COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND

SPRING 2010 Literary Magazine

Connections

Featuring an Interview with US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan

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New Beginnings, *cover photo by Jackie Cutlip-Niles*

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Table of Contents

POETRY

PROSE

CONNECTIONS FEATURE

PHOTOGRAPHS

The White Car

New Orleans 1930s

Karen Sagstetter

My mother was a laundress who kept her rich brown hair tied back in a long braid—everything about her was starched and clean. She worked day and night, tugging clothes through the ringer machine, ironing long after sunset because it was cooler then. From bed, I'd hear the clank of the iron on the stove, metal on metal. And she did tailoring. She could tuck your waists back together after a baby came or repair a zipper by suppertime.

In the 1920s, we were a neighborhood of dockworkers, fish sellers, longshoremen—water people in the city of New Orleans. My family's house on Bernadette Street had settled down six blocks from the Mississippi River and only a few miles from the Gulf of Mexico. Our breezes mixed the tang of salt and sand from the ocean with the smell of good mud from the river.

A balcony, called a gallery, wrapped around the whole second story of our house. To get to my mother's room or to the bath, we'd slip out of our bedrooms through the French doors, walk along the gallery and down the stairs. There were no hallways inside. Leaning toward the roof, their branches hovering over the gallery, were a friendly magnolia and its partner, an ancient oak dripping in Spanish moss. So being on the gallery was like being in a treehouse. When my three sisters and I were young, we'd scoot down the tree trunks instead of plodding down the steps, and we'd complain when Mama trimmed the branches back.

The windows in my room had white shutters, and my mother would adjust the louvers so they turned whiffs of air toward my face at night. There wasn't usually a breeze, just warm touches of air, like her breath, keeping us from a

breakneck sweat, keeping us almost cool enough. I loved the squeak of the louvers and watching her open them.

When I was scared or tired, Mama would kiss me sweet and sing out: "Stop crying!" We managed; we didn't feel down and out, just busy. Our neighbors were in the same situation we were, everybody at the end of a rope, trying to make it meet up with the other end.

I had a father. He did odd jobs, would deliver quarters and dimes to Mama, and then disappear for days. "Vanishing cream," my Aunt Claire would say. One of God's experiments, "like the albatross."

"Violet, honey! Sugar plum!" he'd shout from the back yard where he was raking leaves into the mulch pile. "Give Papa a big hug!" I'd dash from the kitchen, batting the screen door open, and jump into his arms. I liked his rough face, his hefty squeezes, and the way he swung me high over his head. He'd plop me back down and pat my cheeks with both hands, running his fingers all through my hair, like he was looking for something. But by springtime the year I was six, I sensed his hesitation before he lifted me, his grin going limp with my weight.

Aunt Claire had given me a bracelet strung from seashells that was my pride. After mass one Easter morning, I was playing with Papa and showing off my bracelet. He put his fishing cap on my head, and the brim slid down over my eyes since my head was so much smaller than his. But when I clasped my bracelet onto his wrist I had a feeling something was wrong, because it almost fit. My father was thin like a little girl, but should have been so much bigger than me all over, not just on his head. One morning his breath came over my whole face in a rush as he exhaled, and I drew back coughing.

When I was ten and "a young lady," he gave me a quarter and told me to go to Nat's up the street and buy him a bucket of beer. I fetched it but my mother met me sloshing at the front

gate. She was red faced and straight backed as I'd never seen her. Papa was taking her money from the pantry—again. That was the first time I heard her openly mad at him. Her voice was cracking. She told me I was never to get his beer again—the lazy outfit. He avoided me for a few days. I began to understand that "odd jobs" wasn't a real profession. Papa's appointments at speakeasies were followed by visits to St. Theresa, the little flower, approximately once a month, when he would, according to his account, confess to excessive sobriety. Father O'Leary and later Fathers Wilson and Georgette knew him well, and after reminding him of his obligations to the Lord and his wife and four children, would assign him a stiff penance of two full rosaries—the saying of which kept him out of trouble for at least an hour every fourth Sunday. After mass, we'd laugh over it at a late breakfast where we ate biscuits, fried eggs, andouille sausage, oranges, and thick coffee—we were ravenous after fasting from midnight, which was required so we could take communion. Papa usually joined us at the Sunday table but during the rest of the week he was never there for morning oatmeal. That was Papa: a steady diet wasn't for him.

During the Depression, derelicts frequented the back alleys of New Orleans, and in 1931 when my mother finally told my father to go, he joined his fellows in their searches for food. In those days, destitute people would offer families a hand in the yard or garage in exchange for a meal, and Mama and I, and my younger sisters Julia, Cynthia, and Georgia were in the habit of checking the back stoop at suppertime.

"Hello, Mrs. Jones, my name is Steve Thibodeaux and I'd be glad to sweep your sidewalk this evening." Our name wasn't Jones, it was Lumiere, but that's what the men always said: Hello Mrs. Jones. That's how you knew they wanted work and a meal. "Mrs. Jones, it's Douglas from last week. Would you like those bushes by the front door trimmed? I can make 'em match the ones in the back!"

"You know mister, you're right, that althea is a little scraggly. The shears are in the shed—why don't you go fix it up? Just knock on the back door when you're through. Stew okay?" "Yes ma'am. Thank you, ma'am." And Mama or Julia or I would watch until the chore was done and then bring Steve or Douglas a bowl of whatever the family was eating that night—a creole or potato salad or beans and always thick, black, steamy coffee.

Every three or four weeks, while I was measuring cups of rice for a casserole or sorting peaches for a cobbler, I'd hear a hoarse "Sugar plum!" echoing from the back stoop. "Need help with that pie?" If I didn't answer, he'd zing back with, "Miz Jones! Come on! Let me help out." I hated it worse than anything, and my face would screw into a nasty grimace, which I didn't do on purpose, either. Really, I wanted to throw the potato peels and chicken bones at him, and slam the door. Why was I stuck with such a stupid father, a bum? Was I supposed to love someone so slow-witted? Why did Mama say he was lovable? My father was more like the influenza that had stolen my Aunt Claire. I wanted to do charity for sick old ladies, the other men, anyone but him.

