



Photograph by [takomabibelot](#)

# Where the Choices Are Endless

*by Seth Sawyers*

After a childhood in the country, awaking as a freshman in a college town, where the inhabitants are willing and strange.

When I was 18, I left the skinny part of Maryland and woke up in a place paved over with asphalt, girded by concrete, nourished by it. I awoke fascinated by the mechanized hum, disoriented, wide-mouthed before the man-made angularity, the downtown steel visible from the top floor of the college library. I woke up that September in the middle of the great flowering of the American Dream. I woke up in the suburbs.

There were strip malls crammed with a Blockbuster Video, a Hair Cuttery, an H&R Block, maybe a stand-alone Chi-Chi's in the parking lot. Others had take-out Chinese places called Golden Wok or Golden Dragon, Dollar Generals hanging on like old scabs, liquor stores. There were always liquor stores. Some sold good wine but most sold vast stacks of warm beer, half-pints of Hennessey, plastic-bottle vodka, endless lottery tickets printed out on crink-crank printers. You slid your money and your older brother's driver's license to a Korean man or that Korean man's teenaged daughter or his short and grumpy wife. They took your money from behind translucent bulletproof glass and you went back to your dorm room to drink your Natural Light until the ceiling spun. There were Korean men, but there were also Chinese men, and the difference was that Korean writing has circles while Chinese writing looks like a game of pick-up sticks repeated into infinity. There were Indian men and Pakistani men and though they didn't look all that different, it turns out they are not the same. There were dark-haired, sun-starved, shadow-bearded Jewish guys in white dress shirts and black slacks with pleats in front. There were lots of Asian girls and also Muslim girls with scarves on their heads who may as well have been from Jupiter. There were, of course, black people. Black girls ran the front desk at Susquehanna Hall, where I lived. They had scholarships and studied hard and laughed hard and had enough attitude to fill refrigerators. The black guys were tall and dark and moved in their baggy jeans like dark princes, hair cut very close to the skull or else worn in dreadlocks captured in elaborate cloth reggae hats that crowned their heads like broken-down beehives.

There were people who looked like me but whom I did not know, could not know. There were alternative white kids who pierced their noses and lips and, from what I heard, their nipples. There were science-fiction kids who argued over whether *Star Wars* or *Star Trek* had the more fully developed world. The Women of Diversity had a whole hall to themselves. There were gay boys, sleek and shiny and scented.

There were girls in glasses who read poetry and liked it and who drank coffee and liked it. I had just woken up in the suburbs, but these people had been waking up there for their entire lives. They came from places called Arbutus and Glen Burnie and Catonsville and Crofton and Odenton and Columbia and Bowie and Laurel and Greenbelt and Silver Spring. They came from the great paved-over America, the land of housing tracts named for forgotten trees and ruined creeks, the land fought over and won by 7-Eleven, Exxon, Taco Bell, Dunkin Donuts, Payless Shoe Source, Best Buy.

Amazingly, overwhelmingly, you could choose, all the time. At the university where I found myself, there were a thousand classes to which they assigned numbers and for which someone had written descriptions printed up in a thick booklet made of cheap paper. I'd selected mechanical engineering as my major but didn't know why. What was Linguistics? Language and Scientific Value? Fluid Dynamics? The Philosophy of Religion? Computational Methods? I did not know. I did not know about a lot of things, and so I played it safe. I took English 100, History 100, Political Science 100, Precalculus. We were 18, 19, fully grown but clueless. I admired, then, 20-year-olds who read books, who knew how to pack bowls, who had been to New York or the Grand Canyon, who knew what sex was like.

We were wealthy with music, bombarded by it. There was reggae on Susquehanna First Floor South, where I lived, and there was classic rock, which was music that our parents liked, and modern rock, which they did not. There was no country music, but there was East Coast rap and West Coast rap and rap for people who didn't like rap. There was rap you heard on the radio and rap you heard only if you spent time at record stores. There was rap you listened to if you were angry, rap you listened to if you were an English major. There was rap that your parents could hear when they visited, and rap you listened to through giant headphones meant to blast through your eardrums and into your brain, rap meant to drown out, via bass and treble, whatever lurked inside your head.

