

Spring 2014 Literary Magazine



Connections

COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND

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# Connections

COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND  
**Spring 2014 Literary Magazine**

**volume 21      number 2**



**Nanjemoy** by *Allison Burnett*

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# Dear Nan

*William Poe*

Dear Nan:

I can't believe a decade has passed. As the old adage goes, "It seems like yesterday, but it was long ago." Well, no matter how much time passes, life has gotten only a little easier without you in it. Your beautiful face remains frozen in time in my mind.

I wanted to sit down and pen these thoughts to you and wasn't sure where to start. It's impossible to encapsulate forty years of precious time together in any one letter and would not do our time together justice to attempt to do so. From the time I was born and through the next four decades, you would be a principal navigator in my life, often helping to steer me back on course when I ran adrift. It wasn't the forsythia branch that you had us sometimes break off the front yard tree that kept us in line as you may have thought, but our respect and love for you. The switching from the branch never hurt us nearly as much as to show the slightest irreverence towards you. At fifty years old, I sure could use some navigation from you now.

I keep that cardboard kaleidoscope you bought for me when I was five on a shelf in my office. And whenever I want to be transported back to your house on Arcadia Avenue, where we spent much of our time growing up, I give the kaleidoscope a turn or two. Each dazzling design those antique glass beads make reminds me of our now fantastical childhood moments spent together. Like the teaspoon of sugar and whiskey you would sometimes give us before bed when we were ailing to help lull us to sleep. I often wonder if that was where my fondness for libations derived from. And how at breakfast you would cut my toast into perfect tiny

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squares and along with a piece of egg white, dip them into the yolk and sing “eensy teensy spider” so that I would eat, all the while moving our fingers up the spout and down the drain. Or how you would put mercurochrome on our cuts or scrapes, which we managed to get many, then lightly blow on it to accelerate the healing. Nor will I ever forget those hot and muggy summer eves as we patiently awaited those tiny sporadic lights to flicker in your yard. With jar in hand we would attempt to snatch a hovering firefly from its flight to secure him and with deft precision you would remove its light while still glowing and make rings to put on our fingers. And how late nights, the faint glow of a black and white television would slip beneath the cracks of a door and into our bedroom as you sat and watched *Perry Mason* into the wee hours of the morning, and your slight crunching of ice or cracking of Doublemint chewing gum would interrupt the night’s tranquility. I will never forget those long journeys we made to Florida, watching the mermaids at Weeki Wachee Springs. And how before you quit smoking, when you would summon me over to the table as you played cards with your sisters, and give me a bedtime kiss, leaving the same deep red lipstick trace on my cheek that lay on your cigarette. Equally as memorable was how you taught me to kneel before my bedside each night and say prayers before tucking me in. And lastly, some of my most cherished articles from you are your handwritten letters. The letters you wrote to me so faithfully each week while I was in the Marine Corps. Your endearing words comforted your grandson on many lonely nights a thousand miles away. I have each letter you ever wrote yet cannot bring myself to reread them since your passing.

You loved making Sunday dinners, searching for four-leaf clovers, playing rummy, and gardening. Hydrangeas were your favorite. But most of all, you devoted your life to taking care of your grandchildren. And although you bore no children

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of your own, you raised us as yours. You never realized that we knew you had adopted Mom, that would have pained you if you did. However, it only made you more special and endearing to all of us. November 5th is surely a day I do not wish to relive yet a day I will never forget. It was the day you transitioned from the earthly world to who knows where. It was the darkest day of my life, still in fifty years. The day before we sat in your hospital room listening to our favorite singer, Nat King Cole. “Oh, that man can sing,” I remember you saying.

We held hands and talked. I told you how you were the best grandmother anyone could ever have. You asked how the girls were doing and told me to be sure to tell them how much you loved them. They didn’t visit because they were young and scared to see you in this condition. We watched *Wheel of Fortune* as we always did and I kissed you goodnight and said I would see you the next day. The following morning we got word that you were improving and thinking that you were “out of the woods,” I didn’t visit as planned. Instead, I drank in celebration that night. Celebrating your homecoming which would surely be forthcoming. Then an ominous storm rose from out of nowhere that evening, foreshadowing what would become of the following day.

There you lay in your hospital bed, just as I had left you two days earlier. You looked so peaceful. I held your beautifully crooked fingers in my hands, then kissed your lips, weeping uncontrollably. The nurse was puzzled when I asked for a pair of scissors. I snipped a lock of your hair and placed it in a piece of tissue and handed it to Mom. Your soul had taken flight.

We held your wake in our home just like they did in the old days. Your silky silvery hair lay across the cotton pillow and flowed like a weeping willow. Dressed in your favorite pink blouse, you were as beautiful in death as in life. I sat with

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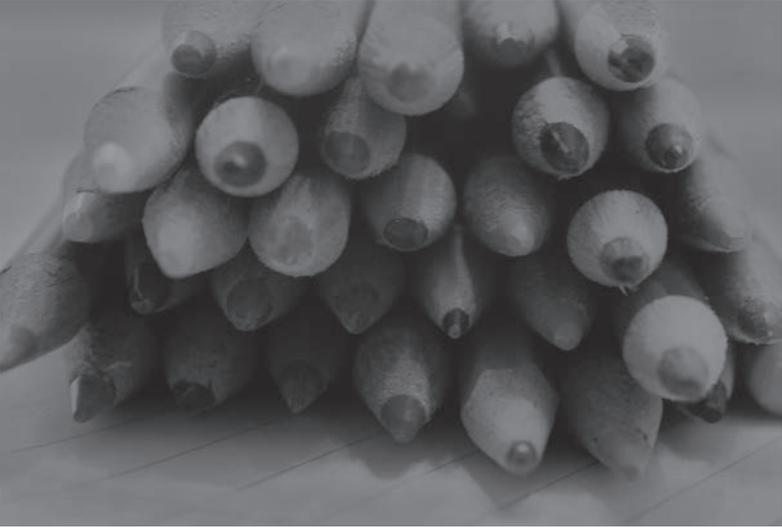
you late into the wee hours of the morning, listening to the haunting voice of Eva Cassidy singing “Fields of Gold.” It would be one of our last moments together. The night before, I drove to the cemetery and lay in your freshly dug grave and gazed up into the chilly November skies. A shooting star whisked by.

The following days, weeks, months, I was tethered to a bed, attempting to embalm my body with any ingredients that would take away the pain. Pills and alcohol brought only temporary relief. Maybe it was the nighttime visits from you that helped pull me through. During your 81 revolutions around the sun, you filled many lives with love and your beauty. I miss your nighttime phone calls and birthday cards.

“Penny for your thoughts,” you would always ask as my head lay in your lap, your fingers massaging my temples. Well that would be an easy answer. I would give ten years of my life to have you back for just one more day.

To steal a line from our favorite Nat King Cole song, Nan: “I miss you most of all my darling, when autumn leaves start to fall.”

