**Plot Becomes Secondary: An Interview with 2019 Writer’s Studio Student Prize Winner Trevor Lisa**

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[*University of Chicago Writer’s Studio*](https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/academic-programs/liberal-arts/writers-studio/curriculum) *instructor and 2019 Writer’s Studio Student Prize judge* ***Megan Stielstra*** *interviews first-place winner* ***Trevor Lisa*** *about his award-winning story, artistic influences, and the value of writing community.*

It was a privilege to serve as judge for the 2019 Writer’s Studio Student Prize, yet another reminder of the exceptional literary talent in this city. There were twenty submissions across genre and difference; some were laugh-aloud funny (thank you, I needed that), others quietly devastating (I needed that, too), and all left me feeling challenged and inspired and connected to something greater than myself. I read about a high school girl in 1967 being asked to give up her top-rank status to the boy coming in second, a man in post-accident physical therapy being electrocuted by his high-tech doctor-prescribed massage doll, a wife first learning of her husband’s gender fluidity from an offshoot comment by a psychic, and so many other incredible stories.

Here’s a secret: judging stresses me out. *How do you choose!?*

During the days that I read those submissions and the weeks that followed, I found there was one that I couldn’t stop thinking about—#16, titled “Shards.” I deeply appreciated its structural innovation, how form served subject: the memories of the narrator's mother's drinking over the course of a lifetime—and its effect on their family—were not linear but shards, fragments. The questions asked in the piece were so subtle and at the same time, gut-wrenching: is it the narrator's responsibility to save his mother? To keep the family together? The guilt and confusion was visceral. It hurt to read. But there was also such deep love. This emotional complexity is, for me, the most important thing in writing and reading trauma—pain *and* love, fear *and* joy. The writer, I would later learn, was Trevor Lisa, author of the chapbook *Make the Pure Products of America Go Crazy Again* and current MFA candidate in fiction writing at Columbia College Chicago. He was kind enough to chat with me about the start-to-finish development of his winning essay, as well as the self as subject, the importance of a writing community, and how “plot becomes secondary when you’d rather not remember.” He also taught me my new favorite word**—***hermeneuts*, or beings who define their existence in narrative.

**Megan Stielstra: How did “Shards” begin for you?**

Trevor Lisa: I think one great journaling session can lead to months of production.

This essay started in a classroom journal exercise at the Writer’s Studio. I don’t remember the exact name of the exercise, but Alexis Pride, the instructor of the course (“Creative Journaling for Writers”) had asked us to consider “something I remember,” “something I forget,” “something I wish I didn’t remember,” etc. and to generate a few lines for each in a notebook. I stuck with the first question and disregarded the other ones altogether, though, really, I was writing about things I didn’t want to remember. I wrote about a traumatic period in my teenage years. My mother had an awful drinking problem, and I wrote about different episodes that involved her drinking, her violence. I hadn’t really made much of an effort to write about this before, but I’ve come to understand this period of my life as having a major effect on the way I think of myself. It brought me to crave independence in a way I don’t think I would have otherwise.

I kept this going in a notebook. I work best in longhand—my typical writing process involves a few passes at something in a notebook or on legal paper—the first almost a sketch, and then filling in the missing pieces with progressive passes, writing the text out each time in its entirety. I then type those pages when I get to a point when they seem serviceable. The result is that I end up knowing my words very well. "Shards" was written in such a way. I tried to zero-in more on the content in broad, impressionistic terms.

**MS: I read all of the twenty pieces sent to me without knowing their genre. There were short stories, essays, chapter movements, scripts (all wonderful!). It wasn't until you and I spoke and you used the word "essay" that I knew the piece came from lived experience. Can you speak to how genre influences your work? Do you write fiction, as well? How does "Shards" fit into the bigger story of your writing?**

TL: I have a difficult time treating myself as a subject. I mostly write fiction. Generally, whether in writing or elsewhere, I’m reticent about sharing experiences from my own life. It’s very rare that I write personal essays like "Shards," but I think the form allowed me to lean into my desire to convey a fractured narrative. I didn’t question a reader’s ability to assemble these disparate vignettes into a cohesive story because that was how I understood them; in my memory they truly are dissociated fragments.

