Table of Contents

Cover Art ................................................. Jonno Rattman
2 COLLISION STAFF
3 FROM THE EDITORS
4 ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
5 God of Motors ........................................... Christina Beasley
12 Like Experiencing Déjà Vu for a Metaphor
   You Can’t Quite Articulate ........................... Dean Matthews
15 Aviaries .................................................. Caitlyn Christensen
18 Guitar Case ............................................. Jessica McNally
24 Eight Poems Written in Jest ...................... David Bodarky
29 Association ............................................. Dustin Braden
30 Flow My Tears, the Computer Said ............. Isaac Hill
32 Night and Morning ..................................... Michelle Vo
33 Drown Monolith ........................................ Patrick Allen
34 Lakeside Violence ...................................... Andrew Sullivan
37 leftmost corner of apartment 109 ............... Evan Chen
38 It was too quiet ....................................... Mike Good
39 Untitled? ................................................. Dean Matthews
41 Photos .................................................... Melissa Difatta
                      Kelsie Hartpence
                      Moira Quigley
50 Megan McCafferty Interview ..................... Sarah Reagle
58 William Scott Interview ............................ Colin C. Post
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Senior Editors</td>
<td>Colin Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing Editor</td>
<td>Eileen Tong</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poetry Editors</td>
<td>Alicia Salvadeo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose Editors</td>
<td>Sarah Reagle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layout &amp; Design Editors</td>
<td>Sarah Ivins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Megan Roth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff Editors</td>
<td>KC Euler, Liz Gildea, Amy Hayes, Kayla Hunter, Alisha Lineswala, Ryan McGinnis, Chelsea Vecchiarelli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy Editor</td>
<td>Megan Roth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flip Book Design</td>
<td>Sarah Ivins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dear Readers,

Working on this spring issue has been an exceptional experience for a number of reasons. First, although our staff has been in a period of transition for the past two semesters – with a number of members graduating, others pursuing different extracurricular activities, and the internal transitions of staff members taking over open editorial positions – they have continued in a dedicated and hardworking service that makes this magazine possible. Second, we received an incredible amount of consistently great submissions and, although we had to turn down a number of quality pieces, I am confident that the pieces included represent a slice of the incredible undergraduate writing being done today across the country – in all its diversity of styles and voices. A great number of these pieces are written by Pitt students and, as an editor of this publication, it makes me proud to be able to showcase the strong writing community here at the university. Third, after three years at the magazine, I am leaving Collision. I could not have asked for a better last semester: the submissions have been some of the best I’ve seen and the staff have been an absolute joy to work with – I am proud to leave the magazine in their hands.

In conclusion, I want to personally thank everyone that has made this past semester possible – the incredibly gifted writers who have contributed their work, the devoted staff who have made the effort to put the magazine together, and the readers who are able to appreciate all that we’ve done. I hope this issue absorbs and entertains you. It’s been real.

Graciously,

Colin Post
Acknowledgments

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God of Motors

Christina Beasley
Sarah Lawrence College
In the fashion of chandeliers, his feet, infected, dangled from the bathtub. His head, a cradle, rocked against the tile. A king never dies, just sleeps. After dancing unabashedly at the drunken dandelion ball, sweat pamphlets distributed to each innocent bystander, his midnight arousal brought nothing but a host of shot kittens. She took him home.

The romantic efforts of a prior playboy were compressed into tiny, fiscal securities. He promised her a new door hinge, a new genius for her smashed and grimy constructions. This rapt poison served in the enamel of his baby teeth; cannibalism allowed him bedsides worldwide—porches for nothing, impersonal monsters in gorgeous machines. She envisioned the wealth of others siphoned into his pores like an extravagant facial wash. She sat him down.

He told her that spouses stain. That grocery lists become inventories for sniper thoughts, scandalous calculations, and tonight, she could bear this realization with him. He could pinch the monogamy leeches out. On this couch, against that wardrobe, over the busted terrarium. Let him count the ways. Let him count the vulnerabilities eased out and left on the floor; shorn lily petal forfeiture and rumpled lingerie.
He offered her a shot of unbridled charisma and a complimentary back massage. He danced around the foyer much like a plastic bag in the wind would, if it were capable of being simultaneously replete with liquid. Spattering and slopping from one stable surface to another, he insisted on a playlist of Barry White, Frank Sinatra, and his own warbling serenades.