Until we meet again,  
Your loving grandson



*Colored Graphite by Anna Readen*

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# Saturday at the Market

*Leslie Dickey*

A small village indistinguishable from the others scattered across Go Cong Province. Anywhere transportation routes converge you find, during the daytime hours, a cluster of farmers, fishermen, and vendors hawking their wares. Their customers aren't limited to the peasants that reside in the nearby huts and hovels, but are also found in the constant flow of people passing by, traveling on the road from Nothingleft to Somewherebetter.

Most Saturdays this rural marketplace is a beehive of activity. Today, the dominant buzz comes from a massive horde of flies congregating at the pavilion in center square. The flies have been drawn to the shaded platform occupied by the White Mice, stern looking National Police officers clad in freshly laundered, gleaming white uniform shirts. The officers, like the vendors who had arrived before them, are busy stacking and arranging the previous week's harvest in neat rows suitable for the crowd's inspection.

In the distance there is a barely perceptible parting of the crowd, a rippling of humanity as two Americans come into view walking comfortably toward the market. The Americans live in a small, pre-fabricated building at the nearby Popular Forces (PF) compound. A shed in a triangular mud fortress. The advisors live off the local economy, the nearest American units lying far to the north. They are acquainted with most of the local vendors and move casually along the road, bantering along the way.

The Americans are softly attired, more out for an afternoon stroll than offensive operations. They move with a relaxed gait, wearing their un-starched jungle fatigues and

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go-to-hell hats more in the style of the Popular Forces than regular US Army soldiers seen near American bases. One advisor is apparently unarmed and the other seems to be carrying an old Winchester Model 1897 exposed hammer pump shotgun, an ancient weapon not unlike one any farmer might have stashed in his hooch. What the villagers don't see is that each advisor has a concealed 1911A1 .45 caliber pistol under his fatigue jacket and that the young officer with the shotgun has a bandolier with twenty-five rounds of double-ought buck tied around his waist. The advisors are confident in their security without being careless with their lives.

The advisors move, apparently aimlessly, towards center square stopping to shop for supplies along the way. Individual stalls are packed with vegetables and exotic fruits, the brightly colored produce creating a rich Impressionistic palette. They stop to chat with the butcher; teasing him about the quality and source of the carcasses he has hanging in the open air.

Moving on to the fishmonger, the Americans compliment him on the size and freshness of the shellfish he has displayed on ice. The advisors are more wary of the finfish he tries to sell them. The US Agency for International Development has introduced a rapidly growing fish to the local aquaculture industry. But it is a rare vendor who will go to the trouble of moving the fish from the cesspool to a clean pond to have their system cleansed with a thirty day diet of corn and fish food.

Finally, the advisors arrive at the pavilion in center square. They socialize with the officer-in-charge and indifferently inspect the crop collected by the White Mice from the area's Popular and People's Self Defense Forces (PSDF). A crop of corpses, collected during the previous week's operations. The bodies have been lightly cleaned to remove any barriers to identification. The arrangement is as tasteful as possible given

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the circumstances. The White Mice seek to have the Cong bodies identified. They are there to interrogate anyone who wishes to claim a friend or loved one.

The officer-in-charge understands that many will be hesitant to claim a body for fear of being taken as a communist sympathizer. For that reason, plain clothes agents of the National Police circulate among the crowd, gauging reactions. A tear, even a faint gasp could lead to a midnight visit from the government.

The Americans note that five of the eight bodies on display have been taken on nighttime operations they accompanied. The remaining three are PSDF kills from an ambush in an adjacent hamlet just six hours ago. Lieutenant Buckley, the youngest American and bearer of the shotgun, recognizes one of the fresher corpses.

“Hey Stan, look at this one! You ought to remember where you’ve seen him before.”

“I think you’re right. That’s the café owner’s son,” said Lieutenant Richards.

Lieutenants Richards and Buckley have known for some time that the owner of the café across the canal from their compound is an official in the underground VC government. This knowledge was one of the motivating factors that took them on regular nighttime forays into the café several evenings each week for a couple of cold beers. A defiant, in your face gesture meant to diminish the villagers’ fear of the Cong.

Some might have thought their actions reckless, but the Americans saw little danger in sitting cheek to jowl with the enemy. After all, it wasn’t likely that a satchel charge or grenade would be thrown into the café that served as sanctuary for the local communists.

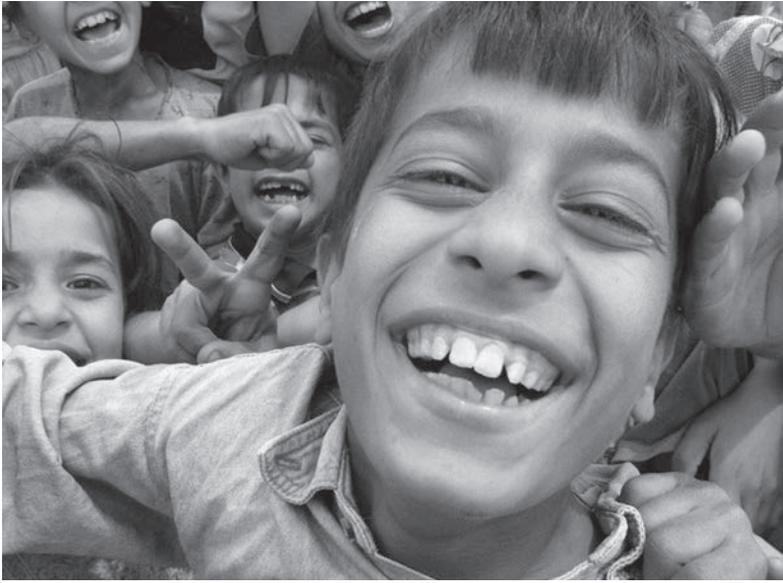
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The Americans finish their review of the piled corpses. Lieutenant Richards informs the officer-in-charge of the identity of the café owner's son and the advisors set off for the short walk back to the compound, passing through the crowd without incident.

Buckley pulls up short at the bridge just outside the compound gate and turns to Richards.

“Hey Stan, what say we hop on over to the café for a cold one?”

Richards grins and responds, “Why not? It's just been another day at the market.”



*Iraqi Victor-UMM Qasar by William (Ed) Moroney*

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# On Flying and Falling

*Sherbie Carson*

From the highest peak of the house, you called down to me,  
“All of the best people are born in December: you and me,  
and Jesus.” And there we were, the day after my birthday, two  
weeks beyond yours, decorating for Jesus’; the day you fell.

And I, who always dreamt of flying, and never of falling—  
Who always dreamed of rescuing, and never of being  
rescued—  
Would have called out your name, if it weren’t your blood  
that pierced my skin and the sidewalk.

It was the day that I learned new nightmares, replaying the  
scene one thousand times over, one thousand times wingless,  
one thousand times broken.

I never saw the angels that braced the weight of your impact  
on the solid stone staircase. Although, the image of singed  
winged giants requesting reassignment brings a peace that I  
carry with me.

And I, who once possessed the unshaken faith belonging only  
to 5-year-olds—  
Who once heard your key turn in the door, and leapt  
from the summit of a carpeted staircase into the safety  
of your arms—  
Would have longed to be the solid arms of sensibility that  
caught you before you reached the valley called Consequence.

