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River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative, Volume 11, Number 1,
Fall 2009, pp. 19-31 (Article)

Published by Ball State University

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvt.0.0058>

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Virginia Tech Shooting Leaves 33 Dead
The New York Times

April 16, 2007—Thirty-three people were killed today on the campus of Virginia Tech in what appears to be the deadliest shooting rampage in American history, according to federal law-enforcement officials. Many of the victims were students shot in a dorm and a classroom building. . . . The killings occurred in two separate attacks on the campus in Blacksburg, Va. The first at around 7:15 a.m., when two people were shot and killed at a dormitory. More than two and a half hours later, 31 others, including the gunman, were shot and killed across campus in a classroom building, where some of the doors had been chained. Victims were found in different locations around the building.

Lisa called him Seung back then, before all the news reports identified him as Cho.

“Seung, would you like to comment on this story?” she would ask, after the rest of us had discussed at length whatever short story we had read the night before for class, Advanced Fiction Writing, English 4704.

“Anything?” Lisa would tuck her straw-straight blonde hair behind her ears, recross her runner’s legs, and wait for something to shatter the silence

that kept hovering in the middle of our workshop circle. I usually spent those moments shuffling my papers, taking an inventory of what stories I had placed in my gray Virginia Tech folder and which ones I had pulled out for the remainder of class. A girl across from me would pick at her pencil eraser, carving it with her thumbnails. Others stared at the dusty tile floor in the center of our ring of desks or pulled their sleeves back to peer at their watches, tracing the second hand's path with their eyes. We tried to ignore what was happening, as if our teacher was just calling roll and had already called our names—a pesky administrative task that had to be done, and we had to be patient and sit through it each day.

After maybe five silent seconds, Seung would shake his head back and forth, such a slight gesture it could easily be missed. Then he would lower his face so that the bill of his maroon-and-orange Virginia Tech baseball cap was perpendicular to the top of his desk. Since he usually sat at about the two o'clock mark of our workshop circle, directly across from my spot at around eight or nine o'clock, I rarely saw more than an inch and a half, maybe two, of his pale, narrow chin and drooping, half-moon mouth. After another five seconds of fidgeting and staring, the rest of us would turn to our neighbors and finally to the teacher, hoping the tension would pass over us like a cloud, never imagining that in six months Seung would fire 174 bullets, killing twenty-seven students and five teachers before himself and injuring another twenty-six students in the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history.

"Ok." Soft and forgiving, Lisa's response offered us a bridge back to the discussions and banter we were used to in other classrooms. The moment had passed and we were on to something like "Good Country People" by Flannery O'Connor or maybe a draft of a story by one of us.

Effective beginnings, discussed in a book we read for class called *Fiction Writer's Workshop* by Josip Novakovich, hook the reader instead of punching him. They invite the reader into the story by introducing character, theme, and style, as well as a crisis. The reader feels invested in the story from the beginning. Except you, Seung, never let any of your family members, counselors, roommates, teachers, or classmates invest themselves. Without the news coverage of your death, all I knew was that you were detached, disconcerting, that boy who was barely even physically present. I had no idea that you were a part of my Bible as Literature class, where I was and where you were scheduled to be the morning you died. Now, I can picture where you sat each week,

about one o'clock to my seven o'clock. But if our teacher had never told me you were in our class, I would not remember your ghostly presence at all.

Your suitemates described you as a fragile guy, someone they were careful with because they didn't want to send you into some "shut-down, lock-out mode." They said you were a sullen loner, creepily quiet, someone who avoided eye contact and offered only one-word answers—if any. They stopped inviting you out to dinner or to parties when you pulled out a knife and stabbed at their friend's carpet.

One of your psychiatrists said that your severe social anxiety disorder was "painful to see," and your childhood art therapist remembers your depictions of tunnels and caves, which, although not alarming on their own, were indicators of suicidal and homicidal thoughts when coupled with your symptoms of depression. There were also the houses you modeled out of clay, "houses that had no windows or doors."