But there must have been an invisible vine tethering us to each other, and he pulled me toward him whether I wanted to go or not. Well, a Louisiana kitchen could always use a bowl of chopped tomatoes and onions. "Sure, Papa. Why don't you see what's ready in the garden and pick something?" I'd push through the screen doorway, balancing my chopping board and a sharp knife, and settle him at a card table in the back yard. He'd turn to his work with great deliberation, arranging the produce like a landscaper and planning the cuts, first eight slices north and south, then six east and west. Eventually, Mama suggested that I give my father cantaloupe and eggplant, because his grip was too unsteady for dicing small vegetables.

When he finished, I'd serve him a bowl of red beans and rice, garlic bread, sliced tomatoes, iced tea. He ate outside, like all the others, and he never came further in than the kitchen.

I know why he didn't ask himself in. See, I overheard something one midnight when I was fourteen, in 1931. That day and evening had been scorching, and the air was still a slow burn. It was midnight, the moon bright as a lantern, wide as the river. I was in bed. A voice surged, above the ruckus of frogs. That year I thought it was daring and sophisticated to sleep naked and also, I had the excuse that it was really hot. So I had to fumble for my nightgown before I could slip out to the gallery to listen from my place among the oak branches. Papa had passed out, I guess, on the grass and came to, there. My mother was sitting beside him on the ground, her robe belted tight against her. She was talking, and he wasn't answering. She held both his hands in hers and kissed him on the cheeks. She wasn't crying, like you might expect. She was just explaining that he couldn't be her husband anymore; she was firm about it.

By the time I was fifteen, it was hard for me to stay in school because we needed money. I helped Mama with the sewing and swept floors at Nat's for coins but she wanted me to quit and take a typing course. To work in an office would be a big step up for her daughters and you could always type to make money. This was one of the few things we argued about. Usually I didn't get that mad at her, even when she was too strict or old fashioned. I think I was afraid to because I knew she kept us going, and I didn't dare push too hard. But I desperately wanted to finish school and maybe be a nurse. I thought it was Papa's fault he was out of a job, his fault I might have to quit school. Most people in those days thought boozers were sinners or pathetic, not medical cases. What they needed was a spanking and more time in the confessional. But that stuff didn't work on my Papa, and in my heart, there was a terrible longing, deep as

the ocean. I wanted to fix the slack red face, the watery eyes, the wheezing, to stitch together the doleful body, make him into a prince or a president.

In addition to my bed, my room was furnished with a rolltop desk, a wardrobe, a dresser with a mirror, and of course my sister Julia. I was raising a banana tree in a pot, which Julia said would never grow indoors, as if she knew! But I used to tug it outside for sun baths three times a week. The long swaying leaves would graze and follow, whisper to me, when I brushed past, and I loved that rustling.

One night I was startled awake by an eerie, whipping noise, and I sat up straight in bed. Late that same afternoon, there had been a storm, with lightning ripping the sky and thunderheads racing over, and this sounded like my banana tree in a wind. I slid into my gown, which was crimped in a heap under the covers, and walked barefoot to the French doors and out to the gallery. Julia was already gone.

I remember the magnolia was full of white blossoms that night. From my spot among the branches, I looked out over the neighborhood. Our block had one- and two-story wooden houses set fairly close to the narrow street. Down the road, in the direction of the whipping sound, was a glow. People were yakking and milling around, like Sunday morning, but I couldn't hear exactly what they were saying.

I ran inside, grabbed a housecoat, and moved back out along the gallery, down the stairs, and along the street toward where the glow was. What I saw was not lightning. Not a visitation by a saint.

A car on fire. A white car, a limousine. A car big enough to carry a captain in medals and pressed trousers to the christening of his ship. A car to convey the governor down Bourbon Street. A big-Daddy yessir car. Its shining white doors were being licked up by twelve-foot-high flames; the metal was sizzling. Red

hot. The crowd couldn't get closer than a half-block, but oh you wanted to see it fry! Crackling sounds, the sound of tearing, the chink of metal peeling off and hitting pavement. That pretty white no-good car cooking hard to a charred twist. Suddenly the gas tank exploded, sparks stormed heavenward, a big smell of gasoline, and everybody scattered for their lives. Porch chairs nicked by embers blurted into flame. Fire trucks snorted their way through the people, who were wandering around in robes and rumpled clothes. My mother was staring from curb side, trickles of sweat on her forehead, concentrating like she was ironing. What in heaven's holy name was that Rolls Royce doing in our street? Nobody was talking much. All the world was hypnotized by the snow car, the black night, the brilliant orange fire.

Papa was standing upright at the corner, his arms folded against his chest, staring at the sky with its divine flames. My arms were folded too, close to me, and I walked toward him. His eyes were teary, and he called out, "Darlin'!" but the smell of wine smothered the air between us and I turned away, back toward Mama. I don' t think he could really see anything except the impossible white car.

The white car burned on Monday night. Thursday morning, Father Wilson came over during our oatmeal and told us. Thursday evening, the paper reported it: a thug with a grudge against a rich shrimper had given a Mr. Lumiere $100 cash to torch the limo. The police, who knew people's situations, had noticed my father spending a wad of new money on champagne and oysters, but especially on champagne.

Wednesday evening, he'd whisked an envelope addressed to a Mrs. Jones under our front door. But after she found out, my mother gave the $25 to the priests. She couldn't see returning cash to a thug. The holy fathers took the cash, said thank you, and never another word about it. The police knew my father

wasn't a criminal but just was desperate for money. He'd never been in trouble with the law before, but still they arrested him, to teach him a lesson and to dry him out.

I was the oldest and I had to go. When Mama and I visited the jail, I made sure my white blouse was starched and tucked in straight, my shoes polished and buckled. I pressed my skirt just right so everyone would know the difference between me and him. Mr. Lumiere was confused about what was going on and shivered and mumbled in his cell. Later Mama sent a sweater for him, even though it was 98 degrees outside.

After jail, Catholic Charities took him in and he lived there 'til he died. I've got my own home now, and that's what matters. I didn't think about him all that much, but sometimes I missed him, his old way of rummaging through my hair, and how he'd let me cry as much as I wanted, when I was a very little girl.

Shoe Polish (for Rob)

Stephanie McCaslin

It smells like shoe polish
You say.
And I think of your box
tucked underneath the bed.
Sealed within it, tins
round and smudged.
Each a different shade,
gloss, sheen. I look,
like a woman choosing
hair dye.
The tools, also
brushes, and cloths
thick with sooty residue.
The black dust falls from them
when shifted, lifted, or prodded.