For fifteen minutes, the only movement was the smacking of his love handles and the gradual misalignment of his bowtie. Little movement came from her; a quiet drumming of fingers, the wandering of preoccupied eyes. She waited. She did not bite her lower lip seductively, and she did not take off her dress. The clock on the table meandered from its comfortable position at two-thirteen toward elsewhere; ambling without objective. The cat was nowhere to be found, and neither were the neighbors. Few evenings pause with such precision and concentration to observe the gyrations of a desperately intoxicated businessman. His twisting and shouting had only improved with liquor; but she was unimpressed with his frantic attempts to amaze, awe, or astonish. She knew everything already—from his smile to the crack of his knees.
Eyelashes tangled, he lost steam. He slid along a table; a slumping stack of heat. An engine sputter of snoring. Elbows as wings collapsing and bending, there was little left of him. A nose pressed against the glass like a zoo animal trying anxiously to escape, with knees bent awkwardly, like something foreign or exotic. His breathing audibly slowed.

She wanted to touch his shoulder, because she was lonesome, too. She wanted to kiss it, but not because she liked it. She thought that people kissed one another because their mouths were the dirtiest parts of their bodies. They wanted other people to have the same infections as themselves. Others could fall into them, wake up, and bear fantastically similar burdens.

Too many people were bad; this was the truth. The playlist faded out.

The trip to the bathtub was arduous. The hallway felt tighter with him lumbering against her arm. Pauses were brief and only so that she could look at his eyelids; they fluttered quietly like the wings
of small insects and his nose pulsed in and out like a tide. She was undeterred. She woke him just enough for the waterlogged dissent to sting.

Suit jacket manta rays nibbled at steel cufflinks. His belt slithered about at the rippling surface like a coal eel. The Armani shirt was, in all likelihood, destroyed. The water temperature was just warm enough for the bathroom mirror to begin to fog, and it vaguely showed the back of her neck, covered in blonde curls. The soap bubbles reeked of lavender, and the loofah bobbed up and down like a buoy.

There were reasons. She was curious and she was infatuated with her concept. She needed to clean him, because she needed to know that men like him could be clean. She never knew what to do with them afterward, but one always figures out something. He did not know her last name. He did not notice her address, but she had his available on the floor, next to her left thigh. A wallet functions as a remarkably detailed brand. Drastic alterations to its contents are permanent body modifications.
The tile was a pretty sky blue and her bathtub was the type with intricate metal claws. The lighting was abrasively bright, as bathroom lighting tends to be. There was no window, because the rationale for having a window in one's bathroom was completely beyond her. She lived immediately adjacent to an apartment building that was both obtrusive and predominately concrete.

The shoes always came off when the feet went in, because she presumed that they were expensive. The socks came off if the feet felt awkward and sad with only socks on, and often, they did. Eyes blinking and inquisitive, palms trembling slightly, the brown loafers were handled with inordinate care. The socks were gray, but one had yellow lining, and one did not. This was strange, but she experienced an unanticipated bout of affection—if only everyone had an attentive partner to make sure that they wore matching socks. She sighed. She did not wear socks.

It was only then that she saw the grimace of his toenails; the cracks. The expense of exits. The quiet suffering of his heels and Achilles; rather bruised ankles. These feet a reef of aching, mobile calamities. Of running, throbbing veins. Her fingers grazed them
softly. It was so remarkable to her; the physical manifestations of these things. The way in which neglect takes root and coils about and creeps into the heart as a hushed and isolated disease.

She could only bring herself to touch the reasons why he never stayed. Why he never took off his shoes and stayed.
Like Experiencing Déjà Vu for a Metaphor You Can’t Quite Articulate

Dean Matthews
University of Pittsburgh
She twitches in her sleep waking him
throwing him back to her bedroom.
He dilates adjusts
focuses 403 AM.
The speakers still coo soft guitar
they often do until her fourth alarm sounds.
The Sahara on his tongue the monsoon under his skull
why cannot they quench another?
Reach for the blue bed cup always reliable here
among these posters and paintings and shadows of a peculiar past.
This is the same cup he will see later after a year’s time
and he will close his eyes.
But for now they are open
and scanning the ceiling swatches for meaning.
Her soft breathing refuses to match the music’s tempo
this is irritating.
He flips buries his head
in the pillow.
For now this scent doesn’t throw him anywhere.
For now it’s just air he breathes.
Déjà Vu

He watches patterns spiral outward
from some indeterminate space beyond his eyelids
soft dark colors       hard sharp shapes
   a human kaleidoscope
A placid mumble and he peeks over his fabric mask
   still out.
There are other beauties
   that do not sleep.
Forest green triangles beat in and out
   with his heart       maroon circles corkscrew
outward and implode back in
   with his breathing
he hears the feedback of his own blood
   humming in his head    focuses on the darkness that is skin
black squares outlined in mellow cream
   a whole sheet of them
float by and ripple as bright purple orbs
   are swallowed
This is the Universe
   he decides.
Aviaries

Caitlyn Christensen
University of Pittsburgh
Aviaries ~ Caitlyn Christensen

Tenochtitlán —
June, 1521.