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But I have never been the one accused of sensibility, level-headedness, logic, or any of the other burdens that leave men flightless. Surely, it was only for this known character flaw that you allowed me to play a role in your adventure that day.

And you, the man who asks only for forgiveness, but never permission—

The man who others call for help, but would never ask it for himself—

Called me to join you upon the ladder—upon the roof—upon the heights that define adulthood.

What a badge of honor to be chosen—or defaulted to—to jointly bypass the stinging bites of conscience in exchange for the 32-years elusive prize of approval. Temporary access into the paternal realm of Questionable Judgment, typically reserved for earth-bound male comrades endowed with the authority to override instinctual warnings for the secret honor of risk-based reward.

And I, your heaven-bound daughter, who dreams only of flying and never of falling, joined the tired ranks of expressionless soldiers who keep sentry over hospital beds in trauma wards made of white cinder block and hand sanitizer.

And women, who are no longer able to make the pre-Thanksgiving call to their fathers to ask Google-able questions about cooking temperatures and turkey brine recipes—

Who no longer visit their assigned location of mourning—  
Patches of earth where sodded grass yields only white headstone and artificial flowers—

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They offered me wordless wisdom, keenly sensing I was the sort to prefer embracing over conversation anyway.

This was the kind of silence that I had come to crave.

The kind of Love, unobstructed by language, that sinks deep into the heart of a winged person who weighs hearts more than words.

It wasn't the biting kind of silence, marked by disapproval, that seemed to chase me even after I had a home of my own.

Not the kind that sat lurking in the bushes waiting for me on the infinite journey down the quarter-mile stretch of driveway as I returned to your home after entrusting you to the metal-winged rescuers who prefer to do their flying with eyes open.

Meals, cards, Generosity, and Judgment came to visit.

And I, who should have led and not followed,

Who should have spoken up and out,

Who should have known the proper formula for disengagement,

Who should have erected and established boundaries,

Who should have more reason than faith,

Who should have grown up faster,

Who should have made something of myself by now,

Who should have worn shoes and not wings,

Who should have—

Did not.

---

Twelve feet of earth and air separate the horizontal from the  
vertical man.

Though fallen, we have been infused with the Divine, and so  
we rise.

Together we lay aside the burden of weight and wings,  
to share a piece of space and time.

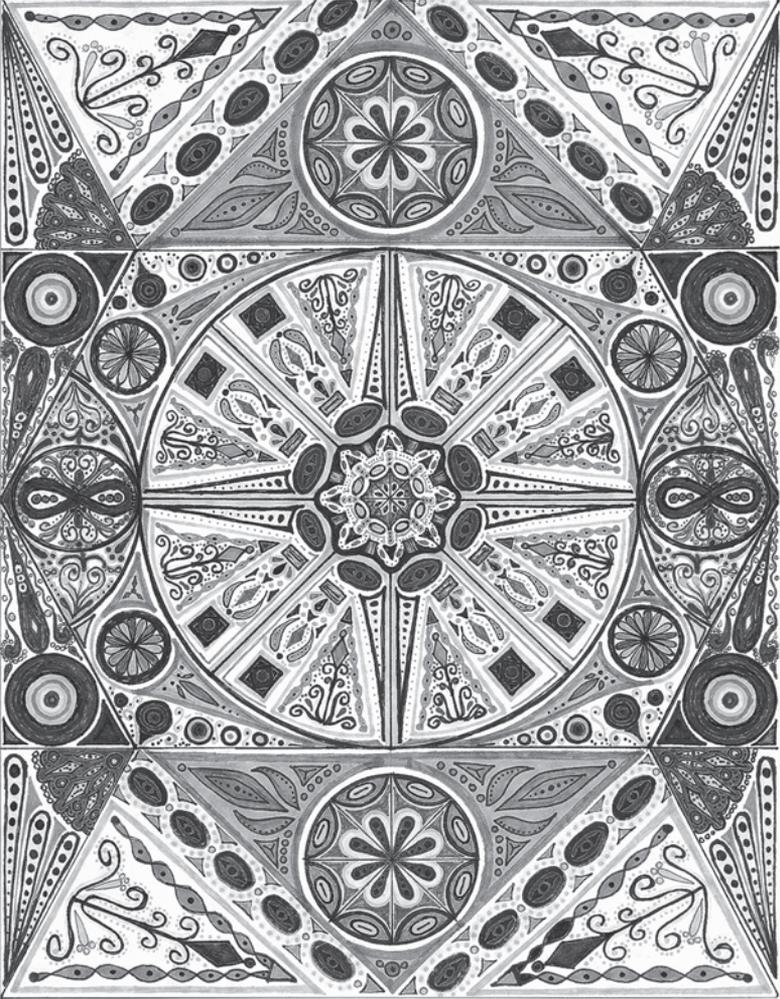
Watching winter birds feed upon generous seed offerings that  
bid them come.

Fallen man, God bids you Stand;

Stand and be Redeemed.

You shall come to walk again,

and I, for the very first time upon feet as well as wings.



**untitled drawing** by *Allison Burnett*

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# Charlie

*Russell Yaffe*

Charlie died when he was nine. He was my best friend at the time.

Everybody expected Charlie to get better, just like so many other kids lauded for their strength and perseverance in the face of a vicious disease. But Charlie did not get better. Ms. Gleason called us all to the rug one day, and Dr. Meredith was there. Dr. Meredith only showed up to talk to us when something real bad had happened.

Everybody knew that Charlie was my best friend. I used to do everything with Charlie. No one ever asked Charlie to be his partner for anything at school because I was always Charlie's partner. We used to roam the neighborhood together on our bikes. Parents confused our names all the time. When Charlie stopped coming to school, I was lost. I had to find new friends. I had to find new friends even though everyone knew my best friend—my only real friend—was Charlie. And I remember feeling for a while like any other kid was just a temporary substitute for him. I'd play with Derek just until Charlie got better. Or James. Or Chris. I wrote letters to Charlie, and he wrote back, but it wasn't the same.

Charlie and I were born a month apart in 1971. We met in kindergarten, and we were best friends by the end of the first day of school. We both loved Legos. We became obsessed with building models out of the small plastic blocks. They started out simple and amorphous to all but our five-year-old eyes, yet by the third grade we had constructed a minor city in Charlie's basement. I brought my mother over to Charlie's house one day so that she could see it. She was blown away, and we were so proud.

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My brother Danny was always mean to Charlie. He would take every opportunity to tease Charlie whenever Charlie came over. Danny knocked down one of our Lego towers once, allegedly by accident. Charlie started to cry, and my mother yelled at Danny pretty good. I knew Danny did it on purpose because I saw him smile as the tower came crashing down. Danny apologized to Charlie without really meaning it. We tended to play at Charlie's house after that.

My parents brought me to the hospital to visit Charlie only once, even though he was my best friend, and at the time I was glad that I didn't have to see Charlie at the hospital. I didn't like seeing him weak and balding, stranded in a cold, blue ocean of a bed, the place he would only leave once he left the world for good.