Your classmates said that you were what you wanted to be—the question mark you scrawled defiantly on the attendance sheet for your British Literature class. Your writings were "like something out of a nightmare," so much so that in the fall of 2005 our English department chair, Lucinda Roy, was forced to pull you from a class in which Professor Nikki Giovanni threatened to resign if you were not removed. Lucinda spent the rest of that semester working with you in a one-on-one poetry workshop.

During her twenty-two-year career, you were one of the most troubled students she ever came across. After the shootings, she appeared on the news, saying, "He was so distant and lonely, it was almost like talking to a hole, as though he wasn't really there most of the time." Back in the fall semester of 2005, during a meeting to discuss your behavior in Giovanni's class, a transcript was written by one of Lucinda's colleagues. It reads: "Lucinda asked if he would remove his sunglasses. It is a very distressing sight, since his face seems very naked and blank without them. It's a great relief to be able to read his face, though there isn't much there."

And your family, they seemed to know you least of all. Your sister said that you were someone she "grew up with and loved." She went on, acknowledging, "Now I feel like I didn't know this person." All along your mother urged you to speak, to make friends, to share anything. She grew so frustrated with you as a child that sometimes she shook you, as though maybe your unhappiness might spill out; maybe your words might emerge.

"We are humbled by this darkness. We feel hopeless, helpless, and lost,"

your sister confessed. “He has made the world weep.”

Lisa’s class had intimidated me at first. It was *advanced* fiction, labeled advanced because we were required to hand in three stories of at least fifteen pages throughout the course of the semester, sixteen weeks in the fall of 2006. My previous creative-writing teachers had allowed me to squirm by with just seven or eight pages of introduction—of triggering conflicts and birthing characters that I never intended on contextualizing. And *those* slap-dash jobs simply wouldn’t do in an advanced course. On the first day of class, tight-lipped and attempting to maintain a veneer of seriousness that would soon fade, Lisa handed out a list of the criteria she used to evaluate stories. Among the thirteen items listed, including *well-evoked settings*, *excellent prose rhythms*, and *clear and interesting themes*, number eleven terrified me most: *evidence of genius*.

A core group of us, eight of the original thirteen, did well under these pressures. We met each of our deadlines with fifteen pages of writing or more and turned in workshop critiques in letter format to our peers and to Lisa, each brimming with compliments and gentle suggestions for improvement.

Members of the “rebel group” usually turned in much shorter drafts, days after their deadlines had lapsed. They rarely wrote critiques for the rest of us and tended to skip class when their material wasn’t up for workshop. Occasionally they missed their own workshops as well, the ultimate creative writing taboo. Seung was the only exception to both groups, attending every class but never sharing his work or participating in our discussions.

Without most of the rebels, most of the time, we usually scooted extra desks out of the way to tighten our workshop circle. The classroom was big enough to hold about forty students and always seemed bare—the eight of us and Lisa, scrunched in the middle of four cinder-block walls and a maze of desks, with a chalk board and overhead projector we rarely used.

In class, we discussed how setting conveys a certain place at a certain time so that the place, the people, and the action are integrated. You could not have picked a more serene, undeserving setting to destroy. You killed the very people who were talented enough, brave enough, smart enough, and caring enough to actually help you. And you did it in my home. You were a trespasser in the soft, green hills of my town; the safe, stone walls of my school; the strong, unsuspecting patters of my heart. And you slipped out the back

door before I could claim what was mine.

In my notes on Novakovich's text, I marked that, in fiction, "whatever happens psychologically can be expressed in the environment." And it's true. Trees are no longer bare in Blacksburg. Instead, I see their trunks adorned with the strips of orange and maroon fabric that were tied around them in the days after. The post office is no longer a welcoming downtown fixture where I send care packages to my friends or premiums to the local radio station's loyal donors. Instead, it's another stop along your dark path, where you mailed your letters and pictures and videos mere minutes before chaining the doors of Norris Hall.

