovers	31
-----------------------------------	----

#### Lizzie Harris

For Delilah, for Margot	32
-------------------------	----

#### Hong-Thao Nguyen

Blue	33
Sheriff's Sale: A Letter to Fishpond	34

#### Justin Hultman

<i>(untitled 5)</i>	35
---------------------	----

#### Jocelyn Sunseri

Topics for dinner conversation	36
--------------------------------	----

#### Ryan Kauffman

Selections from <i>Ode to Recession</i>	38
	40

## FICTION

### 2008 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

WINNER: Peter Kusnic The Birthday Boy	45
RUNNER-UP: Julie Sokolow Pittsburgh's Buddha	58
STAFF SELECTION: Dave Breingan Planes	69
 Jessica Dunewood Like Picking Daisies	 77

## COMMENTARY

INTERVIEW: Sabina Murray	88
INTERVIEW: Terrance Hayes	97
CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES	105

## EDITOR'S NOTE

You're currently reading what I believe to be the best issue of *Three Rivers Review* ever. Of course, it is the tendency of these types of Editor's Notes to heap praise upon the magazine, but it is no misplaced praise in this case. *TRR* has grown immensely in the past few years, and I've had the great fortune to be involved and witness the growth. I was thrilled to get involved with the magazine when I first stumbled upon the yellow-cardstock-covered Volume X Issue 2 during an early campus visit to Pitt.

While staffing the magazine, I have had the great editorial examples of Jacquelyn Seigle and Patrick Smith to help show me that *TRR* could be both the vanguard of undergraduate literature in the city of Pittsburgh, as well as a dynamic, nationally recognized publication. Jacq and Pat both made incredible moves during their time with *TRR* to escape the world of stock covers and create the professional-look magazine now in your hands.

Now, during my editorship, I'm only happy to continue the growth trend. One of the more difficult decisions that Patrick Smith and I faced last summer was that of moving the journal to an annual publication schedule. Ultimately, this has proven a brilliant idea, as it allows more time for the consideration of submissions, and putting the issue together. It has also been a very wise financial decision during this time of financial belt-tightening throughout the University.

*Three Rivers Review* is, as always, produced through the incredible support of the University of Pittsburgh Honors College. The support and creative freedom provided by the UHC, Dean Stewart, and Karen Billingsly is unmatched at any other undergraduate publication I've encountered, and my staff extends our most sincere thanks. *TRR* also thanks Jeff Oaks, our faculty advisor, for his guidance and commitment to undergraduate writing. *TRR* is also grateful to those established writers who gave their time and talent to this issue: Terrance Hayes and Sabina Murray, and our contest judges, Samuel Hazo and Geeta Kothari.

Most of all, our thanks goes to all the undergraduate

writers who submit their work and help sustain Pittsburgh's thriving literary community. It was incredibly difficult to select the work for this issue, and the work represented shows the eclectic talents of the writers studying in the area. I congratulate all our published writers, with special accolades going to our contest winners. I am amazed and energized by the quality of your work.

Thank you for reading Volume XIV of *Three Rivers Review*, and I hope you're excited for Volume XV!

Joel W. Coggins  
Editor-in-Chief  
*Three Rivers Review*

# POETRY

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## 2008 THREE RIVERS REVIEW POETRY PRIZE

### JUDGE'S REMARKS

Suffice it to say that I have never read a more impressive group of poems by undergraduates than those of these finalists. The majority of the poems here I would consider publishable as they stand. But judging is judging, and I am compelled to pick the best from among the best. My choice is Madeleine Barnes for the simple reason that I find in her poems a perfect match of statements and feeling — of words and felt thought. I also sense that, like a good athlete, she is working within her talent to the maximum but not showing it. In other words, there is an artistic restraint, but the poems are more powerful because of the restraint. Each poem is mature in its own poetic way, particularly “The Kite” and especially “Translations of Worry,” which is a remarkable poem.

To name a runner-up, I had to choose from six of genuine talent: Sophia Bender, Katelyn Litterer, Carrie Milford, Andrew Sullivan, Jocelyn Sunseri and Nicola Pioppi. I finally selected Katelyn Litterer. My only suggestion is that Katelyn change “laid” to “lay” in “Prima Facie.”

Samuel Hazo  
President/Director  
*International Poetry Forum*

## Madeleine Barnes

### DIAGNOSIS

I do not call you out of your hideaway.  
No one knows how much time. I do not say,  
how much time? I do not make offerings.  
I do not shake out the wreath of hearts  
that circles me, drumming like something  
immense is near. I do not make way for the cold.  
I burn it out, setting every room to this furnace,  
the skylights blazing. I am almost in my twenties.  
My sisters are young. I understand that answers  
come in different forms, and on their own time,  
sweeping out the dark with little warning.  
This morning eight babies strapped into two large strollers  
passed me at the crosswalk. They were flushed  
with a large wind, cropped hair askew. I did not ask for  
a time table, or a pile of sand. I did not feel marked  
by a vanishing point. I thought that their faces  
looked clairvoyant, conscious of a process that  
at most times, I am not. I did not stare  
long enough to see it.



## THE OWNERSHIP OF SNOW

It felt right to take it all: limb-like flakes  
dropping slowly into chimneys, windshields,  
the bouquet of geese arcing wings behind  
the shed—too much, I tried to claim it,

traced the curtain of the yard  
with my boot-prints, moved tremendously  
toward woods my father had banned me  
from wandering alone, I wished

for a roomful of flasks, for shelving,  
for jars to preserve the snow that flashed  
like broken jewelry, a cold tabernacle  
to sustain the icicles, the mesmerizing fog,

the holly flushed cardinal in ice, impossibly  
held, possessed by the unthinkable *to keep*.  
Snow weighted every pocket, fooling me  
exquisitely, particles winking, nudging

at each other, all of us were rich, the brevity  
astounding. I wished for bolts, for a safe whose dial  
I commanded with an arabesque, a kiss. I would have  
a drawbridge, a moat of teeth and lilies, a monocle

to warn me of intrusion, a lens that would reveal.

## THE KITE

These are the shapes of prayers: a starfish  
cracked by a bruise of waves, the needlework  
of crab legs in my open hand. The kite  
cut its own line, sailed like a flashbulb  
into the coastline, hurdling its streamers

and newsprint flanks fast as a compass face  
shattered under pressure. I followed twine  
through necklaces of sea glass, bottle caps  
and shark teeth meandering the shore's length  
searching out flares of thread, or splinters

of its frame. I spotted the tail's knot  
in the anemone, copper sun, eyelet  
fossils, pieces lost in the channel's boulders,  
ornaments of past lives glinting in a ream of sail.  
Recalling the arc of the line and its tremor,

how, poised in the cables of universe twisting,  
the spool ran out. I chose to let it snap.  
I remembered its fall, the parachute of sky,  
rope cutting wind, shaking everything below.  
When something dies, its counterparts dance.

## TRANSLATIONS OF WORRY

Worry writes well, and in cursive with both hands,  
it punctuates the forehead, spills in sentences of hair  
translating a script the body barely understands.

Distinctive in the wide-lined paper of the stance,  
the syntax of skin, the linguistics of the stare.  
Worry writes well, and in cursive with both hands.

The mouth swells gently at the pen's command,  
brow-bones clouded, pressed lips inflecting prayer  
translating a script the body barely understands.

Caesura of a bent neck strained and enhanced,  
eyelashes weighted by sleeplessness, impaired.  
Worry writes well, and in cursive with both hands.

Clouded knees crease beneath the torso's demand,  
elbows interrupt the paragraph unfolding there  
translating a script the body barely understands.

The verses of fatigue will untangle on their own,  
relieving braided muscle and penning their repair.  
Worry writes well, and in cursive with both hands,  
translating a script the body barely understands.

## EXPLANATIONS TO A DAUGHTER

You cannot explain the ocean sweeping out her hair  
the sleeves of wind that loosen her sleep  
the world unwinding in her infant chest  
the pulse you check with one impatient thumb.  
Explain the shore that opens flexing hands  
untamed weather stripping rushes from  
the shadows littering the boats at night  
all shallow sails inhaling everything.  
She drifts from your arms into clockwork tide  
and holding her divinely to its jasmine floor  
it instigates her dreaming, cradles her form.

Unwrap the cloth to help her hear the shore.

## Katelyn Litterer

### BLACK

Last night in a red dress, I observed that  
if women are fawns, timid in their drinks, *martini*,  
then the man who raped me years ago,  
large and barking, is a black wolf,  
is a shot of whisky.

He got so close: his breath stank like  
dead birds. I turned to an ocean  
and sent out tide after tide til  
my red flesh dress was a deer's coat  
soaked in sea water until the skin hardens  
and cracks.

We were clothed, but we were all nudes  
under our clothes, he hiding a bottle of liquor  
and myself. I camouflaged  
myself in black, your encouragement  
or fear, your looping, the sound of  
trains translating barking til I tinkered  
like a music box.  
If I closed my eyes, I heard trains.

My mother and I watched graffiti roll past  
while we smoked, backs on the red brick station.  
Red Brick Station is the anywhere in this equation,  
we smoked and I quit counting after one hundred.  
The man who raped me. One Hundred. Mother,  
cut off my hair and erase me in parts to leave room.

## STACKING STONES

Our barn was a hundred feet tall, with ten walls separating chicken feed from tractors and old refrigerators. When Amy and I came in search of little birds' nests, we stumbled upon a rooster who had escaped from his roost and run 200 feet to the hay floor of the barn.

I bent down to the rooster's eyes. He was sick.

We must have known this: an adventure!

He displayed himself patiently to our awkward strokes, then started bleeding from the slits in his beak. Because my sister and I had never

been so close to a chicken and because we were five and six, we played doctor.

I held his beak while Amy placed a stone

in his mouth. She was older; I loved her

and let her go first. We switched hands on his beak

and I placed another small stone

in his mouth. Switched again and

more stones. Eventually, he swallowed the stones, or he choked on the stones. He no longer entertained us. Stroking him felt like stroking a hard, cheap carnival prize.

Those stones were smaller than bees, our girlish hands holding them like medication and

telling the rooster "I know it hurts, I'm sorry, but it's good for you," without knowing what it meant

to hurt but knowing how to say it like we meant it.

## MONSOON SEASON

We took the highway, miles north from where  
we would heave our bodies together and pull them like magnets,  
beside the open window and the sound of red water.  
Navigating through hundreds of gallons of water, her car moved  
with me in it. Although we resembled each other,  
she seemed bolder and talked over the thunder;  
the lightning hissed me still within my seat.

She told me pragmatically, *Maria*. Having only  
met her that evening, it seemed appropriate for me to use  
our middle names as a common ground, to redeem us from  
what we would do to each other's bodies  
while the roads continued to flood and the birds  
lined branches, waited out the night and from cracked beaks  
issued frigid concerns. Feathers limit the amount  
of water on the bird, but like my tee-shirt  
they are porous. I ran through the rain  
to her door like an actor laughing,  
my porous clothing soaked through.  
Her key clicked a lock, feathers  
weighed down, I peeled cotton from my skin.

My arms slipped on her while the birds  
bit at one another to stay clutched like forks on  
their branches. Lightning filled every drop of rain  
without the help of man. We women, thankful  
and yet taking it for granted, felt the cold rain  
heat upon our own skin and then pushed it away.

The rain pummeled some birds down to the earth. Some  
drowned. It was monsoon season, the sky and stones were  
dried red for paint. Even I felt indigenous.  
The rain dropped like wires through the sand  
and filled the desert as if the desert had  
walls at its frontier and the  
billows of rain circled within them.

## PRIMA FACIE

Sex opened my mouth like a cigarette, that is,  
your body, wide-eyed, cracked me open and jumped in. That is,  
my body lay prostrate under cigarette smoke.

The windows blared like silent movies, huge in comparison to my  
pink chest, a board with twenty-one rings settled close together.  
Lined up like an audience. Your whispering hands

traced me out like a map. Doors folded up and remained that way.  
Hearing your softened voice, I anticipated little dams that would  
open  
And then shut. Your throat piped locomotive smoke. I crossed

paths to hear you better, I'm listening. Who pieced  
those windows back together, they did it themselves,  
shard hands above their heads.



## LITTLE PIECES

The pressure of one's tongue to something hot and hard and the withdrawal holding dirt, leaving the object cleaner, is the job of a mother or of the frivolous rain that does not taste or feel.

The summer rain had no intention to clean the rocks, to create a pool of dirty water above them, it had no nerves through which to feel. The rocks caught on fire, it seemed, as soon as they had dried.

They popped like knots in a forest fire, hundreds of knots licking the underbelly of your car, like little kamikazes, firecrackers. The rocks, as well, had not known

they were clean now, had been mute, blind, but mobile and thrown by a braking tire. The body of a man unhinged itself and shot onto the quiet road only ten feet before you. Deer cannot

move like that, you thought, before you met his awkward limbs and the rocks set off like traps. His body curled around your metal, his hands were black crows that thudded on

the sheet above the hot engine, his head a mallet upon a drum. You idled as if he were the body that struck and you were the victim, the stone that catapulted, cleaner then.

He wanted to explode gracefully all at once into the summer, clicking off like a lamp, commencing shut down. Instead he writhed on the asphalt like an insect whose wings you had plucked with a popping noise from his back.

He held the only intention, which mattered little now,  
the stones have nestled back into the mud with  
the rain, the kamikaze knew how to protect you.  
Those pieces of stones popped like fire. He looked  
like a bird chewed up by a wolf and spit out.

Ryan Rydzewski

**THE WORLD'S MOST IMPORTANT MURALIST**

I.

The world's most important muralist is sitting on his porch, drinking and watching a funeral crawl past. He sees his reflection in a black door of the hearse and wonders who is more dead. He's been trying to read, but when it's this hot he can only get through a few words before one stops him, sends him spiraling again toward her. It could be any word. Skin. Lab. Apartment. *She has an apartment...*

## II.

The world's most important muralist sleeps, wakes and smiles for a moment before remembering what he's up against. He's dealing with the unexpected science of getting her back—a mishmash of "long driveway" metaphors and a reworking of his daytime conduct. It has started to rain and the streets are sinking. He closes his eyes. A woman with warm feelings for weather unzips her jacket, but she is only a dream.

## LOCAL EMPIRES

It's hard enough to make my bed  
occupy an entire Monday, Julie,  
without screwing the demographics.

"I no longer have a wife," Carlisle whispered  
through the mail. We weren't  
home to hear it, but the ottoman  
looked as though it had been straining  
toward the door.

Julie and I tore our award-winning clothes  
to address the neighbors.

Your deer feeding proposal could not have been more polite.

Your frieze is coming along sideways.

Your garden looks like ingredients.

I don't want to shoot you any more than you want to shoot me.

David Bodarky

**THE GIFT BETWEEN TWO GHOST LOVERS**

That my life has seen only horn from blossoms  
Fallen to the ground or the wind rising lullabies  
Attached to the cocoons on needles and branches.  
I place your feet over my head, touching the toes  
Of your slippers peeping at the sky, pointing at spring flowers.  
I adore your mouth; give me your lips red as a rose,  
Thrown in with a lilac breath and lurking in each apple bloom.  
A gold needle pierces the lotus and rings the pearl bell,  
The white dew drips down on the heart of the deep  
    red peony world.  
If I could take my own heart in my hand  
Like the ripening red on apple-trees to plum bearers  
You would know on looking at it and you  
Would say: "That is your good fortune."  
And you cut the thread from a loom entwined with a flower  
From your dress you gave me that an autumn wind tries to  
Separate but cannot distinguish.

Lizzie Harris

**FOR DELILAH, FOR MARGOT**

“Margot and I were each given a pillow and one blanket; Margot lying just near the store cupboard and I between the table legs.”

