

# Dinnerview: Paul Tran

written by Danielle Susi | August 30, 2017



Paul Tran is Poetry Editor at The Offing and Chancellor's Graduate Fellow in the Writing Program at Washington University in St. Louis. Their work appears in *The New Yorker*, *Prairie Schooner*, *RHINO*, which gave them an Editor's Prize, and elsewhere. They have received fellowships and residencies from Kundiman, VONA, Poets House, Lambda Literary Foundation, Napa Valley Writers Conference, Home School, Vermont Studio Center, The Conversation, Palm Beach Poetry Festival, Miami Writers Institute, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Paul is the first Asian American since 1993 to win the Nuyorican Poets Cafe Grand Slam, placing Top 10 at the Individual World Poetry Slam and Top 5 at the National Poetry Slam.

Here, they talk about Panda Express as MFA decider, late-night bodega lamb, and a feast for their final meal.

## **On their all-time favorite meal:**

This question is more difficult than I initially thought. I want to tell you my favorite meal is the first meal my mother taught me to make: seared salmon steak with garlic and tomato sauce served over jasmine rice. But, as I consider the definitions and dimensions of "favorite," I want to tell you about the first meal my mother and I had after my father abandoned us in 1999. We opened a box of leftover Kentucky Fried Chicken, which the Vietnamese people I know call *ga ong gia*, and quietly devoured everything but the bones. My father took me to KFC earlier that day and, without telling me it'd be the last time I'd see him, dropped me off at Kensington Park across the street from my mother's tailoring and dry cleaning shop. Each time I feel lonely or tired or at a crossroad I find myself walking to the Popeyes five blocks from my apartment in Brooklyn, ordering a four-piece with mashed potatoes and a large Dr. Pepper. I'm laughing now, as I write this, because I might make that pilgrimage in a few minutes.

## **On what the light looks like during their favorite meal of the day:**

There's a boy I love but who doesn't love me back. His favorite meal is breakfast. So I tell myself breakfast is my favorite meal of the day, and the light, from my bedroom window, is typically warm and incessantly clear. It's hard falling back asleep once I wake up because the light ripping through the

trees outside pulls me out of bed. But, if I'm honest, then my favorite meal of the day is whenever I get home from teaching. Sometimes that's 2 or 3 or 4 in the morning during poetry slam season. I'd sit on the front steps and smoke a cigarette, which my roommate yells at me for though, I find, it calms and settles me down after a long day. The moon and what I recently learned is Venus usually glow bright in the sky, calling to my mind a beloved line from Louise Gluck's *A Work of Fiction*.

**What they snack on while writing:**

Hot Cheetos.

**On their go-to late-night snack:**

My brother, Hieu Minh Nguyen, went to the bodega with me once. We ordered lamb over rice from the chef there, who Hieu called "boss" and who, perhaps because he did that, gave us a discount. Now, whenever I get off the subway late at night and make a beeline for the bodega, I order lamb over rice with white and house sauce, and the boss gives me a discount. Sometimes it's a free orange soda. Sometimes it's half off a pack of Newports. I feel rather lucky for this small gift, this jubilant blessing.

**On their food quirks:**

I don't think so. But, when making my MFA decision, I ran a Google search for "Panda Express St. Louis" and happily found two locations in the city.

**On their final meal request:**

I grew up incredibly poor. I remember lengths of time when the free and reduced lunches I had at school were my only reliable source for sustenance. I remember nights when my mother and I only had sesame crackers dipped in soy sauce. So my last meal will be at a buffet with my family, chosen and blood. There's enough food for everyone. Nobody is hungry or wondering when the next check will come to feed them. All my grandmothers are snapping crab legs. My brothers and sisters are pouring bowls of boiling *pho* and *bun bo hue*, fighting over pig knuckles and extra helpings of basil and lime. My mother makes a toast, being the matriarch she is, glamorous in a Givenchy knock-off she redesigned and fashioned herself. We laugh. We sing all of our favorite karaoke songs—Christina's *Reflection*; Whitney's *I Will Always Love You*; Toni's *Unbreak My Heart*—and we dance and dance and keep dancing.