I started wondering how you got to the post office when I saw a picture of you pointing the barrel of your gun at me through my computer screen. Did you take Washington to Main? Or did you run behind my stadium, using the shade of my trees to avoid being seen? Did you cut through the parking lot of my apartment complex? We may have missed each other by only two or three minutes that morning.

And that radio station, WUVT 90.7 FM, where I served as general manager, is no longer my refuge from classes and papers and bad music. It's where I couldn't stand to be, with all of the reporters' nosy, insensitive questions; with the choked voices of my DJs and friends; without Kevin, who was in room 207 of Norris Hall, the German class where you murdered his teacher and four students and wounded Kevin and six more students.

After I was released from Bible as Literature class that day, I called everyone from the station and no one could find our chief engineer, Kevin. I called my friend Kim again and again, hoping to hear that Kevin's cell phone had run out of battery power or that our attempts to reach him had all been lost in the swarm of phone calls in Blacksburg. "I'm ok," she said. "But we can't get a hold of Kevin." "He still isn't picking up." "We just checked his schedule and he had class in Norris." "We're driving to the hospital in Radford." "We're driving to the hospital in Christiansburg." "They can't tell us if he's here." "I just called his mom; she's leaving Pittsburgh right now. I don't know what to tell her—we don't know where he is."

A group of probably twenty of us sat in the waiting room of the ICU at Montgomery Regional Hospital, waiting for Kevin to get out of surgery. We watched press conferences and CNN until a nurse rolled his bed by us, and despite how pale he was, how naked he appeared under his white cotton gown, the blood cleaned from his legs, stomach, chest, and hands, a bullet still

lodged inside of him, we knew he would recover. In that brief interaction, Kevin made us all laugh loudly, our nerves pouring out as we crowded around him. He asked what the grand total of our spring fundraiser had been—it was a weeklong pledge-a-thon that had ended at midnight on April 16, less than ten hours before you hurt Kevin. He would eventually request that donations to his recovery be made to WUVT. Some time later that night, his mom thanked us for being there for her son. She had driven several hours that day, not knowing whether Kevin was alive or dead.

You shot Kevin twice in his right leg, one bullet tearing an inchlong gash in his femoral artery. His doctor later said that Kevin knew he was bleeding to death, so he made a tourniquet out of electrical wire he found in his classroom, something he had learned as an Eagle Scout. At the station, during a long year plagued with transmitter malfunctions, we always joked that Kevin could fix anything—and he can.

Partway through the semester we read the story “Good Country People.” Flannery O’Connor caught me off-guard as always when the Bible-selling gentleman lured Olga to the top of that two-story barn. As he detached her artificial leg, before pulling out a flask of whiskey and a deck of dirty playing cards from a hollowed-out Bible, I hoped, as I had in the past, that he would put her leg back on and help her down the ladder—like the good country people he pretended to be.

Throughout our class, we read and wrote and talked about subjects like prostitution, drug sales, abortions, date-rape drugs, and violent car crashes. More specifically, I remember our stories containing the details of a baby accidentally thrown into an overhead fan and a double suicide involving a professor and student. Everyone, young and old, rich and poor, good and bad, needs a way to rid themselves of their own thoughts. To scream and curse and cry—to speak—and work through their anger. To escape from the Bible-selling gentleman within us all. To cleanse and begin anew.

Even with our cathartic discussions and writings for class, our disgust and surprise and interest at our own words and how they must have found their way onto the page, we still wondered how Olga would ever get down from that ledge, hoping she would eventually recover from such a shock. On the morning of April 17, 2007, I imagine that other people in Blacksburg awoke as I did, stuck up in that old barn, covered in a groggy haze that allowed me to fleetingly forget the shock of the day before—174 bullets fired; thirty-two

innocent people killed; twenty-six innocent people injured; the incomprehensible math of our tragedy.

And from Seung, nothing. No words.