- Anne Frank

I never made a life of books and  
did not make a book my life. We never  
left Frankfurt for Aachen, for Amsterdam,  
for the achterhuis. Instead, we made home

a third floor bedroom; slept with our heads touched.  
We never handed in our bicycles,  
or took turns hovering over trash bins  
filled with disinfectants and our own waste.

I never watched you wither to nothing  
or sized your stretched skin, to find your ribs fit  
in mine. I have never felt the cold dirt south  
of Hamburg, or known those Belsen deathscapes,

but I have closed my eyes, and seen my bones  
collapse on your loose body in the grave.

## Hong-Thao Nguyen

### **BLUE**

My uncle was sold for a pair of shoes in Guam, the  
boat arrived there first. There was a man. Walking  
the white white bedrooms, two  
large couches facing north. Drinking  
water after twenty-four days on salt seas. Nine  
children and the children's children hide in  
grandma's gaped teeth. To afford the goodbye the good  
good life. I will sing for you –  
New pair of shoes, they were blue.



## SHERIFF'S SALE: A LETTER TO FISHPOND

Dear Fishpond,

I told your Ma to watch for airplanes. There will be a face and sun. One square hectometer can fit 84,576 Whoppers, give or take. If a frog decides to eat my bread, the Sheriff of Allegheny County will be forced to eat the frog.

Let's be friends in this private message. You disappear between June and July, leaving no one to pay rent. There are dead salamanders in my plastic cup. There should not be dead salamanders in my plastic cup. I was under the impression you had fish, but your previous letters move white into empty space. Like from behind my desk pouring sympathy into your low wages, a ruler to measure and a book to read, probably a classic. Calendars of fishpond deceive many inhabitants, so potential buyers will be examining the space beforehand. A date has been set, but I'm not telling you when. You must call the Sheriff for that information, or risk a lock on your door.

If a lock is placed on your door, bread-frogs, dead salamanders, and imaginary fish will belong to the highest bidder. Personal records and/or memorabilia. Tell dragonflies to fuck off on the unknown day. Perhaps the sale will occur in June or July to avoid conflict. If you plan on taking legal action, contact the Sheriff at 412-350-4704. Don't think of shooting up the Sheriff's Department either; pond calendars are everywhere.

Your Worry Doll

Justin Hultman

**(UNTITLED 5)**

To participate in spectacle. A means of sustaining a past way of life. You have become the Dow to my Jones. The exchange value of self. How many decaf americano's is your television worth. How to depreciate in value. How many words are too many. The radio paying Bruce Springsteen to keep order. Maintain boarder lines. The American dream sitting five rows back at a high school football game. The next US president throwing up in a urinal. May have gotten too high. May be willing to lead into a war. Simply a cell phone call away. Tell the black boy my drink is getting cold.

# Jocelyn Sunseri

## TOPICS FOR DINNER CONVERSATION

(from *Fibonacci 1202* by Mario Merz)

1: the man is not there thinking

can I paint myself with numbers  
create if not perfect determinism at least

a probability distribution that in trying  
to replicate our humanity we have

2: the woman waiting for her father

created clockwork and computation  
struggle for order in a system

working to maximize entropy  
always we try to justify

3: the man appears, but the woman has gone missing

this mistake by describing  
it to the last decimal

place where the exponential growth of dinner  
conversation is no accident, it was foretold as

5: she returns, but he turns his head

by Feynman and Fibonacci after  
every hour a silence occurs  
despite the forceful hospitality

8: her friend appears, an order

of imported Italian wine

13: a man sits by the first man

21: they do not interest each other

34: no one sits alone anymore

55: the room is full and so are the people

89: Neon

I have always liked addition better  
than subtraction  
aren't letters just variable numbers  
aren't people just variable letters

ATCG QED

Ryan Kauffman

SELECTIONS FROM ODE TO RECESSION

I

push  
 through  
 the helicopter  
 cathedral the left  
 bus stop pillow or the  
 zebra-tiled convenience  
 store ceiling no one looks  
 up from a shame between  
 glance from the Eden fig leaf f  
 rom theMonet hung up the wall  
 blank ceiling shoves ignorance dow  
 n our votes to our shoulders too large  
 from too much press too many reps sets

against the medicine made from bull liver  
Hubbert Hubble consecration of an unend  
ing desire a political unconsciousness bough  
t with disease and the terrible plight of yeam  
ing of reaching for God's hand always that pain  
ted inch away where years have yet to dry and the  
holy shit I just realized my whole life has been inter  
interrupted never comes soon enough nor does the end of civi  
lized participation the Titanic Tristan and Isolde IMAX my father has worked at  
the same job the same road the same flesh the same crimes for thirty-five years or more  
and I have barely begun to scrape the ceiling of that normal curve kind of desperation and humankindness

I  
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stances such as Enhance  
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nd reservoirs of greenhouse gases not controlled by the  
Montreal Protocol taking into account its commitments under relev

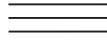
ant international environmental agreements promotion of sustainable fores  
t management practices afforestation and reforestation Promotion of sustainable f  
orms of agriculture in lightof climate change considerations Research on and promotion  
development and increased use of new and renewable forms of energy of carbon dioxide sequestrat  
ion technologies and of advanced and innovative environmentally sound technologies Progressive reduction or  
phasing out of market imperfections fiscal incentives tax and duty exemptions and subsidies in all greenhouse gas

sectors that run counter to the objective of the Convention and application of market instruments for

instance we would like to live in a world where God is dead and the Gulf of Mexico is not

Hubbert is dead

My inability to wake up in your morning I am the Kyoto Protocol







# FICTION

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## 2008 THREE RIVERS REVIEW FICTION PRIZE

### JUDGE'S REMARKS

I had a hard time deciding which story would be first place because each was complete in its own way--they both create a world that is palpable to the reader, with characters and a situation that drive the stories. In the end, I decided that "Birthday Boy" had a slight edge because the writer took on a bit more. Students talk about stream-of-consciousness but I rarely see it done as well as it is done here, an imitation of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (right down the exclamation marks!) in a situation that could be overly dramatized and sensationalized but is not. I appreciated the misdirection at the beginning--Fran's biggest concern is the party--and the gradual revelation of the horror in the basement. Fran emerges as a sympathetic figure and the story's final image of her son lets us know that her efforts to protect him have been for naught.

In "Pittsburgh's Buddha," Zoe does not act in her son's interest at all. Like so many spiritual leaders, she is self-absorbed; her son Liam has all the insight in this family. And yet, Zoe is not completely unsympathetic. The writer achieves a difficult balance here, and in the end, I was both infuriated and saddened by Zoe's inability to see past her own navel.

Geeta Kothari  
Fiction Editor  
*The Kenyon Review*

Peter Kusnic

**BIRTHDAY BOY**

By the morning of the party, Fran Payne had forgotten all about the body locked up in the cellar. The day poured in through the opened window. The smell of rain-washed pine and flowers roused her out of sleep, and she smiled dreamily at the family portrait peering at her from the bedside table. I am giving a party today, she thought excitedly—and nothing was about to stop her from doing that. There were floors to scrub and carpets to beat, balloons to inflate and streamers to hang. A party, yes, for her little man still asleep across the hall—her Edward, nine-years-old. In another nine, he'd be all grown; shaving his face and dating girls, and getting into all the mischief boys that age tend to get into.

She awoke to the thought of him grown and a sleepy grin formed on her face as she yawned and stretched beneath the Queen-sized sheets.

But what was she doing in bed? There was so very much to be done!

On the bedside table was a list and she read it diligently as she assembled her outfit for a day of domesticity: the jeans that pushed her butt up just right (she examined herself from behind in the full-length mirror—two healthy-sized scoops of blue denim) and a light cotton blouse with a frilly neckline. There was much to be done, but—thought Fran—a lady, even at the age of 37, must always look her best.

First, she remembered as she fluffed her hair in the mirror, there is shopping—bags and bags of groceries and favors. After all, it was a party, and, as Fran saw it, excess was best in situations such as these. Then the butcher—she counted on her long, red-painted fingernails—fifteen mouths to feed, fifteen steaks (the good kind) and that didn't include her husband, Howard, whose presence she did not anticipate. She stopped a moment and gazed at herself in the mirror. She felt herself get hot in her clothes and her big blue eyes glazed over like a sleeping chameleon.

She sprung alert! Her mind rushed—not just the butcher! But the baker, too! The cake would be ready by eleven, and the guests were due to arrive at three—plenty of time. She puckered then painted her lips red. And when would she find a moment to help her daughter, Lily, prepare for her dance routine that she practiced

for all week just to perform at her brother's birthday party? The thought brought a tear to her eye, and she sniffled to herself loud enough that if anyone were in earshot, they would certainly ask what the matter was. Her good, sweet babies—that was all—giving, kind, *and* beautiful. Such good, kind, beautiful adults they would grow into, she thought, and she issued a longing sigh as she looked into the mirror and saw her own face: a pale, demure oval accented with crow's feet that indicated wisdom, not just age. And, as her dearly-departed mother had raised her, Fran knew that she was indeed a good woman of good intentions. She reminded herself of this all the time.

Fran knocked at Lily's bedroom door before entering. The day filtered in through the pink drapes and struck the girl's sleepy face beneath the canopy. Fran had errands to run.

"Watch after the birthday boy!" she chirped.

Lily stretched her skinny arms and nodded compliantly as her yellow head stirred on the pillow. A girl of twelve, Fran thought as she shut the door behind her, and in a month a woman of thirteen. Her heart swelled with pride when she thought of her daughter: so fair and compliant and talented, as little girls ought to be. Lily danced in the girls' ballet troupe at the church and she was certainly a gifted, graceful dancer—just like her mother when she was that age. Yes, thought Fran, a young girl ought to be graceful. That's what her mother had taught her.

When Fran approached Edward's bedroom door she felt a weight descend into the pit of her stomach as if she had swollen a sizable cube of wood, or even a whole chopping block. But when she knocked, the door opened, and there he was, already awake, her punctual early-riser, nestled snugly in his bed. If her heart had arms and legs, she thought, surely it would reach out to him and him alone.

"Good morning, birthday boy," said Fran as she bent down and kissed him on the forehead. "My little mop," she said, tousling his hair. "Mind your sister while I run some errands."

He pulled the blanket over his mouth and his bulging blue eyes shiftily examined her. She turned her back to him because she could not think what she was thinking while looking at him. He must not remember, she thought, like I told him. Little boys ought not to know all the filth that mars their mothers and fathers. And surely Edward must understand that Fran will protect him from

knowing all that filth. He will forget, she told herself repeatedly, there's no reason to think that he, a young boy, will brood on the ugliness of life while he awaits his own birthday party. It's not in the nature of little boys.

Fran hurried down the wood steps and checked herself again in the mirror hanging in the vestibule. Sunlight illuminated the foyer and she thought to herself as she sucked in a deep, satisfying breath: What an extraordinary day! She swung around into the kitchen and lifted a key ring off a hook by the cellar door. A light peered in through the crack beneath the door and she wondered who it might be down there; ideas came but she banished those unsavory, unladylike thoughts from her mind—waste of electricity, she thought.

She fumbled with the keys and unlocked the cellar door. Her hands shook and she dropped the key ring a few steps down. Fran slowly descended the steps, her eyes fixed on the keys. There was a mess down there and she didn't have a second today to clean it up. There was only so much one woman could do.

A flutter upstairs. She scooped the keys off the step and hurried back into the kitchen, flicking the light switch off before slamming the cellar door and locking it up again.

Lily appeared beneath the archway in her pajamas.

"Where's daddy?" she asked.

"Your father had to go into work today," said Fran as she patted her sweating palms dry on her thighs.

"It's Sunday—"

She had forgotten. Sunday—yes, the offices at the power plant were closed on Sundays, all Sundays, and this Sunday would be no exception. People would ask questions. Fran dropped the keys into the red pocketbook on the kitchen counter and slung the strap over her shoulder.

"Of course it is," said Fran. "But he had a carpet job today, don't you remember? He's doing a favor for your grandmother's friend, just doing some measuring. That's all. He'll be home soon."

She hurried out the backdoor into the garage, calling back to her daughter in the doorway, "Now, I won't be long."

"But *mother*," said Lily, gripping tight onto the doorframe. "You said you would help me practice, and I need to get my good ballet slippers for today. They're in the cellar."

Fran climbed into her husband's red Oldsmobile and slid on a pair of sunglasses.

"The hot water heater busted last night," said Fran. "We have to wait until your father gets home so we can clean it up, it won't be long. But until then, I don't want you to go nosing around down there. That's 30 gallons of mucky water all over the floor!"

"Yes mother," said Lily in a fluster.

"Make do with the old ones," said Fran as she waved goodbye and backed out of the garage. She shouted from the driveway, "They're hanging in the family room! Ta-ta!"

As Fran started down the street, she noticed one of the two big pine trees in the backyard had cracked about halfway up and leaned heavily on its twin. Dear me, she thought, lucky it didn't strike the house. She had forgotten all about the thunderstorm the night before—a booming crash of lighting; a loud rip; the splintery creak of wood rubbing wood; and then dark silence. After she passed the backyard, she craned her neck to look back at the house and it made her happy—a creamy yellow with green shutters and it was the only two-story house in the whole development. A testament to their success, a symbol of status. It was the house everybody drove past at Christmastime to see the lights; the house where everybody stopped for Fourth of July because the fireworks were always the biggest.

The tree would have to come down, Fran thought as she turned onto the main road of the town. But there was not a moment to take care of that—not today.

The list ran through Fran's head as she drove down the busy street. Homestead was the only town she had ever known—crisscrossed with telephone wires and plazas full of little restaurants and shops fortified with brick edifices; the streets lined with old-fashioned lampposts. Humble yet charming. Fran pulled over by the butcher shop. She sat in her car a while and this crippling throb rose in her stomach, some malignancy moving into her chest and sending jolts of electricity down her extremities. Her breath shortened. She saw her eyes reflected in the lenses of her sunglasses.

And what will they say, thought Fran, what will they ask? There will certainly be questions. She had ignored the mess in the cellar that morning; it was all she could do to forget about

last night. And what would she say? He will not be home, she thought, he will never be home again. She thought of her son, lying on the red carpet in the musty cellar, his shirt tossed on the floor, his bare back heaving as his father mounted him and dug in his meaty fingertips. She watched them in the cellar from over the railing—after inching down the steps, after months of suspicion boiled out and scalded her. Howard and Edward were surrounded by Barbie dolls and roller skates and toy trucks and army dolls next to the big cedar toy chest—all the little plastic, painted faces watching, smiling, without objection. My poor baby, she thought. She was crying now in the car, and she gasped for breath. “Give me strength,” she said aloud to herself, “give me strength,” like she had said the night before, wavering on the steps until she took one step closer. The staircase creaked and Howard looked straight at her, his eyes wide and fearful: caught.

But what would she tell them all? The day rushed over her again and again, the party, the party—yes, the party, she thought, there was much to be done. The guests were due by three. She wiped her eyes under her glasses and secured a green head kerchief around her chin. He left, she thought as she gripped the steering wheel tight. He left and he will never return. But we cannot talk about this—not today, she would tell them. Today was her son’s birthday. Let the children enjoy the day like children ought to—without worry. It was an extraordinary, beautiful day. They were only children. Let them play. They needn’t know all those ugly, adult secrets. They would have their whole lives, she thought, to enter the cellar.

Fran climbed out of the car and stepped into the butcher’s shop, white-washed and spotless like a hospital. Mr. Ramsay, the butcher, lurched behind the counter, one of his broad shoulders dipped lower than the other. He wore a white Oxford shirt sparsely speckled with red spots.

“Mrs. Payne!” he called. “Haven’t seen you around here in a while, where’s the hubby today?”

“He’s sick,” said Fran, toying with the frill on her blouse. “That’s why I’ve come. I’m giving a party for my son. Today he is nine.”

“Getting older every year,” said Mr. Ramsay. “Can’t stay babies forever.”