Hangovers did not yet exist. Time did not yet exist. We had forever. We did experiments. We were trying to fit in, to obliterate ourselves, trying to transcend 18 years old and skinny elbows and a nervousness that wouldn't go away. There were drugs. There was bad weed bought from some guy's friend, harsh seedy stuff broken up in the plastic baggie like desiccated potting soil. There was acid, which

scared me, and dried mushrooms that tasted like rotten dirt, and there was an animal tranquilizer called Special K that scared me so much that I wanted to go back to Cumberland. Some of us did just enough and some did way too much. Some eased into this new world and some jumped in, arms across the chest, eyes and ass clenched, cannonball-style. Some of us came back for the spring semester and some of us stayed in New Jersey, or Ellicott City, or wherever was easier, or more familiar.

There was a girl in Susquehanna who knocked on my door one day to hand me a condom before giggling and walking away. A Korean girl raised by white parents touched my elbow when she laughed. My head was on a swivel.

This world was all hard surfaces. You moved from parking lot to parking lot. Cars were essential. At terrifying intersections, eight lanes of traffic converged, twelve lanes, too many lanes. There were thunderous highways, tangles of exit ramps, traffic jams that would've made Dad turn around and go home. It was all right angles, controlled but frantic, man-made and fascinating.

People came at you in waves. At lunch, the dining hall hummed with chatter, the air laden with perfume mixed with sweat and the steam from countless pans of roasted chicken thighs, boiled broccoli, mountains of fried rice. In the mornings, on the walk from the dorms to the classrooms, you saw everyone in every state: sleepy, hungry, angry, friendly, sad, stoned, hooded, hidden. Between classes, you wandered past the big brick steps outside the University Center, where there were hundreds of bodies milling about, wasting time, some of them Hacky-Sacking, playing guitars, eating, smoking, reading, flirting. There were boys but also there were girls, achingly beautiful, achingly lonely, achingly alive. In the fall of that year, one girl sitting on those steps, a sexy black girl, wrote a poem called "Heat Lightning," which was about sex and sweat and heat lightning. She showed it to me. In the poem were the words "thighs," "spear," and "quake." It was a bad

poem, but it had been written by an actual strange and pretty girl, and that was something.

There was a girl from the Eastern Shore who lived in Patapsco Hall and who had a nice smile and soft, curved body. There was a girl in Susquehanna who knocked on my door one day to hand me a condom before giggling and walking away. A Korean girl raised by white parents touched my elbow when she laughed. My head was on a swivel. There were dance parties at clubs downtown at which we paid \$5 and drank until even I could fake a decent rhythm. There were dorm mixers at which we introduced ourselves and tried to say something funny. There were half-assed barbecues with burnt hot dogs and watered-down Pepsi. There were clubs for chess maniacs, black engineers, and martial arts with names I couldn't pronounce.

There were options, delicious and terrifying. There was food, booze, drugs, music, and sex, or at least the smell of it. I came from a quiet place but woke up in a fast place, a place fat with choices. There were ideas and then other ideas underneath. There were linguistics, advanced mathematics, parking passes, free condoms by the bowlful. I thought I might explode.

But I allowed it to happen. I invited it. I vowed to give myself over to this new place. I was wide-eyed, eager, my insides as fresh and clean and soft as Wonder Bread. There was an altar, and there was a supplicant, and the supplicant was me.

---

I'd been a college student for a week when I heard about a coffee house in the Patapsco basement. My new roommate T.J. only wanted to get high and listen to The Doors, so I went by myself. I found the table with the free coffee and went for it. I'd never liked coffee but was glad it gave me something to hold. I stirred in too much sugar and sipped. There were about 30 people in small groups on the tattered couches, talking. I leaned against a railing. I was glad when a resident assistant said hello and asked where I lived. It gave me something to do.