I remember when Dr. Meredith started to speak to the class. Ms. Gleason began to cry, and that scared me. Dr. Meredith explained it as plainly as she could, as clearly as she could. I understood what she was saying. I understood better than any of the other kids. And I started cry. And I didn't stop. When you're a kid, you don't leave the room when some uncontrollable physical thing comes over you. You just stay there and let it happen. I cried and let it happen.

Ms. Gleason took me out into the hall. She gave me a hug and tried to console me, and herself. I didn't know what to do. Who was going to be my best friend now? It was a stupid thought, the only stupid thought I could come up with. Who was going to be my best friend?

We went to the funeral, the whole family: me, my mom, my dad, Danny. Danny was old enough to get it. And he was old enough to hate himself for how he had treated Charlie. Danny stuck by me throughout the day. I was happy to have him there. Charlie's parents were reduced to nothing. They didn't speak. They cried quiet tears that dried on their cheeks

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and left permanent scars. No one talked to them because there was nothing to say. Worst of all, they had seen the day coming for months, and they had feared it constantly. All of their energies had been spent trying to save Charlie for a year; then all of their energies were spent coping with the knowledge that they would never succeed in that pursuit.

Sometimes I think about what those last few days might have been like for Charlie, if he knew his life was ending. What did that mean to a nine-year-old? I sent my last letter to him about a month before he died. He never wrote back to me. When I hadn't received a response after a couple of weeks, I knew something was wrong. I wish I had visited Charlie one more time, just to say goodbye. I thought about him all the time and missed him, but he might not have known that. I always wrote silly things to him. My mother helped me with the letters, and I always signed off, "Hope you feel better soon!" I wanted Charlie to get better more than anything, but maybe that didn't come through enough in the letters alone. Charlie might have died thinking I didn't care that much about him. That still pains me. Maybe Charlie didn't even really think of me as his best friend.

Everybody gets cancer nowadays. It's hard to keep track of which of my friends have the disease and which don't. I've watched friends lose their kids to cancer—none as young as Charlie, though that doesn't make it any easier. My neighbor's daughter died from it ten years ago. Danny succumbed a few years back. Sometimes I forget I have cancer—the blessed benign kind but cancer nonetheless. I've lost so many to it, but Charlie was the first. Charlie was the first, and Charlie was the toughest to lose.

Charlie would have turned seventy today. I often wonder if he would still be my best friend. The Legos would have ended at some point. Middle school would have happened. High

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school. College. Who knows what kind of person Charlie would have become, or what kind of person I would have become had Charlie been there. I made other friends, but none as good as Charlie, not the way I remember it—my friendship with Charlie, plastered in time on a plane above all others. Maybe he'd still have been that person in my life today. Two wives, three kids, six or seven “close” friends to date, and there would be Charlie, good ol' Charlie.

Or, maybe that's nothing more than a pointless fantasy. So many of my friendships have dissipated over the years. People who I considered my closest friends thirty years ago have been out of my life for twenty. Charlie might have become someone I recalled fleetingly, if at all. Some retiree living in Hawaii who looked forward to games of backgammon by the beach and infrequent visits from his grandchildren. And maybe I would find him on the internet, see what he's been up to after all these years. Or not. But Charlie died when he was nine—my best friend at the time, my best friend forever.

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# A Poem for Winter

*Rachel Heinhorst*

This has been a winter  
with few whispers of spring,  
I mention to my father  
when I call to check his need of anything  
for the coming of the newest snow.

The freezing days keep  
our neighborhood ponds frozen,  
so I don't worry about my son  
discovering a forbidden bravery,

a bravery my childhood winters gave  
when we'd gather at the lake on snow days:  
one foot, push, the other foot, stand,  
and if water finds its way atop the ice,  
two steps back.

This winter of memories has given  
time with my daughter in her bedroom,  
finding long and thick socks.  
I gather and stretch them over her toes and ankles  
while she suggests painting her room  
might be something we can do after snow angels.

Come evening, there is peace beneath the couch blankets  
just as there is peace beneath the snow covered ground  
where spring waits patiently, like us,  
embraced by winter's gifts.



*Winter Wonderland by Brenda Jones*

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# Dharma

*Patrick Allen*

I was an errant youth, able to run with the wind  
A dutiful supplicant still, since that first moment

The scent of passion hung in the late summer air.  
The sound of crickets were an invitation to desire,  
We stood together in that old horse barn,  
behind a once baronial mansion on Dayton Street.

Your heated breath on my neck,  
my hand slipping over the elastic band,  
down through the tangle of blossoming soft hair,  
your warm, almost hot, wetness wicking across my hand,  
a silky smooth milk flooding my fingertips,  
is an indelible memory of sound, movement and touch.

The Cherry Popsicle, dropped from my hand, was melting on  
the ground.  
My hot rod bike lay akimbo, abandoned, down at the corner  
of the alley.  
The red tinged Hunter's Moon, low in the sky, illuminated  
the almost silent building.

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## beach girl: his wife

*Jeffrey Beck*

“See you next year, beach,”  
she said plaintively in her rearview.  
but I knew then, she would never leave the beach  
entirely—the wet sand always clinging  
under the curls of her toes:  
she would always wake to hear  
the lapping waves shhhhhing in the conches  
of her sleepy ears, her ringlets still  
twisting like ocean currents,  
her shoulders still freckled and wet  
with the salt spray by the pier.  
and then, I knew I’d always love it  
too, not for warm sand, or chill waves, or ice-cold  
beer, but for the sun-warm smile of the lovely  
beach girl.

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# Runaway

*Sandra Lee Anderson*

[Flattop Mountain near the Blue Ridge,  
Boone, NC, November 1862]

Sarah Elrod cut up a pumpkin to go with squirrel for the evening meal. “Lafe, bring in an armload of wood before evening sets in.”

Lafe, who worked for his room and board and to learn farming, walked out the open cabin door and bent beside the woodpile behind the house to grab some thick branches before taking up split logs.

“Master Lafe.” Lafe looked toward the woods but didn’t see anything in the shadows. Then he spotted Ben concealed behind the laurel.

“Ben, is that you?” It had been years since he’d seen the escaped slave. “What you doing here?”

“I run away.” Lafe scowled, as Ben continued, “My master sold Mammy to the Bensons near Charlotte, and Overseer, he beat me every day it suit him. Been like that ever since we ran away. I’m his fastest worker. I know he won’t hurt me bad so I can’t work.”

“He’ll kill you this time if he catches you.”

“I had to do it. I gotta help my mammy. Going north and earn money to buy her freedom.”

“I heard of slaves saving up to buy their freedom.”

“Those men have a trade and hire out on Sundays. Master won’t let me learn a trade, and he takes all our Sunday earnings. I want to learn smithing, not always work in the fields.”

“How’d you make it this far?”

“Overseer drove Mammy to Charlotte, so I had two

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days to run. I stayed to the woods and moved at night. Some riders went by, but they didn't have dogs. When I got to the Blue Ridge I couldn't cut through the thickets. Had to use the road."