Fran smiled politely and began to inspect the meat in the



foggy glass display. The butcher nodded compliantly after Fran gave him her order and he set for the back where he retrieved a long red log of beef. He cut the steaks thin at first on the wooden block behind the counter. "A little thicker, Mr. Ramsay," she said. The meat dropped away from the rest of the carcass, red and blue and white, and from where Fran stood, she could see blood spreading beneath the mass. A stream snaked down the table, dammed at the edge, and gave way. Droplets fell to the ground, out of her sight. For a moment Fran thought she might faint, and Mr. Ramsay noticed too, because he said to her: "You look a little pale, Mrs. Payne, everything alright?"

She did not answer. She collected the steaks, now bagged and wrapped in paper, and paid the butcher from her purse, then with a slight smile and an assuring nod. "Thank you, Mr. Ramsay," she said and took off out the door and back into the bustle of a busy Sunday morning.

Fran scratched the butcher off her list—then the grocer, then the party shop, and lastly the baker. The car was packed with bags of food and favors for the party. When Fran arrived home, Lily greeted her in the driveway wearing a pink tutu, twirling on her toes in her old ballet slippers.

She pestered and pleaded as they carried the bags into the kitchen: "Please, mother, I need my new slippers!"

Fran stared at her daughter as blank as an infant, and said with a surprisingly deliberate force: "You have to decorate the patio. I will fix up dinner and do everything else, but I need you to do that for me."

"Can't Edward help?" Lily pleaded, stretching her pink legs into a lunge.

"Why, he's the birthday boy!" Fran exclaimed. "Now do as you're told—"

"Isn't daddy going to help?" she interjected.

"Your father is sick," Fran said absentmindedly as she removed some mixing bowls from the cupboard.

Lily said, "But he's at work."

Fran stared into the kitchen sink, her fingers clasped tight around the edge of the bowl, not knowing where to begin. Heat overtook her, sending her into a dizzy spiral. She broke into a light sweat that clumped the makeup on her forehead. She wiped her brow and a smudge of white caked on her wrist.

“Do as you’re told,” said Fran, her voice weakened. “Can’t you see I’m busy here.”

Lily took the bags of decorations into the family room. There is too much to do, she thought. The clock hanging over the archway read 11:30. The morning dwindled fast. But I will get it done, she said out loud to nobody, I always do.

She began mixing dips and skinning vegetables. Water boiled on the stovetop. She looked out the window and saw Edward swinging on the swing set. Sweet baby, she thought, sweet boy—she sliced the potatoes and dumped them into the water—he won’t remember this. He’s a young boy, deservedly naïve: he will remember none of it. She spread crackers and sliced pepperoni and cubed cheeses on a plate garnished with a flimsy bunch of parsley. Music began playing after a while and she heard the thud of Lily’s ballet slippers on the hardwood in the family room and Fran rolled her eyes. She better have that back porch decorated, thought Fran, everything must be perfect. The pot of potatoes overflowed with foam and smothered the flame. Fran turned down the heat. Keep the peace, her mother had always told her, no matter what keep the peace. Fran strained the potatoes in the sink; the steam took her breath away. She remembered her own mother, silver-headed and wrinkled, her history read in the crevices on her face, in the recipes she passed along to her daughter. Fran whisked a marinade of oil and spice and brushed it over the steaks. Blood dripped off the plate and left a puddle on the countertop. Not too many spices, her mother always said, it drowns out the flavor of the meat. The raw meat seemed human to Fran. She massaged the oil and spice mixture into the steaks and the cold stillness of the dead being beneath her fingertips rattled her. She remembered the storm the night before. A cold front clashed with a warm front and for a moment, she remembered, the tornado sirens sounded, but it could have just been the wind howling against the house. Thunder cracked. Lily always slept soundly through storms, but not Edward. He called for his father in the night, screaming, crying. The wind made the whole house shiver—gusts upwards of 50 miles an hour, the weather man said on the radio. Hail the size of pennies covered the backyard. Howard took Edward downstairs into the cellar, “for protection,” she overheard him say as they started down the steps. But Fran knew. She suspected for months—wrestling in the

cellar, tickling in the armchair—but she kept the peace, like her mother had always told her to do.

The meat chilled in the refrigerator. 2 o'clock—there would be no time for intensive floor-scrubbing and carpet-beating like Fran had anticipated. She looked out the window to the swing set again, but Edward was gone. Lily still danced in the family room. The kitchen was hot and it smelled like she remembered her mother's house smelling on Sunday afternoons: exquisite, comforting, warm. She wiped up the counters and table with a damp dishcloth. Unexpected warmth of well-being cocooned her as she looked over the buffet spread across the kitchen table, proud of the presentation: the culmination of her efforts that day laid out in front of her. Her work finished. The floors are not nearly shiny enough, she thought, but it will have to do.

Fran found Edward sitting on the family room floor as Lily leapt and danced in a blur of pink. But Fran did not ask Edward why he watched, spoiling his sister's birthday gift to him, because he was not looking at Lily. He had no readable expression on his face; his eyes puffy and black, calculating, like a raccoon, yet despairing like an old man. An orchestration of strings and woodwinds rang in Fran's ears from the stereo. Edward stared at the wood floor intently as if his eyes saw beyond the hardwood, beyond the rafters, down to the concrete floor in the cellar, on which a large reservoir of blood had encircled his father's body.

"I won't have time to do the floors like I had planned," said Fran. Neither of her children looked at her. He will remember, she thought as she stood in the archway watching his eyes. She issued a beaten breath and started upstairs to get ready for the party. He will remember this day for the rest of his life.

Fran came downstairs after a hurried shower wearing the red dress she saved for springtime parties. She threw the steaks on the charcoal grill outside. Lily had dressed the back porch up with streamers and balloons: red and blue, Edward's favorite colors. The guests arrived at three as planned and soon the house swelled with people. It all moved very fast. Fran warned everyone to stay out of the backyard. The tree snapped last night in the storm, she said over and over as more guests arrived, and we have to wait until next week to have it taken care of. Some neighborhood children came over to play in the family room and, because they brought gifts, she offered them some supper. Fran

worried there would not be enough food for everyone. There were neighborhood adults who gathered around the too-big table in the too-small dining room, laughing and smoking cigarettes. The family would arrive soon, thought Fran, and even though most of the other people at the party didn't ask questions about Howard, his family certainly would. Luckily Fran knew exactly what she would say.

When the steaks were done Fran forked them off the charcoal grill by the driveway and carried them inside. The house filled with the smoky smell of charcoal and cooked meat.

As Fran stepped through the living room and into the kitchen, the guests all flocked to the smell: "Fran, that looks incredible!" somebody shouted—"Smells even better!" And Fran just smiled and after she set the steaks on the table, she did a girlish curtsy, saying, "All for the birthday boy!" loud enough so that Edward might hear in the next room. Everyone made plates for themselves and began to eat the meal and Fran couldn't stop smiling, folding her hands proudly over her heart. She loved when people enjoyed the food she prepared for them.

Lily showed off in front of all the guests, leaping across the back porch in her tutu, and Fran kept telling her with a tight smile, That's enough, Lily, let so-and-so eat their food. All the children played together in the family room while the adults ate their suppers and drank their wine and engaged in adult conversations throughout the other rooms of the house. But Fran did not have a moment to sit and eat. Her stomach was all knotted, hoping the party would be successful. She wove in and out of the different rooms of the house, smiling, laughing, interjecting in the middle of conversations. And she caught view of Edward still seated on the floor in the family room staring vacantly, while the other children chased each other with toy guns, laughing and giggling as children ought to at birthday parties.

"Birthday boy!" she yelled over all the noise. "Are you having fun?"

She meant it with all sincerity. She hoped he would have fun and play with all his friends. But she could see swirling in his big blue eyes the image of his father, round and round, a cyclone funneling down a drain. She stepped closer to him, their eyes locked—she wanted to put all those horrible things out of his head. She hesitated a moment, squatted down with her hands on

her knees, then spoke: "Would you like a piece of your birthday cake?" she asked enthusiastically.

He shook his head. The other children began crowding her after hearing her generous invitation: "Cake?" they inquired—"I want cake! Can we have some cake, Mrs. Payne?"

Fran looked away from her son and saw the children swarm around her, peering up at her with pleading, beady eyes. "Pleeeeeease," they whined.

Before a word could be spoken, Fran heard a horn honk in the driveway: she sprung alert! More guests have arrived! she thought as she stepped through the thicket of children and hurried out the front door.

Edward's grandmother, a squat woman with big spectacles and wiry gray hair, arrived with a carload of gifts for the birthday boy. Her name was Lois and her powdery white cheeks drooped like balls of yeasted dough. The whole family followed, prodding at Fran—"Where's Howard?" they asked, and Fran scrunched her shoulders regretfully and said, "Poor boy, sick as a dog upstairs." So effortless, she thought.

"Opened the window and in-flew-enza!" Howard's uncle cackled when suddenly Lois started across the front lawn for the house, through the vestibule, headed upstairs.

"He's really not feeling well today," urged Fran as she hurried after Lois.

But she continued upstairs without looking back. "My son's not feeling well, I came all this way, I'm not gonna *not* see him."

As Fran watched her disappear around the corner into the upstairs hall, she knew that the party was a mistake. Lois would know. She would find out her lie. The party would be spoiled. All the noise of the party rang loud in her ear, the slovenly slurp of chewing, opened mouths and smacking lips. The children bickered in the living room until one caught notice of Fran standing at the foot of the stairs.

"Mrs. Payne, can we *please* go in the cellar and play?" implored one of the neighborhood boys. "We want to get Edward's skates."

Fran stepped away from the stairs and wandered dizzily down the foyer. "The hot water heater's broken," she mumbled.

She neared the kitchen and the stench of the meat filled

her nostrils. She almost fell backwards. It was a grilled corpse, she feared—all those grown men and women throughout the house seemed like cannibals, gnashing and gnarling at the meat as though they've never seen food before, sopping up the bloody reservoirs of juice left on their plates with the bread she picked up at the bakery. Fran felt shrunken—a ghostlike apparition floating invisibly through the crowd in the kitchen. They all scavenged and gorged at the table. She felt the blood drain from her brain and down her extremities—swollen limbs filling like water balloons on the verge of bursting. Her head went cloudy, then blank. Specs of white blurred her vision and the voices, the laughter, resounded in her head—echoing, echoing—and she leaned against the kitchen counter, afraid she might faint. The smell, she thought, that horrible smell.

“Say, Fran,” a voice emerged from the clouded darkness. It was one of the neighbors. She didn't remember which one. “Hear you got a busted water heater downstairs. Want me to take a look?”

She clawed at the red cloth over her stomach and timidly stumbled away from him without answering. Lois reappeared in the kitchen archway and met eyes with Fran: caught. A pang throbbled in her stomach with increasing force. They stepped onto the back porch littered with wrapped-up gifts and balloons and fallen streamers. The fresh air was charged with electricity and the sun shined bright in their faces.

“So out with it,” said Lois. “What happened?”

Fran cried into her hands. “Not on his birthday,” she managed. “Let him at least have that.”

Lois stared down, her plump arms crossed one over the other. “You need to tell me what happened, Fran.”

Fran trembled. Her eyes, swollen and watery, squinted in the sun. The night returned to her. She heard again the roll of thunder and the brittle snap of the pine tree. Descending the steps into the cellar, she remembered as the party hushed in her head and all the people disappeared, she felt herself begin to tremble, emotions she could not begin to name uprooted from the pit of her stomach and spewed red all over the cellar. She noticed the ballet slippers hanging on a nail in the rafter. Not Lily, too, she prayed. And Edward rolled out from under the weight of his father and put his shirt back on, cowering in the corner as Fran and Howard

stared at each other, unsure of what to say or how to react.

Silence.

Lois held Fran by the shoulders, pleading. "Where is Howard?" she asked, her flabby cheeks jiggling as she spoke.

By the washer and dryer Howard kept a tool chest. Fran had picked up a wood-handled hatchet. It was almost instinctual, she thought, as mothers ought to protect their children—fight to protect them if need be; and certainly, like the lioness of the jungle slaughtering the deceitful hyena for trying to lure her cub into darkness, she pounced.

"He's not a bad man," Fran cried. The sun blinded her on the back porch. "He's not a bad man!"

He was good to them; provided for them; gave them a house and money and all the provisions necessary for a decent family life. He bought her flowers and they made love and they loved each other. But he spoiled her son—spoiled his youth—showed him something terrible. Something little boys ought not to encounter, she thought. Something that will never let them be right again. And they stood still a long time, the three of them, in the cellar as Lily slept sound upstairs. The storm had calmed. And the voice pleaded forgiveness, booming, bombastic—"It's not what you think, Franny," he said, as if to imply that her eyes deceived her. As if all her suspicions had been false—the coddling in the living room, the touching at dinner—inappropriate! Shameless! Keep the peace, she remembered, it is not real. No more. Her mother's face disappeared from her head and the room took off in a spiral. She had lost control, she recalled, but it was all she could do. It was all she could do. She threw the hatchet and saw nothing else but the red stream across the floor crisscrossed like spider webs, and the bright blue irises swirl in her son's eyes—You will not remember this, she repeated over and over again, You *must* not remember this.

"He's gone, he's left, he's abandoned us," Fran said to Lois as the sun snuck behind a gray cloud, shading the porch. "Let it alone, at least until we have cake and sing happy birthday and open presents."

"But his car's in the garage, Fran..."

Fran stood up abruptly—the silence had become real. It was all around her. They had entered the cellar, she knew. The silence was true. They all saw what she had done. Fran's eyes

widened. Lois blurred—her flabby cheeks stretched endlessly into an opaque white cocoon that enveloped Fran when she looked her in face. So she looked away. She looked out to the street: vanquished. She felt alone. She said nothing. She heard nothing except the low hum of the electricity buzzing in the air. Another spring thunderstorm gathered in the darkening clouds over the town.

Then the children screamed.

The adults screamed.

The last thing she remembered seeing before it all went white was her son running up the street, away from the house, with the wind combing his soft black hair.



## Julie Sokolow

### PITTSBURGH'S BUDDHA

In a loft above a vitamin shop on a busy avenue in Pittsburgh, twelve women in nude leotards sat in the lotus position with open palms. The hardwood floor beneath them was covered over with dunes of sand. With eyes closed, the women faced a wall lined with mirrors while their instructor, Zoe, a thin woman with spiky black hair and tortoise shell glasses, walked circles around them.

She said, "Grab a handful of sand."

The women groped at the floor and scooped up glistening particles with their fingers pressed tightly together.

She continued, "Compact the sand within the walls of your hands until it feels like a solid mass. This mass is your sense of self. Each grain is a facet of your personality, an opinion you hold, a religious belief, a favorite television show, a unique talent, an inherited neurosis. You carry this mass like a tumor in your brain. It pounds at the bones of your skull and won't let you sleep or be at ease. It causes you to say 'I,' when you are one of billions, drifting in a sea of obscurity. 'I' is an illusion, like the solid mass, it is only a conglomeration of beliefs and ideas like grains of sand. To be free is to open your hands and let yourself slip through your fingers."

Zoe's son Liam listened to the hissing of sand as it sifted out of open palms and piled up into tiny mounds. He nudged himself into the back corner of the room, where two walls met, and kept his head buried in his favorite book, Carl Sagan's *Cosmos*. In September, he had been required to read the book for his science class. Now December, Liam, having re-read the book eight times for his own pleasure, was recognized as the middle school's astronomy expert. As his science class moved from the topic of outer space to dinosaurs and DNA, Liam put forth comments much appreciated by his teacher, demonstrating the interconnectivity of all realms of science in light of the Big Bang. Zoe had tried to cleanse Liam of this earthly, or as he argued, extraterrestrial passion, but it was a grain of sand embedded in the crease of his palm, which he refused to give away.

"Open your eyes," Zoe said and stood with her back against the mirror. "What do you see?"