Feathered serpent, trimmed beard,
*malinche*ist*ā* woman in the ear.

I tell you:
Beyond the orchards there are
Fragrant cedar groves,

In the palace
Birds by the thousands,

Housed and well-tended.

I tell you:
Egret, thrush and wren,
Great blue heron.

Accipiter, flycatcher, trogon, green jay
Blue-throated hummingbird
Summer tanager
Chattering parrot, oh me.

Feathered serpent, trimmed beard, *malinchista* woman in the ear
I tell you: light them afire —
Bird
  by
(splendid)
Bird.

The stench of meat and hollow bone.

Chattering parrot, oh Me

on the winged smoke rising
rising
rising
rising
rising.

Aviaries
Honorable Mention

Guitar Case

Jessica McNally
University of Pittsburgh
My father and the neighbor sit around a backyard bonfire. Boot laces loose, legs propped up on the stone fire ring. Both are still wearing their work pants. There's a chalk dust handprint above my father’s knee; delicate, ghostly. Residue from the day’s lesson on Tutankhamen.

The men talk about their fears, their discomforts. But not directly, never directly.

*Can’t see Orion’s belt tonight; so much damn fog.*
*Wood's too wet; fire's too small.*

The neighbor points to a grasshopper shrieking in the flames, one of its legs jammed between two logs.

They take long, slow swigs. Take long, slow drags.

One spits, violently, onto the dirt. One gets up to piss behind an oak tree.

And then the neighbor is gone. Puttering off on his tractor down the steep gravel road.
Leaving my father to sit, to swallow stars and stray ashes with his warm beer.

Blueberry pancakes stick to my paper plate. I spear one with my fork, waving it so it flops up and down, imagining it’s a manta ray.

We ran out of white flour so he had to use wheat. He grumbles about how they don’t taste the same, how they aren’t as fluffy as usual. He grabs a knife and smothers them with butter, tries to drown them in dark pools of syrup.

And when he dumps his stack in the trash, empties the untouched batter down the drain, suddenly the day is ruined.

On the porch, next to the wicker rockers, is an open guitar case. One of the brass hinges is falling off, from years of fastening and
Guitar Case

unfastening. The lining is pale blue and made to look like velvet. My kid brother sometimes climbs inside, pretends he’s lying in a coffin.

There aren’t any stickers on my father’s case, showcasing the places he’s been, the venues he’s played. Like the cases of so many of his friends. He’s never cared for collecting souvenirs, doesn’t showcase his memories with post cards or key chains or stickers. Instead he hoards his memories to himself, selfishly.

Occasionally, he’ll let one slip. Sometimes over mashed potatoes, sometimes during a commercial break. But the best time to catch him is when he opens up his case, pulls out his Taylor by its long neck. And he can’t stop those memories from leaking, from pouring. Through his strings, his fingers, his songs.

--

There’s blood on the collar of my white shirt. I run a finger down the side of my face, across my chin, trying to locate a wound. Tiny shards of windshield are scattered over the lap of my skirt, sprinkled over my stockings and shoes. The warbled voice of Don McClean creeps from the mangled tape deck.
Guitar Case

I push the airbag aside and search for my phone.

* Dad, I hit a tree. *

He shows up with his face slightly wet, around the base of the ears. There's a smear of shaving cream on his cheek. He's wearing my slip-on sandals, three or four sizes too small for his feet.

Our embrace is foreign. It's not soft or cautious, but forceful. There's more heat, more pressure. And for a moment we ignore the broken glass, distorted metal; the smell of smoldering plastic behind us.
Additional Works
Plane-tree leaves shaking, the summer departs,
Waiting for the fields’ last sheaf gathered:
In the evening my husband presents me
With ginger-grass, my apron full of saffron.

I tied two brilliant white pearls
To my dark silk blouse;
The winking stars
Make me coy.