Lafe moved the two of them behind the laurel in case Sarah stepped around the corner. Ben continued, "I met two men coming down the mountain; it was dark. They started asking me questions. I told them I was rent out to your mammy, Miz Lydia on Dutch Creek. Told them I was to help her over the winter, then I had to return to my master come planting time."

"Did they believe you?"

"No white man believe a black man. Told them I got to be there by tomorrow night, sundown, or Miz Lydia ain't paying the full amount. The men was on their way to Lenoir. Then the small man took up a whip. 'You lying, Boy?' 'No sir,' I said. 'Gospel truth I got to be there tomorrow sundown. Up Dutch Creek. That's what Overseer said.' He snapped his whip at my feet. I acted like it didn't hurt. Then the big one said, 'We got to hurry. Let him go.' The small one told me to get up a big oak and kept snapping. 'You stay up there,' the big one said. 'We're coming back at daylight with the sheriff, and you better be there.' Soon as they was gone, I ran up the road 'til I come to that trail over Wataug' Gap that we took last time."

"How'd you find me here?" Lafe asked.

"I met an old couple going the other way. Said I was going to Miz Lydia's. They told me how to find you and said you could help me."

"Glad they didn't start asking questions."

"Seemed like they already knew I'd run away and didn't mind helping."

Lafe glanced over his shoulder. "Bill went out hunting and took the dogs with him. He'll be back pretty soon. You got to leave. Go over to the creek, then walk downstream in it at

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least a half mile so's the dogs can't smell you." Lafe paused. "Tomorrow everyone's going to town. I'll ask to stay home and work on my reading. You stay near the creek 'til I come for you. Don't go on the east side of the mountain by Raven Rocks. Outliers hide there, along with deserters and fugitives from Salisbury prison."

Lafe glanced down at Ben's feet and noticed the scabbed welts streaking the skin. He winced thinking about the cold water biting the cuts. "Try to stay in the creek."

Ben headed back into the underbrush. Lafe scrounged the woods for an old possum carcass the dogs had dragged home earlier. He grabbed it by the tail and swept it back and forth on the ground behind the woodpile and over Ben's trail.

In the morning, he gathered some food and followed the creek until Ben showed himself. They cut west and waded through the grasses of the bald on the top of the next ridge. Water now flowed west toward the Mississippi, and the boys walked downhill from there toward Shull's Mill. When they reached the Watauga Gap Road, they kept to the outside of the natural hedgerows of mountain laurel and rhododendron, so they wouldn't get trapped on the road. The old forest was easy walking. When someone approached, they slipped behind the trees.

"How come you used my mammy's name?" Lafe said with an accusing tone.

"She got the only name I know. I don't think they'd hurt her, being a white woman and all," Ben explained.

Lafe pondered Ben's answer, not sure if that was bad or not. Then he asked, "What if the Yankee soldiers catch you?"

"I'm thinking 'bout fighting for Mr. Lincoln. He's gonna free the slaves."

"I thought you were planning to earn money to free your mammy."

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“I’m a-doin’ both. You can do everything in the North.”

“You don’t love North Carolina? When I’m big, I’m fighting for North Carolina. If I see you, I’ll shoot,” Lafe said.

Ben looked down and shook his head. “I won’t shoot you, Master Lafe.”

“Well,” Lafe hesitated. “If I see someone who looks like you, I won’t fire.”

“I be beholden.”

Once the land began to level out the boys walked in silence. When they came within hearing of the mill Lafe stopped behind a grove of big spruce trees and blackberry bushes. Lafe spoke quietly, “I figure I walk you by the mill, and we say I’m showing you the way to my ma’s.”

“You surely know more than I do, but white folks don’t believe me, and you is just a boy. You be getting yourself in a peck of trouble.”

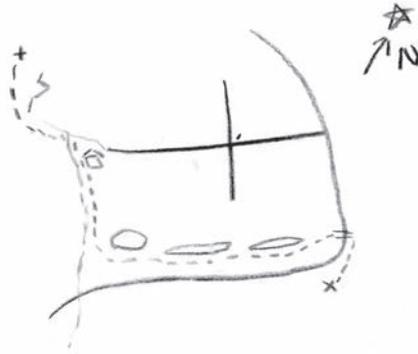
Lafe dug his toe. “Then you best hide here until it’s dark. Follow the river downstream and cross over the bridge. Then climb up Pine Ridge until you get to the old bear trail, and follow the river upstream. That trail will take you over to Snakeden Ridge.”

Ben glanced at Lafe when he heard snakes mentioned. Lafe didn’t notice; he was clearing a space.

He grabbed a stick and drew a long line across the bottom and up the right hand side. “This is the Watauga River. You’re here at the river bend,” Lafe marked an “X”. “Cross the bridge, here.” He slashed two lines across the river. “Then on the west side of the river you got three ridges. Pine Ridge, Snakeden Ridge and Nettle Knob. The bear trail will take you along all three.” He drew three narrow circles in a row just above the river and marked the trail. “On the other side of Nettle Knob, you’ll come to a trail crossing over the ridge.

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That's the one you took last time. Cross over the ridge, and follow it down to my mammy's." There he drew a house.



"If I get lost?" Ben looked worried.

Lafe bent back over his map, and above the ridges drew a long cross on its side with the top touching the Watauga River on the right and his ma's place on the left. "If you get lost, cross over the ridges to Valle Crucis. That means 'Valley of the Cross.' These are creeks." He tapped the stick on the arms of the cross. "They meet at one point, here." He stabbed at the center of the cross. "This one in the middle is Dutch Creek. Follow it up the valley. That will take you to Ma's.

"After that just keep up the creek to Hanging Rock. It's where you went before. Then follow the roads west to Banner Elk. Find Lewis Banner's place. He's a Federalist, but he owns slaves, so wait until dark and go to his slaves, Aunt Reen and Uncle Simon. They'll see you get to Tennessee."

Lafe straightened and gave Ben time to study the map. "Which way is north?" Ben asked.

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Lafe pointed a little to the right and marked the map with a star and an “N.” Ben studied the map, then Lafe scuffed leaves over it. He looked at Ben with wisdom beyond his age, “Be careful.” Lafe paused. “I have something of yours.”

Ben recognized his mother’s pamphlet of Bible stories he had entrusted to Lafe four years earlier. Ben stared at the booklet then at Lafe. He’d met white folks who were kind, but never any who respected his property.

“Thank you, Master Lafe.”

Lafe started quietly back up toward Flattop Mountain. After a mile, he slipped over to the road, not worried about the sound of approaching horses.

The three riders on the signal from their leader fanned out around Lafe. The boy looked up into Mack’s sneering smile. “You been helping any escaped contraband lately?” the slave catcher asked.

“No!”

Mack laughed. “I was under the impression they were your best friends.” His companions guffawed as Mack nudged his horse around the boy and continued down the mountain.

A silent rage crossed with fear rendered Lafe mute as the men rode by, then he felt a surge of relief: Mack hadn’t mentioned any runaways.

