

Spring 2008 Literary Magazine

College of Southern Maryland

Connections



Featuring an Interview with Poet Aracelis Girmay

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The Pier by *Paul Toscano*

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My Dad, the Oyster

Carol Harvat

Tight as an oyster
Under the sand
Shut and silent
Cold, hard shelled.

Then one day he was
Sliced open
Split by the death of his spouse.

The oyster on the half shell
Alive, sits alone
Still
Exposed
Raw with its feelings
Naked with emotion
It spews with sorrow.

Forever changed
Into half itself.

Yet whole
Expressing all emotion
As it lay wide open
On its half shell.



Cheyenne and Catharine by *Cheyenne Adams-Brown*

Jumping Ship

Casey Brandt

He sat in a pile on the weathered blue couch again, barely more than a mound of waste. Knees apart, a glass of scotch perched in his fist, he inched down the worn cushions toward sleep. His head sank steadily until his fingers relaxed, dumping the drink in his lap and waking him.

He became an old ship creaking reluctantly to life. His limbs moved slowly to stand while blood cells scrambled like deckhands to steady his body and keep it on course. Slack-roped muscles strained and scotch rolled from his shorts like salt water over wood planks as he straightened to reach his height.

She moved out of the apartment first. They shuffled back and forth over who should go, should someone stay, what do they keep, how, what, when, until one morning he got out of bed and she was gone. The place began to wither after that. She'd plucked through, taking books, clothes, trinkets, things he only overlooked. Now the skeleton of their space announced conspicuous vacancies. It had become a piteous cliché, a house but not a home, a church with no congregation.

She had even taken the dog with her. No more greeting at the door when he came home, no barking when the delivery guy sounded the buzzer, no nightly walk. He filled the food bowl once out of habit before realizing it would go uneaten. Out of sorts and not quite sure what to do with himself, he made a habit of pouring drinks and docking on the couch.

They used to leave reminders on a small dry erase board in the kitchen. Her final notes were "cancel mail," and "proof of insurance." He glanced at the board on his way to the bathroom and misread "proof of innocence." Suspended over the words, teetering on the bones of his legs, he wished he could find that now, too.

On the subway a few nights earlier, buoyed by pints of beer, he noticed the tattooed arms of the man in the seat across from him. He loved them. His eyes wandered the rest of the car: a straw hat, bracelets, toe rings, a bundle of dreadlocks. They were beautiful decisions, all meant to be noticed and admired. He looked up at the face of the man with the tattooed arms and wondered what he knew of regret.

When bluebirds darted through the backyard of his childhood, he tried to build a space where they could live. He had scraps of wood, a hammer, nails, and carpenter's glue to work with. He had no plan, no measurements, only the inspiration drawn from a fleeting image, and the idea of home. The finished piece was a misshaped construction, all awkward angles and graceless edges; it didn't remotely suit his intention. Worse yet, it replaced his vision with grotesque reality. He moved to destroy it, pounding until the splintered scraps lay dejected in a heap of oozing glue and bent nails, a memorial to his sorry effort.

He was never able to keep doing the same job for long. He never had much trouble finding work, or getting along with other people, or managing the labor. It was the routine that sent him overboard: raise the sail, row in circles, scrub the deck, row in circles. Jumping ship was his real talent.

The first time he put his skill into practice he was working at a bagel shop. They didn't let him work the register because the owner found his demeanor disagreeable to customers. "Trust me," he'd said, "I've been in this business a long time. Just get in the back and make sandwiches."

He started filling orders in the morning, slicing bagels, toasting, adding butter or cream cheese. As the day wore on, the orders shifted from eggs to turkey or ham, from bacon and cheese to lettuce, tomato and mayonnaise. The shop closed at four and

he stayed to clean and set up for the following morning. He volunteered for the role because it allowed him to work alone.

On his last day, he repeatedly fell into a daze watching his coworkers. He found he already knew their movements because they repeated them so often. One would make the sandwich upside down then grab it with her thumbs up and flip it over onto the plate. Another would pick up a knife and then wipe his nose with the back of his sleeve before bringing it down to slice the bagel. They were fools, he thought, their minds had gone numb while their bodies succumbed to menial tasks: cut the bagel, spread the mayo, press the lettuce, wipe the nose.

He felt a sense of superiority as they filed out of the store that afternoon. Grabbing their coats from the hooks and getting into them, right arm first, then left, they offered the same resigned farewells, *bye, see you tomorrow morning, don't stay too late*. Normally, he enjoyed the half hour alone washing dishes, mopping floors, and stacking chairs, but not this time. As he worked through the dishes, dunking and spraying, he was troubled by awareness of his own habits.

With the dishes finished, following his custom, he pulled out chairs and wiped down tables. He started at the back corner and worked his way toward the entrance. Then he stood by the door ready to mop, and as he brushed the crumbs off his white apron and onto the floor, anxiety raced along his scalp and rang in his ears. He'd made this same wiping motion every day for weeks. Someone looking in from outside could have timed it. He couldn't stand the idea of doing it over and over indefinitely.

He finished his work quickly, locked the doors, put the key in the drop box, and knew that he would not retrieve it the next day. He was jumping, leaving the rest of the crew to repeat their habitual patterns without him. As he got in his car and drove, he imagined their faces in the store window watching him go. Some wore masks of confusion, jealousy, or scorn. One was frozen in a snapshot of *are you sure?* But they only grew smaller

and more forgettable as he sailed away. His anxiety faded and all that remained was an open road, an evening breeze through the windows, and a dead-end job in his rearview mirror.