The women facing the mirror spoke in unison: "Nothing."

Each weekly session of Zoe's class "Mind Healing and Corrective Energies" concluded with this unanimous declaration. The first time Liam heard the utterance, he was eight-years-old and gaping in awe at his mother, as though she were a sorceress or magician who had cast a spell. Now, he was twelve, the utterance sounded more like a prerecording than a revelation, and he had secretly grown fond of mirrors. Since his mother didn't believe in privacy, and consequently, they lived in an apartment without locks or doors, Liam found solace in public restrooms. When no one was watching, Liam would talk to his reflection as though it were his twin. And sometimes, he would bring his finger as close to the surface of a mirror without touching it, hoping his twin would pull him into a more favorable universe.

"Class is dismissed," Zoe said. "Your assignment is to go the entire week without saying 'I.' Good luck."

Liam watched the women filing up near the coat closet, buttoning up pea coats, and leaning against the wall to pull the thick leather of their boots up their legs. He spotted a woman who was looking around guiltily while sliding her hand into her purse to retrieve a vibrating cell phone. The woman's facial expression reminded him of the one time he had attended a Catholic Mass. On a so-called sociological field trip, his mother had led him to the church three blocks from their apartment where they sat in the pew closest to the exit. What Liam remembered most of the sermon was the severe and blazing stare a mother directed at her fidgeting son and the subsequent look of guilt that overcame him. It was the guilt of a child who doesn't value the practices of his parent, but knows he is expected to. It was the guilt Liam felt when he looked in a mirror and liked it.

All the women had left except for Dianne. Liam appreciated that Dianne, unlike the rest of his mother's students, always engaged him in conversation. After speaking briefly on their mutual enjoyment of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Dianne brought a wrapped copy of the sequel, *Through the Looking-Glass*, to Zoe's next class as a gift for Liam. Although he rejoiced in the sequel's handling of mirrors as gateways to other dimensions, he didn't know how to feel about his mother's student. She had a china doll haircut that made her look eerily porcelain and innocent for someone so close to thirty. She also giggled after anyone she

interfaced with completed a sentence.

"You must keep your chin rested on the back of your hand while using your other hand to scratch your armpit," Zoe said.

Liam watched his mother posture Dianne's arms, which were trembling to the rhythm of her giggles. He thought about the time years ago when his mother had drunkenly admitted that she always wanted to be a famous sculptor.

Zoe continued, "You are at once thinking and primitive. A philosopher and a monkey. This paradox creates all the tension in your life."

"I don't know if I'm...oops," Dianne said and her arms fell limp.

"It's okay, it's okay," Zoe said and molded Dianne back into posture, "We're conditioned to speak in the first person. It's not your fault, but let's snap you out of it. Close your eyes."

Zoe held Dianne's head in her hands and rubbed her temples. It reminded Liam of how Zoe used to rub his back in soothing circular motions when he was young and had woken up from a bad dream. He thought it inappropriate for his mother to show similar attention to a grown woman.

Zoe continued, "What is it that your 'I' wants most?"

"To have a baby," Dianne said in a low and serious tone that surprised Liam.

"You must disown your desires. The physical urge to procreate is primitive. The psychological longing for a legacy, for your consciousness to live on in another, is the futile pining of an afraid 'I.' 'I' cannot fathom it's own death, and therefore, it is plagued with the fear of the unknown like a child who is afraid of the dark. Release yourself from your fear."

Liam watched as a shiny tear rolled down Dianne's cheek and her eyes opened.

"Thank you," she said softly.

Liam watched his mother stretch her arm around Dianne as they walked together to the coat closet. It reminded Liam of how his father used to put his arm around Zoe's shoulder when they walked barefoot along the sandy beaches of New Jersey.

"Will we see you later this evening?" Zoe asked while helping Dianne's arms into her purple ski jacket.

"Yes," she said and turned away from Zoe. "Will you be

joining us, Liam?"

Liam looked up at Dianne's glossy closed-lipped smile. She waited for Liam to answer with an eagerness and vulnerability that seemed to disturb Zoe. With one hand, Zoe nudged Dianne towards the staircase while flipping the other one in repetitive dismissive motions as though batting away a fly.

"Of course, of course, he'll be coming," Zoe said.

Downstairs, Dianne perused the aisles of the vitamin shop. She glanced at a bottle of Vitamin D and back at Frank, the store owner, a muscular man of fifty who always wore a plain white tank top, regardless of season.

"Can I help you?" he asked, leaning on the counter, looking up from a crossword puzzle.

"Oh, no...thanks," Dianne said and giggled.

She quickly looked away and picked up the round opaque bottle. She wondered what was wrong with herself and hated that she giggled so often, without even finding anything funny. When she had visited a psychiatrist and begged for a cure for her chronic depression, she had been told that someone with such a sunny disposition should try exercise and herbal solutions before seriously messing with brain chemistry. As a last resort, Dianne had landed in Zoe's mind healing class, where she could at least zone out to the hum of mantras and half-baked lectures for a forty-five minute semblance of relief.

"SAD," Frank said, placing the bottle of Vitamin D along with a bottle of St. John's wort into a plastic bag.

"Excuse me?" Dianne asked, looking up from her wallet.

"Seasonal Affective Disorder. Number one cause of suicide is not enough sunlight. That's my theory."

"Interesting," she replied and giggled, pulling the plastic bag from the counter and walking briskly out the door.

Outside, a man holding a Dalmatian on a leash led a woman by the hand under the pink awning of a cupcake shop. To Dianne, something about the sight seemed prepackaged. As though the man and woman were hired actors in a commercial. Dianne walked down the sidewalk with her hands in her pockets, wondering if in the few times she got her husband, Nathan, to leave the house, they had ever appeared so at once wholesome and phony to a passerby.

She also wondered if Nathan would understand that she was again, spending a Saturday night with Zoe and Liam. It would be the third time in a row she joined them at the nearby Thai restaurant, and the time of least enthusiasm. The last two times, Zoe had gone on at length about leading the class on a pilgrimage to India. Frankly, Dianne had been more interested in Liam's zealous speculations concerning the nature of the universe and extraterrestrial life.

"Carl Sagan says that the universe is infinite, so probability is that there's got to be intelligent life on other planets, in other galaxies, or even parallel universes!" Liam had exclaimed.

"Let's just worry about there being intelligent life on this planet," Zoe had said, wafting the steam away from her plate of Pad Thai, "Money is better used on educating this population than taking pretty pictures of stars with lavish telescopes. Now back to the pilgrimage."

Dianne had giggled, but secretly mourned as she watched the excitement drain from Liam's eyes. In her opinion, he was the ideal child. Curious, thoughtful, and bookish, as he was, with shimmering blonde hair and wisps of grey, like clouds, swimming through his blue eyes. If the pilgrimage was to happen, she thought to herself, she'd only go with the interest of looking after Liam in mind.

Dianne departed from the commercial avenue and continued on a metal bridge overlooking the East Side of the city. She stopped and held onto the icy railing of the bridge, looking out at the brown buildings and traffic in the distance. Somewhere, a siren was blaring the ululations of a herd of dying cattle. Probably a suicide, Dianne thought. She turned away from the railing and watched millions of snowy specks floating through the air and melting upon contacting the sidewalk. The snow reminded her of dandruff, and she found nothing to be cheerful or festive about it. Snapping furry white earmuffs around her head, she continued home, to the muted sound of her boots hitting cement.

"Figure out how to levitate yet?" Nathan asked from the living room, above the sound of gunfire booming from the television speakers.

In the foyer, Dianne wiped off her boots on a welcome mat as though rubbing sandpaper against wood.

"Have any messages for me from the guru?" he said and

laughed.

Dianne walked into the living room and sat on the arm of the couch. She watched Nathan's fingers pounce rapidly on the buttons of a plastic controller. On the TV screen, an astronaut with a machine gun was firing bullets at a tall, blue creature with razor-sharp teeth.

"Why does the alien race always have to be hell-bent on destroying humanity?"

"Because it makes for a cathartic shoot 'em up game."

Nathan paused his video game and threw the plastic controller to the carpet. He put his hand on Dianne's knee.

"What are you doing?" Dianne asked.

"You're my wife, can't I touch you?"

"No, I mean, I thought you were going job hunting today."

"Yeah, well—" he said and cut himself off.

Nathan looked down and away while Dianne gazed over his faded Star Wars t-shirt and the slight paunch that was growing underneath. The way his stomach bubbled out reminded her of her grandfather, who had worn suspenders that bent like boomerangs over his hefty torso. But youth still gleamed in Nathan's face, his full cheeks and brown eyes flecked with copper. He wasn't a lost cause, Dianne thought to herself, he still had an MBA from the University of Pittsburgh.

"It's the economy, Dianne," he said, "With so many layoffs, I'll look like a jerk walking around in suit and tie, filling out applications."

"I saw a 'now hiring' sign in the window of Starbucks."

Nathan sighed and nestled his head against Dianne's shoulder. She ran her nails through his thinning hair in circular motions. In an odd way, she had always felt maternal around him. Their relationship started in college, when she had worked at the tutoring center and Nathan had come in with failing grades in statistics. Now married, she was supporting him on a meager salary from her teaching job at the Montessori elementary school. For the first time, she started to wonder if, even as good a person as Nathan was, he and his problems were too big for her to take care of.

Gently pushing Nathan's head from her shoulder, Dianne stood and turned off the television.

"I don't want to be the breadwinner," she said.

"Me neither. I don't know if I can get into this whole capitalism thing anymore," Nathan said and reclined with his hands behind his head.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean, you only live once, so why be a slave to the system? I don't want to be a nine to five drone. I'd rather be a bum."

Dianne threw her hands in the air.

"You don't understand! What if I finally get pregnant? What are you going to do then?"

Nathan braced himself on the arm of the couch and approached Dianne. He lifted her hands into his soft palms with tenderness.

"We'll go on welfare."

Dianne ran to the top of the stairs and once looked back at Nathan. He stood, clinging to the banister in the foyer, with quivering down-turned lips.

"I'm going out with Liam and Zoe tonight," she said and marched into her bedroom. "And I'm never saying 'I' again."

In a room without a door, Zoe sat cross-legged on a bare mattress, rifling through a cardboard box of receipts. One hundred and eighty dollars at the Culture Shop, she wondered, when did this happen? She looked around and regarded the walls lined with vibrant tapestries. Oh yes, she thought, those were necessary. From a side table, Zoe grabbed a pipe and lighter. Cradling a flame to the bowl, she sucked on the tip of the pipe until the severe heat building in her throat startled her. She exhaled, releasing a raspy cough and cloud of smoke into the air.

"Are you okay, Mom?" Liam asked from the adjacent room.

"Yes, dear. I appreciate the inquiry," she said through her hacking.

Bending over the side table, she lit a stick of Nag Champa and wafted the flowery trail of smoke to her nostrils. She closed her eyes and tried to envision herself in India, but the only image that came to mind was the cover of Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha*. Four years prior, her encounter with the book had inspired her to kidnap her son, Liam, fleeing the New Jersey suburbs and her

marriage to a police officer. She landed in Pittsburgh, the location of her father's grave and her place of birth. With a then eight-year-old Liam by her side, Zoe knew she had made a pitiful sight, handing out manifestos in the street and asking college-age baristas where a guru might be hired. Frank had been kind enough to listen to Zoe's manic philosophies and offer her the apartment above his vitamin shop at a cost so low, that Zoe knew, Frank could not possibly make a profit.

Zoe lay back on the mattress and thought of how easily the men of her life could be put into neat little compartments. Her husband had believed in God, just as Frank believed in vitamins and Liam believed in science. Women were different, she thought. Dianne, in particular. So fragile and lost, she had come to Zoe and begged with moist green eyes for a new way of life. And Zoe had been exceptionally eager to take each of Dianne's giggles as affirmations that the pale doll was a blank slate, willing to be sculpted by Zoe's hands into a fine work of art.

Zoe closed her eyes and listened to the sound of feet ascending stairs.

"Zoe?" Frank's deep and smooth voice questioned. "Can I come bother you for a second?"

"Sure," Zoe said and leaned her back against the wall.

Frank entered with a tray of tea and honey balanced on his hand.

"I heard you coughing and didn't want the guru to get laryngitis," he said and delicately laid the tray on the table.

"That's very kind," Zoe said and poured hot water from the teapot into her cup.

"It's chamomile, licorice, and peppermint," he said.

Zoe squirted out honey from a plastic bottle and listened to Frank's fingers drum hollow beats against the wall. She knew she couldn't be anything less than grateful to Frank, yet something about his tan muscles and grey hair had always upset her. He looked like a mixture of grandpa and California bodybuilder.

"I didn't mean to be rude, would you like some?" Zoe said and pointed to her pipe.

"Oh, no...I've got to tend to the store."

"Yes, yes, I'm sorry."

Zoe sipped her tea and watched the muscles of Frank's back flex as he turned to leave.



"I forgot to ask," he said and turned back to her. "Do you and Liam have any plans for dinner?"

"Oh, yes actually," she said. "It's a business meeting of sorts—"

"Just asking, no problem," he said and walked away.

Zoe pulled the next receipt from her box. Seeing the large amount of three thousand and six hundred dollars in print made her dizzy. She looked away and took a large gulp of steaming tea. In credit, she had paid for three one-way tickets to Delhi, India departing from Pittsburgh on New Year's Eve. She wondered if she would have the courage to tell Frank and her students of her impending absence or if she would just flee, like she had years ago from New Jersey.

"Why didn't you invite Frank?" Liam asked, leaning on the threshold.

Zoe's hand shook and her cup leapt from her grip to the hardwood floor.

"Jesus," Zoe exclaimed.

Liam ran out of the room and returned with a towel. Zoe bent down next to him as he bunched the cloth over the expanding puddle.

"Did you go through my things?" she whispered fiercely.

"No. What are you talking about?"

"You asked if Frank could come. How did you know we were going?"

"Today you asked Dianne to dinner and then said that I had to go."

Zoe felt the violent thump of her heartbeat settling down.

"Dinner, yes, dinner," she said and then whispered, "You know I don't want Frank to get the wrong impression."

"What do you mean?"

Zoe ran her hand through Liam's soft blonde hair.

"You know. He might think romance is in the air."

"But I already told him that you like Dianne."

Zoe stood up and felt her heart ticking rapidly. She approached the nearest tapestry and tried to focus on the spiraling pattern of maroon and gold paisleys. She told herself that gurus weren't supposed to scream and cry. But as usual, her son was right. Too often, he saw right through her actions to her psyche, which made her feel like something of a naked fraud. Just as

when she had beamed over the article written about her in the City Paper entitled, "Pittsburgh's Buddha," only for Liam to tell her that it was meant to be tongue-in-cheek.

Zoe and Liam walked in silence down the avenue lit by streetlights. The sky was swirling black and purple and raining icy beads that soaked through Zoe's wool coat and chilled her skin. She clutched her purse tightly under her arm and held her umbrella high above her head. One more thing that she didn't need was three expensive plane tickets getting wet.

"Wouldn't it be nice to live someplace warm," she said.

"Sure."

Zoe turned to Liam. His eyes were squinted up harshly and rain was dripping down his cheeks.

"I have something to ask you."

"I thought you weren't supposed to say 'I,'" he said and squinted up at Zoe.

"It's an exercise for my students, Liam. I've done it already and proved that it's possible. I mean, ideally, I wouldn't talk at all. None of us would. Language causes more problems than it solves."

"I like language."

"Stop being difficult," she said and veered onto the metal bridge.

Liam paused and held onto the wet railing. Zoe hesitated as well and gazed out at the lights of the cars and shops dampened by the fog.

"I wish the stars were out," Liam said. "When I can't see them, I feel like I'm trapped in a dome. A polluted dome."

"You won't feel that way for long."

"What do you mean?" he asked and rubbed his gloves together.

