COLLISION

FALL 2006
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Readers,

What a wonderful five years it has been! Collision has grown from a thin black and white magazine into a colorful (and substantial) collection of prose, poetry, photography, art, and music! I am amazed at all that has been accomplished so far.

In the time-honored tradition, I thank the many writers who have contributed to Collision this semester, as well as the editorial staff, who braved the South Oakland underworld with only the promise of cheap pizza and cookies for the sake of the magazine.

Thank you also to our readership--to all those who make our release parties so successful, and to all those who make it necessary to wonder if we ought to be printing more issues each semester.

Nicola Pioppi
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Photograph by Ben Filio
Photograph by Katherine L. Rife
Photograph by Katherine L Rife
Photograph by Kelly Thomas
ONE GENERATION FROM THE FARM
Margaret Krauss
University of Pittsburgh

Margaret Krauss agrees with the experts--sleep is important for your health

In the sauna of late afternoon,
I follow you like a ranch hand.
A look in your eyes as if you were juggling-
loose limbed and focused,
no need to watch your hands throw one, two, three
looping knives, bowling pins, tomatoes.

Stand next to you while you pull
a branch of the plum tree and
scratch away the thin coat of bark with your thumb,
to show me a rind of green under your brittle nails.
Sometimes we walk the perimeter, stopping
with our arms crossed
you point out the wild blueberries,
the field of mint. A leaf you crush between your fingers
hold to my nose, suggest we mix it with vanilla ice cream.

After dinner, flinching from the whine of mosquitoes,
we pull a carton from the freezer and stir in hammered leaves,
our hands past our noses, breathe in the smell
with the taste.

Before we clear the table, you point out
the big white jug in the middle of the table,
hydrangea, delphinium, forsythia held loosely,
like the two shadows under the streetlight
the space between them bright caulking,
with just enough light left.
Photograph by Ben Filio
SKY CAPTAIN AND THE NIGHTMARE OF CHICKEN LITTLE–THE HIGHWAY ACCORDING TO SAM TITUS

Piotrak

University of Pittsburgh

Sam had skin the color of peeled potatoes. He had orangutan arms. They weren’t hairy. They were just long, anachronistically long. They were Austropolithecus arms, Cro-Magnon man arms. On those arms, scars branched, intersected, and died. Sam had a tracheotomy hole in his neck. It was no bigger than the width of a Bic pen, but it was a hard thing to miss. The skin around it collapsed in on itself like an overcooked pie crust. The scar tissue boundary looked inflamed—a pained pink—like the cloaca of a sexually active and mature shrew. If the scar tissue and tracheotomy were overlooked, Sam bore a striking resemblance to Jay of Jay and Silent Bob.

As we pulled out of Pittsburgh, Sam confessed to me that he was in the midst of epistemological breakthrough.
“Last night I saw Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow. It changed my life Pete. I can’t even begin to explain. All I can say, it’s the modern equivalent of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy. They whole idea of many gods, you know. The different forces of the universe at odds. So much came together. I had so many ideas in my head last night. If only I could tell you half of them.”

“Well we got a whole car ride ahead of us,” I told him. We were driving from Pittsburgh to Shenandoah National Park, Virginia. It was the Outdoors Club Spring Break trip, but only four members of the Outdoors Club were going: Sam, I, Lou, and Padonov. Lou and Padonov were in the other car.

The ride to Shenandoah should have taken only four hours, but Sam’s insistence on bathroom breaks and gas breaks (Sam refused to fill up the gas tank more than a quarter at a time. Said it was more cost-effective) made it a nine hour trip.

Sam said that we could speed up the trip if we dilated time and that the most effect way to dilate time was Prajna Divine Heart Sutra UM—what the Tibetans did: “Ummmmmm-HummanaHummmana-UMMMMMMMMM, Pete it won’t work unless you’re also doing it. Come on now. Ummmmmm-HummanaHummmana.”

Sam didn’t look like he should have been driving. He looked like he’d been out all night sniffing gasoline with Elvis impersonators and Mick Jagger
look-alikes. He, in fact, wanted me to drive. When I told him I couldn’t drive stick; he told me that it wasn’t a problem; that he would teach me as we went along. I told him that I didn’t think a highway was the best place to learn. He told me that it offered the most realistic learning conditions.

Sam had an unorthodox way of driving. He’d scout out a tractor trailer and then draft it for long increments; draft the Big Mac so close that I saw pebbles the size of golf balls being kicked up by its wheels. He’d let Lou and Padonov get miles ahead of us. Then when he saw fit—when he was bored of drafting—he’d gun the Buick to one-hundred something and rocket past them. After a mile or so of being in the lead, he’d pull over to the side of the road to let Ace—his six-week old Siberian Huskie—relieve himself and he too would relieve himself on the highway shoulder, waving to any cars that happened to honk. After a restroom break—which would sometimes last up to fifteen minutes, because Sam wanted to make sure Ace had sufficient time to Number 2—he would get back on the highway, seek out another tractor trailer, and start the process all over again.

And he mostly drove with his knees. He occupied his hands with the task of rolling cigarettes. He was constantly rolling cigarettes and constantly smoking them. He had picked up smoking exactly a week earlier. He had applied as a research subject for a study investigating the effects of
nicotine withdrawal on long-term smokers: “I mean I don’t want to wreck their results. I’m an honest guy Pete. If they’re looking for someone whose been smoking for at least ten years, then I’ll make sure my lungs look like someone’s whose been smoking for at least fifteen.”

Most of the drive, Sam tried to convince me that if he drank enough Gatorade, he’d be able to attenuate radio signals. He’d point to changes in his cell phone reception as empirical evidence. “Look at that Pete. Did you notice how my reception got better after I drank that Glacier Freeze? You saw it with your own peepers Pete. I’m telling you, I need to get my findings published.” His body was composed, in a large degree, of titanium alloy, so I didn’t see why not.

Sam loved to talk. Our car experienced more conversation that the entire island of Guam had experienced in the last five years. Topics included: dog breeding, the secrets of internet gambling, the history of MIT, what to do on an Indian reservation, what not to do on an Indian Reservation, and a prolonged discussion on the most effective method to kill a man with one move. Sam, an avid reader of Dick Marcino—Navy Seal Guru—had a lot to say about the military.