I think of your service days
the foundings of this collection.
Crew-cut you, on the edge of
your bunk, leaning in
to the leather and laces.
Following your systematic map.
Buffing the toes.

Wide eyed, in clothes that bear
your name.
You did not suspect
I would become your heart.

Light and Shadow 1 *by Paul Toscano*

Light and Shadow 2 *by Paul Toscano*

CONNECTIONS FEATURE

An Interview with

Wayne Karlin,

author of

Wandering Souls

and

Homer Steedly, Jr.

by Mary J. Lohnes

In war, promotion is easy; conquer and destroy while avoiding the bullets, the bombs and the treacherous terrain. At home, there are no promotions or awards for navigating through the landmines of war. It is a journey of memories, a battle of "wandering souls." College of Southern Maryland professor and author Wayne Karlin's newest book, *Wandering Souls,* reflects on the struggle of veteran Homer Steedly, Jr. to find peace for himself and the family of Hoang Ngoc Dam, a man he killed in Vietnam.

Wayne Karlin is the author of ten books including *Wandering Souls, Marble Mountain, War Movies, The Wished-For Country, Prisoners,* and *Rumors and Stones.* He has been the recipient of numerous awards including five State of Maryland Awards for fiction, two National Endowment of the Arts Fellowships, the Paterson Prize for fiction, and an Excellence in the Arts Award from the Vietnam Veterans of America. His work has appeared in numerous media forms including journals, newspapers and movies. Karlin, who served in the U.S. Marine Corps, including a tour in Vietnam in 1966-1967 as a helicopter gunner, has taught at CSM for more than 20 years.

Homer Steedly, Jr. started his Vietnam combat service as a second lieutenant leading the 1st Platoon of Bravo Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division. In October 1969, after a series of promotions and reenlistment, Steedly assumed command of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division.

On March 19, 1969, Steedly turned a bend in a trail in the Pleiku Province and came face to face with a North Vietnamese soldier. Armed, they stared at each other for a split-second, before Steedly shot first, killing the 24-year-old medic Hoang Ngoc Dam.

Searching the body, Steedly found several small notebooks and papers which he took and sent home to his mother in North Carolina. For thirty-five years, Steedly's memories and Dam's papers stayed hidden until his mom returned them to him. Karlin, a friend of Steedly, helped him locate Dam's family. As part of CSM's Connections Literary Series, on March 5, 2010, Karlin read from his new book *Wandering Souls,* which tells the story of Steedly and Dam's fateful meeting, the returning of Dam's documents and Steedly's return to Vietnam to meet the family of the man he killed. The reading took place at 7:30 p.m. at CSM's Leonardtown Campus, Building A, Auditorium.

In preparation for CSM's Connections program, Karlin and Steedly discussed memory, confronting the past and how to help veterans work their way through the healing process.

CSM: Wayne, you once asked fellow writer Tim O'Brien why he continues to write about Vietnam and its effects, and his response was "it validates my memory." Why do you keep returning to Vietnam as subject matter?

Karlin: For one thing, because war and its aftermath provide a writer with intense situations which dramatize basic human dilemmas. For another, the mind-sets and kind of decisions that got us into the Vietnam war, the particular situations of that war and the kind of damages it caused, are all are being repeated; and finally, when you are a writer, and when part of your own experience stemmed from an experience which was seminal and self-defining for your generation and your country, I believe there is a responsibility to write about it.

CSM: Wayne, as I was reading I was very touched by your concern and caring for Homer, especially when you brought him back to meet Dam's family. Were there times when you almost abandoned writing this book?

Karlin: Many times, particularly after I brought the documents back—without Homer—and then he decided we should go back and he should meet the family. It seemed he had come to peace with many things after he saw (through film and my description) how much the document return had meant to and helped the family come to their own peace, and I was constantly afraid that actually meeting them, and then going back to the former battlefields, would undo that healing. As it turned out, my fears were unrealized.

CSM: You have worked on this project for more than five years, after all this time what is the thing that surprised you the most and why?

Karlin: The grace and courage of Homer in his effort to face the past, to carry its weight and make something good come from it, and the grace and courage of the Hoang family and a Vietnamese village, so willing to take into their hearts a former enemy and bring the war to an end.

CSM: Wayne, you appear in the second half of the book and periodically in the beginning. As a fellow vet, how hard was it for you in the first half of the book to not include your own experiences of Vietnam?

Karlin: I wanted the book to be primarily the story of Homer and Dam—the American G.I. and the North Vietnamese soldier he killed—and I wanted as much as possible to stay out of the

story. I only intrude into the second part of the book because I had to become part of the story, when I returned the documents Homer had taken from Dam's body to the Hoang family and when I went to meet and travel with them and Homer. At that point, some of my own experiences were relevant.

Steedly: I think there is a lot of personal story there for Wayne as well. I think my return to Vietnam affected him almost as deeply as it did me. It was a healing experience. We all have demons to put to rest.

CSM: Wayne, in the book, you respond to Dr. Jonathan Shay's theory that what keeps some soldiers from committing atrocities is "moral luck" by arguing that "What you do depends on not where you are but on what you bring with you to that place." Could you discuss this idea further?

Karlin: Shay contended that under the "right" pressures, anyone would commit an atrocity. Yet we see that even in the worst incidents, such as the My Lai massacre, there were soldiers in the exact same environment, under the same pressures, who resisted participation. If we accept that something in their background helped them to do so, we can ask what kind of training and pre-conditioning might be cultivated systematically. If we accept such behavior as inevitable for everyone, then there is nothing we can do about it.

CSM: Homer, what did you bring with you when you returned to Vietnam that allowed you to confront your past and meet with Dam's family?

Steedly: The sense of doing the right thing more than anything else. There is a family that didn't know what had happened to one of their family members. It was only right that I go back and explain as much as I could about it.

CSM: Wayne, time and memory play a large role in this book and you even include a discussion with the Vietnamese writer Bao Ninh who describes early Vietnam war literature as being "the ghost of war." Do you feel like the passing of time allows for greater truths to be told or do you feel like time is a hindrance to memory and truth?