He put them around his mouth and breathed warm air into them.

"On New Year's Eve, we're going to India."

"For the pilgrimage?"

"No," she said and hugged Liam to her. "To live there."

Liam pushed Zoe away and marched down the bridge.

"What's wrong?" she asked and followed him with quick steps.

"I like my school," he said. "They understand me there."

“That place! I was going to pull you out of there anyway. They let you watch too much television.”

“They’re PBS documentaries, Mom,” he said and began to choke on his sobs. “It’s like when we left Dad. You always do this.”

Zoe skipped to catch up to Liam. Wind swept beneath her umbrella and inverted its ribs, sending the canopy flying with force in all directions.

“Just calm down, dear. I think you and Dianne will find my proposal quite rational once we can all just sit down for dinner.”

Zoe braced herself against the railing of the bridge and lowered the umbrella to the cement ground. She straddled it and pulled the runner to the handle repeatedly until it clicked over the spring.

“Don’t run, it’s bestial!” she yelled as Liam ran ahead with flailing limbs of determination into the thick fog and darkness.

“Wait up!” she yelled and chased after Liam until the night closed over the bright dot of Liam’s image, like a black hole consuming a distant star.

Zoe ran until one of her legs kicked up and her bottom fell to the hard earth, sending a sharp reverberating pain up her spine. Bending her legs into the lotus position, she tried to calm her throbbing body to prevent herself from crying. Without Liam, Zoe knew that Dianne would never accept the nonrefundable one-way ticket to India that cost Zoe her financial and psychological integrity. Zoe wrapped her arms around her torso and hummed to the thought that Liam knew the way to Dianne’s and after cooling down, he would show up on her doorstep and join them for dinner. But if she knew anything of her own teachings, she knew that Liam was her legacy and the continuation of her afraid ‘I.’ And like a mirror image of herself, he would continue to run, without looking back, leaving her far behind.

## Dave Breingan

### PLANES

They were lost again when James's mother called to give him the news. She briefly touched on the initial pleasantries (which she usually delighted in with the enthusiasm and attention of a middle-schooler madly in love) in a hushed, grave voice totally unfitting her, like she had taken too big a gulp of water and couldn't quite get it down. She got to the point quick: James's grandfather had finally passed away. Then she took her time, talked it all out. He had gone in his sleep. The pain is over now. It's what he wanted. He's in a better place-- fishin' with grandma all the time, catchin' all the big ones. He'd had a full life. Everyone should be happy for him.

James was mostly silent, trying to find the correct emotion, trying to find something to say, grateful his mom kept going on and using "we," as if James had already got out his good cry and said all the proper things, all the things she was saying now. James inquired of the funeral.

"The service is Saturday. We'll schedule you a flight home tonight for Thursday so you can have a day's rest before the service to recover from all the travelling." She swallowed some of the lump in her throat and perked up a little. "Where are you now anyways?"

James looked around him at the tan churches and men selling paintings, at the backs of Andrew and Thayer bouncing along the street in front of him, talking animatedly and taking no notice of him, but drew a blank. Granada? No. They had just left Granada that morning. They were on their way to Madrid (that was it) and had taken a bus to somewhere in between. They were to take another bus soon that would take them to Madrid. That was where they were headed now. To the station.

"Spain," said James.

"Spain? I thought you were staying just in France?"

"Our plans changed."

"You're making me worried. It's been three weeks since we've talked to you, James. Why haven't you called?" Her voice was all back now, the same concern in it as when he had first introduced the idea of taking a few months off after graduating from Brown to travel around Europe with Thayer and Andrew.

Then, too, she had told him she was worried. James had sold the idea of the trip to her and his dad as a “recovery time,” a much-needed and well-deserved break from all the schooling, but she had known better. She had caught a glimpse of the aspiration that was behind the whole scheme (telling her Andrew was coming didn’t help), and she worried, and sighed, and put her hands on her hips, but ultimately these were the biggest objections she would give.

“I know, I know, I’m sorry Mom. I’ve been meaning to. We’ve been very busy,” James said, turning his attention to and following the frayed, chalky edges of Thayer’s sandals as they flipped up with each step.

“Busy? What have you been doing?”

“Well...traveling. Traveling a lot. You know, seeing all the sights, all there is to see. Just trying to make the most of our time here.”

“Money-- are you OK on money?”

“Yeah, I’m OK,” James said, which was a lie, and yet it still felt somehow more honest to James than telling the truth, which was that he had scraped out his entire bank account weeks ago (including the \$500 he had set aside to cover his airfare home, whenever that might be) and had been forced to take up washing dishes for two weeks in a café in Avignon so he could eat (Andrew had advised him to beg). It was Monday and James figured he’d make it to Wednesday on two sandwiches a day before he spent all of that money too.

“If you’re running low, we can send you-- ”

“I’m OK,” he said. Thayer’s sandals took a sharp turn around a building, flicking up some dust from the cobbled street. James followed.

“How are you handling this? It’s very hard. I’m sorry, honey. Call me if you’re upset later and you need to talk. I’m going to call you tomorrow night to check in.”

“I’m OK, Mom,” said James. She was making him feel weary and he was ready to get off. “Listen Mom, it’d be better if I come home Friday instead of Thursday. We’ve got a lot of travelling planned on Thursday and we’re heading back to Albert’s in France, so I can grab my suit and bring it back with me.”

“Are you sure? Won’t you want a day to settle in before

the service? I can't wait to see you, I need to get my arms around you."

"Friday is better," said James. "I'll fly home Friday."

By the time he got off the phone with his mother, James had followed Thayer's sandals, marching along with confident purpose, another six blocks of cobblestone. Andrew and Thayer were still heavily lost in some conversation, which James was glad of. James maintained his space and put his mind to his grandfather. He kicked himself for not thinking of him instantly once he had caught a whiff of his mother's dirgeliness. His grandfather had been in the conceding stage of an uphill battle against pancreatic cancer for the past year, in and out of the hospital all the time. For nearly a year now, it had been "only a matter of time" for him. James now saw clearly what had happened, what his mind had done, how he had allowed it. He had forgotten about his grandfather. He had given him up for dead. His own grandfather. Who took him fishing and scolded him when he wasn't careful with his hook. Who bought him a telescope for Christmas. Who quoted Ecclesiastes at Thanksgiving dinners.

James tried, with great effort, to make himself feel guilty. He looked up at the sky, blanketed with layers of thick dark clouds, like a curtain between heaven and earth. James tried to feel his grandpa looking down on him, as he had felt with his grandma after her death four years ago. James tried to imagine his grandpa furrowing his brow and sinking his bulbous nose in judgment and disappointment, as he would when James as a young child would convince his brother Gil to go exploring with him through the stacks of boxes down in grandpa's cellar and they would end up breaking some ancient family heirloom. But he couldn't do it and he couldn't will himself into feeling guilty either. His grandfather was gone in the realest and most permanent way thinkable. His grandpa was lost to him. That was all James could feel. *I will never know your righteousness again.*

James followed Thayer and Andrew in silence for another ten minutes. He could tell by their involvement in their conversation and the lack of hesitancy in their step that they were completely lost, and had given up the effort of trying to find their way to the station a long time ago. It was a feeling James knew well. In fact, it was the predominating feeling he had experienced

since he'd set out on this trip, "the Odd-yssey" as Thayer called it (Thayer had expressions for everything and made them note the play on words). Perhaps James's mother had been right. They had been too ambitious-- they had tried to do it all. Within the first three weeks out they'd been to half a dozen countries and three times as many cities. At first, they had set out to each new destination with acute attention and care, an almost sacred feeling of obligation to note each city's landmarks, its people, the stores, the clothes, the ennui that summed up it all and got neatly placed under the formidable word "culture"-- as if you could draw thick black lines around each place and monochromatically color it in as with a map. James had even kept a journal which he wrote down impressions in (Luzern: mountains! The Alps!...The Modenese are wonderful: the vendors are always trying to rip off us *grande bambinis*-- they laugh and offer you a glass of wine if you call them on it) and taped postcards, receipts, and Polaroid's to.

But James quickly gave up the journal. It became too much: the lines got blurred, the landmarks got displaced in each other, and the people all ran together. Everything looked the same. James had to think hard about where he was or he would forget. It was terrifying to them all at first (for James could see it happening to Thayer and Andrew as well). James would wake up in some cheap hotel or on some stranger's couch and not know what country he was in or if it was day or night outside. James realized how much you take for granted in this natural background knowledge. Losing it, it was like losing the most fundamental things you are built on. Like gravity stopping. Thayer called it "losing your GPS". It was like being lost, but right when you thought you got your bearings again, off went gravity, out went the GPS again.

James recalled how it had jarred him and had got him in a panic. But gradually, he got used to it. They all did. It was James's greatest faith in man: his ability to adapt. A man can get used to anything, James thought. Put man in the most ghastly situation, the most deplorable of positions, and he will flip, he'll have a meltdown. But give it to him day after day and it'll start to lose its edginess on him. He'll adjust. He'll get familiar with it, then he'll start to anticipate it. Pretty soon he'll be comfortable with it. And after that, who knows, he might even start to prefer it. Now,

when they came to someplace new, they didn't bring along a magnifying glass, a tourist map, and a commitment to American modesty; they brought bulldozers and left behind broken beer bottles. The nights full of strangers, the nameless and frightening food, the endless parade of buses, trains, and taxis, and, above all, the desperation to keep going. It was wonderful.

James took further note of the bounce in Andrew and Thayer's step, the excitement in their voices, the *clip* of Thayer's sandal as it slapped against his heel. James picked up his pace a step so he could get closer to them and hear what they were talking about.

Thayer was philosophizing, "Yes, but by that very logic, a woman's attractiveness derives from her willingness to engage you."

James had heard this conversation a hundred times over the last three months. They were debating sex: what was better, top or bottom. Thayer pleaded for the bottom, playing his part in the argument as the formal, intellectual dandy; Andrew aggressively defended the top, all testosterone. James, if he were in the conversation, would play the ironic goof-ball, making the comments from left field; but he was pleased to just be able to observe this time, to marvel at how they had refined and perfected the conversation, without the slightest conscientiousness that this wasn't the very first time in the history of the universe that this topic had been discussed.

Andrew rubbed his hand through his hair and stomped one foot. "Man, see that's how you got it all wrong. You look at getting pussy like it's a study in psychology. Or a Victorian poem. Like it's gotta come on a silver plate, surrounded in carnations and doves. That doesn't matter. It's much simpler than that. Top, bottom, skinny, fat, black, white, Greek, Spanish, French, British, blonde, brunette, I don't care! Just give it to me!"

James moved up in the space between Andrew and Thayer. Down the road a woman with the longest, most Spanish black hair James had ever seen was drawing attention to herself, screaming musical, foreign profanities and beating her fists against a man's chest, a bag of luggage and random clothes strewn around the front door to a plain, beige row house. They all looked at her. Thayer turned to James; he was grinning.

"What do you think, James? Top or bottom?"



“What Andrew said,” said James.

They laughed and bumped shoulders. The Spanish woman had gotten louder and Thayer, Andrew, and James kept silent and regarded her as they approached. James took a heavy, important sigh. “My grandfather passed away last night. I’m going home on Friday for his service,” he said, looking at his feet.

James kept watching his feet, but in his periphery, he studied Andrew and Thayer, breaking their stares at the Spanish woman, pausing a moment, and then slowly turning to look at each other. James saw everything that happened in that brief, silent look: the restrained concern, the mutual recognition, the agreement that Thayer would speak first.

Slowly, Thayer asked, “Are you coming back?”

James looked at the Spanish woman again, thought of his grandpa, and felt lifted by a wave of freedom and satisfaction. “You think I could leave this behind?” James said, gesturing to the street, the clouds, the feuding couple.

Thayer hugged James and Andrew pumped his fist. They kept walking until the road split into two. Silently, unanimously, they went to the right.

The next three nights were a blur. James was anxious about returning home and drank too much. It had been a while, he realized. The three months since he had left the States had felt more like years. His calls home, ever since he had left, had been strained. They had asked all about where he was, what he’d seen, what it was like, but he knew they didn’t want the answers he had. They wanted stories from *Ernest Goes to Europe*, not the truth. And even if they were interested in what he really wanted to say, where would he begin? How do you describe the joy of a crowded, foreign bar? He felt distant and embarrassed and ugly and he knew deep down it was not location or even time that separated him from home. They were on different worlds, different planes. The Springfield, Pennsylvania that was his home was a place where little kids sold lemonade and Jesus smiled when you carried the groceries for Mrs. Mallory. He couldn’t go back to there-- holding hands with Aunt Lori, dropping a flower on grandpa’s grave, blowing his nose with a Kleenex while his body dripped with blood and sweat. The home his mother called him back to was someone else’s dream, not even from his own

memory but somebody else's.

James found himself sitting alone in a gate in a French airport whose name he couldn't remember. Everyone else had already gotten in line, based on a number on their tickets. A fat man with a tweed suit and a cane was pushing people out of the way and waving his ticket. James stared at his own ticket. He was in the first batch to board, but he waited until there were only a few people left in line before he got up. *Merci*, said the pretty woman who took his ticket. *Merci*, said James, and he walked down the tunnel and onto the plane.

He was feeling sufficiently fried from the week's excesses and was looking forward to catching up on sleep. But of course he had to sit next to a talker, a patriotic, middle-aged businessman from Ohio who kept calling James "son" and asking him how excited he must be to be returning to the States after so long away. James felt threatened-- the man wanted something from him.

"Sure'll mean a lot to your family for you to come home. Time like this."

James stared at the back of his pale and shaky hands. They were covered with the discolorations of fading scars. He felt old, yet without history.

"You don't know this yet, son, but your family...they're all you got."

"I know it," said James.

The businessman let it leave at that and prodded him about his education for a while, but finally got the hint and let James doze off. He woke up to the food cart rattling past him. Caffeinated cans were cracking open. Tray-tables were being loosened. A blonde flight attendant with a pot of coffee walked past hurriedly. James dropped his eyes again and then the rich smell of the coffee finally reached him, as if it had swirled all around the cabin before it made its way to him in one long, wispy train of feeling. He followed the feeling to a moment so clear he choked on his breath. He was all bundled up, shuffling home from the park in boots and snow pants with Gil. It was winter and there was snow on the ground. He couldn't have been more than seven. In the park, they had questioned an older boy about a cup of coffee that he was drinking and when he finished, he gave what was left to Gil, which enthralled Gil and James (Gil took it as a gift

to both of them). It was James's turn to hold and sip it, and he carried it with two gloved hands, perfectly straight in front of his stomach. It was that perfect hour of twilight before dinner where everything was darker and yet you felt like you saw everything more clearly and his father's calling whistle could carry for blocks. They had their heads turned behind them, looking at the trail of holes in an otherwise perfect bed of white that marked their passage back. James turned and looked up, his house now in view, Christmas lights across the fence, an infinite stretch of snow in front of him. Beyond the fence, beyond the snow: a yellow light on in the side window of the kitchen, the curtains drawn back, revealing a silhouette. They saw it, both of them. Their eyes went right to it. They picked up their legs and they ran towards it.

The smell drifted out of reach; the moment left. James tilted back his head, breathing in through his nose, trying to hold it, to get it back for one more second. *Oh God, James thought, come back to me.*

Jessica Dunewood

## LIKE PICKING DAISIES

"Class, this young lady, Chapel . . ." Mrs. Dumars began with a questioning tone towards the girl's name. She was getting old, her hands covered with brown patches of skin over blue veins and her voice thin and strained like wind pushing through a closed window.

"...Horowitz," the girl standing next to her finished.

"Yes, Horowitz, is new to our class and our town. I'd like you all to be polite and kind to her, and show her around so that she can begin to feel at home. Now Chapel," she said looking left at her, whose blue-gray eyes seemed to double in size, "I'd like you to go have a seat near one of your new classmates, and be kind and polite so you can make new friends." Everyone in class stared at her like they always did new kids. She walked past all of the intense gazes and plopped down next to me.