“War’s not a love poem. They got these bullets that shatter inside you upon impact. Shrapnel shells. Maximum kill. They don’t just go in one side and come out the other. What’s going in, is staying in. You understand.”
Sam’s brother was a Navy SEAL and Sam was extremely proud of him. He spoke fondly of his brother’s ability to pepper “fuck” at least once into every sentence (twice if the sentence was a disambiguation and four times if it was declarative.)

Sam’s brother had gotten into a number of barroom brawls during his military service. In one such incident, his brother’s platoon took on and beat an entire squadron of off-duty police officers. The incident started after one of the SEALs pulled a hey-yay-tuts-ass-pinch maneuver on one of the policeman’s wives.

“See that’s what I’m talking Pete. That’s SEAL life for you. SEALs vs. Cops. Guess who wins? That’s what I mean. That’s what it’s all about.”

Sam’s father was also a seasoned soldier. He had served in the Green Beret during the Vietnam War. Like many Vietnam Vets, he returned to the United States with electric sockets for eyes. He took up gambling. A family man, he tried his best to keep his gambling problems a secret. When he finally gambled all the family savings away in Atlantic City, he checked himself into a psychiatric ward and stayed there for about a year. Sam, along with his brother, visited him almost daily. It was during that time in the ward that his father decided to write a memoir about his life experiences. The book has not yet been written, but Sam told me not to worry, because his father
always keeps his word.

After speaking extensively on the ins and outs of Navy SEAL life, everything from Navy SEAL PT to Navy SEAL courtship tactics, Sam explained that he could have been a SEAL, that he, in fact, had wanted to be one for the majority of his life. All throughout his childhood, he had trained for it by taking baths in ice water and by making his brother choke him. He explained that nowadays he’s interested in too many things, that he wants to finish his engineering major and then pursue various projects. “You know—start a corporation, open up a coffee shop. That sort of thing.” Sam explained that even if he still had enthusiasm for the SEALs, he wouldn’t be able to do it now. Not with the body he has now.

He had been in a motorcycle accident three years earlier. He had been popping wheelies, showing off on a street in a Philly infamous for its underground racing, when a car merged sharply in front of him. He smacked into the car and was catapulted off his bike. He tumbled along the road like a lawn gnome in a hurricane.

Three months later he woke up in body cast with thirty-some broken bones, including two broken femurs. The doctors said it was a miracle he was alive, because pulverized bone bits from his femurs could have easily sliced into his leg’s main arteries.

“Worst of all,” Sam says, “Worst of all is not what happened to my
bones, but to my head. I wasn’t always like this.”

He had incurred Unidentified Brain Damage. He received countless CAT scans. He went to numerous specialists. The doctors gave him adderral to treat the focus issues. But the adderral didn’t help him; it just cranked him real good.

We reached Shenandoah National park on the fringes of dusk: Lou, Padonov, Sam, and me. We had six miles to hike to the Adirondack shelter where we would sleep. We had to move quickly.

Sam finished packing in the parking lot on the trail head. In addition to his regular backpack supplies, he took along with him: a bivy sack, a digital camera, Ace who he carried in a small day-pack on his chest, his bag of tobacco, a miniature violin, flasks filled with Amino Acids, and a six-pack of Samuel Adams. Sam, for the onset, couldn’t keep up with us. Every half-mile, we’d stop and wait. He’d come up twenty minutes later: lumbering, soaked in sweat, buried under his gear. Around mile two, he told us to go on without him; that he had a bivy sack and a stove, that he would start up early tomorrow morning and catch up with us. We hiked sixty-four miles of the Appalachian Trail that Spring Break. Sam never did catch up with us.
UNCLAIMED
Jess Flamholz – University of Pittsburgh

Jess Flamholz, a sophomore and Spanish and Italian major, has been writing seriously for seven years and plans to translate and publish her work in a variety of languages; she also aspires to teach Spanish, Italian, and theatre at the high school and university levels. On campus, Sounds of Pleasure, Pitt’s only all-female a cappella group, the Spanish and Italian Clubs, The Accidentals, Chabad House, and Hillel can all claim her as a member. When not playing piano, singing or being theatrical, she prefers the quiet life with a good book, a great laugh, Sicilian wine, and fabulous friends and family.

Dusty like rotting tree bark, each a small piece of earth, of something organic, something extinct, offed. Stacked, piled, placed in a collaborative effort to support the other beneath, beside, above it, like those to whom they once belonged. Bound with hope but disparaged by desolate winters and the weight of large rocks. Collected as mementos, sym-
bols of pride and shamelessness to those who took them.

Laces severed as if by sharp teeth; tongues curled from fatigue and snags of barbed wire; soles imprinted, eroded, by vigilance and silent footsteps. A thinned leather, this suede, rocky like a mountain, stretched like grounds outside barracks, damp, indifferent as a soldier. Rough, spotted with stubble, scraped like knees.

(Stitched from grain of the missing, the shunned, the nameless, the scattered and dispersed?)

A pile waist high, and only of a handful.

Within the threadbare surface, faces like holograms, with hollow eyes and cheeks, sagging flesh, trembling, hungry mouths. Nearly savages, animals, the lot of them, or so they seem. Sisters, once, mothers, uncles, sons, grandfathers, teachers, politicians, gypsies—handicapped by mere birth, defective by association, unclean by tradition.

Salty, the air, with dried tears. Clichééd, perhaps, but for the air to cry? Or tears remembered in the skin?

Humiliated, like shadows that slink into themselves, shooed by the Sun’s hands, silent, submissive, ashamed of being shadow, of being inferior to the power of light (the power of exuding purity), of existing only as this, and nothing more.
“Rid us of blemish, impurity—ourselves. Show us where to tread.”

How (not) to touch such a brown that crumbles at the fingertips, a stretch of pocked, compacted soil that cannot overturn, cannot divorce itself, cannot be harvested, no matter the grain sowed?

(And of what consists this grain? The abstract? The tangible? The profitable? The hopeful?)

