

COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND
Fall 2009 Literary Magazine



Connections

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Fall 2009 Literary Magazine

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Details, cover photo by *Paul Toscano*

EDITOR

Neal Dwyer

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

Sonia Fernandez

Mary Lohnes

David Phalen

David Robinson

Paul Toscano

EDITING ASSISTANCE

Brenda Jones

Jill Peck

PRODUCTION AND DESIGN

Brenda Jones

Carol Wade

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Table of Contents

POETRY

The Four Last Things, Jory Mickelson	4
Morays, Jory Mickelson	6
To: Maxine, Mitzi Phalen	14
Ignorance Is Sadness, Kyle Morgan	16
Stripped, Tiffany Hill	18
Overwhelmed, Janice McCue	19
Life, Ashley Robinson	20
Discipline of Importance, Jonathan Farrell	28
The Alphabetical Life, Judith Allen-Leventhal	30
Untitled, Miranda McGee	37
The Terminal Illness of Irony, David Holmes	38
Deliverance, Ben Rasnic	40
Mindclutter, Mary Humbert	42

PROSE

Beginnings, Nicole Geiger	8
A Fresh Start, Dee Sydnor	22
For the Merry-Hearted Boys	
Make the Best of Our Men, David Robinson	44

CONNECTIONS FEATURE

Author Explores the Memory and Poetry of Life (an interview with Poet Fred D’Aguiar) by Mary Lohnes	32
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PHOTOGRAPHS

Details, Paul Toscano	cover photo
Bonding, Dave Sydnor	17

The Four Last Things

Jory Mickelson

1. A woman wrapped in crimson draws

water to wash the coarse sheet by hand.
She doesn't want to send it to the cleaners
or throw away its rough weave.
She touches the stain his body left
imbedded in the cloth saying, I
have left a mark, as the body dropped
away from its breath like a hinge.

2. Before the sun wakes, a young man

holds his beard back from the embers.
He blows and coaxes them to spark,
to dance at each puff of his cheeks.
Come fire, whom I have kindled and fed,
rise up now before me in red. Do not
go out into the darkness. His eyebrows
ascend like smoke above dark eyelashes.

3. A magpie presses its beak

to the silver platter of compact
strawberries. Each one blushes
like acknowledgement. The bird
stabs and swallows every kiss, his
tail flashing in the sun. Its beak poking
the platter's smooth reflection. Shall we envy
the bird and his slender black tongue.

4. Aspen saplings fester in the rain.

One side of the trees bud out
in small velvet slippers. On the other,
limbs hang as useless as an arm
in a sling. A man with a bandaged
head reaches to steady himself,
but the branch crumbles in his hand,
leaving behind black rotted bark.

Morays

Jory Mickelson

I have never seen water like this.
The grey planks tremble
 out over the surface
 and the weathered pilings box in
the bay like parking spaces.
Forty feet below us, the turbid water
 trembles at the crescendo like a symphony,
so many vibrating strings.
 A crowd has formed at the railing.

Clustered people bend their heads
 over the wood, eyes trained,
expecting the notes to break
 and a fin to emerge.
My hotdog is nestled
 in its oversized bun.
I break off a piece,
 throw it into the water
 and the music moves
 beneath the bread.

A jagged, prehistoric mouth
dances up, out, under
and the bun is gone.

Everyone stands around me
making the noises of approval
and it's a wedding or a parade
where everyone is throwing white
pieces of wheat into the air.
Isn't this what everyone wants?

The heads of the eels below
rise and fall like oil rigs,
the bay sliding off their bicycle-wheel
bodies as they eat.
I know I will dream
my white body down
into that water,
while these tiny leviathans
swallow a hand or a rib,
until I come apart as easily
as the knotting water
when the bread is gone.

Beginnings

Nicole Geiger

The rain hadn't stopped in over a week and, for the first few days, this was tiresome. But now it had slowed to an almost peaceful downpour. The lightning and thunder had subsided. And all the city folk seemed to have adjusted to no sunlight and their feet always being wet. Complaints were minimal if at all. In this city, it was either adjust or be consumed. The inhabitants chose to adjust.

There was no other option. The dark haired boy posing as a man extinguished his cigarette and tossed it carelessly from the darkly tinted window of his Corvette. "I have to do this now. Now or never," he thought with a sigh while pulling out of the alley. Yes. There was no point in waiting. The rain was only going to continue. And such a thing should not interfere with his plan.

He drove around the block for almost an hour, watching the streets almost lazily. There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to grab his interest. The radio announced that it was just after ten. Just after ten on a Tuesday evening. He slowed the vehicle to a gentle crawl and turned his head to the sidewalk.

Just after ten on a Tuesday evening. This meant she would be walking out the door and down the steps within seconds. Just after ten on a Tuesday evening. That meant two cups of coffee, cream only, at the used bookstore four blocks down, two blocks over. Two cups of coffee, cream only, and an hour of poetry by local poets. His hands loosened on the steering wheel. There was no need to be nervous.

There she was, right on schedule. Her dark hair fell down either shoulder and was tucked beneath a knit cap. She hadn't bothered with an umbrella and, instead, went with a black rain

slicker. A tattered book bag was slung over one shoulder as she weaved between a few small groups of people.

At the red light she stopped and readjusted her coat. Now or never. The car crawled forward and stopped, the passenger window rolling down quietly.

“Excuse me, miss?” The voice was soft with a smile and laugh. The girl turned and she, too, offered a smile and nod. He was holding a map and shaking his head, sand colored hair falling against pale blue eyes. “I think I’m lost. I’m trying to find The Landing. The restaurant. Do you know it?” The girl laughed and strolled toward the car, her bold green eyes on the map.

She leaned against the door and ducked her head through the window. Her flaming red hair fell down one side. The smell was intoxicating. The boy gripped the steering wheel tightly and continued to smile. “The Landing? Not a problem!” Her voice was confident and tinkled, too, with laughter. “I wouldn’t go by the map, though. There has been so much construction lately.” She looked up at him and backed away slowly. The girl turned her head and raised one arm. She was pointing and offering directions. But he wasn’t listening. Her attention was somewhere else. This was the moment.

“You’re only about five minutes away if you can avoid traffic.” She returned her attention to the car, her lips curved in a pleasant smile.

It took a moment for that smile to fade. Her eyes were not met with his but with the barrel of a gun. She looked from the silver to the boy, panic etching lines on her lightly freckled face.

“I need you to get in the car now.” The laughter had died from his voice. It was cool, direct, and now held a dangerous edge. The light had just turned. “Now,” he commanded. “Don’t think about running. You’ll be dead before you take two steps. Get in.” His finger gently squeezed the trigger as a car behind

his honked. The girl had no choice. With a trembling hand, she opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat. The window began to roll up and the vehicle crawled forward to join traffic. “Put your seatbelt on.” He turned to look at her, a smile dancing on his lips. “Safety first, after all.”

The girl fumbled with the seat belt and tried in vain to buckle herself in. Both hands were trembling and she had gone, if possible, paler. He leaned over and, with one movement, the seat belt clicked. “There we are.” His voice held a gentle purr as he stroked her hands, offering her one quick glance. Her long hair was wet and curling, her eyes wide in terror.

At long last her voice found a way from her lungs and lips. “I don’t have any money. Not on me or back at my apartment. I have my grandmother’s ring. But I don’t think it holds anything but sentimental value.” She couldn’t stop shaking. The cold mixed with her being terrified.

“Oh don’t worry, I don’t need money. I have more than enough.” He offered a wide smile. Not a grin or smirk but a sincere smile. The words, however, offered no comfort. Tears filled the girl’s eyes as she turned to look out the windshield. The rain and the car both kept a steady pace.