Still damp from the drink he dumped while passing out, he sat back on the couch and drew a guitar to his lap. He held a few different chords, moving them up and down the neck until he found a pattern that sounded good. But the more he worked at it, the more the repeating notes ground around his ears like stones and dulled his intent. His fingers had lapsed into muscle memory, they were rowing in circles. Anger took control. He punched a few clanging chords, then gripped the guitar with both hands around its neck and smashed it on the floor.

He stood over the broken remains, hands pulsing from the impact, and felt a familiar urge to escape. He dreamed of driving in the quiet of night, blanketed by winking stars. He thought of his friends, coworkers, neighbors, people he encountered during his daily ritual. He longed to cut the ropes that held him docked, turn away from the faces he knew and leave them to continue building their monotonous chorus to the rhythm of the ticking clock.

He walked into his bedroom, knelt on the floor, and pulled a beaten brown duffle bag out from under the bed. It was dusty and mashed flat but he shook it off and opened it. As he reached to pull out his dresser drawer and pack some clothes, despair held him still. He already knew the path he would take and where it would lead. Before he could lift a single step, he saw each that would follow and how they would carry him right back to where he now stood. The buildings outside, resting solid and still over lamplit streets, paused momentarily to notice his indecision. He felt as if something he'd been trying to get away from had finally caught him.

Shaken and uncertain, he walked back to the couch. He sat decidedly in one place, in his half-empty apartment, occupying it without imagining where he might go next. The space was an essay on neglect. A tower of dishes balanced in the sink, dirty clothes lay in various mounds on the floor, books and papers had toppled from shelves and were strewn over the filthy rug. The mangled heap of his guitar was the crowning jewel of the wreckage. He stood and swept it against the wall with his foot. When he did, he noticed the glass he'd spilled earlier laying on its side, peering out from under the couch, so he picked it up and went to the kitchen to fill it.

a rocky day

Darren Longley

it was a rocky day
and you were sitting on the wind
you were bubbly... like Fresca
and I wanted to drink you up
wanted to plant flowers
 around your head
and put my hands on you

but it was a rocky day
so I watched you sitting on the wind
painted you against the skin of a tree
the white of your shirt an arrow
 in my eyes
which drank you up like sunshine
and I wanted to warm my hands on you

but it was a rocky day
and you were sitting on the wind
your hair a golden blond
against the blue of heavenly cloud
where I wanted to lie with you
watch flowers grow around your head

but it was a rocky day
and I couldn't seem to find the wind



Rebirth by Katrina Coffman

Saving Momma

Dee Sydnor

“But Momma,” I said, wanting more than anything to be able to crumble into earth and disappear, “what if he wakes up?” She assured me that if he woke up, I could just lay on the charm real thick—he couldn’t resist when I did that. I was his little sunshine, after all.

My dad lay there across his recliner. It was an old La-Z-Boy that he had gotten back when life was good, but now as the “good life” crumbled away, the recliner kind of seemed to follow suit. It used to be a brown plush fabric—I think the lady in the store had called it Caramel Cream. I loved to run my hand across it—the nap would stick up just a little, and if you pushed the nap one direction, the chair looked really dark brown, but if you pushed it the other way, it took on kind of a champagne color. The fabric was really top of the line, too. You know, the kind where the water beads right up on top when you spill it, so that you can wipe it up without the chair even getting wet. Sometimes I poured water on it, just so I could turn around and wipe the water back up. It was a novelty.

Dad was so proud of his chair when we went to buy it. I was just a little girl then—I can still remember walking around the store. There were 28 recliners in the showroom, and I sat in every single one, and I counted, so I’m sure there were 28. Some were soft and cushy—the kind that almost swallowed you right up so that you could hardly get back out. Others were firm and hard. Some rocked, some didn’t. Some even had heating and vibrating buttons, but Dad said he didn’t want one of those *fru-fru* kinds of chairs. Just a hard-working man’s La-Z-Boy—that’s what he had earned for all his back-breaking labor over the years. Who knew then that he’d wind up spending so much time in it.

As I watched him lying there, I thought of how he resembled one of those sock monkeys my mom and I had made to sell down at St. Mark's Fall Festival. We got \$3 each for them, and we could get the socks down at the dollar store, so we were making a pretty good profit on them. We ended up making 75 of them, and we sold all but four, so they were a definite money maker. I had to admit they were kind of cute, in a strange kind of way. Their long arms and legs just seemed to dangle from their bodies like, well, like socks. And that's how Daddy looked—withered, worn, and lanky. Arms and legs falling about him as though only a few stitches held them on to his body. Dad looked like an old, worn-out sock.

We were all the time doing something to earn some money. Momma ironed for two ladies down the street once a week, and they paid her 50 cents for each piece she ironed. It had paid pretty well a few years back, before their husbands had passed on, and when their oldest kids still lived at home. But now it was hardly even enough to even buy a gallon of milk each week. Two little ladies don't need too many things ironed.

Momma and I would crochet doilies and make stuffed animals to sell, just to make a few dollars to help buy some groceries. I walked dogs for their owners when they would go on vacation, and I always did a good job. I made sure to leave everything in the house just the way I found it. I love animals, and I make friends with almost every dog I walk. Caley is a big blue pit bull that lives down the street with a young couple that moved in last year. I think he's a Marine, and she's a school teacher. Once in a while, when her husband's deployed, Mrs. Bailey will get away for a weekend with her girlfriends, and she always calls me to come over and take care of Caley. Apparently, she has a hard time finding anybody to watch Caley for her, so she pays me really good. Caley's a big dog, and she's so strong, she's even pulled me over once or twice. But she's a good dog, just the same. I don't know why people are so funny about

pit bulls. It's all in how they're raised. And Caley was raised to be a good girl. She loves when I come to walk her. Her whole backside wags back and forth when she sees me, and I just have to laugh when I see her.