His carriage moves:
In spite, the moonlight
Catches my box
Of powder, comb, and rouge.
Some marsh wrens scurry north
While some yellow robins flutter south:

Ha! I bend my head back down
To the convolvulus-shades

Coiling atop each other
In my pre-dawn summer window.

Cherry-blooms countless fall
Like snow scattered to the ground.
Felled the only cherry-tree in my garden:

I bind well my robe and stand stout
Before a forest’s pride.
Eight Poems Written in Jest

[5]

The bells ring in the temple; in storm weather,
Crickets keep the time.

In a fine mist, falling upon a heavy fog,
The musk and civet
Smoke and flame

In the censer’s creeping swings:
The bead curtains lower.

[6]

Standing by the bridge,
Waiting in secret for his mistress,
Dew drops on his sleeves
From the loose stones in the basin.

An ibis on the balcony
Half-spreads its wings
And the rain-tree’s shadow
Sifts and cracks:
He quickly dismounts the wall
And stamps the nearby earth
Before his heart
May love again.

Dew weighs, it sullies and stains my robe.
I wait for sleep to take me,
Breathing in faded leaf and flower.

Sleep dances beyond my fingertips,
But my heart is awake within:
I am moved when last night,
Lying on my bed of down and cloth,
I sigh and go out into the darkness:
To shut off the dripping of the fountain,

Damming up the spring pipe,
To hear the lullaby of
The crickets’ song never reposing.
It is nearly three years since you parted.  
Nobody carries that old zither anymore;  
The day is not ended  
And I strum idly the strings:  
Once in the house, and later  
Twice in the garden.

None but the severest high-pitch alone  
Can disperse the early morning cloud,  
Which I hold folded  
In the hollow of my hand,  
The pitch that separates  
Man and woman.
I eat watermelon and think
how in the south,
its nature
seems to be a product
and compliment
to the swarthy humid heat
and sun
of its origin.

I think of country girls,
the feeling of wet grass on feet
and wet sheets on knees.

I see the tired mountains
blossoming,
for one more year

and Midwestern fields
spurning the retreating sun,
whose rays languish
and fall
as the day,
and the passions
which lit it.
Flow My Tears, the Computer Said  ~ Isaac Hill

My laptop has a virus, I think it's AIG. I'm breathing swine flu to the policeman with bacon breath.

The dog is chasing his self, but keeps on running into the glass. & the thoughts pop up like pop ups, taking my time like porn

like an Ouroboros of similes, trying to describe the word like a miniature world, 'cause size is relative & space

is money, an infected compass, always pointing
Do you want to see a pencil disappear? Shove it into your left brain until it's the same
as everything else. "At first the dog chasing its tail is cute," said a man who wanted to know himself. I was told that to know myself I had to look at what I am looking out of, so I pulled out my eyes & shoved them in backwards. After that didn't work, I threaded them with beads and started praying for a refund.
You took me to your room, and threw out the rules we used when the sun was up. To the beat of our hums, we moved in harmony as the empty room wrote a new kind of blues. We grew too wild to be cooped in clothing. You threw my shirt and your woolen socks to the floor, sowing a garden of bright hued plaid and cotton paisley. I felt your heat as we raced to make our two bodies new. Blue plumes of cool air floated like balloons in through your window, soothing our hot skin. We flew to the moon, dueling the white stars.

Our morning truce was a tube of toothpaste.
LAPSED EULOGY the language mimics the subject of the breathless accompaniment to din to draw to dwell ethereal & thereafter return pulse to bared pieces of sob & lack when lack was most known & spoke of during intersections of the absent & as we were pulsing around unaware that a piece of our figurative is now dead & gone & left to lie behind the struggle of remembrance & as the sentient disappoint the sentient & the walls stare back at us without response repose or a pulsing sense of reconfiguration as reality remains a fixed discrimination of creased rock in pieces behind you there behind your lift against it it has a skin like yours I swear it appears as a fineness as if the kindling were a whisper of misstep echo set to drift simply towards the other shore so fragile
I’ve been told to stand in rhythm. I can hear it coming from a military man. Or a nun. One cannot stand in rhythm. Rhythm is mobile. So I can sit alone in a ditch with my shirt drinking in warm earth (were it liquid, I think whiskey, cheap whiskey)

by the fragrant puddle where once there was a lake

and know real rhythm when it walks by. I notice first the held hands, if only because her fingers scrape the earth under my nose. She’s a former friend. Friend’s former lover kind of former friend. Her girlfriend told police he hit her. She didn’t know what the police were talking about. Then oh, yeah, I forgot. It was awful.