“Please don’t cry. This is going to be fine.” He reached over and tucked a loose curl behind her ear, his fingers lingering a moment. Compared to her, he was burning up. His finger traced her cheekbone carefully until eventually retreating. If possible, the girl grew paler.

“You really need to calm down.” He laughed, cracking his window to have a cigarette. “Would it help if I told you a bit about me? Then I wouldn’t be a stranger!” Silence followed and so he continued. “My name is Jack. I have lived in the city my entire life. I like Indian food and am allergic to horses. I didn’t go to college. I think exercise is a complete waste of time.” He took a long drag of his cigarette and watched carefully as the smoke drifted out the window into the cold night air. The girl

remained silent and made no movement to suggest she had even heard him.

The car lurched to a stop at a light and Jack sighed, tossing what remained of his cigarette out the window. He rolled it up and cleared his throat, eyes rolling to his passenger. “What are you thinking about? Right now?” Jack asked, his eyes sliding from her to the now green light. The car dragged forward and Jack shifted the gear gently. His passenger made a small noise of acknowledgment and Jack nodded for her to continue.

“That...” Her voice cracked at first but soon grew stronger. “That I’m sorry.” Jack smirked and started to open his mouth in reply, his eyes had just left the road. But the girl was faster this time. Her elbow came up quickly and with a great deal of force. While the other hand pulled the emergency brake. The car skidded and then stalled, dying peacefully in the street. The traffic around them honked and sped off. Jack swore loudly. The redhead unbuckled her belt and began to frantically pull on the door. But it wouldn’t open. She tried the window but, again, nothing happened. She pushed her weight against the door and prayed for a miracle. It wasn’t until something cold pressed against the back of her head that she stopped.

“That,” Jack began in a dark voice, “was a very stupid idea. Turn and put your seatbelt on. Slowly.” She did as instructed and Jack lowered the gun. He started the car but rather than continue on his way, pulled down an alley. “I really didn’t want to do this. Not now at least. But if you aren’t going to behave, then I’m going to have to take away some of your privileges.” His tone was sharp and clear but had lost a great deal of its anger. The car stopped and Jack pulled the key from the ignition. “First things first. Take off your shoes.” The girl looked to him curiously for a moment, her eyes holding back tears. “Quickly, please. We are on a bit of a time schedule.” She obliged, slowly. “And your socks. Tuck them into your shoes. That’s it. Now hand them to me. And, please, don’t start

crying again.” His passenger did as instructed and handed her shoes to his free hand. He tucked them carefully under his seat. “Very good. Now. I need your wallet. Hand me whatever cash you have along with your drivers license and credit cards.” She fumbled with the straps of her bag and pulled forth his request. The only thing that remained was a faded picture of a time she could never get back.

“Daisy?” He mused, holding the cards in front of him. “Like the flower? I like that. Daisy Leigh Price. Simple. Clean. And to the point. I like that.” Jack looked over to Daisy, smiling. “And now I need you to do something else. Think you can handle it?”

“My options are a bit limited...” Daisy replied bitterly, her toes scrunching from the cold air. And for a moment, Daisy finally gave Jack a good looking over. He was handsome. Too handsome for this sort of stunt. And confident. And in his own way, charming. This whole time he had been calm and collected. It wasn’t until she, Daisy, had made a daring move to change the situation. If he wasn’t kidnapping her, their car ride could be confused with a first date. The awkward bits of conversation and offering of insight. Daisy sighed and pulled on her jacket, eyes shifting to the seat cover. She wanted to look anywhere but into him.

“Very good.” Jack put the key back in the ignition and turned the car over once more. “Now, Daisy, this is very important. I need you to behave. I need you to try and not cry anymore. Because from here on out, I need us to look at least somewhat normal. And people will start to get suspicious if you are constantly on the verge of tears. I understand that you are under a great deal of stress. Really, I do.” Jack practically cooed his sympathies while pulling back out onto the main street. “I also need you to cooperate with me. You were very good about giving me your shoes and identity and money. And that hasn’t gone unnoticed. I need you to keep that up, alright?” Jack sped through the streets now, streaking through yellow lights. The car

bounded down a hill, the lights of the city started to fade in the rearview mirror. “Do you have any questions? Outside the more obvious. Because I won’t answer that one. Not yet.” Jack pulled out another cigarette and cracked the window just so. He placed the gun near the door, hiding it from Daisy’s line of vision and pulled forth a lighter. He inhaled deeply and watched the smoke dissipate. Outside, the rain had stopped.

“You didn’t ask for my cell phone.” This was a matter of fact, not a question. But Jack had asked Daisy to avoid the one question she so desperately wanted the answer to. And complying with his requests seemed to be more rational at this point. Not that anything was truly rational anymore. Daisy looked over to Jack and their eyes met. His lips curved into a careful, calculated grin.

“Daisy, I think we both know why I didn’t ask you for a cell phone.” Jack turned his gaze back to the road ahead, his grin still apparent. He took another long drag and leaned back in his seat. “Why would I ask you to give me something I know you don’t have?”

The radio played a haunting tune, a melodic piece with piano and strings. A voice crooned the words and Jack hummed quietly along. Daisy bit her bottom lip and moved closer to the window. Her hands still clutched the remaining artifact of the wallet. The photograph crinkled in her grasp as silent tears rolled down her cheeks.

For the first time in over a week, the rains had stopped. The city and its surroundings were now met with an eerie calm and silence. And the hope for a better tomorrow carried all the travelers home.

To: Maxine

Mitzi Phalen

Just wanted to let you know that
I always enjoy the e-mails you forward to me.

They often cause the monitor to get blurry,
For some odd reason.

Though I don't forward the e-mails to other people,
And I've broken countless chains,
Please rest assured knowing that
You are my friend,
I do pray for you,
I do support whatever cause the e-mail discusses,
I do love Jesus,
I do marvel at the miracle of a baby,
I do smile at the beauty of a flower,
I am inspired by a poem about Marines,
I do respect the men and women in the armed forces,
I do think puppies are our best friends,
I do think cats air brushed with colorful paint are cute,
 though odd,
I do think women should be informed about the dangers
 of self-serve gas stations,
I do long for the innocence of days gone by,
I do think America is a wonderful place,
I am thankful for the freedoms that our military fights
 to preserve,

I am amused by a humorous video,
I am appalled at traffic carnage caused by inattentive drivers,
I do chuckle at witty office posters, and
I do support exposing the torture that girls and women undergo
in other countries.

I am and do all of this, and more.

I'm just too lazy to forward the e-mails.

So, you won't get one back from me,
Guess I broke the chain.
But you're still my friend. :-)

Ignorance Is Sadness

Written August 18th 2008

Kyle Morgan

You will hear them say that ignorance is bliss,
But you'll never know what you might miss

The world goes by and you stay still,
Life keeps going against your will.

Many will flourish and some others end,
So much is there to comprehend.

The rivers of the world connect us all,
The veins of the earth you can't recall.

The sky's gem filled wonders above your head,
But you'll never see if you only look ahead

Take the time to experience your life
Breathe in the world, exhale your strife.

See epic and grand oceans crash on the shore
and know the nature that's lived there before.

Seek out the mountains and scale to the peak,
If only your dreams you have the technique.

In the midst of dancing snow and sand
Maybe you'll find a lover's hand.

With journeys of life comes true romance
If truly you live it you may have the chance.

Hold your true love and embrace with a kiss
So who in ignorance will find any bliss?



Bonding by *Dave Sydnor*

Stripped

Tiffany Hill

Stripped, teased and twisted
Strung on the line to dry
Ripped, pleased, and *scripted*
Every d
 r
 o
 p till I die
Tripped, ceased, and fisted
With an agonizing cry
Clipped, ~~Frzzz~~, and shifted
Leaves an uneasy s...i...g...h...