Now the poodle that I walk once in a while, Bon Bon, is a spoiled brat, if a dog can be a brat. Oh, she's pretty and all that. White curly fur that gets groomed every week—she goes to the beauty parlor at the same time her “Mommy,” Mrs. Pruett goes to have her hair done. As a matter of fact, if I didn't know better, I'd say they had the same stylist. Their hair is almost the exact same shade—snow angel white—really, that's the name of it. Mrs. Pruett told me one day. And they each have those tight little curls that seem to be only about an inch or two long. Anyway, though, people should be more scared of poodles than pit bulls. That brat, Bon Bon tries to bite me every time I go over there. And Mrs. Pruett just talks to her like she's a baby—it makes me want to throw up.

We didn't always have times so hard. Daddy used to have a good job down at the stamping plant, and he worked hard to make sure every door frame that came along his line was just perfect. But then when the Toyota plant closed down, my daddy lost his job. In fact, a lot of men lost their jobs. Jobs in our little town of Bretonsburg, Tennessee, had gotten to be pretty hard to find. Daddy had really tried to find one, and at first, he was real optimistic. He'd say, “Oh, we'll be back on our feet in no time.” And Mom would fuss when he'd go out and buy cigarettes because she was worried about the money, but Dad's pride would get right in the way, kind of like a big bull dog that you couldn't budge, and Momma found herself agreeing with him, just to keep him in a pleasant frame of mind.

That was almost five years ago, and Daddy's gotten so depressed. Every time his welfare check comes in, he cashes it. He goes out to Kelly's, the little bar right out on the corner of Monroe and James, to “unwind” a little. He can spend half his

check that first night. And then he usually stumbles his way back home in the dark, and he comes in and lays on the recliner so Momma won't know he's been drinking. Oh, please, give me a break. And that's where I come in. Every month, after Daddy's spent half his check out at the bar, he comes home and passes out. I have to shimmy his wallet out of his pocket, take all but about \$10 out of it, then put it back without him seeing me, feeling me take it out, or knowing that I've been there. It's the only way. He won't give Mom any money for groceries—he keeps telling her she needs to get off her lazy ass and go get a job. He's worked all his goddamn life and now it's her turn. But if the men have such a hard time in Bretonsburg finding a job, well, let's just say Mom has done everything in her power. What do I think? I think we ought to leave Daddy's lazy ass in the chair and go live in another town where a woman can get a decent job, like New York.

Last month, when Daddy got his check, I really got scared. He had come in from the bar, and for some reason he hadn't gotten quite so blitzed as he usually does, but he was sacked out in the chair as though he was. So how could I have known? Mom and I waited back in the bedroom until we heard him come in. We heard him stumble into the table and say a few choice words, then we heard his body drop into the recliner—it sounded kind of like someone picking up the back end of a Volkswagen and dropping it. You know, like metal getting moved around with some force. So we would just wait and listen. We could hear the snoring start, those loud gasps for air that sounded almost like a chainsaw starting up. Then when the snoring would slow a bit, and the breathing would become nice and steady, we would know the time to act had come. I would then go into the living room, with a dustpan and whisk in my hands, so I could use them as an excuse if he should see me on the floor by his chair. There have been a few times he's roused up a little, and I've had to hurry and pretend like I dropped

something on the floor that I needed to sweep up. But last month, he heard me coming, and he just laid there. He laid there with his eyes closed and continued to breathe steady, like he was asleep. I almost reached for his wallet, but when I saw his eyelids moving around, I panicked and put my hand on his back. I said, “Oh, Daddy, you need a pillow behind your back or you’re going to have a backache in the morning.” Good save. But it gave him another whole evening to spend from his wad, and left us with very little grocery money.

Now here it was, that time of the month again, and Momma was trying to talk me into going and getting Daddy’s wallet again. My dad has never laid a hand on me, really, but I know that he’s perfectly capable. I’ve just always managed to avoid him at the right time, sweet talk him at the right time, and play “Daddy’s little girl” at the right time. Momma’s another story. One time, my dad came in after drinking, and Mom had leftovers warmed up for him to eat for dinner. Dad went through the roof, “leftovers again!” and back-handed her across the face, sending his plate of food flying across the room and Momma falling over the coffee table. She had to tell the ladies up the street she couldn’t iron that week because she was sick, and I had to work the craft fair at St. Joseph’s by myself. The corner of the coffee table got her right in the cheekbone. She never even cried.

It hadn’t occurred to Momma that we should just leave town. She honestly had never even thought of leaving Daddy. We just kind of hoped that he would go on and die one of these days, so that Momma could get his life insurance policy he had taken out when they were newlyweds. She really had loved him once, and it made her so sad to see him like this. But she was one of those people that could always make things work, so she just made this work out too. My momma is a good woman, and she deserves so much more from life than she’s got. Someday, I hope I can give her more.

But, tonight, I have to retrieve what's left in Daddy's wallet, so she won't have to worry so much about being able to pay the electric bill and the rent. And I have to do it without making him angry. I feel a strength come within me. I tell Momma to go wait on the porch. She goes out the back door so she won't make any noise. I don't want her around if he does wake up. He won't hold back if she's around. I slip my hand into the small of his back. I can feel where the t-shirt he has on has mopped up an entire day of sweat. I cringe inwardly, but I don't dare shake. Smoothly, almost expertly, my hand slides down to his back pocket. Luckily, the tip of the wallet is sticking out just enough that I can get my fingers around it. I pull, so slowly, it seems like it's taking 10 minutes just to get it out of his pocket. I fall to the floor behind his chair, waiting to make sure he remains asleep. I crawl to the back door, making no noise at all, and I go out. I take Momma's hand, and I say, "This is it," and we run.