I notice every tendon in my body when I close my eyes like this, but I can’t name them to save my life. I can type, but I certainly can’t read. I should sleep, but can’t. I want to hold insomnia in my arms and tell it everything will be okay.

In the vision it’s summer—or at least late spring. I say vision because dreams are fleeting, pilfered by wakefulness. Twice a week
I remind myself to buy a journal and pen to slip under my pillow. I’ll do it one of these days, then send it to my parents when it’s full, just because I know they’ll keep it safer than I possibly could.

Outlines of shouts are drawn by ducks on the water’s surface just as they head toward me. He’s taller than my friend and I’ve never seen him before. I want to tell him *hey buddy you know she likes fucking other guys right?* Maybe it makes me malicious, but I’m damn sure right. How else would she find J.?

Whenever I get tired, when fatigue leeches pleasure from my day (or usually evening, I suppose) I’ll call *my* love. She can tell me not to be too frightened, but that a little fear looks good on me. Counsel looks good on her. There’s love to be found in studio apartments.

*She will cry. When she tries to ruin you, she will cry.*

They both drank, sure, but unusually and without grace. Slink off away from me to stab at each other in the dark.

Intimacy, maybe, like corrugated cardboard/midday and cumulus clouds.
Lakeside Violence

I see this lake as a tidal estuary, imagining briny seawater soaking through my wool socks (clearly a ridiculous summertime choice) and reminding me that I’m not nearly as smart as I give myself credit for. Give me a few minutes and I’ll swim, glacial clusters crystallizing on my elbows and fearing marine life, I’ll pull myself out, locking my arms and dragging my legs through mud and reeds.

This year is crucial, I’m sure of it. There’s something emanating from my body telling me so—clavicle, or coronary, or tear duct, or tibia.

There was horror. She can’t throw a casual glance, even at the top of my head. I swear I’m not a violent person, not even verbally. Isn’t that the most destructive kind of violence? I’ve got a scar under my left eyebrow and a loathing for people that tell me so.
some makeshift plaster
falls into the hair that
is not mine.
my face in the mirror cracks
in the poem. later i will sit
on the loveseat and stare at
the television
unplugged as my eyelashes
loose liquid crystal,
my fingernails
tinging with
bits projected in the key of
chrome. my lips part to crease
the wooden accents these moldings
overcoated,
while outside the bells ring
glass tulips
It was too quiet. ~ Mike Good

My mother once told me my father had trouble sleeping after he moved out of the city—onto Donnelly Drive that is—it was too quiet is what he said. Now I live in a house not far from where he lived, and it is not quiet. Crickets in the grass—birds calling—the passing of cars—the passing of planes—the harmonica notes of the moving train. That siren ringing. My head inches from the window. I dream in halfsleep, that I might tell him I have trouble waking.
That drunk is putting out birdseed again.
Photos
Literary Interviews
Megan McCafferty is the author of the Jessica Darling novels, which include *Sloppy Firsts*, *Second Helpings*, *Charmed Thirds*, *Fourth Comings* and *Perfect Fifths*. She also edited a collection of stories entitled *Sixteen*. Megan is currently working on a new novel called *Bumped*. This interview was taken before a lecture at the University of Pittsburgh on March 18, 2010.

**Sarah Reagle**: Narwhal or unicorn?

**Megan McCafferty**: Narwhal.

**SR**: What’s your favorite animal?

**MM**: Narwhal! No. I like the platypus.

**SR**: Why?

**MM**: Because it’s just so bizarre. It shouldn’t exist, but it does. And my son is fascinated with the platypus.

**SR**: What inspired you to write for a living?

**MM**: I never wanted to do anything else. And I would be writing even if I weren’t making a living doing it. I would just be another blogger putting stuff out there, hoping for comments, you know?
Basically I started making up stories from the time I started to talk. And then I started writing them down as soon as I learned how to form my letters and make words. And so telling stories is just always something that I’ve done. I’m very, very fortunate to be able to make a living doing what I would do for free.

**SR:** For the Jessica Darling series, did you develop Jessica as a character first or the plot?

**MM:** I think the plot is driven by character. My books are definitely character-driven books, to the point where I could plop them down in any scenario and see how it would play out, you know what I mean? I think the voice came first, and then actually plotting the book was the challenging part because I think a lot of my early fiction was kind of slices of life or just kind of funny scenes—not a story and not a narrative that would be sustained over 300 pages. And that was something that I had to learn how to do.