Karlin: Time, of course, is the great enemy of memory. But on the other hand it can allow for contemplation of meaning. Homer had forgotten many details of his service; it was a survival mechanism—he'd even put out of his mind the fact he had sent home to his mother the documents he'd taken off Dam's body. But the reality was that all of it had just stayed buried, and still affected him deeply. When he saw the documents again, after 35 years, as when he saw some of the battlefield where he fought, it all came back vividly, was all just waiting beneath a thin membrane of memory.

CSM: Homer, when you returned home, you didn't talk about the war because you were afraid people wouldn't believe you or would discount your experiences. What would you say to our current returning vets about your years of silence?

Steedly: They should find other vets, not necessarily even from the same war, but find other vets because those are the people you can talk to. You can't talk to civilians about combat. You just can't. It horrifies them to even think that you did those kinds of things and are now walking around loose. It doesn't

work. You need to find someone you can talk to without having to couch your words, or hold back your thoughts or tame up your language. Another vet can read between the lines, knows what you are talking about and has had the same feelings you've had or are having. I recently went to the 4th Infantry Division Reunion in St. Louis and met with 150 or so vets from the Vietnam war and within five minutes you are talking openly and in detail about things you haven't spoken of in 40 years. You feel comfortable because you don't have to explain yourself or justify yourself. They know where you have been and that is what these vets need so I encourage them to go to the Veteran's Administration and vet centers and talk with people who have been in your shoes and talk your language and don't do what I did and wait 40 years to do it.

Also, I do think that of all the tragedies, the biggest tragedy of war is not the affect it has had on the vets, tragic as that is, but the effect it has had on their friends, families and spouses because when these vets came back they were different and it affects everyone around them. Any woman who stayed with a man who has lived through combat, post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and all it brings deserve a medal.

CSM: Wayne, as we see the number of Iraq and Afghanistan veteran suicides increasing, how can a story like this change the public and the military's response to those who are afflicted? How would you like to see this disease dealt with?

Karlin: Like Homer just said, when he came back from the war, he tried to talk to people about it, but soon found that no one wanted to listen, either because they were indifferent—felt it had nothing to do with them—or because he disturbed the more comfortable images they wanted to have. Because of this, the experience always remains inside, creates in oneself the

feeling of being a pariah, outside the community—one can't come home. In his case, as in many, it led to self-destructive, suicidal behavior. When Homer and I went to Vietnam last year, we helped the Hoang family find, disinter, bring to light, commemorate, and then rebury in peace the remains of the man Homer killed. That process—not literally of course, but in essence and pattern—is what an individual, and a country, has to do to bring men and women home from war. The community has to be willing to listen, to share the experience and be changed by it—and even to make something positive come out of it—in order for the soldier to truly come home.

CSM: Homer, how do you think families and the public can help returning soldiers?

Steedly: Good question, not sure I know the answer. Talk with another vet. Of course, when you come back that is the last thing you want to do. You want to return to a normal life. I think the military does a better job of encouraging vets to attend counseling which is a good idea because you aren't going to do it voluntarily. It is too fresh and painful for you to want to go there. But at some point they really do need to talk about and touch their emotions. I was afraid of my emotions. I had so much anger and rage in me that I was afraid that if someone said something wrong to me I might go and kill someone. When I first came back, I never had a weapon far away and I had a real fortunate incident where I realized that my combat instincts might lead me to kill someone, but stopped in time and realized the danger.

Try to understand that it is scary coming back. You are coming back from a place with no rules and you are coming home to a place of rules. My solution for PTSD was that I became a workaholic. I worked six or seven days a week,

twelve-fourteen-sixteen hours a day. I loved working with computers, was good at it and didn't mind working like a maniac but that is how I dealt with it. I was so busy I didn't have time to think about Vietnam. I think that is how a lot of veterans handle it.

Sooner or later, it has to be dealt with because the little of things can bring it back. I thought I was perfectly normal; just a shy farm boy living 30 miles out of town in the country in a trailer by myself, who didn't make eye contact or talk to anyone. I thought I was coping well but now I know I had all the classic symptoms of PTSD. Of course, if someone had talked me into seeking counseling I might have gone once or twice to be polite but that would have been the end of it.

My healing has been quite dramatic and I am now in touch with hundreds of vets via email and phone. It has gotten to the point where I feel like I am back in a leadership role, back helping my troops.

When I returned to Vietnam and talked with two North Vietnamese vets I had fought with in battle (against one another). I learned that they see themselves as freedom fighters fighting against a corrupt government. They have no animosity toward me or other soldiers now even though at the time they saw us as a foreign invader. They understand that my country sent me over there and that soldiers do what they have to in combat. It's something to return forty years later, trade rice wine and opposing views of the same battles with your former enemy.

CSM: Homer, how do you describe your return to Vietnam to fellow veterans who may be too scared or filled with anger to return?

Steedly: I come across two types of veterans; some are in tune with what I did and applaud me for it and yet there are others

who still see the Vietnamese as an evil hoard, as inhumane killers and monsters and that is the way they have to see them because if they didn't they can't live with the things they did. They can live with it as long as they believe that those people deserved to die. Think about this, I was a Christian and seriously believed in the tenant that 'thou shall not kill' and suddenly I was half-way around the world in a situation where people were trying to kill me. In order to survive, I had to kill. When I came back to the states, I was a killer out on the street but no one knew it. War changes you forever. It is a break in your sense of reality and it is hard to get back from that.

CSM: Homer, how does working on your website (http://www.swampfox.info/) and sharing your war experiences help the healing process?

Steedly: On the web site, I try to give enough personal experience to give people a feel for combat but I try to concentrate on the stories of day-to-day military life. I try to give the veterans a forum to help them tell their story, many of whom are still deeply suffering from PTSD, having flashbacks, nightmares etc. I don't think most people realize how few Americans actually went to Vietnam. I want people to understand how futile and irrational and horrible war is but at the same time see what incredibly brave and courageous and good-hearted people were on both sides of that war.

I try to focus the stories on the camaraderie and big snakes anecdotes we all experienced. The day-to-day stuff they don't remember because when you come back from combat and you try to think about that time, the memories that come back immediately and that overwhelm you are the horrors, the terrors and tragedies because they are the most deeply engrained. Most vets get flashbacks and then try to back away from

remembering. You don't want to think about it anymore. So I try to focus on the good times and we did share good times and amazing experiences together. Good bonding experiences. When vets read those, then they are encouraged to share and this is what they need to do, they need to work slowly through the times. They need to remember the good friends they had. You know the bonds we made over there are stronger than most of us experience in our lifetimes, with the exception of maybe your spouse or your parents. You trust your fellow soldier implicitly. If you turn your back, you know that the man behind you will give his life if necessary. Those kinds of bonds are hard to explain. I like to tell them that if they will meet with other vets they will feel that bonding and sense of belonging again. I think veterans miss that feeling because we lost that bonding, we returned to the world but we didn't belong here either; we weren't the same people that left. We walk among you but we are different.