“The grit and cinder of a man undone.”

Weightless, the brown—not like air, which bears molecules of tiny memories that detonate when scissored; not like feathers, whose infinite fingers accuse and writhe at the slightest breath; not like snow, which falls and settles on shoulders, tongues, bare feet, in July.

But instead like skin, which tears like soggy paper; like its chalky, filmy surface, which flakes in sheets and seasons; like itself, a thin sheath to clothe delicate miracles—a thing almost alive.

Oh, on these soles a burden but to wait for the Never-Again, the Never-Returned, the Never-Begun. Impossible to sigh with such parched tongues and not wither.

A pile waist high, and not a cup of shifting sand.
AFTER THE GENOCIDE OF MY FAMILY IN UKRAINE
Erin Lindsay Dragan University of Pittsburgh
Erin Lindsay Dragan agrees that guitars make the best lovers: you tune them any way you want, they never cheat, and you can play them as often as possible.

My young great-grandfather danced upon the salty sea to Ellis Island. He was eight and could barely warble his name in English to the people at the desk. The placard around his neck is lost to us now but so is nearly everything else we, the descendents, knew about the mother country. It was said that Wasyl was forbidden contact with Ukraine for twenty-five years and no one knows why an eight-year-old would travel halfway around the world to settle in Pricedale. Mother Russia bullied her children and we were serfs that belonged to the land, roaming around as the flow of the land would let us. We had horses and he always told my father that there
were open fields and villages, but there was also death hanging like storm clouds. Letters from the old country were destroyed when found floating in U.S. mail, and through a torrent of hard drink, would bellow “YOU ARE AMERICANS” at his children when asked where we were from. He was never the same after his first wife, an Austro-Hungarian opera singer, died young. My father would accompany him to the bar to slake the burning ash of iron ore in his lungs after a shift under the red eyes of Overseer Carnegie and Wasyl would throw Russians into the glass behind the bar. Sometimes I dream he would mutter Veronica’s name in his mind as the blood spurt from the Russian’s head, a little red revolution just south of Hell With the Lid Off. His second wife was a bitch and took him from his family, hence my grandfather forsook atom dreams of perpetual energy for American nuclear family bliss. I never knew him as a courageous man, as he began to die when I was learning to walk. This is my soul’s missing hole on the right, as the right is the giving hand, and what is there to give? And sometimes I wonder what I would’ve done in both of their situations. Now, when I ride horses in the desert west, flirting with the sun and the wrangler boys, or when the knifeblade edges of my skis carve faces in the snow-packed mountainside, I crave the answer to the blood mystery coursing in my elastic veins. I may as well have crawled out of the Earth and began to exist.
A NIGHT IN TAOS

Jenna Gwyn                                          University of Pittsburgh

Jenna Gwyn is Junior English Writing/Lit major.
She lives in West View in the North Hills and she works in a frame shop, as a chiropractic assistant, and a first grade tutor. The following piece was inspired by five weeks spent in Las Vegas, NM over the spring and summer of 2006.

1.
A sandy shore holds open the gorge’s gaping mouth. By the time we find it, the last slides of sun have all leaked away, stretched thin over the flat plains above, lying mute in the five o’clock shadow of the Rockies. Sharp brush has shaken off the heat’s thirsty touch.

The bottom is dark- river babble guides us
into the tent, into our blankets, click out the light.
Sleep creeps up but I kick it off.
A rambling fortress of wild sage surrounds our heads and shoulders on all sides, and my mouth waters for my mother’s soup.
We face our heads away from the slithering water, a snake that carves through sand and rock Chomping away at the melting shore.

What if... We all suspect but won’t let the fear on our breath mix with the cool twilight
and take us all away- by morning the water will rise

Drip
Splat
Drop
I don’t know if it’s fear or the clump of rock and roots burrowing into my ribs but I hold my breath
2.
At dawn I wake
from a sleepless coma
and in the great New Mexican drought of 2006,
we greet strange flakes, feathers
that fill our shoes like candy on St. Nicholas’ day.
They’ve become gauges of precipitation.
I tie them quickly,
quickly I dress and draw sharp breaths.
I dip my fingers in the newly frosted river-
that mimics slushy motion in my veins.

The sprinkling powder turns into cotton blossoms,
falling heavier now-
erasing color from the air; separating us, like static-
In the white noise we become comic book characters.

We roll up the tent on the ivory gilded shore.
We roll up the tent,
blankets and all.
Heavier now.

Up the path, like Huck Finn, Up
the trail that dissolved with
the clear dusk sky. But legs kick instinctively
toward the surface-

Breathing Becomes harder than walking- I cannot do them
both. I sit, you lean over and grab my shoulder- so
many layers I cannot feel your hands. You can’t feel them either.
You click my picture. Smile,
You ask. I try to curl my lips against gravity, away
from the belly of the churning ravine that echoes like an empty shell.

I clutch a pine cone, its spurs stick to my faded purple gloves
and sleeves like Velcro. I peel them off as it rolls
through the spaces in my frigid fingers, stamps
the dressing on the hard ground. I wade
up through the rest of the sage brush, pocketing its
arms that grab at my ankles and elbows like lonely, needy children.
3.
We slide out from the veil of the storm.
At the canyon’s jagged, broken jaw, I turn back
to the orange dust asleep under an alabaster quilt, forgetting
the freshly pressed footsteps thawing ahead, forgetting
the jeep, forgetting
the land

I squint
through billowing white curtains of confetti
swirling out and over
tracing the abyss
forgetting to land.

I turn. I squint through the seams of its form
as I throw back my knapsack of speech. I see
unfiltered beauty in an unearthly firm. Raw and
unchewed, nothing is haphazard.
All that can be fashioned already is-
was once silent still as this mound.
I tuck away intellect, perch on all my words
Until they are pinned down motionless.
Vision goes light-years beyond sight, and truth
transcends its own proof. Nothing I touch
escapes creative implication-
The unchartable formula falls into us all
As we pull the weight of our bags

I walk. I stretch out the folds of the dream-softened climb
Me and my pillow
You, with guitar in one hand,
and Paul, his pack a person standing atop his shoulders-
Atlas leading us out toward home, pressing onward against the falling sky.
I took a picture of the Vltava flowing indifferently behind a ruddy-faced organ grinder. Another of Prague Castle, with spires stabbing skyward. A few of the sun: pouring out from behind the clouds and resting on the Charles Bridge, illuminating the end of an anonymous cobblestone street, making the gold leaf glimmer on the astrological clock, the Orloj, in the old town square. My pictures prove that Prague is a beautiful city. Still, my album is an incomplete keepsake. All of my albums are. There are things, important or beautiful, that film simply cannot capture.