Through the Bumbershoot Forest by *Angela Lucier*

Garden of Regrets

Leslie Dickey

Lush growth run amok
races without control
through what once was lawn.

Dandelions mock us,
mimic the coming summer sun,
greet the new spring.

Thorns of wild roses
grasp, tear at our flesh.
A painful reminder of years of neglect.

Chores forgotten in years past
when the career was everything,
now haunt the newly retired.

Can order and symmetry be restored
with a new dedication to nurturing
that we have ignored?

An Interview With Poet Aracelis Girmay

Mary Lohmes



George Orwell said, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” But, what is truth and how do we tell the true stories of our lives when so often we hide the facts even from ourselves? Writers often imagine the experiences of others in order to get to the universal truth—the collective human experience whether it is the first pangs of love or hate, the brutality of war, or the protective strength of a mother. Discovering the universal truths and telling the true stories of our lives and communities is the focus of poet Aracelis Girmay’s *Teeth*.

Girmay read selections from *Teeth* as part of the College of Southern Maryland's Connections Literary Series on March 7, 2008 at the La Plata Campus.

Girmay is the author of *Teeth* and *Changing, Changing: Story and Collages*. A Cave Canem Fellow and the recipient of grants from the Toor Cummings Center and the Watson Foundation, she lives in her native California and in New York, where she leads community writing workshops for high school and adult students.

In preparation for CSM's Connections program, Girmay discussed community and the power of storytelling in reaching the universal truths of our daily experience.

CSM: Martin Espada recently said that too few of our young writers are responding to the politics and events they are seeing around them. As a young writer and teacher, could you respond to this assessment?

Girmay: In terms of the community of young writers I know, I think several of us are working in direct response to the difficult, brutal, joyful events of world—the world of family deaths, memory, this war, private war(s), serious loss, the public news, the private news. The writers I witness at the Bronx-based Acentos family are doing this work. Writers I've heard at Kundiman readings, Cave Canem readings. These are young writers talking to the world, in response to the world(s). Whether it is from the point of constructivism or reaction, or both, I'm surrounded by young writers who are doing this work.

As someone who teaches high school students, I also see that several of them are ready to tackle the large and difficult subjects. They're wanting to—needing to—talk about gender roles, language, love, power, sexual abuse, eating disorders, the

war, responsibilities and immigration. I think it's instinctual for several of my students to associate poetry with a certain kind of urgency. They ask themselves and I ask them "What is necessary for you to talk about? What questions do you have for the world? What questions and solutions do you NEED to stand in longer? What are they?"

Urgency is often about issues. Urgency is often in response to the political. The poems we study and the poems my students move toward often inhabit an overtly political space. This is what moves them. This is cause for language for them and, I believe, they are writing the things they need to, because they need to. This is true for my after-school program writers, too. It's stunning to witness.

CSM: You have taught several community writing workshops, including some with high schoolers in the Bronx. Could you describe the importance of storytelling as a teaching tool and as a means of defining one's self?

Girmay: I tell my students that when we walk into a room, it's not just us coming into that room as individuals. I remind them that we each carry a whole parade of ancestors—names known and unknown—with us wherever we go. My students have studied the elegy that Martín Espada wrote for Robert Creeley and they had a very strong response to the lines "Poets must spread the news ..."

I ask my kids, "What happens when you think of your poem as a memorial to all of your dead? Your ancestors? If the ghosts/sounds/places follow you everywhere—inseparable from DNA—how does this translate into the poem?"

Storytelling is an act that eradicates forgetting. As Carolyn Forché wrote, "Poetry is against forgetting." It is a way to document our histories. It is a way to communicate, to remember, to locate ourselves in a bigger sea of past. It is the thing that

connects us, makes us empathize. My students and I are readers and writers. When reading other people's stories, it's very clear that writing has the ability to serve as a catalyst for an active response—pushing people to live differently in the world because of the awareness it solicits, but also because it can stir people into wanting to do, to act, to have a dialogue, to respond, to do something.

CSM: How do you prepare yourself as a writer to write with such brutal honesty about topics such as rape? I am thinking in particular about your poem, "Palimpsest," in which the reader is given all of these emotions the father is feeling (anger, fear) but it is the daughter's unread voice which ends the poem. How hard is it to get inside a character enough to make such a powerful transition?

Girmay: It's very hard. I sit very still. I call upon everything I know, everything I've ever seen or heard. With this particular story, I was reading testimonies and this story needed to be written. I questioned then—as I do now—what right I had/have to write from that place. But I also felt I had to step inside of the persona of the witness and person. I needed to, in that poem, write about the strategies of terror and torture and dehumanization. The impossibility of the decisions we are left with or those that we force upon each other. I needed to write about the process by which people try to dehumanize other people—in this case, the soldiers are trying to dehumanize the family. Really, what is happening is that the soldiers are dehumanizing one another. This is war. War is horrific. No matter what, I believe in peace. I'm not saying though that pacifist strategies are always the most effective, and I do not call myself a pacifist. But I do think we must sit longer when thinking about the implications of war. What is really at stake? How are we all participants in every war that ever happens?

And that poem, that poem pushed through me very slowly and painfully and I forced myself to stay pinned to my seat for hours until the first slivers of voice showed themselves on the page. The poem was hard. The transition from voice to voice was not the difficult thing. At that point, everyone has entered into this space of terror and the terror is experienced, I believe, by everything in that poem—the daughter, the father, the brothers, the soldiers even.

CSM: Community and the world outside often invade or complement the thoughts of the speaker in your poems. Could you talk about the importance of community in your life and work?