My hope and dream is to live long enough that the last war will be something that old people remember and young people think is something quaint they study in history class. There are better ways of solving problems; war creates more problems than it solves. Think of all of the incredible people who have died in war on both sides and imagine what they could have contributed to the world if only they had been able to live. What a waste.

Locked

Dee Sydnor

An innocent bystander really
says she's so sorry
she knew we were close
[I gasp for breath]
Her eyes plunge into mine
searching the depths
for my buried treasure.
[Time to freeze]
Empty-handed, she returns
to the surface,
key dangling from her finger.

Evening Stroll *by Thaddeus Stephen Wright*

Lone Musician *by Thaddeus Stephen Wright*

in that slight pivoting

Patrick Allen

"At the subtle moment when man glances backward over his entire life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate." —*The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus*

Unionization had finally come to Hell.
The contract called for one fifteen minute break per century,
And a single payer plan
That Republicans had to administer,
All the while muttering about how the freedom loving spirit would leak right out of everything,
Once the Damned were allowed this SOCIALIST mollycoddling and such.
Sisyphus was taking a break,
Smoking an unfiltered Lucky Strike,
Adjusting his mandatory shoulder pad
And unlacing his steel-toed boots,
Now required, for anyone whose work involved exposure to heavy rolling objects.
Tantalus strode over,
Pulling the hood down from his head-to-toe Wet Suit
That protected his skin from prolonged water exposure,
That the Union insisted was not part of the original Contract of Condemnation.
He offered Sisyphus a caffeine free, diet, Coca Cola,
Took a proffered coffin nail from the pack in return, and sat down.
Tantalus blew a smoke ring and asked, "So how are things going with you and the rock?"
Sisyphus sang, "I got to keep on pushing …."
Then he, who dared to think that he was the equal to a god,

asked, “How about you and the food and water gig?”
“Same old, same old,” the Lydian king chuckled, “Dip and
reach, reach and dip…”
Then his eyes narrowed and he furled his brow,
“But you know that fruit is starting to look moldy;
And that water, it’s got to be brackish, what with not just the fish,
But everybody else in that end of the pond, pissin’ in it.”
Then, as they took one last pull on their sodas,
Stubbed out their smokes,
Getting ready for their next shift;
Sisyphus turned conspiratorially toward Tantalus,
Looked him deep in his rheumy eyes,
And said, “I been meaning to ask you a question.
You know,
Cause you understand the set up and how things are going down
around here.”
The trickster of the Gods, the cannibal, and infanticider, nodded
his head and sighed deeply,
Then turned his full attention to the man who had cheated
death itself;
And said, “What?”
Sisyphus pulled him closer …
“I want to ask this one question.”
“What is it?” Tantalus felt gnawing fear rising in his chest now.
The Great Stone Roller pulled still closer to the Man of
Unrequited Desire,
“What I wanted to ask you,
Be honest with me now…
Does my ass look big in these jeans?”

Field of Old Dreams *by Robin Karis*

Dans Sa Lumière

Rachel Heinhorst

I love him, I think
he loves me too, sometimes,
when my neck slips and travels
to the side he likes.

He adores each moment
of this black lace enchantment
and I dissolve my fragility
into the eyes beneath my skin,
before he leads me out again,
and what right do I have
to think heart's light
relies on the dawn.

It is never night when we kiss,
and there is no witness
to the restless pleasure
that lays me down.

Washington, D.C.

Ernie Wormwood

I rode buses over old streetcar tracks
to my uncle's, Hodges Restaurant, downtown.
Danced at Rand's with my boyfriend,
we were the only white people.
Chocolate City they called it.
I had a dream with Martin Luther King,
limped through the Rotunda to honor
John F. Kennedy, sobbed through riots,
saw ground broken for the subway,
and marched down Pennsylvania Avenue
decrying presidents, decrying wars.
Washington's a protest capital, a government town,
full of opposites, full of circles and avenues,
lines between this and that. I crossed them
wondering "Why is there a line here?"
Sometimes life in the city is so unmerciful,
it brings a tear to the Moon and a great weeping
is heard. Thus Washington is cleansed.
And so they arrive—nights of luminescence,
supremely palpable joy, and days of reckoning.

Stairway *by Kyle Morgan*

Longing

Carl D. Bevard, Jr.

I have taken the ring you once gave me
And I have put it on a string.
That string I have strung ‘round my neck,
Where together it and the ring form two adjoining ones.
The circles as they overlap betray my longing:
One eternal circle wrenched out of me,
And simply to touch that lost eternity
I have built my own image of it in twine.

Window in Nijmegen *by Mitzi S. Phalen*

CONNECTIONS FEATURE

An Interview with U.S. Poet Laureate Kay Ryan

by Mary J. Lohnes

We think of the poet as a man or woman alone, an artist working through their threads of thought and weaving images out of thin air but according to Kay Ryan, the 16th U.S. Poet Laureate, it takes "a lot of wool to make a poem." Ryan, who read at the College of Southern Maryland on April 2 as part of the Connections Literary Series, notes that wool can come in many forms: the time to reflect, the casting of an idea, an engaged student and even the belief that someone has in you, your work and your dream.

Kay Ryan was born in California in 1945 and grew up in small towns along the San Joaquin Valley and the Mojave Desert. She holds a bachelor and master degree in English from the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and an associate degree from Antelope Valley College. Ryan is the

author of several collections of poetry, including *The Niagara River, Say Uncle, Elephant Rocks* and *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems*, which was published by Grove Press this spring. Ryan has been the recipient of numerous awards including the Ruth Lilly Prize, a Guggenheim fellowship, the Ingram Merrill Award, a National Endowment for the Arts fellowship and four Pushcart Prizes. She has been included in *The Best American Poetry* collection four times and was included in their *The Best of the Best American Poetry 1988-1997* anthology. In 2006, she was named the chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, a post she will hold until 2012.