Overwhelmed

Janice McCue

There is killing in Afghanistan;
We should do something.
What happened to Darfur?
Weren't we going to do something there?

El Salvador, Nicaragua . . .
Which one had the Sandinistas?
Iraq, Iran; I'm supposed to care. I want to care.
I'm just trying to make sure sandwiches are ready for
tomorrow's lunch.

Life

Ashley Robinson

Do you ever feel it's too much?
That the load put on your shoulders should be taken down
That the goal you're trying to reach is unattainable

Do you ever wish you could go back?
To change what happened then, into what's happening now
To change that mistake that eats at your heart, away at your soul

Life...
It's full of confusion, misunderstandings, heartache, and pain
It's full of happiness, laughter, enjoyment, and relief

It's Life...
You take the good with the bad and the bad with the good
You live and you learn and ultimately you will learn to live

In Life...
There is no such thing as perfection, but a thing called satisfaction
There is no wrong and right because your wrong could be
your right
—only you know

Life...
Is full of change
You grow from an infant to an adult, maturing not only mentally
but physically and emotionally
You change your paths along the way, what seemed interesting
in the beginning may not turn out fine and dandy in the end

They come in and they go out
Those who seem to be friends
Those who are supposed to be family
Life changing decisions
And decisions that change your day
But the ones who are true and real will stay forever

You...
Dream about the future
Live in the present
Sulk in the past

LIFE is like LOVE
A four letter word
Beginning with L and ending in E
Both having meanings that *you*, yourself, create

Life...
It's your choice
Live for the day
OR
Let the day live for you

A Fresh Start

Dee Sydnor

I always said I was going to drive east until I ran out of gas, and my 1983 Honda Civic sputtered out in the small town of Thurmont, Maryland, which prided itself on being the “Gateway to the Mountains,” at least according to the sign. There must have been more than one gas station in that town, but I thought I’d better take the first one that came along, just in case. So I stopped at this little convenience store/gas station/liquor store, and no kidding it looked like Goober Pyle coming to wait on me. While he wiped his hands off on an old, greasy rag, he asked what he could get for me and I told him to fill it up with low test. I seriously had to wonder his purpose for wiping his hands at all. “You in visitin’ somebody in town?” he asked, and I responded that I was just driving and ran out of gas (in other words—just fill up the tank and don’t ask me any questions). He started right in on cleaning my windows after he’d gotten the pump started, and if I didn’t know better, I might have guessed I was the only customer he’d seen all day, at least the only female one.

Trying to avoid his annoyingly cheerful smiling face while he was cleaning my windows, I took a glance down the street. It looked like something right out of a 1960’s TV show—small town Main Street USA—I thought I was going to start seeing everything in black and white with Andy driving down to the courthouse in his sheriff’s car. A little old man that had to be well in his nineties was out sweeping the sidewalk in front of his shop, which looked to be a hardware store as far as I could tell. He had an old whiskey barrel beside the front door of his shop filled with petunias that were spilling over the sides. These stuck out for sure in the black and white scenery. They were a variety of colors—some were as bright pink as my jacket, others were as yellow as my hair, and I thought I’d never seen prettier flowers in any flower shop I’d been in. Those flowers spoke to me in a way, and I thought that maybe I could

thrive here too. It seemed like this might be the perfect place for a girl like me to make a fresh start, so I decided I might stay “a spell.”

I asked Goober where I might find a job in this little town. He said that the Wal-Mart down the street was probably hiring, and he was pretty sure they'd need some help with Marian out, but in the meantime his shop had the best ice cream in the county, so if I wasn't in any hurry he'd fix me a sundae. How could I refuse that—no, I certainly wasn't in any hurry, so I parked my car and went inside with him for the county's best ice cream sundae, which he made for me right after he washed his hands.

Ice cream sundaes are almost like medicine. I introduced myself as Suzanne Mitchell, and I found myself about to tell this really nice mechanic/ice-cream sundae maker my life story, much more than I ever intended on telling anyone. We sat for the longest time, my only friend in this little town and I, laughing and talking about everything except for the things that mattered. I kept catching his eye and wondering if he had a story to tell too. His warm, brown eyes told me that maybe there was more to him than was apparent on the surface as well.

I thanked him and left the station with my full tank of gas and a new friend named Jimmy. He had completely forgotten to charge me for the gas, and I had completely forgotten to insist on paying for it. Wal-Mart was my next stop, since it's pretty hard to make a fresh start with \$98 and change in your pocket, and I was in luck according to the manager because Marian had left there just yesterday when she went into labor. So, I was going to fill in for her for a while since she'd be on maternity leave, then if I worked out they might decide to keep me on for good. I was working in the jewelry department, and though it was pretty slow most of the time, they'd need me to float around to other areas of the store when they needed a hand elsewhere. He said I could start the next day, and I left there feeling on top of the world since I'd gotten a job pretty easily. I asked my new boss, Dan, if he knew of anyone around with a room or small apartment for rent, and after a few phone calls he had me staying with a little lady on Vine Street

named Bess Garner. Bess had lost her husband a few years back, and she had just decided to rent out her basement for a few extra dollars, but mostly so she wouldn't have to spend so much time alone.

After unloading my things from the car and moving in, I piled a few blankets on the floor and got some sleep before having to get up and start my new job. Promptly at 6 a.m., I showed up at Wal-Mart and reported to the jewelry department where I began to get acclimated to my new surroundings.

The first day at my new job seemed to go okay, and I remember it well since that was the day I first met Ben. I was cleaning up the jewelry displays, polishing the glass, and adding some other objects for interest. I added a little velvet jewelry box that was honestly never going to sell, opened the bottom drawer, and let some pearls spill out onto a little sexy nightie I had gotten from the lingerie department. Then this guy showed up in a fishing cap and introduced himself as Ben. I just happened to have that lacy black negligee in my hands arranging it in the case when he walked up. He took notice right away. In his hand was a rubber eel, God only knows what he thought he might be doing with that. But I decided he was harmless enough—how can a guy with fishing lures all over his hat be anything to worry about? Of course, being the new female in town, and choosing to decorate my jewelry display cases with naughty nighties, it just so figured that every guy in Wal-Mart would start trying to hit on me, and Ben was no exception.

I resisted Ben's charms for a good week or so, but when I'd run out of money and had two more days until payday, I decided to take him up on his offer to buy me dinner. I'm a cheap date anyway, and since I hadn't eaten all day, the beers went straight to my head and I found myself slightly intoxicated. Apparently this was what Ben had in mind for the evening anyway, so we ended up rolling around on the blankets in the floor of my rented basement apartment, where he figured he'd bring me in and make sure I hadn't had too terribly much over my limit. And, well, if I wanted a little companionship in the meantime, he was ready and willing.

Ben might have been a really good-looking guy if he'd been raised in say Chicago or New York where a man knew how to make himself look and smell nice. But instead he came from some Podunk town somewhere down south and had never figured out what a woman really finds appealing in a man. He still had this erroneous notion that a woman liked a man to smell masculine. I could see that maybe all this guy really needed was a woman in his life to straighten him out a bit. So I brought him home and made him shower and shave, use deodorant and spray on a bit of that sample of Hugo I brought home from Wal-Mart.

We became an item around the store, and I soon had proven myself to be a valuable employee. The jewelry department had never sparkled before I came to town—that's what the townspeople were telling me. I liked my new job too, and for the first time in a very long time I was able to sleep through the night without waking up in a panic. I felt safe and isolated here in Thurmont, and I felt like my slate had finally been wiped clean.