Breathing, for example, feels different in every place. Prague’s November air is cold, thin, incomplete — at least, when there is no snow. When the air is full of snowflakes, it turns somehow rich and sharp; the city lets itself be properly
seen, and fallen in love with. Those who are lucky or stupid or brave enough to get lost in Prague, in the downward-drifting snow, know this — and they know something no one else does. If they are smart, they do not try to photograph it; it won’t work.

He and I — I never did find out his name — were lucky and stupid, and the flakes fell on our hair. They stayed there, benevolent and white, while we kissed and pretended we weren’t cold. We turned a corner and watched the snow get caught in a streetlight’s glare, and it wasn’t the sort of thing that we could describe to anyone else, or to each other. I have no photographs of the snow in Prague, and I am thankful for this: my memory remains uncontested, impossible to verify, beautiful.

I do have a picture of him from that night, although I wish I didn’t. By the time I developed the film he was already a memory, and I prefer him that way. My camera didn’t capture things right; the discrepancy between its proof and my recollection is jarring. His eyes, for example, look blue in the photo — although I remember them being green. Staring back at me from their two-dimensional prison, they look unremarkable. I know that they were anything but; I can still conjure his face in my mind. His eyes were bright and sharp. They radiated almost to the point of malice.

His eyes were, I think, the reason I gravitated to him in the first place. In London for the semester and Prague for the weekend, a friend and
I walked into the hostel bar of Pension Dlouha 33 prepared for adventure. We feigned nonchalance as we ordered drinks and sat ourselves giddily next to the group at the long, center table. He sat at the far end with his brother, eyes glinting under a shock of dark hair. We left the bar as a group — ten of us, maybe, speaking the friendly banter of strangers who decide to become friends. By the end of the night, there was no one in between him and me; my friend had disappeared with some of the others, his brother was off somewhere, and we moved in the darkness of a club to songs I have since forgotten. We drank Becherovka and absinthe, because we were in Prague and we could. We traded belts. I pretended to understand his thick Scottish accent. He pretended he didn’t have one. My friend reappeared, ready to go home. He wrote his phone number, but not his name, on my arm in red ink. The next morning, it was still legible.

I sent him a text message, later, after my friend had announced her intentions of going to bed early. At about two o’clock in the morning I met him outside. Light as a burglar, I slunk out of the room with its twelve bunked beds, down the stairs and around the old elevator shaft. Hands in pockets, he stood by the double doors and smirked, or maybe grinned, when he saw me. His eyes switched on. He suggested we walk. I thought we wouldn’t go far, that we’d find a place to dance and drink and kiss for a few hours more, and so I left my jacket upstairs. Along with it were any thoughts of the boyfriend
I had broken up with two weeks before — the one back in the States, who, regardless of how many pictures I e-mailed him, couldn’t quite understand the things I was seeing and experiencing, the things I wanted to see and experience. Did he understand why I wanted them? I wasn’t sure.

I had my camera with me as we set off in some direction, comfortably linked on our way to nowhere in the lightly falling snow. I could not retrace our path from that night even if I tried; it is forgotten to me. All of the logistics are — how my body fit next to his, whether I came up to his shoulder or his chin, how far I needed to stretch to kiss him. They say it takes 3,000 repetitions of an action for it to become automatic, for your body to remember how to do it. I spent miles with his arm around me, hours with my eyes trained on his — but it was not enough to grow this sort of kinesthetic sense. Now, from a distance of two years, my lips have forgotten his just as surely as my legs have forgotten how to carry me through Prague’s winding alleyways.

Then, though, my body knew everything. He and I wandered the foreign streets, pausing at times, ostensibly looking for a destination. I got cold, and he offered me his jacket. All I had to offer in return was a single arm-warmer, which he took and never gave back. Possibly he has it still, tucked away in the back of his sock drawer where he does not need to explain it to anyone. Maybe he wasn’t lying when he said he planned to climb Mount
Kilimanjaro, and my arm-warmer has seen the tops of mountains. My belt could have, too — after all, I still have his. I wear it sometimes, because it is a good belt, perfectly worn in, and those are hard to find. When I am complimented on it — which happens — I smile to myself and keep its history a secret. Maybe he regrets trading it away, and threw mine out in frustration, along with the arm-warmer. Maybe he just forgot them when he packed his things.

Eventually we found an open bar full of bleary-eyed locals and fell into a dark booth. A lone old man sat at the bar, face illuminated with electric carnival colors; intent on the video-screen gambling game he was playing, he took little notice of us. Not so with the bar’s other patrons — small groups of men and women, talking infrequently and in low voices. They stared at us unwelcomingly as we intruded on their malaise, a boy and a girl flushed more with the excitement of travel, newness and spontaneity than with the cold. It did not take long for someone to throw a coaster at us. Relinquishing our spot, we left the bar before we’d even finished our drinks. We kept walking, no longer pretending to look for something or somewhere. I was lost, but not alarmed. Time wore on; it was too late to be considered night, but any hints of sunshine were still buried deep beyond the horizon. We kept going, talking about things that weren’t important and kissing unabashedly in public places while the snow fell.
Occasionally, someone would walk past us on their way to somewhere. These people did not matter. Certainly they could see us. Very likely they muttered disapprovingly under their breath, and their disapproval turned to mist in the saturated air. It never reached our ears. I remember only a young woman in a tan coat who came upon us as we watched the snow. We stood among smooth, white pillars under a roof, and she appeared. She wove through the pillars — in my memory there are many of them, but perhaps there were only three — and disappeared into the shadows. I do not think he or I said anything about her, but I want to remember that we huddled closer together in the presence of someone else.