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# **The Poetry of Denali: A Confluence of Sounds and Spectacle**

*Judith Allen-Leventhal*

dedicated to Dylan Magargle  
March 19, 1957 - January 14, 2014

Cacophonous journey through  
Wasilla and Talkeetna en route north from Anchorage.  
Later, alongside the Teklanika River running westward  
toward  
McKinley's majesty.

Dusty hair-pin turns around Wilbert's Nose, a proboscis  
giganticus,  
leading onward to Kantishna Lodge and Roadhouse at  
Denali's heart.

Along the way, both coming and going, musical euphony  
of Wonder Lake, Polychrome Mountain, and,  
weather permitting,  
vistas of the great Alaska range from Eielson Center.

Reassuring, the alliterative and assonant of  
caribou, cow moose, kettle ponds, and grizzlies;  
the taiga and tundra of the boreal forest, nourished by the  
Savage and Sanctuary rivers, and charmed by Igloo Creek.

All of this,  
rooted in the sublime lupine's  
roadside modesty.

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# Living in the Moment

*Sharon Mroz*

Looking back on years past, it is the “only if,” and its counterpart, “what if,” that tears a heart apart at the seams. Existence is overwhelmed with the business of activities, tasks, and self-induced stress and worry. Time is wasted fretting over things that never transpire. All too often time slips by without being noticed. It is at a crossroad, the transitions of life, that the question enters the mind, “Where did the time go?” With a knotted stomach, piercing lasers soar through the memory of broken promises; uncompleted projects, good intentions not acted upon, and then regrets sneak in like thieves to devour all that is valuable. Thankfully, everyone has an opportunity to learn from former regrets. No matter our age, each of us can start anew with the rising of the sun. Lives are inundated with looking forward, letting go, and the seasons of the ever-changing world.

It is a human habit to wish life away. All have heard a child wish they were grown. Youth is never fully appreciated until adulthood. The fascination of pure discovery, the newness of life, creates adventures everywhere child’s feet lead. Simple things are huge. A clump of trees are a forest, and a puddle is a river. The sidewalk is a highway, a crack in the pavement a sport. Reflecting back, honeysuckle has never again smelled so sweet. Even a dangling willow tree becomes the Amazon. These are the days that children wish away in exchange for unending responsibilities. Never has an adult uttered the phrase, “If only childhood was not so dreadfully long!” In contrast, most adults look back longingly. My mind rewinds to a time gone by, and there I am all bundled up snug and warm. The door opens and the frigid air circulates with a commanding presence. Pure white snow blankets the

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ground. A spray of frost sprinkles my face as I fall to my back playfully plowing through the fluffy softness with my arms and legs. Rising with extreme caution, I turn around to gaze upon the enchanting snow angel. In a fleeting moment an angel recaptures my innocence of yesterday.

The past should be cherished, but it ought not be where we live. When teenage years are in the past, we emerge into a fast forward mode. Funny, yet not humorous, how time lasts forever as a child, but the adult years pass with lightning speed. Yesterday a child, today a mother bombarded with countless tasks. It is easy to understand her desire, if only briefly, to obtain peace and quiet. But in the blink of an eye babies are grown. The day comes when a mother's six-foot baby walks away with nothing but his backpack. Her eyes burn and tighten prior to the invasion of tears. The lump in her throat is prominent when she feels her stomach fall to her already weakened knees. The rapid beat of her heart yearns for time to freeze. Her baby is a man! Where did time go? Was it fretted away? Anguish rips apart her once whole heart, as her busy household overflowing with activity turns into a stale, stagnate, dead silence. In her deep sadness, regret and guilt consume her over the lost moments. It is said the greatest pain for a woman is childbirth; however, it does not compare to nurturing a child for nineteen years, then having to muster the strength to let go.

Relentless and unmerciful the clock ticks on. It can be a friend or enemy, and it is our choice as to how it will serve us. Holding on to what holds us down causes us to remain in the past as the world moves ahead. My sufferings have been many; however, they are now insignificant aside from the lessons they taught. The treasured moments are when my heart, soul, and strength were planted firmly in the here and now. Embracing the season at hand, putting the past behind

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me, and trusting the future to tomorrow, releases me for the joy of today. Guilt melts away like snow, when life is lived one day at a time. Precious memories are made when the current season of my life is embraced. Even the painful moments are a blessing.

Pondering a solution to reverse the habit of dwelling on what has been and dashing to what is yet to come; it is my belief that one must be diligently mindful to change the cycle. As this was written the thought, “Wish it was Friday!” popped into my head. When will it ever end? Each morning a commitment must be established to seize the day. Grasp loosely to the positive events of yesterday. The ticking of the clock laboriously continues to advance; this hour will never return, and with the next tock it is forever gone. We should spend our days in the peace of the present, which will provide for a more pleasant tomorrow. We all have a choice to make. The rising of the sun offers a new day to live; live each one to the fullest, for one day will be the final sunrise.

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# True View

*Judy Angelheart*

Do you recall  
Or would remember be more precise  
When it was  
Bottles filled with colored water  
To catch the sun  
Did you know  
Then that kitchen windows  
Give the true view of life  
The treasures put there  
True hearts on display

So if you would like  
To know someone better  
Ask them to see out  
Of a window in their life  
A mile in their shoes  
Could not tell you more  
Than peering through  
To see their view  
Reflected like many jewels  
Glimpse into a soul



*Old Plantation* by Anna Readon

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# Clements

*Robin Karis*

The four-way stop in  
Clements marked our final  
approach to Aunt Bobby  
and Uncle Bernie's.

Powder blue Nova, cramped  
legs for an hour, eight  
track tape of Zeppelin calling  
for air drums, fake riffs  
accompanying Mom's duet  
with Robert Plant.

The four-way stop,  
our yellow brick road  
to cook-outs, holidays,  
snowed-in weekends.

Blue and white trailer,  
clothes on the line,  
tinkling collar on  
a red blur that barked

Worn Sorry cards,  
creased Parcheesi board,  
Venison masqueraded as store  
bought roast beef,  
spaghetti dinners, canned  
corn, my brother  
counting how  
many rolls I ate.

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Locked glass cabinet,  
black powder guns,  
a still skunk on top of the  
TV watching every step.  
Bodiless twin deer standing  
sentry above the couch, flying  
squirrels and the red fox  
bringing up the rear guard.

Noogies if you said anything  
bad about Clint Eastwood.  
Uncle Bernie's silver  
tooth glinting  
maniacally in the reflection  
of his rebel-flag belt buckle.

Ice cream cones at the Fairgrounds,  
Mom's burnt acorn  
squash at Thanksgiving.  
Ice skating at the pond,  
many feet sharing  
four skates.

Yellow brick washes  
out, the trailer  
is gone.

I never go to Clements anymore.  
Aunt Bobby lives in Waldorf now.  
No four-way stops to  
lead the way, just red  
lights, beeping horns.

I wonder what happened to  
the Parcheesi set with  
the faded game pieces?

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# These Hands

*Peyton Reynolds*

These hands,  
not yet rough from labor,  
not yet burned from fire.  
These hands,  
which have touched everything I have touched,  
which have felt everything that I have felt.

These hands are special.

These hands,  
Which hold life,  
juggle love,  
and sense not only material objects  
but rather the world  
in its entirety.