Since he was practically living with me anyway, we decided it was probably a good idea for Ben to go ahead and move in with me, so we moved his furniture to my apartment, and set up housekeeping together. I had never been so happy before in my life. Ben and I did everything together, and our days at work were spent running over to each other's department, flirting and teasing with each other, and our nights were spent in each other's arms. I began calling him Big Ben, which made him turn a little pink on his forehead, and since I thought that was kind of cute, it became my name for him.

After I'd had about all I could stand of Wal-Mart, I talked to Ben and we decided I should open my own shop. Surely in my own shop I could use all those great ideas I'd had in the jewelry department and profit from them instead of making just a little more than minimum wage. It just seemed like the right thing to do, so Ben and I went down to First National and took out a loan to get my little shop up and running. I decided I'd sell lingerie, jewelry and fragrances, and I spared no expense with the fixtures for my

shop, since it was a good investment. I only bought the finest products to sell, and even though my prices would have to be a little high for me to turn a profit, I decided anyone would be glad to pay the extra to have a high-quality product. I also decided to set up the shop so men could come in and pick up a little something for the lady (or ladies as the case might be) in their lives. While this was a good idea, and ultimately what got the shop jump-started towards success, it led to the demise of my relationship with Big Ben.

My shop became frequented by men, many men. These were men who smelled nice, knew how to speak to a lady, and loved to buy pricey gifts for the ladies in their lives. The lawyer and doctor types were driving up from Frederick with other business, and they liked that I didn't know them and that I didn't ask questions about the recipients of all these goodies. Occasionally one would invite me out for a little dinner, and they always wanted my help in finding a suitable gift, so I quickly found myself with a thriving business.

My days at the shop grew longer, and Ben became annoyed with me for being gone all the time, but mostly because I had so many successful men in my shop keeping me out late at night. He didn't understand that these were just business associates, and that I needed to keep these gentlemen happy in order to make my business grow. Big Ben is just a redneck country boy, and he doesn't know anything about running a business.

He began stopping by the liquor store on his way back from Wal-Mart in the evenings, and the Jack on his breath would be starting to turn sour when I finally made it home. Just about anyone knows that whiskey and jealousy don't mix, and Ben proved that it could be a volatile combination. I came in one night after work, and I guess it was a little late, but I'd been entertaining a client, and Ben met me at the door. He asked where the hell I'd been, and I'd had a few glasses of wine so I guess I giggled a little. That seemed to set him off. I'd never seen him like that before. The fury in his eyes was scaring the hell out of me, and before I could

get out of the way, his fist pounded into my left cheekbone. I lost my footing and found myself in the floor, feeling like I'd been hit by a truck.

I opened my eyes and he was coming at me with both hands, saying that maybe, just maybe he needed to show me a thing or two. I began to cry out, "No Benny, honey, my Big Benny," and I knew I was lucky when the hands went for my hair instead of my neck. He grabbed my hair in his big calloused hands and I knew not to cry out. He dragged me into our room, and he threw me on the same bed we'd made love in. I lay still, afraid of what he was going to do to me next. He stripped me, unzipped, and drove me hard telling me I'd learn how I was supposed to behave.

I've been through this a time or two, and I've learned that you have to just let them have their way, and don't try to cross them when they're angry like that. It's the only way to come through it without getting beaten up too badly. He settled down after he got there, he zipped up his pants and went into the living room where he tumbled into the recliner. After a few minutes he began to snore, and I knew I'd better get moving. Reaching up, I locked the bedroom door, being careful not to make a sound. I threw some clothes in a bag, and I climbed out of the window.

My hands were shaking so hard I could hardly get the key in the ignition, and I prayed that I wouldn't wake him up. I pulled out of the driveway cautiously, with the headlights off, even though it was tempting to just get the hell out of Dodge. I began to breathe again once I was to the stop sign and the house was out of sight. I drove straight to the police station and got a restraining order on Ben. My shop was about to become my apartment for a while, so I pulled up the alley around the back of the shop and carried my things into the stockroom. I swore to myself, "Never again," and went to the bathroom to freshen up and clean up the mess he'd made of my face, wondering when I'd ever be able to finish cleaning up the mess I'd made of my life.

Discipline of Importance

Jonathan Farrell

Rain

Slowly the beads fall on the clear shield,

Protecting me from the world

Detaining me from the world

This box is comforting

Basic accommodations wait by default

Knowledge is given, lessons learned

Preparing for life

The Master gives his words

Shows his works

I am grateful, I appreciate his teachings

I glance back to the spiteful glass

It taunts me with a view

Thoughts run wild

I want this, I need this

To attain the best of life from The Master's perception

But I am not virgin to the world

I have tasted life

I don't want this, I don't need this

Do these skills apply to me?

The Master presents a new lesson

I, one of the few pupils

Scrutinize

Absorb

Learn

I take what is given
Though I may not need
I do want
I silence my desire to break free
I settle down in a distressed calm
My youthful mind is restless, disciplined to grow mature
Out of respect I stay,
Waiting for this sentence to end
Out of respect I return,
Each week, playing the role of inspired student
Secretly wanting,
Just once more
To be free
And feel the rain

The Alphabetical Life

Judith Allen-Leventhal

Alpha:

Ableson

Aitchison

Allen

Anderson, P.

Anderson, S.

Batson

...

The children grew up, over the years, and out of the order.

Sitting in rows of desks, marching, one squarely behind the other.

Waiting in lunch lines, trays in the cue;

Standing in line for school-issued this's and that's;

Rehearsing and auditioning;

Buying tickets, year books, a final cap and gown.

Along the way, each in the rows suffered the pains of the others:
spelling bee lost, try-out foiled, first dance stumbled or shunned.

Equally celebrated were the youthful successes at
marbles, jump rope, first kiss.

Later, marriage changed the order sometimes
(an Anderson married a Johnson or Schmidt).

Deaths interrupted the sequence

(tragic car crash, unfortunate war, lingering illness).

The children grew up, over the years, and out of the order.

Ableson

...

...

Anderson, P.

Batson

...

Johnson

...

Schmidt

....

Zeeman.

Beta.

Alpha: Beta

CONNECTIONS FEATURE

Author Explores the Memory and Poetry of Life

An Interview with
Poet Fred D'Aguiar

by Mary Lohmes



The delicate dance of words that form the best poetry can often be seen in those moments when you can feel the paint splinters beneath your hand, smell the bitter sweetness of fresh tar, and hear the inability of words to make sense out of a tragic student death. It is with words that we dare to dance, to wade in and experience all the edges of poet's a world: in this case, Fred D'Aguiar's *Continental Shelf*.

D'Aguiar was born and raised in London but lived for nearly a decade in Guyana. He is the author of several poetry collections including *Mama Dot*, *Airy Hall* and *British Subjects*. D'Aguiar has also authored four novels, including *Feeding the Ghosts*, three plays, and *1492*, a radio play which was produced by BBC Radio 3 in 1992. He has been the recipient of numerous

awards including the Minority Rights Group Award in 1983, the Guyana Prize for Poetry in 1989 and the Whitbread Award. He holds a bachelor of arts from the University of Kent at Canterbury and trained and worked as a psychiatric nurse before teaching at numerous colleges including Cambridge University, Amherst, and Bates. He currently teaches English and writing at Virginia Tech and is working on a novel about Jonestown, Guyana.

As part of CSM's Connections Literary Series, D'Aguiar read from his latest poetry collection, *Continental Shelf*. The reading took place on October 16, 2009 at CSM's Leonardtown Campus Auditorium.

In preparation for the program, D'Aguiar discussed *Continental Shelf*, the changing perspective of memory, and the importance of poetry in school and life.

LOHNES: How hard is it for you to write from the perspective of your childhood? I am thinking in particular of the poems, "Ledge" and "Leaving" where you are reliving events from your childhood.