There was a burst of amplified noise from the speakers. There was a small stage, a stool, and the microphone stand. An older girl, the coffee house emcee, welcomed us. She motioned to an overweight guy sitting on a couch, who grabbed his acoustic guitar and sat on the stool. "I don't know about you guys," he said, strumming the guitar, "but seems like every time I turn on the radio, I hear this

song.” He played the fast opening chords of the Green Day song “She.” I recognized the song but didn’t know the words. Some people sang along. Another guy did a few minutes of stand-up comedy. An Asian girl played the violin.

**With a jerk of the head, crow-black hair hiding half of her face, she looked into the eyes of the taller girl.**

Then two girls climbed onto the stage. They were Goths. I’d heard of Goths. I’d seen them in videos on MTV, late at night. These girls had dark makeup around their eyes, their lips bright red, their faces pale everywhere else. One of them was short and pretty. Her hair was dyed black. The other was tall, stretched-out, her hair dyed red. Both wore long, flowing black clothes and thick-soled black boots. They reminded me of witches and I couldn’t stop looking at them.

The shorter girl grabbed the microphone. “We were just talking and we realized something,” she said, smiling shyly. “I’ve got a cappuccino maker.”

“And I just got a new coffee grinder,” the taller one said, bursting into a big smile. “We’re going to be roommates. We already got the forms.”

They laughed and then looked into each other’s eyes and then the shorter one said, “We also found out that we have the same favorite song.” She pressed a button on a small plastic boom box and the music began. The girls looked at the floor. I recognized the slow, sad synthesizer notes of “Time After Time,” by Cyndi Lauper. It was a song from when we were all very young. The shorter girl, the pretty one, went first. She held the microphone close to her mouth, and sang, “Lying in my bed, I hear the clock tick, and think of you.” Then, with a jerk of the head, crow-black hair hiding half of her face, she looked into the eyes of the taller girl. The shorter girl kept going: “Caught up in circles, confusion is nothing new,” she sang.

Then, the short girl, without a word, handed the microphone to the tall girl, who sang the next line perfectly. Then the tall one handed the microphone back to the short one. They did this back-and-forth for the rest of the song. They were good at it, and they’d just met, and the one girl’s hair was deep black and the other girl’s

hair was bright red and I was attracted to them but I also was fighting the urge to turn away. Then they were both holding the microphone and they sang, one mouth close to the other, “If you’re lost, you can look, and you will find me, time after time.” Then they held hands, intertwining their fingers. Still staring into the other’s eyes, they lowered the microphone, and were done.

I felt I’d seen something I wasn’t supposed to see. I looked around, at the others on the couches, but they only clapped, politely. Some weren’t even watching. I thought about getting more coffee but instead stood there, holding the paper cup. I knew then that I’d signed on for something, that it was all going to be new from then on, and that there would be fascination but also repulsion, a sweet pull but also a push. I knew I’d have to either hold on or let go. But I knew I’d hold on. I wondered, just then, what Mom and Dad were doing. I checked the clock in the dorm basement. It was dinnertime. I guessed: pork chops, green beans, and scalloped potatoes at the dining-room table that Mom had saved for, and loved. I thought about sitting next to Mom on the couch, Dad over there in the big chair, the *Times-News* sports section on his lap. We wouldn’t even have to talk.

**Seth Sawyers’** work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Baltimore Sun*, *The Morning News*, *The Rumpus*, *The Millions*, *River Teeth*, *Fourth Genre*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. He is at work on a novel about a 10-foot-tall office worker. He teaches writing classes at the University of Maryland Baltimore County and is an editor at *Baltimore Review*. He has been awarded scholarships to attend the Sewanee Writers’ Conference and Writers@Work. He is a former Emerging Writer-in-Residence at Penn State Altoona. [More by Seth Sawyers](#)