**SR:** In hindsight, would you change anything in the novels?

**MM:** No. Actually, yes. There is one thing I would change. I would change Paul Parlipiano’s name because it is very, very close to the last name of someone with whom I graduated high school. And it has become like, an albatross. And I’ve had to state many, many times
that the character was not inspired by him in any way. […] But as far as the books are, even the flaws in the books, they’re what I wrote at the time. I think all writers can go back and read their earlier work and go, “Oh, God…” But I think they are what I wrote and what I wanted.

**SR:** What’s your favorite word or phrase that you’ve used in your novels?

**MM:** I like the words that I’ve made up, like “interwencheon” and “jackassinine.”

**SR:** Crustache.

**MM:** Crustache. I didn’t make that one up though. But you know, “assplosion.” I like having fun by coining new words.

**SR:** How about your favorite word in general?

**MM:** I get that question a lot, and the answer that I say—because I do like the word—is “sublime.” I like the word, and I like the idea of it.

**SR:** Who is your all-time or current favorite author?

**MM:** Probably my all-time favorite author—only because of how profoundly influential she was on me as a kid—would be Judy Blume. Reading Judy Blume’s books when I was a kid made me want to tell stories that were read by girls all over the world. And she was from New
Jersey, and I had the Judy Blume diary. I would say she was my first idol, and I think because she was my first, she’s the most significant.

SR: What is the last good book you’ve read?
MM: I’m reading a book *In the Land of the Believers* [by Gina Welch] right now, which I find very interesting, about a non-believer, atheist woman who went and became part of Jerry Falwell’s church just to see what that kind of belief is all about. And I find that very interesting. And because I’m obsessed with all things relating to my novel—*Bumped*—that I’m writing right now, it’s very hard for me to read fiction for pleasure right now. The last book that kind of blew me away—I really enjoyed *Going Bovine* by Libba Bray. And that was such a departure and so out there and weird. If I’m going to read anything, it has to be totally different from anything that I’m reading right now. And that was just a really remarkable book.

SR: Do you have any non-writing related hobbies?
MM: Is exercising a hobby? I need to work out, and when I work out, I watch TV. That’s actually when I get to watch most of my TV. I work out and watch crappy, terrible TV while I’m at the gym. But I also like to go hiking and be outdoors. The thing is, I don’t have a lot of hobbies because I’ve made my two hobbies into my career—
writing and reading were my two hobbies. And now both of those things are my job. I often joke: I’m not a good hobbyist. I’ve given up on every hobby I’ve ever tried. I haven’t stuck with any of them except reading and writing.

**SR:** What is the great and/or most beneficial thing that you’ve done in college?  
**MM:** Transfer.  
**SR:** Where did you transfer to and from?  
**MM:** I started out at the University of Richmond, and I transferred to Columbia. And those colleges could not be more different from each other. And I would say that I don’t think I would’ve gotten as much out of Columbia had I been there all four years. So I think the experience of transferring was incredibly beneficial to me because it made me appreciate what I had once I got there. And also by that time, I knew what I wanted, and I made the most out of every class that I could take in the two years that I was there. I learned a lot about myself, and I learned about my perception of who I was and what I thought would make me happy versus the things that really do. And I don’t think I would’ve learned that had I not had the experience of transferring.
SR: What advice would you give to college students now?
MM: Try new things. Take classes in different areas. If something interests you, just try it. Because college is the time when you can do that. And you might find a passion that you didn’t even know you had. Once you get out of college, you’re never going to be around this many people your own age; you’re never going to have the same opportunities that you do now. So take advantage of it.

SR: Do you think your next novel, Bumped, will be more suited to both genders?
MM: Honestly, I would love to say yes, but I don’t think so. I think it will appeal more to girls than to boys. Basically, the story is set about 25 years in the future, and it asks what would happen if there was a virus that rendered most of the world infertile at the age of 18. So teenagers are responsible for repopulating the planet.
SR: Sounds like a nightmare.
MM: Right? But it’s comedy. It’s like The Handmaid’s Tale meets Heathers. And it’s about the girls getting pregnant, and the choice is more about their choices and the way the boys are actually marginalized. Which is something that I think that if I was going to write about, then it would be a separate book. I think it would be interesting to get more of a perspective from boys who maybe aren’t
as valued in society as girls are and also as the more virile boys are. And it is something that I could write about in a different book that would appeal to boys. And at one point, I thought part of this book was going to be about that, until I realized that I had way too much going on already. And it would just be focusing on the two female characters that I’m focusing on. So I think it might be something that I could explore elsewhere. But I hope that guys will read it. I get e-mails from guys who say that my books aren’t as girly as they thought they were going to be. But I think that trying to butch it up just to try to get a male audience is silly. For me, the story comes first. And if I happen to write a story that has a wide appeal across genders, then that’s great. But I can’t tailor the narrative just for that.