D'AGUIAR: The trick in recalling an early experience is to court sentimentality then shun it the moment it lowers its resistance to your formal advances. "Ledge" rehearses this sense of being poised on the brink of something frightening and dangerous. It hints at a ledger too, the book-keeping side of writing poems, of measuring the past for emblems of self-understanding and then understanding of the wider world.

"Leaving" has a twist of sorts in that the poem switches the place of the mother and the son so that she ends up leaving the child behind. Neither position is easy, of course, but the rehearsal of both creates this affinity of loss shared by both

parties, whereas back then I felt like the aggrieved subject. The bread image in the poem is really about sustenance and comfort provided by food, and the sensuous, in the absence of the real thing that was wanted then, that is, parental love.

LOHNES: In a *Poetry Kit* interview, you talk about poetry and music being tools for generating black pride. Do you see any artists today who are using words and music to push boundaries, make political statements or shape the way cultures are seen?

D'AGUIAR: In that interview I tried to make a claim for listening to music as a teenager in London, say, Bob Marley, and becoming a poet. Marley's unique blend of a musical aesthetic with an astute politic awareness proved instructive for me at that time. It seemed crucial to view a poem as simultaneously about aesthetics and politics.

LOHNES: How so?

D'AGUIAR: Well, to me a poem is a beautifully made creature and it should take a moral stance in the world, moral as pertaining to politics, rather than the Keatian sense of beauty for its own sake. I tend to read poems and stories which engage with the world of philosophical ideas and social policy.

LOHNES: How are reading and writing connected for you as an author?

D'AGUIAR: I read as a writer and I write as a reader—that is, I read and take what skills I can discern from others and I often end up writing something as a direct result of a book I am reading at the time. I read to learn and this keeps me reading, and it helps me to account for what I've read before a skeptical audience.

LOHNES: As someone who teaches writing, to what extent can writing be taught? Are there some elements of craft that can't be learned?

D'AGUIAR: I do not subscribe to the binary simplicity of whether writers are born or made. I teach students how to read and write and some go on to be successful while others turn their reading and writing skills to other ways of being in the world. Craft is a matter of habit, of practice, of continual return to the labor, and compulsion of daily writing. Ultimately, we are engaged in an art form, which is something of a mystery to me.

LOHNES: How can and should writers make poetry more accessible to readers? And how can the reading of poetry be encouraged, particularly in K-12 classrooms?

D'AGUIAR: I think the best recipient for a poem is a child, the child in the adult, and I know that intuition rather than intelligence drives the poem as a felt and corporeal thing. Every school should have a reading series and a poet in residence, every school in the land. Poetry is more than an art; it is a way of life.

LOHNES: Your work is very reflective of personal and historical perspectives. How does your exploration of characters and history shape your understanding of your place in time?

D'AGUIAR: I find the measurement of time to be the most illusory thing in my life and the firmest confirmation of my mortality—both at once. I do not view myself in history, since I count for nothing in the larger scheme of the earth's population and the earth's trajectory as a limited resource earmarked for exhaustion by human habitation. I see history as a part of

the air and so I am indistinguishable from it. Therefore the personal emerges from this history just as history emerges from the personal.

LOHNES: In the poem “Elegies” you reflect on the tragic events at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2006, and you are often interrupted by memories of your childhood, the daily routine of being a parent, your job, and explorations of language. How does playing with time and form in this and your other works free you as a writer? Have you found limitations?

D’AGUIAR: A student from my Caribbean class was shot in her French class. I was in grief about her loss and the pointless deaths of so many others. My gaze in “Elegies” roams widely as I sought ways to commemorate the deaths and create a good poem. The sonnets, loosely made for the most part, loosely engage with the history of the sonnet in English and time in the poem is lyric rather than linear. Articulation does have its limits, especially when it comes to grief. So I may have foundered a few times during the course of tying together Guyana (where I spent my childhood), the UK (where I was born and returned to as a teenager), and the US of my adult working life. It was hard to write about my student, her loss, and the loss of 32 others with anything less than a total commitment of my art and life. The formal approach is hidden (a history of the sonnet) beneath the primacy of memory as a pathway to empathy that forms a lasting connection. And in retrospect, I struggled with the idea that the dead do not care one bit about my agony since they are beyond perception.

Untitled

Miranda McGee

I nibbled on my muffin
as you stood there and reflected
on everything that I wanted to know
on all the questions that I had asked you
and when your answer came up short
I answered equally distracted
we looked at each other and smiled
your face brimming with careful charm
innocent compassion
and maybe a little guilt
at the request you had made
and the quickness of my reaction
but I pretended not to notice
I just nibbled on my muffin
enjoyed the cinnamon
and waited for 3:11

The Terminal Illness of Irony

David Holmes

There's a ghost in this room
It feeds on the despair
Turning a home into a tomb
And the day-to-day into a dare

There's a knock at the door
But the key is lost
I tell them to please wait
But friendship turns quickly to hate

The windows are covered in frost
I try to write my name, to remind myself
But I can't remember how
So much for good mental health

The death of knowledge
The terminal illness of irony
Nothing left to read or write
Nor much left of me

There was a ghost in this room
But a photograph always fades
Bad memories loom
The home is now forever a tomb

I can't find it in the grass, or in the tree
Nature seems a cruel enemy
And will soon forsake you and them
As it has forsaken me

But by then it won't matter
By then the world will burn and for the smoke
No one will be able to see

Where did the ghost go?
Why does everything always flow
Away from the center?
Why can't I find the key
And let the good enter?

Deliverance

Ben Rasnic

In summer they rise,
black wings with yellow trim
scissoring the Chesapeake night air:
fireflies flashing their curious miniature lights.

They rise then
hover; then rise
again; the soft luminescent trails
dissipating in the darkness.....

These same creatures
I once took great delight
as a child in smashing
their peculiar carcasses;

fascinated by the splinters of light
showering burning confetti
from the smooth white ash
of my Louisville Slugger;

or sometimes I would trap them
in the vacuum chamber
of an old Mason Jar
and gaze at the blinking lights

for hours
as they would gradually fade
until at last nothing remained
save the stench of death.....

And now
as I experience the fireflies
aspiring higher and
higher into the night,

I would like to think
that these are the souls
of all the innocent creatures
whose lives I have crushed

and now they rise again
navigating their way
toward a kinder, gentler realm;
unencumbered by human frailty.

Mindclutter

Mary Humbert

I sometimes shuffle through the clutter in my mind.
The chains and whips and Freudian slips hanging on my
mental walls.
The odd desire and devastating disappointment
That combine to make strings of things I've longed for, lost
or loathed.

The dark attic of my mind holds secrets
and hides the hideous that must not see the light of day
or be examined too closely by my cursed conscience.
The sheer volume of it could conceivably crush what's left of
my shaky sanity.

In some of the darkest corners I've hidden horrors,
Unspeakable joys and perhaps a pile or two of useless pity,
Wasted on myself throughout the years.

Pearls of wisdom sit on a shelf next to lessons learned and
bridges burned.
Wishes, permanently deflated by years of unfulfillment,
Wander aimlessly looking for a way out.

The good memories are prominently displayed
Organized, categorized, and Simonized.
They gleam and glitter with a shine produced by constant use
And they radiate from the sunny smiles and heart swells
they produce.

Clumps of song lyrics, poetic verse and lines from love letters
hang everywhere like cobweb curtains.
Years of fears and tear-producing emotions are stored in mental
blocks
creating walls where there once were none.

Reflections of people I've known and people I've been stand at
the ready,
Prepared to step forward and be recognized should the need arise.
Faces I've worn hang in the mist like Mardi Gras masks, waiting
in the wings
For some fleeting moment in time when they might again fit
the situation.