These hands are wonderful.

And to have held these hands,  
as I find my mother has held me  
and my father carried me  
and my sister hugged me  
and as I have destroyed myself...

Yes, to have held these hands,  
and to touch everything I have touched  
and to have felt everything I have felt  
and to have held everything I have held.

Hands  
are amazing.



*Fridge Poetry* by Judy Angelheart

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# The Act of Forgetting a Lover and Whiskey

*Ethan Fugate*

## I. Her

I wake every morning to the  
Chimes of bells, ringing  
On some forgotten seashore,  
Her arms swaying gracefully  
In the rhythm of the sea breeze  
Squalling against tall blades of grass.  
The progression of seasons upends me;  
The silence of a morning wreathed  
In new snow hushes the vexing bells—  
And stops my ears from humming.  
There are only vestiges left—  
Often I can only make out  
The silhouettes of her comeliness;  
Nothing about her figure.

## II. Whiskey

It hasn't been too long,  
And it is awkward to say  
"I'm better off without it."  
I can see it from my window,  
That neon calling me gently—  
I leer and loom, blenching in  
The reveries of her as phantoms  
Forever escaping a never-ending coquetry,  
"I'm better off without it."

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# Otha's Song

Ahmad Wright

Otha Higgins kissed Lucy on the mouth seventeen years ago, and he was excited at the thought that she still might remember him. Last Sunday the men of the church mentioned her. They whispered amongst themselves and under their breaths. When she sang, they had looked to the ceiling and nodded to the floor. Their faces softened as if to recollect on something sweet.

*Sugar molasses in a teapot! Damn, that woman can sing!*

Otha thought it too. Lucy's voice could enchant the musty church air and permeate the reading of scripture long after a performance. He had only seen her from afar from the top pew, then she disappeared after the service. He had to find her and hear her again. That voice touched his insides and choked tears from his eyes; made his hands tingle, too. Everything fell through his fingers if he thought on her too much.

Struggling with his backyard garden beets in the soft ground, Otha tugged at the leafy stems to collect the harvest whistling Lucy's song. In the ninety degree afternoon heat, he imagined the sun a tall, yellow glass of liquid that he wished he could apply piecemeal to his crop without the humidity. Otha's chest was bare against his coveralls, a robust middle filling the empty spaces. His dark skin glistened like the soil he had taken so much care to set just right to give his beet garden the glow it deserved. Otha was not a small man, but he crawled in the dirt the same way he walked upright, with a tangible limp due to arthritis in both knees. He knelt to cradle a plant in his hand that had set the wrong way. The beet root was brittle and dry, inverted unnaturally. He crushed it in his fist.

"Otha you finished yet? You'll melt out there."

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Ronelle, his wife, yelled from the screen door, electrifying the Virginia air. Otha didn't answer. He never did when he was in the garden, but he worked faster, savoring the beetroots collected in his bucket and the bitter aroma of the scent in his nostrils. He smiled at the purple-crimson haul, anticipating the bunch of them at the dinner table hours from now, boiled over rice with pig's feet. Lucy's lips were beet red too the last time he touched them, draining him of all the air in his chest. Seventeen years ago, Lucy sang like an anointed angel. Last Sunday, her voice stirred his spirit just the same. The preacher had announced her right before the choir started and there she was, just like that. Seventeen years like a drop in water.

Otha wiped the sweat from his face with the back of his arm to return to the house.

Goochland, Virginia was thirty minutes from Richmond and Otha liked it that way. His house was a single floor, two bedroom surrounded by a horse farm on one side and three acres of crabgrass and a gas station a quarter mile to the left. He inherited the house from his father after the Korean War, and kept it up after his daughter Cherise was born, raised and married off to a bank teller in Washington, DC. Ronelle looked like her: brown-skinned and reed thin; same high forehead and coarse hair. *A handsome woman*, Otha thought, remembering how his elbow trembled when he walked his daughter down the aisle.

"Did you wash up, honey? Your face is filthy," Ronelle said, and handed him a rag, so he could take care of the business himself. "You going to cook those?"

"Somebody got to," Otha said, placing them at the screen door. "I'll skin them tomorrow and set them in water."

Ronelle placed the silverware on either side of his plate. The church bulletin lay at the center of the table. Even at sixty, her nightgown billowed around her muscular thighs, the remnants of her career as a dance teacher 30 years ago. Otha

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couldn't help recall that Lucy was taller than Ronelle and wore her nails red to Ronelle's green; red nails that looked like jewels if a man blinked too quickly. They had blinded Otha one too many times.

"Now eat," his wife said.

Snap beans, chicken wings, corn pudding. The food swirled in front of him, a great dish of familiarity. His stomach responded in kind. It was food that sustained him, food that he liked for all the years Ronelle had made it, always on time placed with knife and fork in a napkin; cold milk in a glass jar. He wondered if his ancestors ate this way, four generations removed from working the Virginia plantations: a one room shack, a good woman, a family, a plate of warm food.

Otha remembered how Lucy had talked about Europe, and how she would return to tell him of her travels. His eyes grew with excitement at the thought tearing into the chicken wondering if the insides of the pyramids still had gold, if Paris was like she said it was back then. Otha was scared to fly since a training flight during the war went haywire and he lost his nerve, but when Lucy had looked into his eyes it was if he was in the air all over again.

"You ok, Otha? Lost you there for a minute," Ronelle said. She took his plate while he was still sucking the bone. "Dessert is an apple." She placed it on the table, patted him on the belly. "To help you get rid of that."

When she turned the corner to leave the kitchen, he stood to stretch. The photos on the kitchen walls re-told the story of their lives together, over the years: wedding, picnics and barbeques; a wall album of their first and only born, from bucket bath to bachelor's degree at graduation. As Otha entered the living room, he scanned the furniture. The wood-framed sofas boxed in two potted plants in the corners. Everything was placed perfectly as if awaiting a museum

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guided tour. Finally, Otha limped down the hallway, catching his wife's eye while she was on the cellular phone talking to who, that, and the other. Once in the bathroom, he stripped to hit the shower.

"Where are you going?" Ronelle yelled through the crack of the bathroom door.

"Down the street," Otha lied, "to get me some fertilizer for the next crop."

"We have a garden, not a farm," she said. "And don't forget your glasses."

He got dressed. Jeans and a clean button down shirt. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he sucked in his stomach. *Right nice*, he thought. Otha found his Cavaliers baseball cap, the one his daughter got him when she graduated University of Virginia, and tumbled out the door.

The main road was paved and narrow before he got to the highway, 64 West to Richmond. At the stoplight, he caught his friend Vic crossing the street with two bottles of Old English peeking from a brown paper bag. When Vic waved, Otha started to press the gas, but the light was still red.

Vic's toothless grin expanded, breaking the monotony of a haggard grey beard.

"My man, Otha. What it do?" Vic was bald from the hairline to the middle of his big head and his pants pinched his waist to tuck an open shirt, perpetually sliding from his bony frame. "You going to see her, eh?"

"See who?"

"She still look fine, don't she? In church last week she was something else."