SR: I was going to ask if you wanted to say anything more about Bumped?

MM: This is a book that I started thinking about when I was writing Perfect Fifths. I’ve been researching and reading and wrapping my head around this book for almost two years, even though the actual writing has only been since the Fall. It made leaving Jessica Darling a lot easier, knowing that I had this other thing. It’s a real challenge. I’m taking risks while I’m writing it.

SR: Would you say M.T. Anderson is an influence?
**MM:** When I read *Feed*, I was not influenced but inspired. I did re-read *Feed* as I was thinking about this book. What I really love about his book is that I could see that. I could see every scenario in that book. The roots are already here. I think the best dystopian novels are the ones that are not such a leap. I made sure that everything in *Bumped* has roots—no matter how absurd it might sound on the surface, oh, paying two 16-year-olds to have sex, to make a baby that you’re going to sell to an affluent couple who can’t have one. But the roots of that exchange are already here. Whether it’s in different countries or different ages, all of it has its roots in reality. But making it believable is the challenge. And also making it fun to read. I don’t want it to be a book that’s a chore to read.
Just before spring break, I sat down with Professor William Scott and asked him about the current state of literary scholarship, the problems of representation of power in working class literature, and the importance of sit down strikes in labor history. Professor Scott received his PhD in comparative literature from Johns Hopkins University and now teaches a number of English Literature classes here at the University of Pittsburgh, including Sexuality and Representation and Working Class Literature.

Colin Post: How do you see the field of literary criticism changing? William Scott: Everyone who teaches literature is exposed to this crisis – which is the crisis newspapers are facing: the decline of print culture and the rise of new, digital media. Pitt’s English department is an interesting English department because you have the whole spectrum represented, including people in Film Studies who only work on new media stuff. There are people who are writing books about YouTube and on the other extreme you have people who are writing books about Chaucer.

That’s pretty exciting, but overall the way I think things are going to be changing in the next fifteen or twenty years is that the boundaries are going to be redefined. Some of these scholars who are working more with new media and these other kinds of texts
might establish their own identity and set up their own type of discipline that’s no longer part of English in the traditional sense. When I’m feeling more pessimistic about it, I think that what I’m doing will be lumped together with Classics programs. To some degree, opening a book or reading a poem is not that different from studying Latin or Greek or classic literature.

**CP:** What are some of your current research projects?

**WS:** I’m finishing a book right now. I’m literally buried in it as I’m trying to finish it in the next few weeks. That book is a project that I’ve been working on more or less for the past ten or twelve years. That’s about working class writers – novelists in particular – and problems about representation and power - different ways that workers are represented by writers and ways that they represent themselves through unions. Questions of representation are related to questions about the power they have. I’ll be really happy to have that book done so I won’t have to be so consumed by it.

My next project is that I’ve got a whole lot of essays that I’ve published in journals or given as talks on a variety of African American writers. I’d like to edit some of those and put those into a book. I’m not sure yet what common thread they would all have – maybe modernism or figures of musicality.
*Colin C. Post*

**CP:** What work has gone into the production of this book?

**WS:** It grows out of the dissertation research that I did. A lot of the preliminary research and the basic framework of the book have their origins in work I did as a graduate student. Since I’ve gotten my degree, I’ve had time to rethink how to turn it into an actual book. I spent a few years deciding how to weed things out of it while keeping the same basic theoretical article.

**CP:** What is the basic argument of the book?

**WS:** The basic argument is that industrial workers in the late 19th and early 20th century discovered that they had a new kind of power that was connected to the workplace itself and that they didn’t need to rely exclusively on unions or political parties to help them out. Workers realized they could do things like sit down strikes – things they could do on the job, in the actual workplace, to make sure their demands were met. That was a change from one sort of power – from parties and unions – to a different type of power - structural or environmental power that comes from the actual place they’re working in. That’s something that historians or literary scholars don’t recognize very clearly. So I’m trying to draw attention to that shift and say that it actually had consequences for how writers represented workers. Industrial workers, in novels, started to look
different than workers had 30 or 40 years prior. I’m trying to connect the study of working class literature to the actual changes that were going on in this country in ways that have been neglected.