And the various stages and ages of me hang on hooks in a row
in the back.
Bits and pieces have been recycled to create the current model,
With the rest stored for possible personality repairs, or future
thought failures.
Empty hooks stand ready for the weight of the would-be-me
And the person I might be tomorrow.

For the Merry-Hearted Boys Make the Best of Our Men

David Robinson

*Oh list' to the tune of an old Irish harper,
And scorn not the strains of his old withered hand...*

No Bard of Armagh was Frankie Buckley. Every week, his thick and clumsy fingers plucked from a beaten guitar the memory of a dear native he himself had barely seen. But for the regulars at McGirr's Bar and Grill, his Thursday night performance heralded the coming of another weekend.

It was on one such night that Daniel and his father, stranded together by one of Mom's prayer meetings, discovered Irish music. Daniel was up in his room, practicing on the keyboard for an upcoming piano recital, when his father's voice summoned him downstairs and out to the car.

The early nightfall of January had sunk everything into blackness, save the scattered patches of snow that floated orange beneath streetlights and seemed to only accentuate the darkness of the rest of the world. Daniel's father guided the car out of their development and onto the main road. "Doing homework up there?" he said, his words in turn accentuating the silence that lay beneath the whir of the engine and the heater.

"Piano," Daniel said.

"Ah. Piano." He drew a breath, like winding up for a golf swing. "You know I've been thinking. It might be good for you to go out for one of the sports teams. They have basketball, don't they? Or cross country?"

"Cross country is over. And basketball is in the middle of the season already."

His father sighed, nodded. “Still, you might meet some new friends. Maybe even turn that pudge of yours into muscle.” At this he grabbed Daniel’s developing paunch and gave it a shake. He laughed, and Daniel forced a smile. He had by now resigned himself to never being an athlete like his father or Tommy.

“There’s the Boston Meatloaf Factory,” Daniel said, pointing. They had already passed most of the usual fast-food places on Route 9.

“Let’s see what’s up the road here.” Not much at all was up the road, as car dealerships and strip malls gave way to unlit fields and dilapidated farm houses, but they soon reached a final outpost of civilization—the old inn now called McGirr’s. Even as they pulled into the dark gravel parking lot, even as they climbed the creaky steps, even as they passed through the heavy green door, Daniel sensed that his father shared in his own instinct to turn back. This was clearly not the whitewashed, ethnic-themed chain restaurant they had expected. But Daniel pushed on, followed his father to a nearby table.

“Some place,” said Daniel’s father, rolling his eyes. The wood-paneled dining room was large and low-ceilinged, the tables carved with initials. Stretching along the wall was a nicked and weather-beaten bar, where a handful of older men hunched, not speaking to one another. At another table, a group of doctors told loud stories about their patients and their golf games. Daniel’s father pulled a small paper menu from a plastic table display, and Daniel did the same.

““Liam’s Light Menu,”” Daniel’s father read, “Chicken wings, nachos, fried cheese... I wonder what’s on the *heavy* menu?”

A redheaded waitress came over and started wiping the table. Her uniform black pants hugged tight around her wide hips and her white blouse hung open to reveal the lace edge of a black bra that harnessed a pair of dangling breasts. Daniel’s father quickly ordered a Guinness, and for Daniel, a Coke.

“Mmm hmm, and do you have I.D., sweetie?” she said.

Daniel froze, fearful at this question that had never been put to him before. “You need an I.D. for a Coke?” his father interrupted.

“Oh, juuust a Coke. I thought you said rum-and-Coke,” she giggled, shaking the thought from her head. She left to get the drinks, and Daniel and his father shared a laugh.

“Gawwd,” Daniel’s father said. “Hopefully they can wake up the chef back there so we can get some dinner.” The boy smiled in response.

The meal was greasy and unremarkable. At one point, one of the golfer-doctors at the other table fell from his chair in what was either a fit of laughter or a collapse of drunkenness, causing the entire room to turn and stare, and even old Liam McGirr to shout from behind the bar that he hoped it wasn’t how he treated his patients. But as Daniel’s father finished his second beer and Daniel his second Coke, they noticed that, though the character of the crowd hadn’t changed, there were now many more graying heads at the bar, and many of the other tables now buzzed with life. A heavy-set man with a ponytail and a guitar was setting up a chair and a microphone on the stage.

“Ohhh boy,” smirked Daniel’s father.

The waitress appeared just as the musician started to strum his guitar. “Something from the bar? Or are you guys leaving us?” she smiled, drawing a thick tress of her red hair behind her ear.

“Well, I could stay for one more Guinness,” said Daniel’s father, “and another Coke.” When the waitress left, he added, “You *have* finished your homework, right?” But he smiled to soften the statement.

As Frankie Buckley strummed and bellowed his way through his set, he took more and more of the audience with him. Conversations gave way to sing-alongs, and an energy began to warm the room. For Daniel, every song was a new

adventure—he laughed and thrilled to the tales of hard, hearty people and huge, mythical figures like Tim Finnegan and the Wild Colonial Boy. He cried for Roddy McCorley, hissed at Captain Farrell, and fell in love with Sweet Molly Malone. Even his father seemed to loosen up in the warmth of McGirr’s, and Daniel felt with him a kind of fraternity that he’d never before known. In bed that night, his head buzzed with the music.

*Beauing, belling, dancing, drinking,
Breaking windows, cursing, sinking,
Ever raking, never thinking,
Live the Rakes of Mallow.*

Sister Hatchett saw potential in Daniel. The Sister, who, with her puckered face and old person’s breath, was one of the least favorite teachers at St. Isaac’s, was impressed by this boy who, in these days of baggy clothing, poor posture and shuffling walks, wore crisp shirts and pressed pants and could sit up straight and poised at the piano. Daniel had, she felt, a special gift for precision. He played with authority; with neither the sloppy, dragging fingers of most of her students, nor with the self-conscious, showy flourishes of others. In three years of lessons, Daniel had grown markedly. And although she hadn’t yet pushed him all that far, he seemed able to handle any piece of music she found for him.

Daniel’s latest challenge was a spirited tune from Ireland called *The Rakes of Mallow*. Sister told him that it would be fun to have some comic relief in the Winter Recital—a little reprieve from all the classical standards that he and the other students would be playing. It was a marching band tune, she said, and a favorite in Ireland. The notes came fast and sharp, and it took all he had to keep his fingers from tripping over them as he played. Add to that the challenge that each verse increased in tempo from the last, and it seemed he would never get through the entire song without messing it all up. But when he did get

it, he felt a thrill like sledding down a steep, snowy hill. Sister Hatchett had never given him the lyrics to the song, had never indicated that lyrics even existed, so Daniel pictured that the Rakes of Mallow must be some giant cliffs on the Irish coast, standing tall above the foaming sea, like he'd seen in pictures on calendars. In his moments of rapture, he pictured his notes flung in a stratospheric arc across the Atlantic and plunking one by one into the waves at the foot of those great cliffs, as if in homage.

By the time the recital had come, he had it down by rote, and though it took all the sweating concentration he had, he made it with nary a screw-up. Afterward, everyone smiled and complimented him. "He's a very good musician," said Sister Hatchett to Daniel's mother. "And a fine young man. You should be very proud."

It only took a few weeks for McGirr's to become a Thursday night tradition. Daniel and his father ate their usual dinner and listened through Frankie's first set. This was generally the point at which his father either knocked back the last of his Guinness and asked for the check; or, alternately, was taken aside by one of the other men to be told a dirty joke or asked for a business contact, which meant that they would be able stay for the second set. Tonight, it looked like it would be the door, as Daniel's father slurped the Guinness foam from his glass and swelled with his telltale yawn. But just then Frankie Buckley himself, still sweating from the stage lights, sat down at their table.