When the cold grew unbearable, we found our way back to my hostel. He came in to warm up, through the double doors, around the old elevator shaft and up the stairs. We sat in the kitchen on the seat, heavy and long like a church pew, and pretended to forget about the people sleeping on the other side of the wall. Eventually it was time for him to go; he had a plane to catch. He pulled his camera out, I struck a pose. I lost my balance, pulled the bench into my side, sputtered and gasped at the wind knocked out of me. I don’t think he got his picture, ever, for which I am grateful.

I am only in his memory, if I am anywhere. What shade of brown my hair really was, the color of my eyes, the way I smiled — I should hope that these things are better and more poetic in his mind than on film. He cannot
look, like I can, to see that my hair is just as dark as his or that my smile is smug, the smile of a girl holding a secret important only to her. I have this proof — I know that I was not as glamorous as I believed myself to be. I know that whatever secrets I thought I had were as temporary as solitary snowflakes. I would prefer to have forgotten all of this, or never to have learned it at all, but I cannot bring myself to throw the pictures away.

I realize that my mother can never read this; that I have no excuse for my recklessness. I realize just how reckless I really was. I realize that walking through a foreign city with a foreign companion is always a bad idea, but especially so when it is dark and the streets are empty. That we must have annoyed the locals at the bar at 4 a.m., and that I should be thankful they did not turn violent. I realize that at nineteen, I was hungry for experiences that weren’t necessarily in my best interest. And if my brother, nearly nineteen himself, were to do these things now — I would throw a fit of righteous, protective rage.

And what of the old boyfriend, the one back in the States? His photos stared back at me until I was home, kissing him one last time in a routine my body had memorized. His eyes, hazel, stared at me through my self-imposed exile back at school, through the weeks of not talking to him. They stared at me until I bought a plane ticket and flew up to see him, until they were once
again the eyes of my boyfriend.

He called the other week, asked me what I was writing about. Prague, I said; a small answer to a big question. I never told him about the snow in Prague, about my walk at night. I never explained why I had only one arm-warmer. He knows only the scantest outline of that part of my memory, because that’s all he wanted to know and that’s all I could bear to tell him. And now, writing these memories — memories I rarely think of, memories I share silently if at all with a stranger who may or may not have known my name and likely has forgotten it since — thoughts of him interfere. I cannot write these memories in isolation. They exist, in my head, beautiful as ever, but their perfection dulls as I commit it to paper. They become as normal as a pair of blue eyes tucked into the back of a photo album.
ARIA IN PIECES
(for Glenn Gould)
Amanda James

Climb punctual evenly
heavy – Glenn
it chills me
to know

you are human
- to stare at your black
& white photograph
and imagine

I could put my fingers
in your hands
wear them-
wrinkled, knuckled

gloves, more valuable than your weight
in ivory. Glenn, I can hear you
undressing in the way
your Variations vary. When

I lie
on my carpet listening
& I imagine I might sink
in and die, euphoric.

It’s happening more
frequently now that I open
my eyes crying
& they are tears

of “A” sharps
and “D” flats. They are scales
in G major, sliding
into my lips, and when they slip
sideways while I am supine
on the floor, they are the living
chords of dead
men falling

into my ears, sliding
through channels until
finally your dotted
half notes fall through

my mind, bouncing
off my spine
as though I am your
xylophone,

as though you’ve pressed
one hammer for every
one of
my bones.
GASP
Todd Christopher Cincala University of Pittsburgh

Todd is currently completing his MA in English at the University of Pittsburgh. His poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in 5 AM, Main Street Rag, Four Corners, Perigee, and Avatar Review among, other publications.

It lasts only a moment
Not even a moment, just a Mo
Caught by a quick lash
Shut of a Venus fly
Trap eye

In passing, two
Thick lipstick crescents
Curling a perfect
O
Around a red ripe
Fork-speared cherry
Tomato.

Savor sweet
Sidewalk salad eater,
Spring juice dripping her lips
Close

A keeper, stash
To devour later
In cool private, porcelain
Quiet.
Voices wafting from down the hall wake you from slumber.

Do you need me to call an ambulance?
No, I’m fine.

You fall back to sleep, pillow over your head.

A dream, you tell yourself. It was only a dream. You wake to find your mother still in bed. She’s not feeling well today. You brush it off and gather your things for school.

After school, your father picks you up from the babysitter’s house later than usual. He tells the babysitter that your mother is in the hospital, fluid on her lungs. The babysitter seems concerned but you do not know what that means.
You will later learn that when one organ, her liver, started to fail, the other organs followed suit. You visit your mother daily. She comes home after a week with a white, five-inch three-ring binder under one arm, your father’s arm wrapped around the other. The binder is a new way of life, full of diet and lifestyle changes for a woman in need of a liver transplant. No salt. No alcohol. Nothing that is not pasteurized. Also in the book is a chart of the 63 pills she is to take pre-transplant, which ones to take when, which ones to take on an empty stomach, which ones to take on a full stomach, which ones don’t allow her to be in the sun. The next page is the same chart, this time with 96 pills that she will take post-transplant, every day, for the rest of her life.

You walk through a dark hallway, hands pressing lightly against each wall, guiding you toward an end that cannot be seen. Fingers grazing lightly against the eggshell paint of the walls in your childhood home. A yelp comes from below you. The dog. You stop, allow your hands to sink lower until your fingers feel fur. Fur that runs against you, tickling. You blow the animal a kiss, loud enough so he can hear it, then take a big step as he falls back into slumber.

It’s a Friday morning and you are ten years old. For most, this would mean a weekend is coming, a weekend of soccer games or slumber parties.
For you, it means that in only a few hours you will be in the car with your father and six year old brother driving four hours to see your mother in a hospital, where she has spent most of the last year because her body has rejected the first two liver transplants that she received.

Hotels are too expensive for weekend trips, your father’s mother tells him. They purchase a motor home, one that will be parked at a campground near Pittsburgh. It gets decorated for Halloween with lights and ghosts hanging from the front of it. There are Thanksgiving and Christmas decorations as well. And one more set of Halloween decorations. Your mother helps when she can. When she is too healthy for the hospital and not healthy enough to go home, she stays in the motor home with you.