Generally, what scholars of this kind of literature do is define the thing they’re writing about by the kind of union or party it’s identified with. A great example of this is the poetry anthology *You Work Tomorrow*, which breaks up the poems by the unions the writers were affiliated with. What’s implied is that the most important aspect of these writers is what kind of union they belong to and how their writing reflected the ideology of the union or, say, the Communist Party. For example, a lot of people write about Upton Sinclair as a representative of the socialist party and look at his novels as representative of socialist ideology, but I’m not interested in that. Instead, I’m interested in how they reflect the new type of power that workers discovered they had at the beginning of the 20th century.

The reality is that most unions and political parties – no matter how radical they were – strongly disapproved of sit down strikes. This can be seen in the novel, *Industrial Valley*. At the end of the novel, the few Communists that are there say that the sit down was good to get the ball rolling, but now we’ve got to be careful and not use it anymore. They were basically saying, do it when we tell you to
do it. But the reality is that workers can actually do it on their own when they decide that they want their voices heard.

Another thing that’s different about my book is that I don’t talk about all different kinds of work. There are a lot of different kinds of worker narratives – like stories about miners – but you don’t see that same kind of power in these different kinds of work because these workers don’t work on assembly lines. Miners, for instance, don’t have that same kind of material power that industrial workers have via the assembly line. In order to hurt the company, they would actually have to leave the mine and maybe block the entrance, but this doesn’t afford the same kind of power as a sit down strike.

**CP**: So the assembly line affords this power because the workers are unified through their universal material connection to the assembly line. **WS**: In a lot of leftist political theory you hear a lot about class-consciousness – that workers aren’t united because they haven’t yet become class conscious. One of the things I talk about in my book is that the assembly line forces them to be organized in a way that class-consciousness doesn’t really account for.

If you look at the history of labor in this country, the high point in their power is right around World War II as a result of sit down strikes. Through these they were able to more or less paralyze
the companies. For example, the US Steel companies saw what happened in the tire and automobile industries as a result of sit down strikes and didn’t want those same things happening in their steel mills. So, a lot of them preemptively recognized the unions in order to avoid this.

**CP:** What would happen if workers tried to employ a sit down strike today?

**WS:** Well, a lot of these companies learned their lesson and started taking advantage of the processes of globalization. A lot of these big companies started to relocate their factories or breaking up their production system so they weren’t so vulnerable to those type of actions. If they were structured the way that they were – centralized in core plants – then they would be threatened if something halted production at those centralized plants. There was something like a sit down strike in a glass company in Chicago last year and Obama resolved it. The company was bought by a larger, multinational corporation and fired all of the workers and didn’t give them their last paychecks. In response, the workers locked themselves in until they were given their last checks. They weren’t even demanding their jobs back – they just wanted their last checks. I think Obama made some phone calls and was able to get the company to back down.
Back in ’97 or ’98 there was a big strike by UPS and that was like a sit down. They didn’t actually sit down because they don’t have an assembly line to sit down at, but they had a central computer in Chicago - which had all of the essential information - and when they decided to strike, the workers turned off this computer. So, this had the same effect as a sit down strike, because it paralyzed all of their operations. The company can’t actually fight back against that. The power of the UPS workers had to do with the actual equipment they worked with.

Those kinds of things are still happening, but not so much in the US anymore. Most big US companies have most of their production done in other countries. So it’s much harder for workers to inflict the kind of damage they used to be able to.

**CP:** Do you see these same relationships between power and representation in contemporary working class literature?

**WS:** What you see in contemporary US working class literature is a theme of mourning – mourning the loss of these jobs. A great example of this is the memoir *Packing House Daughter* by Cheri Register.

What happened, beginning in the 1950s when American companies began expanding overseas, is that very similar kinds of strikes and workers movements that happened in the US in the
1930s started to occur all over the world. At first, this happened in Western Europe – places like Germany and Italy. The US methods of production were exported following World War II to help rebuild Europe and then in the 1960s you started to see the same kinds of sit down strikes and workers movements. Once that happened, the companies wised up and realized that they had to move again– going to South America, Asia. In each one of these places, after a couple generations of being there, you saw the same kinds of strikes and movements. Right now, the places where these things are most likely to happen are in countries like China and Mexico.

There are no contemporary US writers doing this kind of writing, but there are writers in these other countries writing books like *Industrial Valley*.