In 2008, Ryan was appointed the Library of Congress' sixteenth Poet Laureate. The Poet Laureate position, also known as the Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, is appointed annually by the Library of Congress for a term running from October to May, though many laureates' tenures have lasted multiple terms. The poet laureate seeks to "raise the national consciousness to a greater appreciation of the reading and writing of poetry" through readings, events and the creation of a national project. Ryan has dedicated her tenure to honoring her beloved spouse and teaching partner of thirty years, Carol Adair, who passed away from cancer in January 2009. In October 2009, Ryan unveiled The Community College Poetry Project; a three-tiered project she hopes will encourage and promote the importance of poetry and community college programs. The Community College Poetry Project includes "Poetry for the Mind's Joy," a web site to be launched by the Library of Congress that will feature poetry submitted by community colleges and a National Poetry Day on Community College Campuses on April 1st that will include events, readings and a conference call/webcast. Ryan has lived in Marin County, California and taught foundation English skills at the College of Marin, a community college in Northern California, for more than 30 years.

In preparation for CSM's Connections program, Ryan discussed the importance of community colleges and her work and struggles as a poet.

CSM: Have you been surprised by the reception of your work since you've become poet laureate?

Ryan: It had started changing before that. Obviously, I couldn't have become poet laureate if the work wasn't finding an audience. The laureateship is a great honor and distinction in that it has an affect on people that aren't very intimate with American poetry. It's like if my neighbor were a NASCAR champion. I would be impressed, just as a NASCAR champion might be impressed that I am the laureate but really neither one of us knows or understands what the other does.

CSM: As someone who calls themselves a modern hermit, how has serving as the poet laureate changed you, your writing habits and your perception of your career path?

Ryan: I am pretty old. I am 64. I'm not really worried about my future career path. Being laureate has made it very difficult to write because it is very occupying—readings, interviews, travel. But this would have been a difficult time anyway because of Carol's death. So in a way, it is difficult to sort out what's occurred because of the laureateship and what has happened because Carol isn't here.

CSM: The focus of your tenure as poet laureate has been community colleges. As someone who teaches at a community college, and whose partner did as well, could you talk a little about the importance of community colleges in America?

Ryan: I've made it my project as the laureate to simply advocate and praise junior and community colleges. I guess it's like saying that I am really in favor of oxygen as an element needed for human happiness but I really do believe that community colleges are so essential to our country and they are taken for granted, underfunded and often un-respected. I wanted to show the nation that all these teachers and students in these community colleges are doing wonderful, life-changing work. They deserve the utmost respect. I consider community colleges as nitrogen fixing agents in the soil; they are converting people and communities into something rich and productive.

CSM: You teach remedial and introductory English classes at the College of Marin, a community college, correct?

Ryan: I always did but I haven't been doing it the last couple of years. I did it part-time for well over 30, probably 33 years. I would teach nine units and then have a lot of undefined time to gather wool for my poetry. You know, it takes a lot of wool to make a poem.

CSM: What have you learned by teaching these classes?

Ryan: Teaching English skills is gratifying because the acquisition of the ability to read and write is the access to one's mind, one's self. When you learn how to write an orderly paragraph, you have not only learned to write but how to think and you've developed a platform for thinking further.

In choosing to advocate community colleges, I have met so many teachers/instructors who have tears in their eyes and are so grateful that we are bringing their work into the spotlight. They say their schools are exciting, gratifying places to work. What's interesting is that so many of these teachers are in the same position that I was in, in that they are teaching evening classes

and the students are coming in their scrubs, their work clothes, or they have a child who might be in the corner of the class coloring. These are exciting students to work with, they have a terrific appetite for what they are getting—an education. The exchange in a community college classroom is like bread, giving people bread.

CSM: What is one misconception people have about community colleges?

Ryan: That the quality of education is inferior to a four-year school. I happen to think it is better because the instructors and students have a closer relationship. It is very likely that a community college instructor will know your name and be more accessible. I graduated from community college in the Mohave Desert (Antelope Valley College) and I was so excited to get away to UCLA thinking I would be rubbing shoulders with Nobel Prize winners etc. but I ended up rubbing shoulders with teaching assistants. Even in upper division courses, I found it impossible to make contact with the instructors. It was very alienating and frustrating. Looking back I had a great time at that little school; it had 800 students. Carol always used to say that "people have little cups, all you have to do is fill their little cup with knowledge." You don't have to have a Nobel to do it; being a good instructor is more important.

CSM: Your poems have been labeled short, accessible and the like and yet by your own admission there is a lot going on beneath the surface including multiple meanings, inside jokes and recombinant rhymes. What are your intentions as a writer?

Ryan: I go in thinking there is something I want to understand or there's a place I want to arrive at, something that is troubling my mind that needs clarifying and I keep writing until I have solved it

or until it fails and I give up. You know, most poems don't work for one reason or another. I write an awful lot of material that will never be seen.

CSM: Do you have any lines over the years that you have kept that you wish you could find a home for?

Ryan: I am really crazy about malapropisms (replacing a word with a similar sounding word). I have used "No Rest for the Idle" and I have a poem called "Green Behind the Ears" that came about because someone said it instead of wet behind the ears, and I thought that was a really beautiful turn of phrase. There is another title I have been saving for years which is that "I am at the end of my straw." I thought "I am at the end of my straw" would be a great topic for a poem, but I haven't written it yet.

CSM: You've mentioned in several articles that you never wanted the typical poetic life and that poetry for you has been a personal pursuit. What has poetry taught you about yourself?

Ryan: I've learned that I am actually less superficial than I think. Well if you talk to me in regular life, I tend to bounce things off at fairly ground level but through poems I find understandings that I am otherwise incapable of articulating. For me talking is kind of frustrating. It is hard to get at anything substantial. It is easy to say things that one has said before, you know, we sort of tar paper over things with our conversations while poetry allows for deep exploration.

CSM: You tend to read mainly essays rather than poetry/ fiction etc. How does reading essays on writing, its aesthetics, construction etc. influence your work?

Ryan: I think it primarily influences my work in the sense that it is intellectual companionship. These writers think at an exciting level for me. It makes my brain work at a deep level and accelerates my thinking.

CSM: What does writing in free verse offer you as a writer?

Ryan: I don't know if I would call it free verse. When I think of free verse, I certainly don't think of something as highly rhymed as my work.