Girmay: At any given point in time, one's community might be perceived as one's body. What I mean is this: In the same way our bones wear our muscles and vessels and skin, our bodies, too, wear our communities. Community might be the place we stand in presently. Take, for example, the bridge I'm crossing now—the rail tracks and the seagull and the couple holding hands just in front of me. This instant, whether I love it or do not love it, this is my community—the realm I'm sitting, breathing, thinking in. Of course, there are the communities we build relationships with ongoing—the community of a family, a home, a neighborhood, a group of people. I can't separate community, really, from existence.

When thinking, specifically, about my work as an educator and a writer, the communities I write toward (in homage of, in conversation with) and against are always changing. What is very clear, though, is that the work I do as an educator and writer and student in the world will always be infused with an intent to document the powers of our communities while asking questions. The work will always be infused with an intent to love more strongly—and by this, I mean in my life and work I hope to push my capacity to see, listen, envision change with an intent

to strengthen my being—and hoping to be of further use to my communities.

CSM: Birds, particularly black birds and flight, are a re-occurring theme and element in several of the poems; could you describe the importance of the “flying Africans” mythology in your work? (Note: I particularly loved the mother who sews herself a set of airplane wings.)

Girmay: I certainly remember hearing the story of the Africans who grew wings and flew away and up out of the fields. I remember hearing this story when I was in junior high school. That story is in the field of my consciousness as is the beginning and the end of Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*. The notion of people taking to the sky is one that takes bold hold of my imagination. On my door now is a copy of an old photograph of one of the parades that used to happen—in the photograph are four women with bird wings made out of layers and layers of paper. I think, too, of old images of children dressed as condors in the highlands of South America.

The relationship between birds and people and our mythologies is old and deep. There is also my own geographical relationship to the birds. Growing up in Santa Ana, there was such a presence of crows. They used to make the loudest, largest sounds as they plummeted down onto the old house’s roof. The “caw caw caw” is one of the most constant, most homelike sounds I know. What brilliant, wild, ferocious birds.

In the specific poem you refer to, I wanted to talk about the threat and beauty that crows always represented to me. I also wanted to talk about a mother’s resourcefulness. What does a mother, my mother, do when something threatens to take—or takes—a child? I wanted to talk about necessity and invention. You know that saying, “Necessity is the mother of” ... yes, I wanted to talk about that. But I also wanted to talk about the

task at hand, the need to go deliver a child to safety, but also talk about the magnificent freedom that “crossing over” might pose. All of that is in that poem. How once we realize our potential to fly away, the decisions we make to go or to stay can be difficult, very difficult indeed.

CSM: You are an avid reader and as we already said, a fairly young writer. Which of your contemporaries do you admire and wish people would read?

Girmay: My contemporaries. What an exciting question. I admire Patrick Rosal, Ross Gay, Simone White, Tracy K. Smith, John Murillo, Terrance Hayes, Kamilah Aisha Moon, Stephanos Papadopoulos, Matthea Harvey, Linda Susan Jackson, Thomas Sayers Ellis, Dante Micheaux, Samantha Thornhill, Tyehimba Jess, Denizen Kane, Evie Shockley, Steve Scafidi, Remica Bingham, Abraham Smith, Ruth Irupe Sanabria and Rich Villar. I admire each of these poets so deeply—and, yes, I wish people would read them all and read them all again. If I ever said any true thing, it’s that they are astounding, wonderful minds and hearts—and every day, their work teaches me.



Amish Boy by Anne Machetto

Mirror, Mirror

Jessica Kelly

Daddy's princess,
Mommy's paycheck,
All-Stars,
& Stilettos.

Computer nerds,
Football bullies,
Suburbs,
& The ghettos.

Best friends forever,
Player hater,
Kool-Aid,
& Hard liquor.

Chicken dance,
Suicide note,
Harder, faster,
Quicker.

Run around,
Upside down,
I don't know
What to do.

School is lame,
It's all a game,
I don't know what
Happened to you.

And the World Fades Out

Jessica Kelly

I drown myself in black nail polish
Trying not to see what's beyond my room
It seems the world is flying past
And I am stuck here; somewhere
 In Between
In this hole that I can't climb out of
 So I dig deeper
Never letting anyone see what lies beyond my fake smile
 and forced laughter
My face covered in shame;
 My body the same.
My world is upside down.
 So I dig deeper.
I want someone to know my secret;
Someone to reach out and help
But I know that no one will.
 So I dig deeper.
Knowing they don't care
 I dig deeper.
The light seems farther and farther away.
I'm so cold.
 so lost.
 so scared.
Someone save me.
Someone care.
 Before I dig so deep
 There's no one there.

A Fish Tale

Tori Milkovich

At the age of eight I received my first pet fish as a birthday gift. He was an angelfish, about three inches long, with luminescent silver scales, speckled with black dots that almost resembled pepper. He was beautiful, and when he was first placed in my room, I knew we would be the best of friends. Such a present at that time in my childhood was viewed as a symbol of growing up in my eyes; almost a key to the door of adulthood. Having a living being in my possession, waiting for me to name it whatever I pleased? Who could ask for a greater power at the age of eight?

I would spend countless hours with that fish, talking to him, trying to teach him how to do barrel spins. I affectionately named him Flipper, not only after the famous dolphin, but also due to his special ability to flip himself out of his tank and flap around lovingly in my hand. For almost four years I would walk into my room and see his square expressionless face looking back at me, greeting me after long trips or even just a long day at school. I was in love.

In late January after the first snow had fallen, I stomped into my room after having stripped off all my snow-covered clothes. I casually strolled into my room, soaking with sweat and slush. I plopped onto my bed, stretched my arms as far as a twelve-year-old's could go, and yawned. My day had been a success—I had managed to pelt every stop sign in the neighborhood with snow, and even beat my rival next door neighbor in the annual snow fort building contest. The day was so perfect that every star and planet must have been perfectly aligned for me. I casually turned my head in the direction of my tank expecting to see my beloved silver-finned fish floating around lazily in his humble underwater abode—it would not be so. He was staring at me, indeed. But he was upside down, and there was an awkward haze in his water.