Voice, according to my class notes, is a metaphor that's difficult to define. Persona voices "create the illusion of someone speaking to the reader, in the first person." You attempted to create your persona through death. You had twenty-three years to define who you were and, instead, you waited until the very end to rant about injustices trivial, if even real, in comparison to the injustice you caused. Your videos, dubbed "manifestos" by the media you sent them to, do not cover your dead body in a veil of credibility. They are not an excuse.

During the estimated ten to twelve minutes of shooting your 9mm Glock and .22 caliber Walther at point-blank range within rooms 204, 206, 207, and 211 of Norris Hall, you remained silent. "He never uttered a sound during his entire shooting spree—no invectives, no rationale, no comments, nothing," explained the Virginia Tech Review Panel's report released in August 2007. "Even during this extreme situation at the end of his life, he did not speak to anyone."

On April 19, 2007, a friend of mine, Paul, e-mailed me a list of what he called the "torturous ironies at Virginia Tech." He wrote that "after years of being endlessly offered an audience, a dialogue with his fellow students, his teachers, and counselors, he now wants to command an audience, demand a monologue." He added that "after years of being a self-described question mark, he now wants to provide answers." Paul ends this list, declaring, "the most painful irony of all is this: now that he is finally ready to speak, I can't hear him."

But sometimes, I think that I can. Its physicality—your garbled, monotone words recorded and preserved forever in videos displayed as newsworthy—I can struggle to set aside. The echoes of your voice, though—a terrifying continuation of spirit, of which I keep hoping I've seen the final instance—I cannot bear. In this sense, I hear your voice all the time. I heard your voice when Ryan Lambourn, a twenty-one-year-old man in Australia, created a video game called V-Tech Rampage that traces your route from West A.J. to my post office to Norris, allowing players to shoot bystanders who flail their arms and scream. "Shine" by Collective Soul, with the lyrics you wrote on the walls of your suite: "Teach me how to speak / Teach me how to share / Teach me

where to go,” is played for the course of the game.

I heard your voice on the radio when Neal Boortz, a nationally syndicated talk-radio host, asked why your victims couldn’t defend themselves against you, armed with a gun in each hand, rushing into classrooms averaging 24’ x 25’. “How far have we advanced in the wussification of America?” Boortz asked, before continuing, “It seems that standing in terror waiting for your turn to be executed was the right thing to do, and any questions as to why twenty-five students didn’t try to rush and overpower Cho Seung-Hui are just examples of right-wing maniacal bias. Surrender—comply—adjust.”

I heard your voice from Nathan Jones at Penn State University, who dressed up as one of your victims for Halloween. Jones explained why he dressed up in a Virginia Tech T-shirt, complete with fake bullet wounds and blood dripping down his chest. “It’s not that it was funny, it’s that we are notorious and infamous in State College, so we have to do things that push the envelope just for shock value.” He went on to defend his actions: “The thing is, everybody’s making a big stink about Virginia Tech. Virginia Tech was thirty-two deaths out of the twenty-six thousand that happen in America every day.” He added, “That’s the problem with college students. They all live in an ivory tower of privilege. They don’t understand, when it all boils down to it, it’s someone wearing a costume.”

I heard your voice from NBC News President Steve Capus, who aired your tapes mere hours after receiving them, letting the family members and friends of the deceased and injured stumble upon graphic pictures of you, holding your guns, the last image their loved one may have witnessed.

I continue to hear your voice with the barrage of daily headlines:

5 Hospitalized After 14-Year-Old Goes on Shooting Rampage at Cleveland High School (Fox News, October 11, 2007)

Police: Pennsylvania boy planned ‘Columbine’ event at high school (CNN, October 11, 2007)

High School Gunman in Finland Kills Self, Eight Others, Warns of Shooting on YouTube (Fox News, November 7, 2007)

Omaha Mall Massacre: Police Say 20-Year-Old Gunman Killed 8 People, Wounded 5 Others, Before Killing Himself (CBS News, December 6, 2007)

Terror at Northern Illinois University: Gunman was a former student armed with an arsenal of weapons (WQAD-TV, February 14, 2008)

“There doesn’t seem to be much enthusiasm in our class—about anything.” Lisa bobbed her head back and forth with each word as she tried to make some sense out of the situation. “Several people have just dropped off. I mean, they’re still registered for our class, but they just never come and haven’t turned anything in. It’s weird.”