You gather your belongings, school books off the table, a pack of peanut butter crackers for the bus ride to school. You put your blue and pink bookbag on the table and set out ingredients for dinner. Something quick, you know your father will want to leave right after he gets home from work. French toast. You place a frying pan, a bowl, a loaf of bread and the bottles of cinnamon, vanilla and nutmeg in a small pile. After school, you add eggs and milk to the bowl, mix in the vanilla, cinnamon and nutmeg and dip the bread in it. As the first piece of dripping bread hits the frying pan, the garage door opens. You add another piece. And another. The first three are done before your father makes it upstairs with a beer in his hand. You give him a plate,
make three more, one on a plate for your five year old brother and two for you then sit down.

Three beers later, he is ready to go. He picks up another case of beer and your brother and puts them both in the car. You follow, carrying your book bag on one shoulder, a bag of puzzle books and cards on the other. You read the whole way to Pittsburgh, R.L. Stein mostly. A book light that reads “University of Pittsburgh Medical Center” lights the page in the darkness of the car for you and you smile at the thought of your mother giving it to you almost a year ago. She handed it to you and told you to never stop reading. She proudly told a nurse who was passing through that you are her daughter. The nurses know you by name now, know which books you have and have not read, occasionally give you one while you sit in the hallway holding your brother’s hand, waiting for the doctor to leave the room so you can go back in and be with your mother again.

The floor is cold, the tiles never ending. You watch the reflection of the lights glowing on the floor as you strain to hear what the doctor tells your mother and father. Another transplant? Home? No change? Your brother looks up at you and mimics your action. The floor reflects a nurse closing in on you. She smoothes your hair, offers you a popsicle. Her name is Marsha, and her blond hair hangs in her eyes. Her eyes are green, green like the organ donation awareness pin that your mother has started wearing.
You take the popsicle and she goes, quietly. A gurney rolls past, sheet pulled up over the face. You tell your brother the man is just sleeping, you know he is dead. Dead like your mother could be without her third liver transplant. Dead like your great-grandfather and your mother’s mother and all the other people that you miss. Dead like the thousands that die every day waiting for an organ, waiting like your mother.

You stare out the hospital window when they finally do let you back in. The perfect vantage point for a view of Dan Marino’s retired #13 football jersey hanging from the old Pitt football stadium. Dan Marino is your father’s all time favorite football player. The Miami Dolphins are his team. You stare at a building you swear looks like a boot, one you will later find out is the Learning Research and Development Center for the University of Pittsburgh. Your mother says that if she could go to any college she wanted, Pitt would be it. Your father agrees. You dream big and you choose their adventure for your own.

Your mother is discharged from the hospital the next day. The doctors shake her hand and tell her they are sorry. Sorry for what, you wonder. Your mother explains to you that there is nothing that they can do anymore. Your mind flashes back to the man on the gurney the day before. You do not want that to be your mother. Who does? At ten years old, there is a lot your mother needs to teach you. How to put on makeup. How to do geometry.
How to live life without her.

She has had two liver transplants in eight months, more than her fair share. But then there is nothing fair about this. Your mother did not do drugs, didn’t infect herself with Hepatitis C, didn’t ask for her life to be cut short. Instead, she had children. Children who were tough to deliver. Children who forced her to have blood transfusions before donated blood was tested for Hepatitis C. Your birth is the most likely cause of your mothers illness, and perhaps her death. You feel the guilt rise up in you, a tide that you cannot stop. Your parents, even the doctors, all assure you that you are not to blame. You are not so sure. It is your eleventh birthday and your mother is being sent home to die.

She has dialysis at a local hospital every day. She moves into your grandparents’ house so that she is closer to the hospital. You see her everyday after school. You prefer seeing her daily to seeing her weekly, but you do not like how she looks. Her body is swollen, yellow with jaundice from a liver that is not working. Her skin is translucent, you can count the bones in her fingers and do so regularly.

The doctors tell her to hold on, tell you all to hold on. She is number two on the waiting list. Soon. You live for the waiting list. You look for car accidents, wishing someone would die so that your mother could live. You feel horrible, but you continue wishing. You listen to traffic reports on the
news every night, listening for fatal accidents. You sit by the phone, waiting for the call that one of those fatal accidents resulted in a liver for your mother, another chance at life.

School is your refuge. A place to keep busy, a place where grades are what matter, not life and death. All the teachers ask about your mom, but you tell them that she is fine. You hope that if you say it enough, you will believe it. You call your grandparents’ house at lunch every day, making sure nothing has changed. Nothing ever does.

The doctors tell your mother that “someone famous” is on the list right before her, she tells you. She tells you to distract you, make you ask questions. Instead, you are quiet. If someone famous is on the list before her, they will get the liver first. They will live and she will die. You wonder who it is. Eventually, you ask. Your mother tells you it is James Earl Ray. James Earl Ray, the man who killed Martin Luther King Jr? The one and only, she tells you. A murderer is on the list above your mother? You are stunned, and stop wishing for people to die in car accidents. If they do, he will get their liver.

You watch the news more intently now, waiting for stories of James Earl Ray getting a liver transplant from the University of Pittsburgh. The story doesn’t come, not before your mother gets a call that they have a liver for her. You wait, sitting at your grandparents’ house while your father drives your mother to Pittsburgh again, for her third transplant in eleven
months. She is told it is good they found a liver; she might not have made it another day if they had not. You watch the late news, unable to sleep. James Earl Ray died. Died waiting for a liver transplant at the University of Pittsburgh. Died because the judge would not let him leave Tennessee where he was jailed to go to Pittsburgh to get the transplant. The judge killed James Earl Ray, but let your mother live. You owe the judge her life. You owe him her life if she makes it through surgery.

You sit up all night, knowing your father will call when the surgery is over. You know it takes twelve hours from the time they leave to the time he calls, you have timed it twice before. Twelve hours unless something goes wrong. You don’t want to take any chances, so you wait. Phone in one hand, TV remote in the other. Your order a pay per view movie and watch it over and over, not paying attention. Your mind wanders to moments over the years, you and your mother, your mother and your family. You try to imagine your life in the future, without her. You can’t. You cannot picture high school graduation in your head without your mother there. Or college graduation. Or your wedding. Or the birth of her first grandchild. You know that’s why she keeps fighting, she does not want to miss these things either.