In a moment of panic I plunged my hand into the tank, nudging him with my small pink fingers in an effort to make him move. I received no response, not even the flap of a gill. I screamed at the top of my lungs for my mother, who quickly ran down the stairs and into my room, fearing that I had done something drastic such as accidentally stab myself. She dashed in and saw what had actually happened. My mom walked over to me where I was on the floor sobbing, and just talked to me about how these things happen in life. I didn't listen, or even care. I had just lost one of my best friends, my solace in times of despair. All I wanted was my fish back.

After about half an hour of tears, I realized that it was time to come to terms with my fish's death. Just as we were about to scoop him out of the tank, I realized that I would have nothing to remember him by.

"Mom," I inquired, "can you stop taking him out of the tank for a quick minute?" Feeling sympathetic, she asked me what needed to be done to make me feel better. I simply replied that I wished to tie a piece of fishing string to his fins, so that I could hold him upright in the tank, and snap a picture of him. At that moment, my mother started to cough, and quite profusely at that. Looking back on that moment now, I realize that she must have been doing everything in her power not to giggle at my earnest thoughts of tying my dead fish up so that I could take a picture. My mother held herself together and told me the usual mom-type quote.

"Honey, you don't need pictures, the memories you have of him should suffice." Being young and naïve, I believed her. So we continued to fish him out of his tank, and march him to his final (well... so we thought) resting place, the bathroom.

My mother opened the lid to the toilet, and told me to take my time dumping him in there. I sat on the floor in front of the fish cemetery sobbing and humming a common death march. After several minutes, when my eyes were completely swollen

shut, I flushed the toilet and threw my fish in. I watched him swirl round and round until he was in sight no more. I felt slightly relieved that I no longer had the burden of seeing my fish's cadaver. I turned away, and began to walk out of the bathroom. As soon as I had turned my back to the toilet, an awkward gurgling sound rang out behind me. I quickly turned around and saw that a curious brown chunky substance, and my fish, was emerging from the toilet. I was horrified, so I dashed to the handle of the toilet, rapidly trying to send the material back down to the depths of hell where it came from. With no success, the fish and brown matter kept elevating towards the brim of the bowl. Before I knew what was happening, I was standing in what I presumed was human feces—and my dead fish was on the floor beside me. We would later receive a call from the county sewage department, informing us that there were problems with some of their plumbing systems, and that they were sorry for any inconvenience that may have occurred.

In this situation, any normal family would be jumping up to higher elevation, perhaps shrieking in disgust. But not my mother and me. We stood there, with a smell that could kill seeping into our nostrils, laughing and staring at each other in disbelief. At that point my fish's death was not just sad, but amazing. My fish was helping me create marvelous memories, even after he was dead. I realized the luck of this, and just kept on laughing.

About an hour later, after we had managed to clean the bathroom and stop the geyser that had been created in my bathroom, we were faced with the daunting task of disposing of my fish's body once again. We considered burying him, and even went as far as to go outside with a shovel. But the ground was frozen as solid as the South Pole (used to be), thus making it impossible to bury him. Nature had defied us once again.

We trekked back inside, and put my fish in a plastic container. My mother kindly took the container out of my small clutches, and stuck it in the freezer. I almost questioned her logic at that

moment, but decided I wasn't ready for any more bizarre conversations or events. My mother took a seat by me at the sturdy old wooden kitchen table. Sunlight was streaming in through the windows, and the snow was glistening so bright that we had to turn the blinds to protect our eyes. While sitting there, my mother told me that there was one last option.

"Tori darling, Flipper should be left to rest in the compost bin, where his body can go back to nature eventually. Plus it's a guarantee that he'll stay there."

Oh how I loathed that compost bin! Countless nights I had been forced to run outside in the rain, cold, and dark just to put a few fruit peels in it. Many a day I had been forced to help my mom turn it, so that the sunlight could compost it better! I despised its existence, and was not ready to let it be the final resting place of my beloved. But after a long coaxing talk, and some more tears, my mother managed to convince me. We put on our snow gear once more, this time with some difficulty due to it still being damp from the "Let's-Try-To-Bury-It" method. We waddled into the kitchen, opened the freezer door, and took the infamous plastic container out.

Looking back on this, I realized that day was a serious bonding day for my mother and me. She helped me cope with a loss, clean up our own feces, and find a final resting place for my beloved fish. After that day we became much closer and began talking more. The death of one relationship, led to the birth of another in my life.

The next morning I woke up still feeling the woe of losing my fish, but feeling optimistic about life. The snow was still thick and white, and word was that there was to be a snowball fight down by the cul-de-sac Donaldson Drive. I put on my snow gear once more, opening the front door and squinting into the sunlight. I looked down at my porch and saw my pet cat sitting there, licking his paws and looking quite satisfied. The half-eaten body of my pet fish was lying there next to him.



Tracks by *Paul Toscano*

Swimming

Laurie Stahl

I am learning to swim.

Except I think my body already knows. It's the oddest feeling, one of the oddest I've ever had.

Let me explain.

For reasons too tedious to go into, I don't like putting my face in the water but I love to swim. How do I do it? My ex-husband taught me, 23 years ago now, to do a basic lifesaving stroke. It's a bit like being an enormous frog—but between that and backstroke and simply keeping my head out of the water whatever I'm doing I've swum an awful lot over the past 20 years. I like it—it makes me feel as no other exercise does.