When I am writing, each word that I use in some sense calls to other words. It calls to its sound family so that all of these words come clamoring, take my mind into new directions. I am trying to do one thing, say trying to describe an aspect of loss, trying to explain it, and then all sorts of words become present in my mind that take my thinking in new directions even as I am still trying to go along that original path. So I get redirected by rhyme. It is a very fortunate thing. As Milan Kundera noted, "Writing has to be better than our regular mind; some operation has to occur by which we are made better than ourselves." So for me one of the great properties of rhyme, is that it simply enlarges my thinking.

CSM: Did you have problems when you were first incorporating rhyme into your work, because for a long time it was considered a faux pas?

Ryan: Two things were great impediments to my reception as a poet. One was my deep affection for very playful, unpredictable rhymes. The other was that I like jokes and amusement in my poems. I don't know if my poems are as amusing as they used to be but I always need to amuse myself in some way. So the tone of my poems might have seemed not sufficiently grave to those who need poetry to be this serious pursuit. I think poetry can deal with grave matters without being grave.

CSM: Many of your poems seem to lack descriptive adjectives. Is this intentional?

Ryan: Is that right?

CSM: You don't describe things extensively, though you do use some adjectives like "green" regularly.

Ryan: I love to hear this—did you count my words? You know somebody did that once; they had a computer program that analyzed word usage. It is so weird. I don't remember what they found but I would love it if green showed up as a major word. I was thinking of Elizabeth Bishop recently and she uses the word pink a lot.

CSM: What is your favorite thing about being a poet?

Ryan: Having access to parts of my mind that I can't reach in any other way. I love writing and it is still a perfect source of private amusement for me.

CSM: You took on the second year of the laureateship in order to help you get through the loss of Carol, and I was wondering if the poetry is still coming to you anyway, if there are poems at the back of your brain going ok, let's write/talk about this?

Ryan: I am the kind of writer that…I don't know if I have anything to write about until I sit down to start. I don't seem to be the type of person who is knitting away at some project in the back of my mind. It may be that I am but I am lucky that if I sit down and put a few words down, I have a general direction to proceed.

CSM: What is the hardest thing for you to do as a poet?

Ryan: Interesting. I don't know if I have ever been asked this before. I think the hardest thing is giving up on a poem that isn't working. I often get invested in an idea and what I try to do is recognize when something has gotten bogged down, overly elaborate, stiff, or if it smells too much of the lamp; in other words, it is overworked. I'll put away those pages and I try to start completely over on that same idea but I go about it in another way. Sometimes after all of that frustration, I will be able to do something simpler that works.

CSM: You have said that your late spouse, Carol Adair, was your strongest advocate and your single companion in your poetry life. How did she support and sustain your work as a writer on a daily basis and how has her death affected your work?

Ryan: You just asked a question that will take me the rest of my life to answer but I will try to answer it superficially. She helped me over the almost endless hump of trying to get my work accepted. We started living together in 1979, and there were many years, probably half of that time, I was getting nowhere. Carol would insist that I give her packages of my work, a list of publications and she would send them out for me because it was so discouraging for me. She would say, "Okay, we'll send out 100 packages and hope for one acceptance; one in a hundred that would be our goal. Harden your heart," she'd tell me. Carol made it possible; I would just be too discouraged. She helped me continue. She was the backbone; she always believed in the work and never doubted it, even the early work that I, myself, didn't think was very impressive. There are times I wonder why she believed in it. I don't know what would have happened to my life and work had she not been there.

q u i e t

Joanne Van Wie

take the sound of that dead fall rising
waiting for us to notice
the weakness of the wind

take the still ripple out and we can't believe
we keep struggling to see it move

in the depths we only float on the edges
on to patches of moss
when someone swallows

this hard, cold quiet exhales each of us

but take the sounds away
of the body rolling out
and the words underneath it
they pass
they pass.

The Last Black Tobacco Farmer *by William Poe*

The Mason *by William Poe*

Once Upon A Look

Judy Angelheart

She is still beautiful
As she floats
Suspended between worlds

I entreat the angels
To go before God
Beg him to give me a new language
One more finite and infinite
For I find no words here will do

The calmness I feel
Is only matched by her face
Gentle tranquility
I so wish to embrace
And carry it back
To things that I know

I have lost my ground
Find no firm foothold
All I can do is watch
The magic unfold

Beams of light
Flit before my face
Their movements mesmerize me
Faint voices sing come dance with us

I believe I could
Grace that place
Yet I am frozen
Only my heart moves
Beating hard upon my chest
Coursing blood in every space

This is my only clue
I sleep not
Nor do I dream

What span could be built
To take me there
Hold open the gate
To let me escape

Thought a smile
Cross over her face
She enfolds me with her gaze
Teasingly she bids me come

Would I dare transverse
Could I carry her back
Or would I have to stay

My lovely lady of the lake

The Old Woman's Confidence and How She Gained It

Jacqueline Hahn

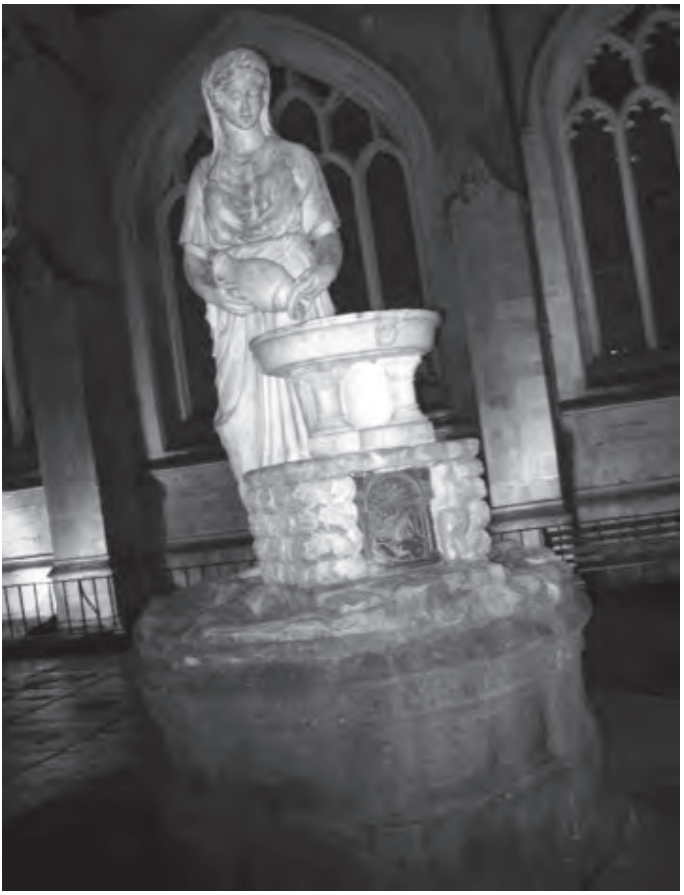
"In the days of my youth I remember'd my God!
And He hath not forgotten my age."
—Robert Southey

"You are old, Mrs. Wilson," the young girl said,
"There is signal of grey in your locks.
But still you insist on false platinum curls
Like the model who graces the box."