"Hi, I'm Chapel," she whispered. She was really pretty, almost too pretty. Most of the white girls in my class all seemed to look alike. Long stringy hair down their backs, bright blue or brown or green eyes, they all wore pink nail polish and all wore the same lime green rain boots, with pink polka dots on them, no matter what season it was. Her hair was full of waves and curl. Each strand a different shade of blond and gold. Even her blue eyes were frosted over with gray.

"Yeah, I heard," I said, and continued picking the scab off my elbow.

"Can we be friends?" she asked shoving her right hand out to me to be shaken, each one of her finger nails a different color. Yellow, blue, clear with silver glitter, deep purple and orange.

"You should probably pay attention; we have to do stuff in here." I licked the palm of my right hand, sat Indian style in my desk, and rubbed the ash from my knees. She continued to look at me and I pointed to Mrs. Dumars. I hadn't ever actually met someone like her before. Someone different. I didn't want to be her friend though; just wondered why she had to come sit next to me and start talking. Maybe she wanted to annoy me, or maybe Mrs. Dumars told her to. I didn't know, but wanted to find out.

"Take out your History books and let's get back to this

Civil War," she whined. "What was the Civil War caused by again class?"

Tommy Lorena raised his hand quickly; he had an answer for everything. "Black people not wantin' to be slaves no more. The slaves caused it," he boasted.

"Well, not exactly Tommy. Yes, the slaves desired freedom, but the root of the problem was a difference in beliefs and the choices people made. That's what split the North from the South."

The lunch bell rang after a long discussion about what each side believed in and after, Mrs. Dumars told us to think about which side we would have been on if we had lived back then.

I went over to my usual corner and sat down with my tray. The table was wobbly and hardly ever cleaned, but it sat away from people and near a window.

"Hi, is anyone sitting here?" Chapel had found me. "And you never told me your name," she smiled and showed a mouth full of white teeth.

I looked around at the completely empty table, rolled my eyes and looked back at her. "My name's Andi and you can actually sit where ever you want."

It was chicken patty and corn day, so I waited for the usuals to show up. Patrick the Garbage Disposal would eat anything that anyone else didn't want. He was huge for a sixth grader. Stood a foot above everyone else and had a large gut hanging from beneath his soiled t-shirt. He wore glasses, and had a buzz cut. Some people thought he was a bully, but he was really sweet. He'd even eat food that someone had bitten off of or partially regurgitated. He didn't mind.

"Hi Andrea," he said as he walked over to me holding his tray of delectables. "Got anything for me today?"

"Sure Pat. You can have this chicken sandwich, the tapioca, the cheese stick, and the corn".

"Thanks, but you keep the corn. You know I don't digest vegetables very well."

He scooped up everything that he wanted and continued on his rounds. Chapel looked over at me disappointed. I wasn't sure if she was mad that I gave my food away, or that he hadn't asked for hers.

I looked up at the clock and realized I didn't have much time to drink my chocolate milk before Tanika Dawson and her crew would arrive. Every chocolate milk day, they'd come over to me and dump my milk over into my food, swirl it around with their fingers, pour it back into the milk carton and force me to drink it.

It started because I wasn't on Welfare. Tanika lived a few houses down from me, and everyone on our street had Welfare. On the first of every month, all the neighbors would see each other buying groceries and all of them were using food stamps, but not my family. My mother refused food stamps and insisted that she and my dad could take care of my brother and me without any help. I didn't care about looking like we needed help. We did and having Welfare would make things easier, but my mother wanted to fix things her way, and that made some people mad at us.

Last year Tanika began picking on me, calling me "little nappy headed monkey," and jet black ashy knees", but those names didn't hurt me because I had heard them all before. The interesting part was that her hair was just as nappy as mine was; only she covered some of it up by wearing clip on weave pony tails.

One day on the playground she started "Come here you little nappy headed rat. If you so important, why is your hair so nappy?"

"At least I'm not on Welfare," I yelled back. And that's when she jumped me. She slapped and scratched me until I climbed on top of her and snatched her ponytail off. I held it up in victory, but days later she jumped me again, only this time, she had friends with her.

I rushed to open the carton, but I could already hear her heavy feet pounding the ground behind me. Chapel's eyes, again, doubled in size, and I turned around to see the group of misfits. Tanika's red shorts were riding up between her legs. Rolled up at an angle towards her crotch, the fat of her inner thighs was smashing up against the material of her pants, rubbing and gnawing at her skin. I laughed to think about how fat she was in those clothes.

"Hey," she said grabbing my shoulder. "Go, ahead, you know what to do."

I didn't understand how they could possibly be amused

by me anymore. I didn't even put up a fight. It would waste too much energy. There was no combination of food and chocolate milk that I hadn't had before, so what the thrill was for them was a mystery to me.

"Ladies, can't we be civil about this?" I asked sarcastically. They hated when I used eighth grade words. "It's a beautiful day outside, you all have on new ponytails-- Trina, yours looks particularly nice today, and there are better things to be doing. Bobby Winston, for instance, has a crush on you, Tanika. I think you should talk to him." I winked. That really made them mad. I always did something to make the ritual a little more exciting. "Ok girls, if you insist." I tipped the carton over into the corn partition of the Styrofoam plate. The brown swirled around the yellow cornels making some of them come to life, and swim across the chocolate ocean. When the carton was empty I reached over for Tanika's hand and stuck her finger in it. "Stir," I said. As soon as I was ready to down the stuff, Chapel stood up dramatically, as if awakened from a coma, and began to protest.

"You can't make her drink that, that's not nice!" she yelled as loud as her soft voice would allow her to.

"Excuse us?" the group said in unison, as they had rehearsed.

"Don't drink that Andi; they can't make you."

"Listen, they do this all the time. Just stay out of it." She was ruining everything. The only reason I put up with this crap was because I didn't want them to bother anyone else. I could handle it.

"But they don't have to. No one's forcing them to be mean."

"Then why don't you drink it?" Tanika suggested.

"Good question. Why don't you?" This girl didn't seem to be as annoying as I thought. She stood firm in her plain yellow sandals and stared at Tanika.

"Ha," Tanika said looking around the cafeteria. "We have better things to do."

She spotted Bobby Winston and motioned to the girls to follow her over to him.

"Come on, let's go," I said grabbing her hand. "I don't want to watch this."

I took her to the emergency stairwell and down two flights

of stairs. There was a clothing bank in the basement of our school and a lunch room for the custodial and lunch staff members. I learned about this place last year when I peed on myself in the lunch line. It was fishstick day, and somehow I convinced myself that I could hold it until I got my food, but instead, I stood squirming for three minutes until my bladder burst and watered down apple juice began to run down my legs. Mrs. Rizzi, one of the noon-aids pulled me out of line and took me downstairs.

"They have practically new underwear down here," she said, "and some more pants for you to put on."

I looked at her wondering how many people had peed on themselves in the lunch line before, and then asked "what do you mean by practically new?"

"Well, they're clean" she said.

I had gone down there everyday ever since.

Mr. Jackson, the head Janitor greeted me at the door as we came in. "Andi, you're late," he announced and looked over at Chapel.

"Don't worry, she's cool. We just ran into a little incident, that's all."

"Well, hey, I grabbed this for you from the art closet. This is a good one, real strong. Tried it myself." He pulled a thick permanent marker from his pocket, and snatched the shiny black cap off.

I bent over, sniffed it and smiled. "Good. Any luck with the paper?"

He grinned again. His face reminded me of my grandfather's. Thin, frail, and covered with brown, wrinkled skin, but happy. Always happy in the eyes.

Reaching over into one of his trash cans, he said, "You just ought to be the happiest little girl in the world. I went through every classroom lookin' for this." He held wads of crumpled brown paper bags, still in nice size pieces. I ran over to him, grabbed them. He pointed to his cheek, and I kissed it.

The noon-aids and some of the other cleaning staff were in their lunch room. It was small and cramped. Crates of donated clothing and toys created seating around a long old dining room table. Mrs. Rizzi had brought it in to give the place charm.

"Andi, where have you been? You never stay in lunch that long," Mrs. Rizzi stated. She was beautiful for a middle-aged



lunch helper. Her face was full and chubby, but defined. She had high cheek bones and a rounded, but solid chin. She always wore make-up, no matter what day it was, and her smile never left her face. Her wide hips hung over the sides of one of the clothing crates, but in a way that made me feel comfortable around her.

"You're not going to have time to eat now, but I'll pack your bag so you can pick it up later. Who's your friend?"

"Oh, she's not my friend. She's new. Her name's Chapel. She's persistent."

"Well, it's nice to meet you Chapel. I'm Mrs. Rizzi." She stuck her chubby hand out to be shaken. Pudgy fingers coming to an end with blood red fingernails.

"Hi," Chapel replied nervously. This was the least amount of words I'd heard her speak since she had arrived. I could tell she was afraid. She kept tugging at her ear lobes, and fidgeting with her hands.

"So, what's the news? I've been waiting for this report all day," Mrs. Rizzi cut in a little overly excited. I gave her and some of the other noon-aids daily reports on teacher gossip. In return, they gave me anything I wanted for lunch and leftover food to take home.

"She's pregnant," I burst out laughing.

"What?" she screamed.

"She is. I heard her crying to Mrs. Dumars this morning in the staff bathroom. She kept saying 'I knew it was wrong, but I did it anyway. He'll never leave her for me.' There was more, but Principal Sheridan walked by, and I had to pretend I was doing something," I continued to giggle. Chapel just stood there confused.

"It serves her right, sleeping with a married man. The principal at that," one of the other ladies joined in.

"We better get going," Chapel said. "Aren't we supposed to be somewhere?"

"She's right, I'll be back later."

Recess had already started by the time we got outside. Principal Sheridan had recently decided that recess was important after his second heart attack. He added on an entire fifteen more minutes, leaving me and Chapel with little under a half an hour. We went out the back doors that lead to the playground. Monitors

only had to watch for the first five minutes, and then they were allowed to play.

The sky was plump with thick gray clouds and the air smelled sweet and fresh. Our kickball field was set up on the blacktop. Bright orange mats were placed in a diamond shape for the bases, and the outfield led to the gravel. The grass was filled with girls playing hand games and kickball spectators. Jump ropers and hopscotch players were on the very edge of the pavement, avoiding stray balls. Only a few sixth graders could be seen on the swings, the rest were fifth graders, and they were playing spider. We walked past all of them to edge of the grass and through a few trees. There was a clearing there that I went to everyday. It sat next to a large open field on the side of the school, but was only a good spot when the trees and bushes were full. Once winter hit, everything would be bare and exposed.

"Here, you can sit on this rock," I told her "You don't want your skirt to get dirty."

"Why are we way out here? Are we allowed to be out here?" Chapel asked. I thought about how she didn't have to be with me at all.

"This is the best marker he's come up with yet. He's a strange old guy, but he's useful."

"What's with the paper?"

"I'm going to smoke it."

"Well couldn't you just use regular paper?"

"Nah, this burns slower. And if you fold it right, a really thick smoke can be pulled back in."

"Does it do anything to you?" The concept was strange to her, but she seemed intrigued.

"Not really, I do it to keep from smoking cigarettes. I figure if you don't want to do something bad, it's better to do something less bad instead."

"Oh, well. What's that on your arm?" She was staring at the big, tan, plastic-looking square on my arm.

"An old Band-Aid." I had had it there for a long time. I always took off my Band-Aids early to pick at my sores, let them dry out in the air, and pick off the scabs. I liked the way it felt on my skin though, a nice slick patch that my hands could glide over. It stuck pretty well, so I decided not to wash it and to let it fall off. I slid my hand down my arm. "And, where are you from

anyway?"

"My parents just got a divorce. My mom said it was the best thing to do, or at least the easiest. She wanted me, and my dad, well he didn't care either way, so we moved here to live with her boyfriend."

"Oh, sorry. This marker is really strong though," I took a long and deep sniff and looked up through the tree tops. It made my head feel clear and empty. Only the fumes could move around inside, so all thoughts had to leave. A drop of rain plunged down quickly as my head was tilted back and smacked my forehead, between the eyes. I shut them and allowed the breeze to run its hands across my face. The pre-rain breeze always made me feel good. Another drop fell, and I brought my head back up and watched as Chapel tried to pick a dandelion with a bee on it. "What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Picking a flower," she said confidently. "I love dandelions."

"That's not a flower you nit; it's a weed."

"It's a flower to me," she continued waiting for the bee to land before grabbing it.

"Why don't you go pick a real flower, like a daisy? There's millions of them over there in that field. And lots of them don't have bees on them."

"That would be too easy," she looked at me and her eyes darkened to the color of the clouds. The wind began blowing thick chunks of hair into her face and I stared back at her to understand. "Are your parents still married?"

"Yeah, I guess so. They fight a lot, but we're all still in the same house."

"And that's what I want. To be in the same house no matter how much fighting there is, but they say it's not good for me. Do you think I caused the divorce?"

"Not really. You're just a kid. Sometimes parents just do things. We might not ever understand them." I inhaled another long sniff of the marker. The strong smell burning the inside of my nose. "Here, you should sniff some of this. You think too much." I passed her the marker; she stared at it, put the tip of her nose to it, and passed it back.

The rain began to fall a little more quickly, and the teachers blew the whistles for us to come back in. Swollen

rounded raindrops bounced and danced across the blacktop more frequently, as stragglers tried to pick up the last of the jump ropes and kickball equipment.

We ran back into Mrs. Dumars's classroom and sat down before the bell rang.

"Let's shut the windows before these papers start flying all over," Mrs. Dumars began. Freshly graded essays were smacking themselves up against the cream colored walls plastered with dead presidents and long speeches. "And why don't you all divide up into those for the North and those for the South. No one can be undecided or in between yet. North on the right, South on the left." Everyone split up, and surprisingly, there were a lot of people for the south. I expected Tommy Lorena to be on that side, but not seven whole people. Chapel even went to that side. We debated our reasons for being on each side, and stated why one side was better than the other.

Tommy Lorena said "every man deserved a slave back then, it was only fitting." He still hadn't gotten the point. His red hair stood in curls and his freckled face gleamed.

Chapel then raised her hand and said "both of these were the right choices for those people. It's easier to choose what seems right or what each person is used to. That's why I'm on this side. Not because I agree with them, but to see what made them think what they did."

Mrs. Dumars looked dumbfounded. I, too, was impressed, though not fully understanding. Somehow I knew it had something to do with why she sat next to me, something to do with why my mom doesn't want food stamps, something to do with why her mother chose divorce, why Patrick eats so much, and why Tanika teases. Maybe it meant that there was reason why Principal Sheridan was sleeping around, or why all those girls dressed alike. Maybe if I thought about it long enough, I'd know why I liked being by myself, smoking paper, and chatting with the lunch staff. Maybe that was why she didn't like picking daisies.

After school, Chapel and I decided to head for the swing set. Neither one of us rode the bus, so we could take our time getting home. As we passed the kickball field, I heard someone screaming my name and yelling things that included the word "nappy." Turning around I saw Tanika, her friends, and Tanika's

older sister Raven standing on the gravel.

“What do they want?” Chapel asked with hesitation.

“To fight.”

“What you going to do, go tell? They’ll beat you up really bad if you don’t.”

“Are you my friend?” I asked. She had no idea that she was going to get beat up too.

“Yeah, I guess so.” She looked at me, and then back at the girls.

I hadn’t exactly picked the best time to check, but when she nodded, I knew. I took off and jumped on Tanika, her sister tried to pull me off of her, and her friends looked at Chapel. She ran up to help and they jumped on her. We got beat up pretty bad, but at least we got first hits to actually initiate the fight this time, and at least I knew now that I just had to catch Tanika alone to finish it.