Let me explain, too, that for most of my life people have assumed I'm a swimmer. They take one look at my broad shoulders and exclaim it—as if swimming grew shoulders and not the other way around. And I guess I am a swimmer, of sorts. I've swum at all times of day or night—in empty pools, hot pools, fast pools, crowded pools, pools where they forget to turn on the lights. I've swum in pools outside in winter in Colorado, with steam rising off the water and snow falling on me and the water warm as a bath. I've swum where the Dallas Cowboys train (and learned what “fast pool” means). I've not swum in the ocean, much, or in lakes—and I swim not just for exercise but to hatch myself out of myself, to enter an entirely new place.

People complain about swimming. It's too much trouble—changing, getting wet, showering, changing again—but all that's the part that captivates me. It's an initiation. A transformation. An entering. Sometimes swimming for me is difficult, if I've not done it in a long time and I'm out of shape, if I'm swimming next to a triathlete who's been freestyling through the water for an hour already, if I'm feeling particularly embarrassed about

my enormous frog stroke. When I'm out of shape I give myself a certain amount of time in the water—and the promise simply to move in it for that long, without stopping. Swimming for me comes back quickly—in a week I can double my time, in a month I can swim for an hour.

And each time, no matter what, the transformation. I change. I relax. The water, the movement, the exertion, the struggle all feel natural. Despite my awkwardness, I feel at home.

But still I am embarrassed. I don't feel that my swimming is real swimming, and that is what I wish I could do: the forward crawl, freestyle, that on-your-belly graceful sleek cut-through-the-water stroke that everyone—except me and the old ladies—seems born knowing.

I am learning to swim.

I've had two lessons with Beth, my instructor. Beth is positive and happy and a mom, and unlike some previous instructors who treated me like glass seems instead to intuit an inner toughness and pushes me accordingly. Did I mention I've had two lessons? Within the first 30 minutes of the first lesson, I was swimming freestyle.

Not breathing well and panicking a lot but, still. Swimming.

The funny thing is, I've never done it and yet I knew how. Beth tells me to get in the water and swim freestyle without breathing for as far as I can and when I come up, three quarters of the pool later, I feel glorious. I feel transported. I feel fast and streamlined and sexy and long and strong as if I'm possessed by something that knows how to fly. Beth is amazed. She tells me I'm perfect—my stroke, my kick, my form. She tells me I'm fast, clearly without even trying to be fast. She tells me I have great lung capacity. She tells me that I already know the hard strokes people struggle with—my enormous frog turns out to be an almost-perfect breaststroke, my backstroke is wonderful. I have

good upper body strength and a strong pull. She tells me that once I get comfortable breathing there'll be no stopping me.

No stopping me? What do I do with this? I am far too used to my limitations. Far too comfortable with not knowing how. When I get good at things I run from them—this essay, people, places, jobs. But I'm coming to realize that maybe there are some things that I can't escape. That are, instead, built into my bones and etched into my soul, that come from some other place. Inborn, inescapable things: the gift of writing, the gift of getting along, the gift of sensitivity, the gift of understanding dogs, the gift of my smile—and now, the gift of swimming.

I've been cataloging gifts the universe has given me. This week, I can see a little bit the gifts I send out into the world. That are inevitable parts of me. That are the pieces of who I am. My knowledge of them feels clumsy, the controls and filters are unfamiliar, they tumble out into the open and expose me.

My world is transformed.

I am swimming.

Lost

Jessica Scaparro

warmth on my neck
makes me think of you
Your secret I kept
through the absence
of reality

my face is still
as my heart cries out
Your secret I kept
as the petals
began to fall

I lay awake in bed
still reaching out for you
Your secret I kept
trying to rebuild
my soul

I smell your favorite shirt
and the memories grew
Your secret I kept
because it's the piece
kept with you

Where Sidewalks Did Not Go

Maria Ilse Birnkammer

My childhood neighborhood was confined to one block and the four streets which outlined it. The first street which dared take us away from our own Piper Brooke Avenue landed us at the elementary school. Although we knew there was a bigger world out there, we felt safe within our boundaries, within the same streets where sidewalks were lined by bushes with red berries, and an occasional chain link or split rail fence. We knew exactly where the cement jutted or cracked, jumping out to grab skates or send one's bike out of control. The white sectioned sidewalks gave us many games of jump rope, hop scotch, and chalk art. On hot summer days we would watch for hours as ants by the thousands appeared from the spaces between cracks, leaving brown sugar-like piles of dirt. They came to sop up the dropped cherry popsicle which was now a puddle of red goo. However, as we got older three of my brothers tired of these predictable pastimes and set out to push the boundaries of their territory, usually in the summer months when days were longer and boredom rallied ideas and project plans. They wanted to find something remarkable, something which would grow in the telling, and something that would transport them to places beyond.

Initially, the three of them would set out to explore on their own. We, the two sisters and diapered baby brother, were left behind, but we did not miss them. We were busy with our own devices and a few missing siblings meant the tetherball, adjustable roller skates, and bikes were ours free and clear. It wasn't until they returned, excited over their find, that we sensed an adventure in the air. This spirit of reckless adventure wrapped us in cloaks of brave explorers on an important mission. We

teetered on the threshold of greatness and the impending exit from safe yards and street curbs would liberate our young spirits.

Early the next morning, our procession of young explorers snaked through the neighborhood, much like the *Family Circus* family. We traveled further and further from our world as we passed through strange backyards with wooden backyard furniture and suspicious dogs. Through kitchen windows we could make out friends still in their Superman pajamas eating breakfast and watching *Leave It to Beaver* on the television. My brothers told us to keep walking, don't worry about the dogs, and run if we saw a grown-up. Boy, that reassured me. And always, always we had to climb a fence. I knew we must be breaking some kind of law and was glad when we finally reached our destination.