I don’t know how "Shards" fits into my writing, but I can honestly say that I’m proud of it. The piece was a successful experiment. I haven’t tried to write in this confessional mode since working on the piece, but maybe I’ll try again if another memory strikes me as being worth the pursuit.

I prefer writing fiction. Fiction allows me to pull from my life freely, with gratuitous plunges into feelings without having to be specific about the memory they come from.

**MS: You tell us right away, in the opening sentences, that you're questioning your own memory: "What I have in my possession are shards of episodes; facts and fragments that I've duct taped together.” Can you talk about the structural choices in this piece? Was that the original intention, or did you figure it out in the writing process?**

TL: This was something I had in mind at the outset of writing the piece. I wanted to replicate the way that memories of trauma live in the mind as disparate chunks, as details without a plot. Emotional truth was very important in composing the piece, and I wanted to be true to the way that I think about this particular period of my life. When I think into it, they truly are “fragments.” I see the memories of my trauma in terms of the colors, the quality of the light, less so than the actual things that happened. The idea of plot becomes secondary when you’d rather not remember what happened.

I was averse to the idea of having this story come from an unreliable narrator, though. To me, this narrator needed to be beyond reliable; there needed to be a sense of his desperation, his need to relay these stories that he’s been tortured with as best as he could.

There’s this bit in the final “episode” where he’s describing an encounter my sister had with my mother, and the narrator repeats the phrase “I wasn’t there” every couple of sentences. I wanted this to be a kind of call back to that opening line, asking the reader to consider whether his being there or not had anything to do with the legitimacy of what he was telling. I wanted to weigh the frailty of memory with the robustness of his desire to have some kind of command over it.

**MS: The language is stunning; poetic and precise. Tell us what you read, what you listen to. What do you let into your head?**

TL: I try to be very careful in my writing. I see sentences as fragile things that need a lot of attention. My writing tends to meditate more than assert, so potentiality is important to me on a sentence-by-sentence level—I like to find natural places for repetition, and ways to give sentences additional terminating clauses beyond the end of the thought as a means of exploration. I read my work aloud as I’m writing, too.

Needless to say, I’m a bit obsessive; I have a lot of intensity and very few interests. Most of the music I listen to (especially while I write) is repetitive and obsessive itself—I listen to a lot of Pink Floyd; they all met in architecture school, and their music has this quality of having been built through repetition. Rarely does a day go by when I don’t listen to a Floyd album in its entirety (I’m stuck on “Meddle” right now). It’s a short hop from Floyd to Radiohead. I’ve also been on a Philip Glass kick lately, too; he’s someone who, like the Floyd, builds his music with anxious patterns, themes that repeat *ad infinitum* and become central lines to hang disparate flourishes from.

My favorite writers all tend to focus on sound in their language—Don DeLillo likes to play with assonance and rhymes, and I’ve read fairly deeply into his corpus. He comes from a lineage that includes James Joyce (another favorite of mine), so I think this makes sense. Toni Morrison writes sentences that haunt me in the acuity of their language, the strange details she holds on to.

I read a lot of philosophy, too. I think my favorite nonfiction writer is the political philosopher Hannah Arendt. Her work informs a lot of how I think about the world (maybe her notion about the necessity of creating rigid barriers between what is “private” and “public” answers what I meant in question #2). I spent most of my college years steeped in a Marxist tradition—Adorno, Benjamin, etc.—but I’ve been away from that for a bit. However, the remnants of that are visible in my interest in discussing consumer culture in my work.

I also really like Lorde. I don’t know how she fits into my aesthetic, but Lorde kicks ass.

**MS: I'm interested in how talking about our lives can help us understand our own lives, and I was moved by the discoveries you were making: "She hated peanuts. How hadn't I remembered?" Can you speak to how writing influences memory?**

TL: Martin Heidegger thought humans live as hermeneuts, as beings who define their existence in narrative. Writing, then, as a mode of inquiry, is a way to assemble the free-floating chunklettes of memory and thought in our mind into something intelligible. Most of the discoveries I make in writing have less to do with uncovering dormant memories than they do with forming connections between things. The connections are the biggest discoveries, I think.