# COMMENTARY

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## INTERVIEW

### Sabina Murray

A day after being awarded the Fred R. Brown Literary Award, Sabina Murray summed up her fall visit to the University of Pittsburgh by sitting down with the staff of TRR for a friendly discussion. Murray is the author of the novels *Slow Burn*, *The Carnivore's Inquiry* and most recently *Forgery*. Her collection of short stories *The Caprices* received the PEN/ Faulkner Award for Fiction in 2003. She has also written a number of screen plays. She is currently a member of the MFA faculty at the University of Massachusetts and splits her time between caring for her family and working on her writing.

**THREE RIVERS REVIEW---** How do you know what's worth writing?

**SABINA MURRAY---** I don't really know what's worth writing until I've been into the story for a while. I discard a lot of material. What's worth writing is always up for debate. I know what I like to read and if I'm not bored by my own writing, then I think I'm on the right track. If the subject matter is still intriguing to me, if it bothers me, if I want to know how the story finishes when the end doesn't exist, then I think I'm on the right track. But of course, what different people read inspires them or entertains them. And it's really impossible to come up with something that you think is just definitively good.

**TRR---** Your first book was published while you were still an undergrad?

**SM---** I wrote it while I was an undergrad, but I published it the summer after.

**TRR---** What was that like?

**SM---** I didn't know that it would be published. Of course I hoped it would be published, but I think at that time, I was more focused on the difficulty of actually writing a novel. And when that was done I had a certain feeling of accomplishment. But I really didn't have any confidence that, that (publishing) was something that would happen. When it did get published, it was a little unsettling. I felt that I really had to make a commitment to what I was going to do in terms of my career. Before that, I

always wanted to write but I was also an Art History major as an undergrad. I had these opportunities to do things like move into a museum and those were also things that interested me. It kind of made me had to commit at what I thought was a pretty early stage by the development of a human being. But it was exciting. It was, you know, affirmation.

**TRR---** Had you published before that in avenue similar to *Three Rivers Review*?

**SM---** I had never even sent my stuff out. I had written a few short stories. I just kind of took on the novel. And I think, in many ways, its easier to get a novel that you write as a young writer published, than a collection of short stories. It's just that people seem more interested in the longer form, if you don't have a level of sophistication that you acquire as your career progresses. You're better off writing a novel if you're a young writer.

**TRR---** At Pitt, the undergraduate program is tailored towards writing short stories, and encourages students to write a collection. Do you think that helps students move onto writing a novel afterwards?

**SM---** I think that you figure out many of the small problems you have as a writer in a shorter form. If its basic things, like working out how dialogue moves, or the shape of characters as they move through a short series of action, I think you can figure out a lot of these things in the short story format. But as a body of work that shows some sort of accomplishment, I think it's harder to pull of that sense of commitment and a large idea in a series of short stories, unless you've really conceived of them, than it is in a novel.

**TRR---** As someone who's taught undergrad before, what are some of the common mistakes that you see or just the trends in general that you see in the work of undergraduates?

**SM---** With undergraduate writing it's really, I mean I can come up with things, but it's really difficult to say that because a lot of people don't mature as writers until they're in their thirties.



You're still technically a young writer until you're forty. You're still able to win these awards that are put out there for young writers. So I say yes there are mistakes that undergraduates make, but it's also completely appropriate because it's part of the process to be making those mistakes. The number one I see is that people don't worry about the action of the story. They worry about the situation. They worry about who the characters are, but they don't make them do anything and it can be kind of tedious to be reading about people who are moving around these small spaces that nothing dramatic actually ever happens to. There has to be a reason to tell the story. And I think sometimes young writers miss that. You really have to force your character through a crisis, or we'll wonder why we're watching them at this point. The other stuff is just small; figuring out dialogue; figuring out language; tightening up images. Some people tend to become in love with this kind of florant heavy language that doesn't really communicate ideas. And I think you know before you write the most important thing is to think, to have something worth writing and that gets dismissed somewhat in the process. But you know at the same time if you're 19 years old and you're sitting down to write a story, if you feel inspired, than that's pretty much what you should be doing at this stage of your writing.

**TRR---** What do you think about the rising number of MFA programs and the increase in number of applicants?

**SM---** I think its fine. I just think that people need to have their expectations clear on what an MFA does for you. It doesn't make you a doctor where you can now perform surgery. It doesn't have that kind of "Now that you have this certificate you can accomplish this" effect. SO having an MFA does not mean that you will be able to publish books. It doesn't mean that you will be able to teach. What it means is that you took several years of your life and you put it aside to do something that you love with likeminded people. It's one of those degrees. So there can be as many MFA programs as is possible and as many MFA applicants, but we have to be realistic about what that accomplishes. There's also this idea that MFA programs teach people this cookie cutter fiction. Nobody wants to read cookie cutter fiction. Nobody is going to buy short stories that remind them of other short stories.

That as a model for the MFA program is deeply flawed because it doesn't result in anything. I think that my advice for the people going into an MFA program would be to make sure that they're going there to work with a specific writer and to have a project in mind when they go; either to envision a book of short stories, or a novel something that they can leave with because that is valuable. If you have a publishable book upon leaving, than you've really earned your time and you've, you know, spent your time.

**TRR---** Do you recommend that people take a break before they go into an MFA program?

**SM---** I can't see that it hurts. At the same time you know there's this idea that experience results in better writing and I don't think that's necessary true. You can write very successfully about things that you've never been through. You leave college, you go and you get a silly job. I mean this is what I did and you know party a lot. What do you do when you leave college if you're not really pursuing your career and that's fine. But maybe you're waiting for yourself to mature to the point where a few years at a graduate institution can really help you. I can understand that. But to think that real life experience is going to result in better fiction, I think is really optimistic. I was working at a gap for a while. That's not going to win me a Pulitzer Prize. So we just have to keep it all in perspective.

**TRR---** And I think that that's one of the biggest problems that faces writing majors. They graduate and they don't really know what to do.

**SM---** Most people don't write full time. I teach. That technically is not writing full time. If you can have a couple of things you do well, that can always help you. Any artistic field, any artistic profession, I can get whiney cause writers are known to do that and say "Why don't people value writing?" but really the business world, the work force has never really valued that. So you do need to have another job unless you are tremendously successful, which is but a tiny winy portion of writers who don't need to teach or do nonfiction or journalism or one of these things that writers do. I have friends who are computer programmers. These

are all thing you have to do to make ends meet. What you need to learn to do is to write in small chunks of time and not think that, you know, you need your 8 hours a day of wondering around and thinking about important things before you can sit down. That's what will kill you eventually.

**TRR---** Do you think that there is a distinction between being a writer and being enrolled in an academic writing program?

**SM---** The identification of a writer, who's a writer and who isn't is just incredibly fraud any way. I have four books published and I've been publishing for twenty years, but if people who don't know me ask "Oh what do you do?" "I'm a writer." Immediately they get this bizarre attitude of, "Oh are you? So anything I know?" And these are people who don't read fiction. I don't know what they do. I don't know who they are and I'll be like, "Well, do you read literary fiction? Tell me what you've read in the past year and I'll tell you whether I think you know my work."

But there is this idea of "Oh writer. OK jump through some hoops for me. Impress me with what you've done." I find that incredibly obnoxious as you can probably tell. But in addition to that, it puts this immense pressure on people who are young writers starting out to prove themselves. The only people who would admit to writing are people who just have this tremendous sense of identity, earned or unearned, where they think "Oh well I'm a writer," and it has nothing to do with being in an academic program. And the title will always be arbitrary, because maybe somebody in an academic program is writing a lot and should use that as the way they identify themselves but they'll probably say student. And if they say they are a writer, somebody will say "OH. Well anything I've read," which is absurd because people who've never read anything will ask you that. Or "Anything published?" So it's just not a good term. We all write. We all read.

**TRR---** How do you deal with your problem pieces in general?

**SM---** I put them in a drawer until they start to interest me again. Sometimes I feel that when I am writing I'll lose track of what interested me about that piece, what I felt really compelling. And I tend to research a lot. So when it feels like its relying too

much on research and there isn't enough of my own thought in the piece, then I'll label it a problem and stick it in a drawer until I can find my way through it again. Usually I do end up going back to things. Not always but most of the time. I'll find something intriguing that pulls me back into the piece.

**TRR---** So do you think that there is a distinction between, having technical problems in a piece versus just being stuck in a piece?

**SM---** If it's just a matter of editing, I can edit thing endlessly and happily do that. Editing for me is part of the process. I don't really consider it a problem. For me, the problem is if you don't feel inspired to finish it. That to me is the only real thing that's difficult to deal with. If it's a matter of figuring out time, if the pacing is off, that's a fun thing to work with. That's not a big bad thing. A little ratcheting here and there. So I just kind of work on that until I think its reading smoothly.

**TRR---** As someone whose been publishing for a while now, do you think that the way young writers work is evaluated in academic settings resembles the market for fiction?

**SM---** It depends on the day. The market for fiction changes so frequently and there are so many different opinions. I have colleagues who work in the same program. We work with the same students and they have many valuable things to say about student work. We're not always going to say the same thing. So there really is no consensus. If there was that would be bad. People have to really find their own voice and write something that's original and valuable and that doesn't exist out there. That's the only way that you're going to make it as a writer; is that you find something that you do well and that you can bring into fiction, in a way that doesn't sound like anyone else. So if you can do that and nobody else can write what you're writing, then that probably means you're doing well. Whatever anybody might say about it. if it's entertaining and compelling, the academic setting shouldn't be a part from the market place. It does exist apart from the market place, but I don't know of any writer who doesn't want to publish his/ her book. That kind of dichotomy does exist in some people's mind, but I think its fraud.

**TRR---** You write short stories, screenplays and novels, right?

**SM---** Yes.

**TRR---** For the author, what do you think is the main difference when sitting down to write one of these three forms?

**SM---** For me the screenplay is like a puzzle because I'll start out with a story treatment which is a narrative and it's written like a story so that kind of pacing, language and it's written quickly in present tense. When you start writing the screen play, it's like pulling apart narrative you have to put words back into people's mouths and describe setting on its own. It's like breaking things into pieces and you do that with this idea that somebody is going to come a long who is very good at his/ profession directors, actors. And that they're going to come along and take your structure, your dialogue and the barest outlines for settings and they're going to turn it into something great. It's an incomplete work .Your job is to make it absolutely clear to everyone what they're supposed to do. What they can come in and bring their talent to. When you write a short story, it's all up to you. You start it, you conceive an idea and you create all the characters. You create how they deliver their lines and you finish it. In a shot story, you have a very limited amount of time to do this. So you really have to have an idea that can be executed within 30 pages. I have some short stories that go up to 40 pages. So you need to have a very clear idea. You can't explore things in a vague way in a short story. You have to get in quickly and get out quickly and have a few people walk around the idea, execute what they need to do to have it illuminated to the reader and then get out. So you have to be very sharp about what you're doing in a short story. In a novel, you can be more expansive. I tend to write novels about characters more than about ideas. I do tend to write "novels of idea" and everything I have tends to have this idea label, as if you can write something without having an idea, but novels do tend to cover more time usually not always but usually and it's usually carried by one specific character. And that's really how I see it. The screen play is just a breaking down of things into real time without interiority. The short story tends to explore idea specific

concise clearly executed ideas and the novel is usually for me an exploration of a specific character.

**TRR---** So when you start, do you always start in that mindset? Or do you ever start a short story then take it and make it a bigger piece?

**SM---** I haven't done that in years. I don't know if I've ever done that. I've always just had this idea that some things are short stories and I will give myself three months to get it done, or a novel which you toy with for years. It takes me a while to get a character fully realized enough to start writing a novel. They'll usually be kicking around in my head for two or three years sometimes longer before I can sit down and start writing the book.

**TRR---** Which one do you find more enjoyable or easier to write, the short story or the novel?

**SM---** I usually think whatever I'm writing at the time is my favorite for. And I think I'm lucky in that. If I'm writing a short story, I don't want to be writing a novel. If I'm writing a novel, I wonder how I ever wrote a short story. In terms of fun, there are different things that I like about each form. The short story is incredibly intense and everything has to be perfect and in its place but you're in and out quickly. You get a quick sense of accomplishment. With the novel, it's an easier thing to write. If you don't get any resolution at the end of thirty pages, it doesn't matter because you still have 270 more to figure out how exactly he's going to get out of this relationship or what she's going to do that's so appalling to the public. There just different. Screen plays I have fun with, but I think that if I had to choose one thing it's probably not going to be the screenplay, either the novel or the short story, probably the novel.

**TRR---** How has your writing influenced your family life?

**SM---** It's usually the other way. I've always written the whole time. Before I had a family I was already a writer. So that's already who I was. I have two kids an 11 year old and a 6 year old boy and I'm married. I have a dog and I'm teaching. And what it does is

it teaches you to be incredibly efficient with time. I remember in graduate school I'd not feel up to it or not feel inspired to write in the morning. I would go do something else and then come back in the afternoon. I don't have that luxury anymore. So I have to really be able to get everything out of an hour in the morning. You know however much time you have you have to be regimented and I take my time to write and I make it scared. If I'm working at writing I don't answer the phone. It's my job, so why would I be answering the phone or doing other stuff. I just don't. It's my work. I go into my office and I shut the door and I think it's really made me articulate of how my time is to be spent. Having a family and having other things that I take care of that want my time. And that could possibly erode the time I spend on my writing.

**TRR---** So to kind of sum things up, what do you think undergraduates should aim to walk away with at the end of completing a writing program?

**SM---** I think that they should have read a lot. I think that helps. You really need to be aware of what's being published now and what we call the foundation of our literature. You need to know what you're standing on in order to innovate. And you should leave hungry with the idea that you could contribute something to that that nobody else could do. What has come before you and where you're going to take it are the two things that you really need to have articulated before you go off and do something else.

## INTERVIEW

### Terrance Hayes

Terrance Hayes, a Pitt alum, recently sat down with TRR to discuss his career as a poet, and his experiences with undergraduate writing. Hayes was born in Columbia, South Carolina in 1971. He is the author of *Wind in a Box* (Penguin, 2006), *Hip Logic* (2002), a National Poetry Series selection, and *Muscular Music* (1999), winner of the Kate Tufts Discovery Award. He has been a recipient of many honors and awards, including a Whiting Writers Award, a Pushcart Prize, a Best American Poetry selection, and a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. He is an Associate Professor of Creative Writing at Carnegie Mellon University and lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, with his family.

**THREE RIVERS REVIEW---** To begin, what can you tell us about your career as an undergraduate and your path to becoming a poet?

**TERRANCE HAYES---** I didn't major in Creative Writing as an undergrad. I was a Fine Arts major, on a basketball scholarship, but I wrote because I had one professor who was interested in what I was doing and he knew I was writing. There weren't any creative writing classes though, because it was a small school. That was at Coker College in South Carolina. Then, he suggested I send some of my work out once the time came to decide between basketball, painting or poetry. So, I did. I sent out a bunch of stuff – not even all poems – because that's how little I knew about how graduate school works. I just knew that I wanted to do something with creative writing, so I sent essays, short stories and some poems, too. And everybody was really nice, but the University of Pittsburgh was particularly nice and I heard from Toi Derricotte, I think Lynn Emanuel was on leave that semester, but a few other people from Pitt called and I thought, "oh, maybe I'll try it," since I hadn't really ever taken any creative writing courses before. I thought it'd be cool to come to Pittsburgh. So I came out as a graduate student. I had just graduated, I was tired of playing basketball, I liked painting, but I thought I'd try poetry. It ended up being really cool. I liked the city. It was hard adjusting to the program and being around people who had studied poetry and considered themselves poets, while I considered myself more of a jock who painted. It was cool though, because I made in-roads to the city because I was looking for a community. That's really the reason why I came back to Pittsburgh [to live and teach]. I



had made so many friends outside of the university, although I'm still very close to both my professors who were there and some of my classmates. I had also made a lot of friends who are just kind of regular people in the city. When I decided to move back, about 7 years ago, it was really because of that. Apart from the books, that is really the scaffolding for whatever my success is. Once I got here, I just kind of wrote and hung out. I didn't have any real ambitions. I wrote a manuscript, which was part of the requirement to graduate. Then a person said to me, 'can I send these poems to my editor?' and it was just a small press in Chicago called Tia Chucha. Some of my classmates said 'no, you should enter it to Yale; it's a good book, it should have a bigger sort of debut.' I thought, well, I'll write more books, it's not a big deal. If someone wants it, I'll give it to them, and that's what I did. It wound up winning some contests, and getting some attention even though the press went out of business because it was so small. It was just luck though, getting the poems out.