You drift in and out of sleep, but the phone doesn’t ring. Your grandmother wakes you up, tells you to shower for school. Still, the phone doesn’t ring. You beg to stay home from school and wait. Your brother begs also.
You pack your brothers' Rugrats bookbag and carry it to your grandfathers' red pickup truck along with yours. He promises to call the school when he knows something. You make him promise again before walking into the building. All day long, you wait. At lunch, you check. Nothing. Between every class you check. Nothing. At the end of the day, you get back into the red pickup truck, silently. It has been nearly twenty-four hours since your mother and father left. Your grandfather looks at you. You look back. Silence. You wonder why your father didn't call. Did he call? You ask. Your grandfather tells you your father called only an hour ago, and said your mother was finally out of surgery. You ask what took so long. Your grandfather glosses over it, says there were some "complications"... but she's fine.

You find yourself in the same white hallway again, watching the nurses walk by. You place a dustball under your finger and move it around the floor in circles. The doctor emerges, smiles, and holds the door open for you. You find your mother sitting up in bed, smiling. The doctor thinks this one will do the trick, she tells you. You silently thank James Earl Ray for dying. You thank the doctors and the nurses and God. And you thank your mother, for being strong enough to hold on until the right thing came along.

Eight years later, the transplant clinic has moved from the Falk building to Montefiore, 7th floor. You walk off the elevator with your mother next
to you. You run your fingers over the wall of memory, glad your mother’s name is not there. You look for James Earl Ray. His name is not there either. Your mother walks on and you catch up. She checks in with the receptionist, and the doctor comes to the lobby. He asks why she is here. For my yearly check up, she tells him. He looks at her, tells her she is amazing. Pulls out his stethoscope and listens. Listens to her heart beating. Tells her she has a small murmur. Nothing she can’t live with. He tells her to leave. To give him time with his real patients. He hugs her. And you. He pushes you out the door, tells your mother to call if you cause any trouble. Tells you to come and talk to him anytime you want. You’re in the same city, after all.
LETTER S PARTS THE WATERS

Shana Kraynak University of Southern California

Shana Kraynak is a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh and is currently in the Masters of Professional Writing program at the University of Southern California. Though she is still in awe of the palm trees, mountains and smog, she misses the Cathedral of Learning and the wonderful skyline, writers and food that thrive in Pittsburgh.

There is a dream that all the writers of the world will someday sing and sway the waters of Italy in striped, wool sweaters with long dark wooden paddles, parting line breaks in cerulean in dusk in love are the scientists and mathematicians
with logic, with long legs, with lies
of future and bank accounts and the measurement
of other women’s breasts.
The writers fail because they write about
one.
The one.
And as their paddles caress dirty waters
they sing and shine in romance languages
while the directors appraise the moon.
BIRTH CERTIFICATE

Yelena Valer’evna Moskovitch

Emerson College

Yelena is a student at Emerson College (Boston) studying Playwriting and Cross-Cultural Theatre. She is originally from Kharkov, Ukraine, USSR, but her homes include the Ukraine, Israel, Paris, Wisconsin, and Boston. Her latest work, *Black Fish* (2006), a trilingual play (Eng/Ru/Fr) about Russian immigrants in Paris after the Bolshevik Revolution was stage-read in Boston as part of the Nicole DuFresne Playwriting Scholarship and stage-read again in Paris through Moving Parts (both under the play’s original title: *Those Who Walk Behind Us Lead the Way*). It will produced in Boston this November by Emerson College as her Honors Thesis.

The most honest love
letter you’ve ever
received—it will not do,
You’ve grown into
your mother’s dress;
you touch now
with a pen.
It will not do
the castle in St. Petersburg,
the witch in the chicken-leg house.
All the Katyas
in all our literature
will be your misloved
grandmothers and daughters,
in every translation.

If you do find the gambling eyes
of Dostoyevsky in your own,
cover them with your palms.

You’re still that child
looking for her destiny.

Soon skin becomes paper
and if there are no answers
in your own creases,
crumble the page,
uncrumble the page,
and go on your way.

The missing cobblestones,
the uprooted weeds,
the crack in the concrete road.

There are creases all around you.

Behind you: a row of Ukrainian women sing your departure.

"I am ready to be misloved." You say, staring at your palms.
STAFF SUBMISSIONS
IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER
"AWKWARD PAUSES"
He found each finger of my right hand, then my left. Placed each, cold like dishes in winter cupboards, on the octave following middle C. His hands were wet, staining the pristine white keys with salty dew drops as they danced in calculated movement, though the tempo followed his speeding heart. Dots and lines, dots and lines, scribbles reminiscent of a neo-archaic language to which I was not privy. Our hips shared the piano bench on the carpet of his living room. His eyes darted to corners I hadn’t noticed, crevices in couches, miniature ornaments and picture frames, all with stories locked behind inked eyes. I tried to focus on the lesson at hand, in between nervous glances, fiery grazes of the skin.
With a pen in his strong, skilled hand he explained the circle of fifths. One chunk of the alphabet jumbled, rounded out with # and b for good measure, in some semblance of order. C far from A, G next to D, B above F#. Bb (2 flats). Eb (3 flats).

I was a skeptic.

This was the guy I had known since middle school, who only had eyes for my twin sister since she first directed her attention to him. Every school dance, every hayride, every birthday, his thick arm around her thin upper body, part of the shape we shared. Brown curls so dark and thick they could have passed for black, his broad chest housing a baritone voice in every overpriced photo. His marching band gait never leaving his body. Heel, toe. Heel, toe. As if he lacked the confidence to let his arms hang, his feet drag. As if he didn’t know how. And she, without the confidence to dance alone, without a corsage, without a ride, without the nervous attention of some gifted musician who spoke only in treble clef without awkward laughter. People told us that I had the longer face, that I looked more mature. And yet she was the one turning heads. Rather, his head, but still it stung. As alike as we were, had she managed a few more curves, longer lashes, fuller lips?
An organized mess to the untrained eye: German Johann David Heinichen wrote in 1728 of this haunting circle, encompassing the 12 equal-tempered pitch classes of the chromatic scale. On a piano, the relationship of seven keys is equivalent to a perfect fifth. Five white keys, two black. Essentially a reference chart for harmonic distances between chord progressions in traditional Western music. A framework for the placement of flats and sharps in scales, entropic relationships.