Frankie always made the rounds between sets, usually gravitating to the bar and the more stalwart regulars. Liam gave him a housie every once in a while, and the fellows in the audience could be counted on to buy him the rest. It wasn't much compensation for his weekly toil, his sweat and soul, he'd say, but 'twas enough.

"Great set," said Daniel's father, without a great deal of enthusiasm.

“Thanks much,” said Frankie.

“Let me buy you a beer,” said Daniel’s father, a hitch of reluctance in his voice. He flagged Mary the waitress and signaled with two fingers, to which she smiled knowingly.

“How’re you liking the show?” said Frankie, “I’m not much of a musician, but I manage.”

“We keep coming back, don’t we?”

“Indeed you do,” said Frankie, moving to allow Mary to lean across him and place the drinks on the table. She didn’t seem to notice Daniel’s eyes snuggled in the vee of her blouse.

“You know, Daniel here is a musician too,” said his father.

“Is that right, now? What do you play, lad?”

“*The Rakes of Mallow*,” Daniel blurted out, “...and a few others.” He wasn’t used to being included in these manly conversations. When the other bar regulars did join them at their table, they rarely addressed Daniel directly.

“What instrument, I mean?” said Frankie, laughing. His father laughed too, heartily, and Daniel blushed and laughed along.

“Piano. And some harmonica...”

“Well, there’s a piano here!” Frankie said, pointing to an old upright in the corner that looked to be straight out of a Western movie. Daniel had noticed it there before, but assumed it was more decoration than anything else. “Why don’t you play us a tune?”

Daniel looked back and forth between the two smiling faces, and over their shoulders at the crowd of weary old men and chunky women. They were all, it seemed, engrossed in conversation, occupied with one another. Not like his recital audience, who sat politely and waited for his performance. No, to play to them would be to interrupt and bother—or worse, to be ignored. He shook his head slowly.

But Frankie wasn’t easily put off. “C’mon, now. Why not give it a shot?”

“Maybe later,” his father answered, turning to Daniel and winking. “When you’re properly limbered up.” Daniel sighed his relief and his disappointment into his Coke straw while his father and Frankie talked in a general way about the neighborhood and all the construction on Route 9.

“I’ll give you the cue during the next set,” said Frankie, standing with his empty glass. “We’ll get you up there yet.”

It was toward the end of the night, his father yawning and well beyond ready to leave, when Daniel finally heard it. “And now folks, we’ve got a special guest,” Frankie announced to the dwindling crowd. “A friend of mine is going to join me up here, and I want you to welcome him with all yer hearts. Young Daniel, just twelve years old. Come on up, Danny!”

Even though Frankie had gotten his age wrong, Daniel felt proud at hearing his name—at hearing Frankie Buckley bestow upon him an Irish-sounding nickname that he’d never been called. He stood awkwardly and walked to the stage around the edge of the room. “How ‘bout that *Rakes of Mallow*?” Frankie said in a voice that the audience couldn’t hear. “I’ll start it off, if you like. You join in when you’re ready.”

Daniel crossed to the piano and took a seat on the crooked stool; opened the flip-top to a set of chipped and tobacco-yellowed keys; stabbed the middle C a few times, just to calibrate. Frankie asked into the mic, “Have you found the piano yet?” The audience laughed. Frankie gave him a firm nod, as if to instill confidence, and began strumming. After a few bars he stopped, told the audience, *The Rakes of Mallow*. If ya know the words, sing along. And then you can teach *us!*” Again the crowd laughed, and he strummed the first few notes.

Daniel turned to the keys. He straightened up his posture, poised his hands, waited for his opening. A beat, another, and he was off. He heard Frankie’s notes. He heard his own notes. The first verse, the second, then they picked up the tempo—both of them together, as if by telepathy. The five verses came and went—the whole song, as he had always played it—and

they kept going, turning it into a kind of reel. Clapping now, the entire audience. Stomping and thumping and throbbing. Daniel wasn't thinking about his posture, his fingering, even his breathing, as Sister Hatchett had taught him to do "when the butterflies start nipping." He didn't have to think about anything. There was just the music, and time flowing through it, both ancient and present. Frankie gave him the nod that this was the end, and they drew out the last few notes while the audience erupted into applause. Daniel stood, took a humble bow, and shook Frankie's meaty outstretched hand. He wanted to apologize for the shaky start, and the slip-up halfway through, but Frankie just said, "Beautiful," and clapped him on the shoulder as he stepped down. Mary smiled warmly as she brought Daniel and his father a free round.

The success of his performance buoyed Daniel through the following week. In school, he daydreamed back to the lights and the faces that were all shining at him, for him. And each week thereafter it was the same: Frankie called him up to the stage, and his heart's pounding kept rhythm as his fingers flew across the keys, and that bright moment on the stage would see him through all the drudgery and darkness of the rest of the week.

One night, Daniel managed to catch to Frankie after the performance. The musician was still on stage packing up his guitar.

"Hey Frankie," said Daniel, "how did you get into Irish music, originally?"

"Ah," said Frankie, standing up. He squeezed a handful of sweat out of his black ponytail. "Irish music is like Irish blood," said the musician. "Either it's in you, or it's not."

Evenings, when he should have been doing his homework or working on Sister Hatchett's new assignments, Daniel spent hours learning other Irish songs—*The Jolly Tinker* and *Johnny I Hardly Knew Ye*. Each song had a story, and each story a hero.

And by playing these songs, Daniel felt that he was keeping these heroes alive; perhaps even becoming a part of their legacy.

Soon, his obsession began to spill beyond the keyboard. On weekends, when his mother took him shopping downtown, he'd spend hours in the Things Celtic store, examining Claddagh rings and woolen sweaters, flipping through books of pictures and proverbs. He bought a Quiet Man's Cap, which he wore in school whenever he could get away with it. Other kids, who had previously seen him merely as a nerd, began to think of him as an eccentric. Even Steve Jackson, the popular jock, once said, "Nice hat, man," as he passed in the hall.

Then a web site of Irish coats-of-arms caught his eye, and he scrolled through until he found his own family name. Byrne. Three white hands on a red field.

He went downstairs and asked his mother about it. "What percent Irish are we?"

She paused, thought for a moment. "Well, your father is mostly English. And my grandfather was Irish, so that would make you... a quarter, maybe?" Noticing his disappointment, his mother added, "but it's okay. Everybody's a little Irish, dear."

Daniel smiled and managed to forget his disappointment before too long.

*That was me 'brother Sylvest'
A row of forty medals on his chest...*

Tommy was big in all the right places. He had an arm like a leg, as the song went, and a punch that could sink a battleship. He had always been untouchable in that way: six years older, and good at all the things that their father liked. Back at St. Isaac's, he'd lettered in both football and lacrosse, and now he sparred on his school's boxing team. What's more, in his three years away at college, he had maintained a solid three-five

average, while Daniel sometimes wondered if he'd make it to tenth grade at all. He hoped, though, that now that he was in high school, maybe he and his brother could connect, somehow. Tommy could tutor him in sports, maybe give him tips on how to survive and become more popular at school.

It was a Thursday evening, well into spring and the snow long gone, when Daniel's father called up the stairs. "Get ready," he said, "we're picking up your brother at the airport."

Daniel came down, found his shoes by the door. "Your mother has some year-end thing with her group," his father continued.

"She's meeting us out for dinner."

It was warm outside, the sun surprising for the hour of evening, as they drove toward the airport. Daniel, who had been working on *The Wild Rover* for the past week, practiced his fingering on the dashboard. Maybe when Frankie called him up tonight, he would be able to play more than just the one tune.