“Well, yeah,” I paused, suddenly aware that what I chose to say could come across as a criticism of Lisa, the last thing I wanted to do to a teacher who inspired me to write. We stood in her office after our first conference that semester to talk about one of my workshop pieces. Her office was cozy, with chocolates and cups of warm tea. The walls were lined with overflowing bookshelves—stacks of poetry here and piles of fiction there—organized chaos. Her door had several posters taped to the front of it, including one to promote her award-winning book *Toy Guns*.

I would return to her office several times to talk about my class work but also to talk about graduate schools. At the start of the spring 2007 semester, after our class had ended, she wrote letters of recommendation for me and critiqued a few of the essays for my writing portfolio. She also loaned me a copy of a book her friend wrote. The book was filled with her notes to the writer, and I relished such a voyeuristic look at two friends communicating right there on the page.

During our meeting that day, Lisa drew a detailed map of my story with circles and arrows and lists of which characters were where and did what to whom and why. I watched her pencil brush the paper, quickly transcribing her thoughts into a visual representation of my words. Then she handed me her copy of my story. It was filled with her notes: plus signs for a strong line or clear idea and prompting questions to help me navigate through the murky themes and skeletal characters I was now determined to improve in following drafts.

“I guess I’ve noticed that only a certain group of us ever turn anything in

or talk in class,” I finally responded. “Like Marilyn,” I continued, hoping an example would help. “She’s a great writer but she never shows up or turns in her work.”

“I know. She *is* a great writer,” Lisa sighed. “And there are a bunch of students in our class just like her.”

“But then we have people like John,” I wanted to highlight the positive as well. “He always does his work and gives good feedback for us,” I explained. And he did. Although I disagreed with a lot of what he said, I knew that his opinion was worthwhile and that without his loud laugh and inexhaustible voice our classroom discussions would have fallen short of the hour and fifteen minutes we were required to fill. Our reverberations of thought would have slowed and softened even more than they already did, tired from traveling from one side of the workshop circle back to the other, eventually vanishing in the void around which our desks were arranged.

“Oh yes. I’ve taught him before. He’s great.”

Lisa paused, glancing out into the hall before asking, “What about Seung?” She was obviously concerned, looking anywhere for an answer that might explain his strange behavior. I didn’t know it then, but she had already alerted the associate dean of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences about him in early September, only a few weeks into our semester. The report of the Virginia Tech Review Panel, requested by Governor Tim Kaine, says that at that time, the associate dean found “no mention of mental health issues or police reports,” even though Lucinda Roy had already reported Seung’s writing to the associate dean and to a web of other university officials—the vice president for Student Affairs, the assistant provost, the Judicial Affairs director, counselors at the Cook Counseling Center, among others. All of Lucinda’s warnings to university officials were eventually ignored or discarded, with the reasoning that since his writing didn’t “contain a threat to anyone’s immediate safety,” Seung had the right to free speech.

“Um.”

“I mean, have you ever talked to him? Does he talk to anyone in our class?” she asked hopefully. In addition to alerting the dean, Lisa had encouraged Seung to get counseling with her that fall, which he declined.

“Um.” I had talked to just about everyone in that class for one reason or another. Betsy and I were both working on our writing portfolios to apply to graduate school. Terry was up on the indie-music scene in Blacksburg and listened to WUVI. I even saw John at a professor’s keg party I went to for

a research project that my friend was doing, something about watching cars drive by and counting how many people wore their seat belts.

But even when I think back to days when the class before ours let out late and we all had to camp out in the hallway, eating vending-machine snacks and sitting down against the walls, stretching our legs out on the floor and maybe finishing our reading, usually just talking about this and that, I can't hear his voice or see where he sat among us.