There we stood, among trees higher than our house. The ground, soft with pine needles, crushed acorns and last fall's leaves gave off a dry dusty smell. We knew we had arrived. The long limbs and thick cover insulated us from the neighborhood noises that now seemed so far away. Unlike the spindly black and white birch guarding our front yard, these trees had not been domesticated by children and birdhouses. These trees dropped their leaves wherever they wanted without the guilt of messing up a tidy green lawn. These were trees that animals called home and that the Indians hunted among. These trees were real trees and this profound truth gave us that divine energy which adults search long and hard for. We breathed in the sweet air and knew for the next few days we would escape our everyday world into this fantasy of wilderness and togetherness. It wouldn't last forever because something else would inevitably distract us. Worse than that, our own solidarity would break down and the tree fort would be left to be finished by another group of young explorers on another summer day. But for now

it was the most wonderful, most holy activity to come our way in the middle of summer vacation.

In hindsight, I wonder what my mother must have thought as five of her six children left the house with a rusty wagon full of old wood, our father's tools, a brown paper bag full of sandwiches and apples, and most amazing of all, no bickering. I wonder that she didn't worry or demand that we get back by a certain time. I know now that our day-long excursion meant peace and quiet for her. She never asked about the tree house or fort, never asked whose woods we were in, and never asked if we were returning to our project the next day. She had faith in us because she had faith in the church bells that rang at six every evening. We would get home in time because none of us wanted to miss dinner or the *The Little Rascals* and she knew this. And she was right. We trudged back to the old neighborhood, tired, sweaty and itchy from bug bites and briars. We had made progress but would need more nails. We flopped down in front of the television until our father came in the door, scattering us to daily chores like setting the table or dusting furniture which had been dusted the day before and the day before that and the day before that.

Later, scrubbed clean and in our beds, we thought about the day. We thought about tomorrow. More nails. Less jelly on the sandwiches. A jug of water and some band-aids. Walter Cronkite's voice floated up the stairs and images of the Vietnam War played out in our den. So far away. So far away. Over the fence and so far away.



Cindy After Marriage by *Tina Chi*

The Fairy Tale Lie

Samantha Skinger

(Dedicated to “The Group”)

So Cinderella, when do dreams come true?
I doubt your claim; I’ve never seen the proof.
No rescue, charming prince will not come through.

To be a princess, all young girls pursue
A palace pink with jewels upon the roof.
So Cinderella, when do dreams come true?

False hope, which grows and chokes like wild bamboo,
They wait for blast of horns or sound of hoof.
No rescue, charming prince will not come through.

The world is lost as Greed and Lust accrue.
In truth, most men lack spines and are aloof.
So Cinderella, when do dreams come true?

True love rare does exist and finds fair few.
Your tale’s a lie; your story is a spoof.
No rescue, charming prince will not come through.

Your rags to riches tale belongs to whom?
Today your story’s nothing but a spoof.
So Cinderella, when do dreams come true?
No rescue, charming prince will not come through.

Contributor Notes

CHEYENNE ADAMS-BROWN is 16 years old and currently in the 11th grade at Thomas Stone High School. She loves all aspects of art, including photography, sculpturing, painting, crafting, jewelry making, etc. Her goal is to be an art education teacher. Her photo, within the magazine, was taken at her aunt's 50-acre farm in New Windsor, Maryland.

CASEY BRANDT is a writer and Southern Maryland resident.

MARIA ILSE BIRNKAMMER is a writer who lives and works in Calvert County.

TINA CHI (contributor note unavailable)

KATRINA COFFMAN is currently studying art at the College of Southern Maryland, with an emphasis on photography. She will be graduating in May. She enjoys shooting landscapes and documentary portraiture.

LESLIE DICKEY is semi-retired and currently attending classes at the Prince Frederick Campus.

CAROL HARVAT writes short stories and poetry with nature, food and social themes. She moved from Portland, Maine to Maryland three years ago and writes for *The Calvert Recorder*. She earned her B.A. in Journalism from the University of South Florida.

JESSICA KELLY (contributor note unavailable)

MARY LOHNES is the media relations specialist and an occasional English instructor for the College of Southern Maryland. She is working on a collection of short stories about people who are not writers or artists or attempting to be any of the above. Currently, she can't decide whether her favorite quote is, "I feel like I am taking crazy pills!" or "A human can very well do what he wants, but cannot will what he wants."

DARREN LONGLEY has been with CSM nearly two years. He enjoys theatre, reading, and writing.

ANGELA LUCIER is currently studying art at the College of Southern Maryland, with an emphasis on photography. She enjoys shooting landscapes, urban and rural scenes, and things in their natural environment. She also shoots concert photography and event photography in her spare time.

ANNE MACHETTO has lived in the Virginia/Maryland/Washington, DC area since she was 10, and has found it to be a rich source of photographic opportunity—sometimes pictures just appear as she is driving down the road, so her cameras are her constant companions! Ms. Machetto worked for the federal government for over 30 years, retiring in 2004. Since then, her time has been divided between her two loves: photography and teaching yoga.

TORI MILKOVICH (contributor note unavailable)

JESSICA SCAPARRO is a student at CSM, transferring to St. Mary's College in the spring. She has two majors, which are English and women's studies. She hopes that others can relate to her words and feel the emotion behind them.

SAMANTHA SKINGER is a senior at Lackey High School. She originated from Pittsburgh, PA and is an avid Steelers fan. She is involved with multiple organizations including the Masqued Chargers and Destination Imagination, and enjoys reading and spending time with her family and friends.

LAURIE STAHL is a freelance writer living in Annapolis.

DEE SYDNOR is a student at College of Southern Maryland, has four children, and has lived in St. Mary's County for 27 years with her husband, Dave.

PAUL TOSCANO has been with CSM since 1980, working first as a counselor, then as distance learning coordinator.