He was sure that Tommy would love McGirr's and Frankie Buckley; might even relate to the songs about drinking and fighting, having come from college and all those wild times. But it also made him nervous, bringing these two worlds together. He wasn't sure it was right to open up the secret that he and his father had shared. But the misgivings quickly sank away in the joy of spring. Tommy was back, and his mother's prayer group was finished for the year. They could all go to McGirr's tonight. It would be just like in Ireland, where he'd read that the local pub is a kind of shared living room, bringing families and whole communities together.

The plane was delayed, which left Daniel and his father bored for a while in the baggage terminal. They sat in plastic chairs and watched the overhead displays for signs of life.

“So when do you finish school?” Daniel’s father finally said, seeming to realize only then that conversation was an option.

“The end of June. After Regents Exams.”

“Sheesh. They keep you for a long time these days.”

Daniel thought for a moment, then smiled. “What do you think Tommy will think of McGirr’s?” He didn’t ask about his mother, because he had a feeling that his father didn’t want to worry about that one.

“McGirr’s? You’re brother’s coming home from college tonight—from dining hall food and pizza and... *wings*, or whatever they eat there. I think we can do a little better than *McGirr’s*.”

Daniel shrugged, mimicked his father’s sarcastic smile. He blamed himself for not thinking it through, how the menu was so limited, and all the food was greasy and tasted faintly of cigarette butts. He felt dumb and ashamed to have suggested it, and didn’t stop blushing until they saw Tommy’s tall, square frame emerge from the terminal tunnel.

They ate at O’Hanlon’s, an Irish-themed chain restaurant on Route 9: old-style Guinness posters on the wall, rowing shell hanging from the ceiling, and 50’s rock n’ roll oldies raining down from the speakers. Tommy told stories of the plane ride and of college life, and everyone basked in the warm feeling of reunion.

“This isn’t bad, eh kid?” his father said suddenly. Daniel felt embarrassed at the attention. “The food’s certainly better than McGirr’s. And you’ve got your... your Irish thing here,” he said, waving vaguely at the decor.

“We have to get you enrolled in that summer program,” his mother said. Then, to Tommy, “You’re brother’s becoming quite a pianist.”

“A penist?” Tommy giggled. Daniel giggled, too.

“Now, really,” his mother said, and his father frowned.

Daniel felt warm, and again thought of how it would be for Tommy to see him play. He sucked in a breath and tried it: “Maybe we could head over to McGirr’s after this. Catch some good, old after-dinner Irish music?” He tried not to look too anxious.

“I don’t know...” said his mother.

His father, trying to flag down a waiter, ignored him.

“Irish music?” said Tommy. “I thought you were into all that jazz and swing.”

“Dad and I have been going to McGirr’s lately. Every Thursday Frankie Buckley plays there—he plays Irish folk and trad. You’d like it,” he added.

His mother gave a look that wasn’t quite disapproval, but it certainly wasn’t enthusiasm.

“Irish folk music? Isn’t that a little depressing?” said Tommy, his smile crooked. “All that death and war and famine?”

Daniel’s father laughed. “The dirges! Ahh, the dirges!” He hunched over and closed one eye. “Jaysus, the darrges!” They both erupted in laughter, and his mother rolled her eyes.

It was spring. Tommy was home; his mother was back. No more Thursday nights. And although he felt a hollow pang where the notes would have been, Daniel managed to laugh along.



Contributor Notes

JUDITH ALLEN-LEVENTHAL teaches at the College of Southern Maryland in the Languages and Literature Division and lives in Southern Maryland.

JONATHAN FARRELL, despite his youthful age of 23, has lived a life that men of age 75 haven't even known. He's overcome four years of homelessness while attending middle school and the beginning of high school. His mother is the inspiration for his art, as she is a poet who was also featured in the *Connections* magazine while she attended CSM. He gives great thanks to his mother and God for giving him the ability to raise himself out of hardships and for the gift of language.

NICOLE GEIGER is 22 years old and goes to school full-time while working part-time. When she's not starting pieces of writing that almost never get finished, she enjoys reading, cooking, and photography. She spends way too much time on the Internet, and is slightly addicted to both *Desperate Housewives* and *Psych*. She thinks everyone should read at least one book by both David Sedaris and Elizabeth Wurtzel, and that everyone should own at least one anthology of Robert Frost poetry. She dedicates this and all of her writings to the following people: her parents, Dawn and Mark Geiger, her older sister, Jesse Tjarks, her favorite English professor, Judith Allen-Leventhal, and to her friends, Katherine and Renee. These people are her inspiration and muse. They kick her in all the right places so that she actually gets things done. They provide love, stability, coffee, chocolate, and fantastic literature suggestions.

TIFFANY HILL is currently a student at the College of Southern Maryland and hopes to transfer in the next year to major in psychology and minor in poetry.

DAVID HOLMES is a college student living in St. Mary's County, Maryland. He is studying journalism and loves reading and writing, watching movies, and listening to music.

MARY HUMBERT writes to clear her own thoughts and for her own amusement. She lives in Southern Maryland and works at the College of Southern Maryland.

MARY J. LOHNES is a freelance writer for the College of Southern Maryland. In addition to author interviews, copy, releases, and other things that pay the bills, she writes short stories, poems, and magazine articles. Her most recent articles on sustainable fashion and fungi will be published by *Intentionally Urban Magazine* in spring 2010 (www.inurmagazine.com).

JANICE McCUE was always frustrated that her math scores were a bit higher than her verbal scores on standardized tests. Though she still enjoys reading and writing, she teaches math at CSM. Maybe it was the letters used in algebra that allowed her to embrace her destiny.

MIRANDA McGEE is currently a student at the College of Southern Maryland.

JORY MICKELSON earned a BA in creative writing from Western Washington University. Her poems have appeared in *Plainsongs* and *Jeopardy Magazine* and are forthcoming in *Oranges & Sardines*, *Free Verse*, *Collective Fallout* and the *New Mexico Poetry Review*. She is also the nonfiction editor of the nascent literary magazine, *5x5*.

KYLE MORGAN has been a student of CSM for a few years now, and has a sincere passion for writing poetry. He has been writing for many years, mostly as a way to express his most complicated feelings that may be impossible to interpret in other fashions. He has lived in Waldorf, Maryland his whole life and is 21 years old. "Ignorance is Sadness" is a motivational poem urging you to take life by the reins.

MITZI PHALEN lives in Southern Maryland with her wonderful husband and three amazing daughters.

BEN RASNIC currently resides in Bowie, Maryland and crunches numbers for a living at a paper recycling firm in Alexandria, Virginia. His poetry has appeared in recent issues of *Connections*, *Breadcrumb Scabs*, *Jimson Weed*, *The Orange Room Review*, *The Clinch Mountain Review*, and *Westward Quarterly*.

ASHLEY ROBINSON is 19 years old and has been attending CSM since the fall of 2008. Once she finishes at CSM, she plans to transfer to the University of Maryland College Park. She aspires to be an accountant one day. She has a passion for writing poetry in her spare time.

DAVID ROBINSON teaches English at CSM. He holds an MFA in creative writing from Colorado State University.

DAVE SYDNOR is the father of four children, is a grandfather, has been an employee at J.F. Taylor, Inc. for 25 years, and has been married to Dee for 28 years.

DEE SYDNOR is a student at the College of Southern Maryland majoring in General Studies: English. She currently serves as the president for CSM's new Xi Delta chapter of the Sigma Kappa Delta English Honor Society for Two-Year Colleges. She is married to Dave, is the mother of four, and enjoys being a grandma!

PAUL TOSCANO has been on the staff of CSM since 1980. As a certificated professional counselor, he looks for the human element and emotion in his photography. His photographs have been published in *Southern Maryland: This is Living*, *Agora*, and previous editions of *Connections*.