**TRR---** It seems there was some serious skill involved too, though.

**TH---** I guess, in terms of people just liking the work. What I'm really suggesting, and this is even how I got into the program – I was too dumb to be ambitious, I just kind of knew I liked reading and writing. It is harder now, with certain successes and exposure to just say 'oh, well I just like to write poems more than anything else,' but that is basically what I try to get back to, even now. Only now, it's trickier.

**TRR---** You are also in teaching now. What lead you to decide on that path as a writer?

**TH---** I like teaching. I like performing, you know, and also, as a person who just enjoys reading and talking about books, teaching is perfect. That's why I like it, because I'm always reading and I have a ready audience. I couldn't be a librarian, and just read and keep it to myself. And performing, I couldn't be a comedian where I can't reference what I've read. Somewhere in the middle is teaching and I like that.

**TRR---** So would you call yourself a performer or performance poet?

**TH---** I'm a performer, kind of a ham, but only in the nerdiest sense. I'm only a ham about getting excited about a book. I've never felt a phenomenon like there is a thrill about me [performing]. It is a situation where I'm just excited or I want to share something I've read with you.

**TRR---** What have you been reading recently?

**TH---** I've actually just been reading for a contest being held by a press out of Brooklyn. It was interesting because the guy who runs the press just asked me if I would write an introduction and that has taken up a lot of my time. Typically, I have a lot of other books. I have a book by some guy, a young poet, who graduated from Columbia University and some other books I want to read, but this thing [the contest] sent me has taken up a lot of time. Which is interesting too, because I write a lot of blurbs and introductions at this point, so it is a way to still read but it has business attached to it. With this book though, I think the woman is African, so the book is different than what you might think of in *Poetry Magazine* or more academic magazines. Even though she is very intelligent, based on the subject matter – writing about Hegel and Ralph Ellison and Picasso, she is clearly very intelligent and literate, but the poems have a more mobile and social element or activity in them. The guy who asked me to do it, asked me to look at it first. I think he may have done it because he thought I wouldn't like it. I actually did like it. I think it's not the kind of thing I see when I'm judging contests, but it was still kind of refreshing. The introduction I wrote was mostly about that – about reading a book so passionate and social and without pretense, which is really what it was. Anyway, I read about a book a week. So, last week I read that about four times and put the introduction together. I think my favorite thing to say about reading a book a week is I feel that I can read anything once and it might not register. When I read a book a second or a third time then I feel like, 'ok, I've read it!' So, when I say I've read a book a week this year, maybe only one of those books have I gotten ready to read again. I'll have it and if it was good, I'll read it one more time. A lot of books just

come and go though. It's not that they're bad; they just don't blow me away.

**TRR---** There's a lot out there to read. Now, you've done a lot with undergrads – you've judged for *Three Rivers Review's* Poetry Contest, you've twice been a visiting writer at the *Bucknell Seminar for Younger Poets* and, in general, you make yourself available to undergraduate writers. Besides being a teacher, why is it you're so active with the undergraduate community?

**TH---** You know, I feel there's more teaching done than when I was an undergraduate. There are all these questions and you need to be savvy – sending your poems out or even getting them ready for a graduate portfolio. Then, how do you still remain very creative and open to everything? Basically, I do it because I typically find undergrads to be more open and creative than graduate students. This is sounding terrible for graduate students, but I mean you know, by the time you get to graduate school the only thing you're majoring in is Poetry, so you can be a little more up-tight and concerned about getting a job. I'm interested in a looseness, which is too bad because sometimes it can come out in a cockiness and ignorance – you don't really know as an undergrad what the field is like. I've dealt with the kid who is cocky and excited about his work and the one who needs to get a job, and to ask 'how do I write a poem to get a job?' that's just not interesting to me. I just find a lot more energy in some ways in undergrads than I do in grad students.

**TRR---** Between teaching and writing, what do you have on your horizon?

**TH---** I have some poems in [the March 2008] issue of *Poetry*. In general, I travel. I'm going to Indiana and Fairbanks, Alaska soon. I typically do one reading a month throughout the year and it has been like that for a long time. Since I've been on leave [during the Spring 2008] semester, I've been doing like two readings a month which can start to get to be a lot. It keeps me from having to get an agent or a webpage or all this stuff people keep trying to make me get. I keep it simple. That's not to say I might not get an agent sometime. Now I'm just not interested in reading all over. I'll just

take a trip and I like to plan; I like hotels. I like to try out a new poem – that’s the best thing about going out and reading. It is not about exposure or trying to sell a million books.

**TRR---** You mentioned you like the energy and freedom that undergraduates write with. What kind of advice would you give to young writers? What do you tell your students?

**TH---** In my last Advanced Poetry Workshop, on one of the critiques a kid said ‘you know, you sure picked a lot for us to read,’ and they had to choose three of six books to read over the course of the semester and then write essays about them. The kid didn’t understand why we had to read in a workshop class. This was all written in a course evaluation, so we didn’t have this exact conversation in person, but from the first day of class, I had told him the best way to learn how to write a poem is to read what other people are doing, not to just make it up out of thin air. A lot of times you’ll find that people have done what you want to do and they can provide you with effective models. To me, it is really that simple: the best way to write is to read. Not even workshops do the same thing. It is not about fixing a poem – you can’t “fix” somebody’s poem. You can read it and then talk about it but it isn’t someone else’s job to fix your poem. It’d be my job to say ‘what would you like to do in this poem?’ or ‘this is what I see happening,’ but that would be my very subjective response and I don’t want you to write a Terrance Hayes poem; I want you to write your poem.

**TRR---** What do you typically have your classes read?

**TH---** A lot of first books. I feel it is important to read a lot of first books, a lot of contemporary books. In that last class, the other choices might have been Jim Daniels’s *Selected* or Lucille Clifton’s. You would choose between either of them, because they’re both pretty common-language poets, but provide very different experiences as poets. Then Yusef Komunyakka or Denise Duhamel, which makes one wonder what those two poets have in common. Duhamel is really conversational, and her poems are long and all over the place. Yusef Komunyakka on the other hand is very restrained and refined, very tight and lyrical in his

poems. They both like to write about cultural stuff – he references mythology and music; she’s using pop culture – in that way, they’re very similar. So as a writer, if you want to explore that sort of thing, here are two writers that will provide different models for exploring the topic, in different ways. And neither of them are wrong, you just have to read them and see. I could always say, ‘read this person,’ then ‘this is how you do it.’ That’s not how it works though. If you like really simple language, maybe Lucille Clifton is right for you, maybe Jim Daniels is right for you. If you like allusion, maybe it’s Komunyakka, maybe not. It’s about finding your best model, not saying that one person is better than another.

**TRR---** Do you use a textbook in your teaching?

**TH---** No, not in writing classes. it doesn’t really matter about the book to me. My syllabus changes all the time. It depends on what I’m reading at the time, so I don’t teach the same [books] year-in, year-out. The lessons do tend to stay that same though.

**TRR---** You mentioned a cultural influence on poets, which can even be seen in your own work. Your book *Wind in a Box* sees separate allusions to David Bowie, Michael Jackson amongst others. Why does that tend to come out in your work, and what importance do you place on it?

**TH---** Really a lot of it comes from those two. Yusef Komunyakka is from the south and can be abstract sometimes in his poems. Denise Duhamel is actually from New York but she lives in Florida. Komunyakka is from Louisiana but lives in New York, so they’ve kind of changed places. I like both of those guys, so I like that I don’t have to choose which side to be on. I don’t want to have to decide that I’m only going to write like Komunyakka or Duhamel. I think it can be said that I draw from them, and I do draw from stuff and I’m just as likely to reference Borges as I am Kool Keith, or Strom Thurmond as I am David Bowie. Those two people don’t really suggest anything about a person other than a really wide knowledge of the cultural.

**TRR---** As a young writer, it is exciting to see new subject matter

come up in poetry, and especially the culturally relevant, which can give the work a sort of Warhol-like feeling with its use of pop-culture.

**TH---** We're at a place where everything can be subject matter. Even personal stories, and not just personal stories, but everything, anything, can be written about. I think that is why I decided to be a poet over a fiction writer, or journalist, because I feel like in poetry you can be those things too. You can be a fiction writer, or a journalist and do research in poems; it just seems ideal. It's true though, and all of your own interests and quirks become subject matter as a poet. As I was saying, with me, when I first started out here as a grad student, I needed to be more than just a student and not just be in the circle of people trying to do poetry. So, I found myself with rappers and basketball players and steel-workers and weed-smokers, anyone you could think of – musicians and bums, and so I do my work in the same way. I'm too restless to be only one sort of poet or even one sort of people. It just means again, that it is a reflection of me. That's what my poems are about and that's why they're all over the place and kind of schizophrenic. I'm just a little bit like that myself.

**TRR---** One last thing – In your books *Hip Logic* and especially in *Wind in a Box* you seem to take ideas and really expand them throughout several pieces. On the whole, the sequence seems like a general tendency in contemporary work. Why do you think it is?

**TH---** I'm not sure that sequences are really a new thing. If there is a current trend, it is probably the "book" project. There are a lot of books on a single topic. The poet Maurice Manning who won the Yale a few years ago, all three of his books have been around one topic, almost like a novel. The poetic sequence is fairly common, poems in parts. Again, I'm somewhere in the middle. I don't have the interest in writing a whole book of "Blue" poems or something more like what is happening right now. I am interested in exploring an idea until I'm tired of it though. In *Hip Logic* I wrote these short little "anagram poems," and in all I wrote about 100. People told me I should make a whole book of the anagram poems. I thought they're not that good, and they're even kind of

boring to me. Even if I like the form, even if I made it up, it can still be boring to read a whole book of.

**TRR---** It is an interesting form though.

**TH---** Right. I don't think anyone needs a book to get the feel of them though. So, I just tossed out the ones I didn't like and threw the rest in with my other stuff. There are a lot of people out writing in sequences and books, and I'd love to do it. I just can't; I don't have the patience to do it. I do find it compelling though, especially with the poet I mentioned, Maurice Manning. He seems to really have a knack for it – the long sequence on the same thing. Kevin Young is another poet who writes lots of books that seem to meditate on one thing. It's good— just not for me.

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

**NATALIE ALLEN** is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh.

**MADELEINE BARNES** is a freshman at Carnegie Mellon University majoring in Creative Writing and Fine Arts. Her poem "Afterlife," received Princeton University's 2007 *Leonard Milberg '53 Secondary School Poetry Prize*, chosen by C.K. Williams. It appeared in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* in August 2007. Her work has also appeared in the *North Central Review* and *Dossier*.

**DAVID BODARKY** was born in 1986 and is being educated at the University of Pittsburgh in East Asian and Hispanic Languages and Literatures. So far as he is not a professional English writing major, he writes nature poetry only relevant to non-feudal pastoralists and bourgeois-linguaged shepherds, yet has the robes to be both, but only because he is too macho (or not macho enough, it's difficult to say with formalists) to write a villanelle or sestina. One day, after licking algae from cave walls and lolling walrus-like on some stony shore when his Picasso has come to drive him to the sea, David aspires to write poetry professionally (but only until Picasso is ready to return him to the world).

**DAVE BREINGAN** is from outside of Philadelphia and is a Junior at the University of Pittsburgh majoring in English Literature, Fiction Writing, and Business. He is an officer of "Keep It Real", a student organization that tutors refugees in Lawrenceville. Dave also plays intramural soccer and is a member of WPTS 92.1 FM, where he hosts a blues program.

**JESSICA DUNEWOOD** is a Junior at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in English Writing, obtaining the Children's Literature Certificate, and pursuing her options for further education. She currently works with children and hopes that that is something she will continue to do after college.

**LIZZIE HARRIS** is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh, majoring in Poetry, Art History and Philosophy. She is currently the Editor of *Collision* Literary Journal, and hopes to get her MFA in Fall 2010.



**SAMUEL HAZO** is the author of books of poetry, fiction, essays, and plays. He is the director of the *International Poetry Forum* in Pittsburgh, where he also is *McAnulty Distinguished Professor of English Emeritus* at Duquesne University. He has been a National Book Award finalist and was chosen the first State Poet of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania by Governor Robert Casey in 1993, a position he held until 2003.

**JUSTIN HULTMAN** is a 4th year English Writing major at the University of Pittsburgh.

**RYAN KAUFFMAN** is a student at the University of Pittsburgh, where he majors in English Writing.

**GEETA KOTHARI** is the Fiction Editor of *The Kenyon Review*. Born and raised in New York City, she now lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is a two-time recipient of the fellowship in literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts and the editor of *'Did My Mama Like to Dance?' and Other Stories about Mothers and Daughters*. Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in various journals and anthologies, including *The Kenyon Review*, the *Massachusetts Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and *Best American Essays*. She teaches at the University of Pittsburgh.

**PETER KUSNIC** is a junior with a major in Fiction and Creative Nonfiction writing and a minor in African American History. Born in Youngstown, Ohio, he has been writing stories since he was six years-old (he is now 20). He says that in all those years, he has never had such a challenging, and at the same time, satisfying writing experience as he had with *The Birthday Boy*.

**KATELYN LITTERER** is grateful to TRR for publishing her poems and is excited to have almost completed a BA in Literature and Creative Writing at Pitt. She plans to move on to Columbus, Ohio and then on to an MFA program in poetry and/or an MA in Composition. She is especially thankful to Maurice Manning for writing *Bucolics*, to Lynn Emanuel for making her write a two-page poem, and to her ultimate inspiration, her mother.

**HONG-THAO NGUYEN** is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, and is majoring in English Literature and English Writing. She is pursuing a certificate in Women's Studies. After graduation, she plans on attending graduate school for secondary education.

**RYAN RYDZEWSKI** is a senior at the University of Pittsburgh. After graduating in the spring, he hopes to teach for a couple of years before entering an MFA program.

**JULIE SOKOLOW** is a Chancellor's Scholar at the University of Pittsburgh, musician, and writer of drama and prose. Her work has appeared in *The Original* magazine and on Pittsburgh radio station WYEP. Her debut album *Something About Violins* was released on the label Western Vinyl. Currently, she is developing a screenplay out of her collection of short stories set in the surreal New Jersey suburbs.

**JOCELYN SUNSERI** is a senior at Carnegie Mellon University. Her studies have focused on Physics, Spanish, and English, and she ultimately plans to work in education, public policy or "community organizing."



# SUBMISSIONS

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*Three Rivers Review* accepts unpublished work by undergraduates at institutions of post-secondary education in the Greater Pittsburgh area. **We do not accept simultaneous submissions.** All submissions are reviewed in anonymity.

Submissions are opened & reviewed between September 15 and January 15. Responses to submitted work can be expected by February 15, following the reading period.

Submit up to 15 pages fiction or 5 poems to:

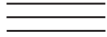
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Annual Three Rivers Review Poetry & Fiction Prize contest details are made available during the Fall semester.

Thank you.





NATALIE ALLEN  
MADELEINE BARNES  
DAVID BODARKY  
DAVE BREINGAN  
JESSICA DUNWOOD  
LIZZIE HARRIS  
TERRANCE HAYES  
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