Perhaps a year since he and my twin sister practiced sloppy, inexperienced kisses, twitching and blinking in each other’s company before homeroom, I share the piano bench with him in his family’s living room. A husky stares at us from the couch adjacent to the instrument with one gold eye, one blue. I am wearing a skirt because, if nothing else, he’ll think of her when he sees my shape.

My flip-flopped feet experiment with the bronze pedals, thigh muscles visibly flexing. He fools around a few octaves higher, sixteenth notes with a hint of jazz’s rhythm. I practice the last chord he taught me. The husky’s ears perk up and fall upon hearing the muddled details of our otherwise silent practice. He scrawls out a few more dots and lines onto paper with preprinted staves. A sheet with the circle of fifths receives its first wrinkles
as he passes it to my left, my fingers stumbling through his next creation.

Our hour has passed and my arm brushes his as I fold a ten dollar bill into his palm. The same arms that will embrace my shrinking body after I tell him I lost my virginity, after I can’t think of anyone else to tell. “You know,” he says into the silence while he holds his hands between his thick thighs, “I did kind of like you for a while. And this summer…at Amy’s party…” He trails off in mid-sentence and sends my mind racing, garbling my thoughts, scrambling the letters and phonemes like that damn circle of fifths. My eyes remain downcast as I stand to leave the room, the house. Where was that smirk on my lips I had imagined?

Our piano lessons came to an end. My keyboard collected dust around the clear tape on every plastic white key with C written in pencil, D and E interspersed with black keys left unlabeled. F, G, A and B. The black keys push their way through, open to interpretation. A# or Bb? Same key, same pitch, same place in the harmonic scale of things. Yet there still remains a choice.

That crumpled paper with Bb-Eb-Ab-Db circling in major, staring at dead ears. All I read was “Bead.”
AIRPORT ROAD
SELLS, ARIZONA 85634.

Our trailers lined paths home, from airports to abandoned deserts, to darker tones and splitting lips mouthing words, calling us “spito.” The tea stained rocks play backdrop to our self-dug pools and sheds, filled with crushed beer cans; emptied by our fathers, paid for in blows.

There are roads that lead nowhere, and never ending excuses as to why we stay inside.

Our old metal playgrounds have the day off whenever the temperature rises, which is everyday, of every week, of every desert year.

Our thin trailer walls seem to leak the tragedies of our neighbors, and our run down fences and P.O. boxes let us know that someone has forgotten us.

On most days, you can hear the booms of airplanes,
exceeding speeds of sound;
echoing new sounds that seem to rip and tear at every part of your ear.
When the heat is bearable, we make the trip down the road
to the part of the rundown airport that still has some pavement.
We ride our bikes and race around shamelessly pleased
to tread on ground that doesn’t shed on our foot heals,
stain our skin brown, or remind us that we are never clean.
When we can’t help but notice our baked skin and dry throats, we race back
to soak in the cool air only to find the expression of our mother,
who surely was crying while pouring our concentrate juice
in old jelly jars painted with Looney Tunes.
ORANGES
Nicola Pioppi

Today, a panhandler asked me for some change,
or a cigarette,
but I don’t smoke,
and my rent’s due,
so I offered him an orange
from my paper lunch bag.
He refused, and then
a pause--
he called me back.
I was dismayed to discover at lunch
that the oranges were thick-skinned
and bitter.
STAFF PICKS
Awww yeah. You found Humble Voice.

Operating as a brand new community of artists aptly housed on the website www.humblevoice.com, Humble Voice offers a variety of inspired features geared toward both local and widespread audiences to view and create artist profiles. Each anomalous profile offers ample views of photography, art, film, writing or music. By creating a profile, one can upload, maintain and manage not only a community of friends and family, but also a vantage point to share your own artistic creations – in whichever form they may abound.

Outstanding new features include calendars to track local readings, art shows, band performances and community events. Each artist community homepage contains featured artists, each day’s top listened to/viewed/read creations as well as a shout out to the newest members of each commu-
nity. Members can manipulate their own profiles by uploading a profile photograph, their own art of any and all kinds, basic biographical information, messages and friends’ profiles as well as unique-to-the-site features with bulletin boards, commentary, featured texts, blog space and community actions and photos.

Humble Voice proudly advertises its “earn points” feature on the site, which basically goes something like this: make a profile; upload loads of your art, writing, music, etcetera; make friends; browse communities; tag favorite bands and artists; earn points and redeem them for great merchandise and special offers. Not only is Humble Voice a great way for artists to network with other artists in the same or different fields, it also allows for the same (but better!) friend correspondence as rival sites.

Humble Voice is geared toward you - made by artists for artists. It’s not just your space.
SUPERNOVA

Jenn Dean and Matt Agnew

Supernova, a galactic stellar explosion or a delightful local reading series? The answer: it’s both -- but only one happens in the comfort of a coffee shop. Which one you choose to attend is up to you. The less dangerous option, of course, is Supernova Reading Series which takes place at Kiva Han on Forbes Avenue and Craig St. on selected Wednesday evenings. You can choose to go and listen to your peers project their poetry, fiction and non-fiction adventures or read your own little heart out with one, two or three short pieces you either wrote or love. Supernova aims to please in an open microphone setting with one simple rule: everyone gets two rounds of applause. Supernova helps students and the community appreciate literature and allows writers to have their voices heard. So if it’s a colorful display in the deep dark sky you crave - no help here - but if prose and poetry is your aim, check out Supernova on the stalker grounds of The Facebook and MySpace. They even have a blog - it is that serious.
MUSIC
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<td>The Meridians</td>
</tr>
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FUTURE SUBMISSION

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