I think I finally told Lisa that I wasn't sure if Seung spoke English, or if he was embarrassed by the little English he could speak.

"Well what about the workshop critiques he's given to you?"

In my mind I turned the pages of the stack of critiques I had received so far that semester, never finding his. "I never got any from him."

"Really? He's been turning them in to me."

"I'm pretty sure. I could double-check—"

"No, I'm sure you're right," Lisa breathed in and out. "I've been teaching him outside of class each week because he doesn't ever say anything in class."

"Does he talk to you then?"

"Sometimes he'll go a half-hour without saying anything to me, just working in my office, even when I ask him questions."

"Oh."

You are not entitled to an ending. But more than I want to admit, your cheap, surprise farewell doesn't, won't end. At night, when I check the locks to my house at least twice, along with the back corners of my too-big walk-in closet, the bathtub behind that opaque curtain, and underneath the bed, you don't end. Around midnight, when my heater's clicks and drums start to murmur, my dog's irregular snores whisper, and my smoke detector's green light floats above me like a target, you don't end. Each week when I survey my graduate classrooms at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington for windows—big, small, *I could fit through that*, easy-to-open, first floor, second floor, *how many steps to get there?*—and exits—nearby doors, flights of stairs, long and bare hallways—and ducking places—desks, tables, cabinets, *where else?*—and barricades—bookshelves, file cabinets, chairs, me—you don't end. In early spring, when it's time for our annual lock-down drill at the elementary school where I work as a teacher assistant and I show my elementary students how to hide under their desks and tables, away from our window and door, within the cabinets under our classroom sink that they eagerly climb into, gig-

gling as though it's just a game of hide-and-seek, I know that you won't end yet.

And every day, when I wonder why you didn't come to our Bible as Literature class that morning with your guns ready; when I draw a map of our classroom, Pamplin 1001, in my head, circling the second seat from the door, mine, and counting the eleven steps you would have taken from the front entrance and the four steps you would have taken to my desk; when I catch shards of our class discussion you missed that morning—Abner, the commander of Saul's army—carrying our swords—violence begetting violence—history repeating itself; when I peer through those bottom few inches of our classroom window not covered by blinds to see a line of police officers sprinting by, ready to fire; when I turn on that television in Pamplin 1001, the one a small group of us stared at for two hours, hearing the local news anchors say “seven to eight casualties” and “Norris 204 and 205,” while teachers told us to stay calm and quiet, to move away from those windows and the door, to keep trying to reach our parents on cell phones; when I replay the phone conversations I had with my family and friends and even acquaintances while I waited for a teacher to tell us all that we could go home now, not realizing that only the worst news could have traveled that fast, that not everyone would get to go home; and when I see those unarmed boys from the Corps of Cadets bravely guarding the front entrance, not knowing that you were already dead—I'm not sure you will ever end.

Lisa e-mailed our whole class a day or so after the shootings, asking us to come by her office and check in with her so that she could see us and talk about anything we wanted. I stopped by a few hours after I got the e-mail and tried to turn around when I saw another student already in her office. She saw me in the hallway and beckoned me to come inside. The other student had not been in our fiction class, and instead, he was in my Bible as Literature class.

He continued talking as I walked in Lisa's office and sat down. He talked about some of his writings, a poem he had written about a chair—some sort of metaphor to provide distance from what had happened—that read long and I knew immediately that I didn't like it, and philosophy. I tried to keep up, nodding and nodding, not understanding anything being said. At one point I apologized, said that they were having a wonderfully intellectual conversation, but that I just couldn't focus, my mind couldn't work that way or that much,

right then. After an hour or so—the time felt infinite as I repeatedly tried to enter the conversation, to care at all, beginning to understand the difficult months of polite, confused, unnecessary small talk that follow a tragedy, that we all had ahead of us—I found a way to worm out of Lisa’s office when he was leaving and another student was arriving.

Revision. “Don’t fear changing your text radically in search of its best possible shape,” advises Novakovich. “And certainly don’t hesitate to get rid of whatever does not work.” You.