"In the days of my youth," Mrs. Wilson replied,
"My hair swung to my waist in a braid.
But the color you question is honestly mine
On the strength of the nine bucks I paid."

"You are old, Mrs. Wilson," the young girl whined,
"And your boobs are beginning to sag.
Still your necklines, they plunge like the Appenine Gorge.
Don't you think you're a bit of a slag?"

"In my youth," said Ms. Wilson, "my boobs were quite firm,
But were rarely the subject of talk.
I'd a brain in my head and a witty retort
For those fools who would whistle and gawk.
And though your audacity grates on my ear
I will give you my solemn decree;
When the youth of the future heap scorn at your feet
You'll just wish you had aged more like me."



Statue, Bath, England *by Jessica Parker*

Contributor Notes

PATRICK ALLEN has been at CSM for 23 years. He is the chair of the Social Sciences, Human Services, and Teacher Education Division. He is a psychologist, who finds himself compelled to engage in talk therapy by sending out these messages to whomever may be listening.

JUDY ANGELHEART writes poetry, short stories, articles, and blogs when the mood or inclination strikes her, which she prays is often. Sometimes she is prodded to write, and, other times, the words just come to her in the middle of the night. She likes to keep her writing simple; she doesn't want to cause any tangled minds or frazzled nerves. Judy lives in Lusby, Maryland with her wonderful husband, Dimitrios. They have two dogs and a cat.

CARL D. BEVARD, JR. was born in Prince George's County but raised in Southern Maryland. He attended CSM as an undergraduate before earning an AA degree in General Studies and transferring to Saint Mary's College of Maryland, from which he graduated with a BA in English after studying abroad for his senior year. He is an adjunct instructor at CSM at the Prince Frederick Campus and enjoys reading and writing, but mostly the study of Medieval and Renaissance literature, history, and philosophy.

JACKIE CUTLIP-NILES is a local artist with a passionate flair for photography. She has an extensive background in "black & white" and digital photography, with an emphasis on unique, "one-of-a-kind" dark room techniques that she applies to her imagery. The merging of poetry and images is a recurring theme, emphasizing the sublime beauty of our rural and maritime Southern Maryland landscape. Working in her home dark room and studio, her distinctive style of photography and printing merge to create unique pieces of art. Living with her family in Dunkirk, Maryland, Jackie continues to find inspiration from the natural world, discovering wonder in every day.

JACQUELINE HAHN is the mother of two astonishingly grown children, and an adjunct instructor of English at CSM's Prince Frederick Campus. She also plays and teaches violin and is a member of the local symphony orchestra.

RACHEL HEINHORST is an adjunct English instructor for CSM who writes poetry.

ROBIN KARIS lives in Charles County and enjoys photography and writing. She also enjoys working on her family tree, in the hopes that she will find a relative somewhere in a land far, far away, who maybe has a castle.

MARY J. LOHNES is a writer for the College of Southern Maryland and several other publications and organizations. In addition to writing, she is interested in urban sustainability and food production/availability issues. She is currently working on a series of war poems.

STEPHANIE McCASLIN is an assistant professor in CSM's Mathematics, Physics, and Engineering Division. She specializes in teaching the mathematics education courses for pre-service teachers. She is also an alum of CSM, as she received her AA from Charles County Community College (CCCC) many moons ago. She enjoys encouraging her students to consider math concepts from alternative points of view, and pushing them to extend their thinking beyond "the box!" She lives with her boyfriend, daughter, and a menagerie of pets, and even though she grew up in various locations around the world, she loves Southern Maryland, and has made it her home.

KYLE MORGAN had a poem published in the last edition of *Connections* titled "Ignorance is Sadness." He is a student at CSM.

JESSICA PARKER has been working as a career and academic advisor at CSM since October 2005. She is an undergraduate of Towson University and is preparing her master's thesis at the College of Notre Dame of Maryland in contemporary communications.

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

WILLIAM POE is a Maryland home improvement contractor and part-time oral historian for Calvert County. In 2009, he was awarded the Calvert County Public Education Award for his book, *African-Americans of Calvert County*. He is the creator of "Voices of Calvert County," a local cable program which shares the stories of local African-Americans. He also directed and produced the documentary film, *The Life and Death of Sharecropper Enoch Tyler.* He has published essays, poetry, and photographs in local magazines and periodicals.

KAREN SAGSTETTER has published poetry and fiction in about thirty literary journals, two chapbooks of poetry, and two nonfiction books, and has won first prizes in short story contests sponsored by Glimmer Train Press and *Antietam Review*. She studied in Japan as a Fulbright journalist and has worked in museum publishing for many years.

DEE SYDNOR is a student at CSM majoring in English. She is the mother of four, the grandmother of one, and is married to Dave.

PAUL TOSCANO has been on the staff of CSM since 1980. As a certified 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*.

JOANNE VAN WIE, lives in Mechanicsville, Maryland, with her husband, Michael, and their children.

ERNIE WORMWOOD has new work coming out this year in *Garygoyle* and in *The Poet's Cookbook*—poems that celebrate German food.

THADDEUS STEPHEN WRIGHT is a fine arts student at CSM. He is in his second year of study and is specializing in photography. He also works as a part-time teacher's assistant. His work has been featured in the annual student show at the Tony Hungerford Gallery, he has pieces in the permanent collection of the Walter Grove Memorial Gallery, and he made it into the finals for the Photographer's Forum College Competition. He is quoted as saying that "photography is not just a hobby for me; it's a passion. It's the way I capture and celebrate life."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