**MS: "Shards" doesn't tie up with a shiny bow (neither does life!) but there's a definite sense of a complete movement, a full emotional experience. Tell us how you arrived at the ending.**

TL: I wanted the focus to return to the narrator. I wanted to give the reader more access to his thoughts. The piece is mostly a recollection of events, so the mother serves as the main character for most of the piece. Except the essay really isn’t about her, is it? I wanted to end with the narrator reflecting on his role in the chaos. There’s a sense of aftermath, too—the final scene lives in a kind of negative space, between the major “episodes” of the mother’s drinking.

I feel compelled to mention the ending’s content, so I hope you don’t mind my spoiling it. The piece ends with the family on vacation, with the narrator in a state of contemplation, looking out on a distant cluster of mangrove trees, imagining them gripping the silt to keep the soil together during a hurricane. This seemed like a convenient metaphor for how the speaker sees himself—he’s an older brother, a stationary thing in the lives of his siblings, and however battered by wind or water, his job is to keep their lives together. Having moved the setting to a vacation in Florida, I arrived at this metaphor almost accidentally, but it worked well with my intent of repositioning the narrator at the center of the stage.

**MS: This was written, at least in part, within the literary community at the University of Chicago Writer’s Studio. Can you talk about the influence of a class—of other writers and readers—on your work?**

I can honestly say I wouldn’t have written this essay without Alexis Pride’s class. It wasn’t a subject I was comfortable wrestling with, so I’m grateful that the class was there to push me into it.

More generally, though, I stubbed my toes on The Graham School. I have a corporate video writing job, and my boss at the time was pushing “professional development” as something we should all be pursuing. I found a couple of one-off workshops (they were “voice” classes), which my job paid for me to attend, and I enjoyed them so much that I took Alexis Pride’s four-week “journaling” class on my own. I had been toying with the idea of getting an MFA at the time, and I learned that Alexis was on faculty at Columbia College Chicago. I was really impressed with her as a teacher. I had already done my own research on the program, but taking the class was definitely one of the reasons I ended up applying to (and accepting a spot in) Columbia’s fiction program. Though being in an MFA program isn’t exactly “work” itself, it’s helped me put my writing in a more central position in my life.

But, aside from The Graham School (or writing classes in general), my relationships with other writers are very important to my identity as a writer. I don’t think there’s very much in our culture encouraging this kind of work, so I see myself—even in my most hermetic moments—belonging to a community.

I spent most of my formative years in athletics; in some ways, I look to the people in my writing circles in the same ways that an athlete would look to a teammate—for discipline. I do a lot of long-distance running, which—like writing—is a solitary pursuit, but that doesn’t necessarily mean it’s an isolated one. I ran a marathon this past summer with some friends from college. None of us live near each other anymore, but we did, in effect, train together. We continuously checked-in with each other throughout the training process, shared our progress. We leaned on each other.

This is how I think of my belonging to writing circles. Having other writers in my life holds me accountable. Whether that’s something like setting aside daily writing time, or something bigger, like feedback on a manuscript draft, having writers in my life keeps me grounded in my practice. I know I said earlier that I’m reticent about sharing my life with people, but I freely share drafts and excerpts with my writing friends. I sometimes also print stories out, booklet style, and saddle stitch them together and mail them to people I’m close to. I love sharing my work with people in my life. It’s fun.

**Trevor Lisa** is the author of the chapbook *Make the Pure Products of America Go Crazy Again*. His fiction, which has appeared in *Stillpoint Literary Magazine* and *Mandala Journal*, explores the intersection of fascism, college sports, and multilevel marketing organizations. Trevor studied creative writing at the University of Georgia and is currently an MFA candidate at Columbia College Chicago. If you’d like to connect with Trevor about his work, please email him.

**Megan Stielstra** is the author of three collections, most recently *The Wrong Way To Save Your Life* from Harper Perennial. Her work appears in the *Best American Essays, New York Times, Poets & Writers, The Believer, Longreads, Tin House,* and elsewhere. A longtime company member with 2nd Story[,](http://www.2ndstory.com/) she has told stories for National Public Radio, Museum of Contemporary Art, Goodman Theatre, and regularly with The Paper Machete live news magazine at The Green Mill. In Winter 2020, Megan will be teaching [Online Writing Group](https://grahamcourses.uchicago.edu/search/publicCourseSearchDetails.do?method=load&courseId=22451).

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