"Vic," Otha said. "How've you been?"

Vic approached the open window of the pickup. "Lucy ain't where you think she is," he chuckled.

"Shut up Vic."

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“She at the same place, but she ain’t the same.”

“Thanks, Vic.”

Otha revved the engine. This was a long ass light.

“Otha, you didn’t think I know’d ’bout her did you?” Vic teetered at the curb, but the bottles of liquor in the brown bag rooted him in place.

Otha raised his voice. “I heard her just like everybody else.”

“*Like everyone else,*” Vic repeated, bringing the bag of liquor to the crook of his elbow like he was cradling a newborn child. “I could go with you. Show you the way,” he said.

“I’m fine, Vic.”

When the light turned green, Otha floored the gas pedal, leaving Vic stooped at the curb with a half full bottle already at his lips. Warm air pooled the sweat collecting at Otha’s brow into a single droplet inching its way to his nose. The evening sky was bright as it had been in the afternoon with only with the addition of an orange horizon; *a slice of Heaven*, Lucy once called it when she looked over his shoulder. They had met in church the one time when Ronelle didn’t make it. For some odd reason, Otha chose to go anyways looking for the Lord’s help to ease his burdens, bunions, and falling interest in his pension plan from the beer company where he would drive a truck for the next thirty years plus. The kiss between he and Lucy had come unexpected, just a reflex after he had helped her to her car. She was lean and brown, back then. More mascara than eyes. Long hair. Her voice had held him captive and a sinner for life, and her song was still in his head as if she passed it on personally to him.

Approaching downtown, Otha drove by a home bordering on the redeveloped part of Richmond just shy of the mall. Generally, Otha only came this way for Christmas when Ronelle wanted to shop for clothes or he needed garden tools

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or fancy soil from the hardware store. Here the earth had been tilled, broken and bought by corporations, a city within a city sprung from a boardroom. When he turned onto the familiar street, his heart jumped and he took a breath. Otha stopped his truck across the street from the house and sat still for a good ten seconds. What would he say? Should he have brought something?

Fiddling with the key still in the ignition, Otha suddenly felt nervous. *This is foolish*, he thought. He got out of the truck and limped to the house. The porch was shielded by a part of the roof and obscured by a ten foot poplar. Through the wide, front window, he could see someone moving inside. Suddenly, the blinds in the window opened and closed. Otha tensed his legs to lock his knees and straighten his posture.

The front door opened.

“Can I help you?” A young man said, tearing out of a sweater already over his head. Beady eyes, beard, and long blonde hair. He seemed lost.

Otha cleared his throat. “Lucy in?”

“Who are you?”

“Otha.”

“Okay, Otha? Lucy is out. She works this time of day.”

“It’s Saturday,” Otha said, instinctively looking up at the sky. “Almost night.”

The young man scratched his beard. “Yes it is. She’s busier on Sundays, especially. I’m not from around here. You want to leave a message?”

“Who are you?”

“Her caretaker, most of the time.”

“Why she need taking care of?” Otha regretted the words soon as they left his mouth. He was sixty-two and Lucy not more than a few years off that. “She sick?”

The young man took in a breath and exhaled. He wore bright yellow slip-on shoes, and a ripped t-shirt that exposed

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an arm pit and half of his pale, freckled stomach. "I got to go get her. You can tag along," he said. "She expecting you?"

"No."

A short drive and three turns later, Otha caught Lucy's profile stumbling from a chain restaurant as she approached the sidewalk. Her eyes were fixated on the ground; she shuffled her feet with baby steps to keep her balance in high heels. A fitted turquoise dress made her look like a Motown singer, an extra Supreme.

She yelled: "Casey!"

Casey honked the horn in acknowledgement and opened the door to stand and greet her.

Otha sipped air to his lungs the minute she stood in front of him. Lucy's face was heavier than he remembered, but the woman he knew was still there, pursed lips and a sturdy frame. She leaned into the car and looked him over.

"Lucy?" Otha whispered, attempting to open his car door, but she slipped into the backseat before he could say more. Perfume overwhelmed the air inside the car, clinging to the cracks in the leather seats, to anything that moved or remained in its vicinity. It stung his nose and made his eyes water.

"This car parked too far, Casey. Shame on you for making an old lady walk."

"How did it go?" Casey asked, putting the vehicle in drive. Otha watched her in the rearview, her sullen eyes, caked with make-up, stared back.

"I always kill, baby. Always." She dipped into her purse and counted her money. "The choir was great. They wanted me to sing solo at their house."

"Saturday church? That's extra," Casey smiled. "A house solo? Extra, too."

She handed Casey a fold of money over the seat and he took the cash and stuffed it down his pants with his free hand.

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“Casey, this my old friend Otha. You see he don’t talk much, but he like to watch.”

“We met,” Casey said.

Otha saw her apply more make-up and continued to watch her in the rearview mirror in the shadows. He rubbed his hands together and turned to face her.

“Lucy, when you get back?”

“I was in church last week.”

“Didn’t see you,” Otha said. “Heard you but—“

“—Well I saw *you*, Otha. And I got in town when I got here,” she said. “Will leave when I’m good and ready.”

Lucy’s warm, liquored breath blew in his ear. “A night like this was when we last met,” she crooned, gravel in her throat. Suddenly, she leaned away from him and extended her heel through the center front seat partition between Casey’s right leg and Otha’s left.

Otha asked “Where we going?” Like it mattered. His heart beat faster as Lucy hummed.

“My ex-husband, rest his soul, never liked me to go on the road, but I’m fine now,” Lucy said. “Y’all got a light?”

“I’m out,” Casey said. “No more fire here.”

Otha checked his pockets. Lucy’s fingers tapped his shoulders, soothed them. “If I remember, you don’t smoke. Relax yourself.”

Otha closed his eyes to let her song tap the edge of his brain. Cigarette smoke filled the car to the point where he felt lost in the hazy darkness and transported to a speakeasy he saw on a cable television show. When Otha opened his eyes to roll down his window, his dream left with the incoming fresh night air. Car horns beeped. Music blared from the shadows of intersections blending with the oncoming night. Lucy finally broke the silence.

“Casey, remember how much we made last Christmas? I made that choir sound like God’s gift!”

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Casey did not answer. He accelerated through a red light and slowed to a stop next to a church. The church windows, stained in liturgical motif, were surrounded by people slowly entering the building. When Casey got out the car, he opened Lucy's backseat door. "Honey, your audience awaits."

Otha quickly followed, unlocking his own door to stand and greet her. He winced at the grind of his own knee caps. He took Lucy in a hug as she was retooling her dress and watched her every move. She adjusted her wig and straitened her garters; pulled wrinkled, sequined gloves to the elbows. Her dress was orange! White six-inch heels claimed her feet, and her smile did the rest, under a willing moon. She took Otha's arm to stabilize her feet in the massive high heels; he felt strength in her clawed fingers, but once inside, she let him go.

"Wait here in the back y'all," she said.

He and Casey took a back pew near the exit as she appeared center stage in front of the choir already humming in song.

*Come Un-to Me. Hear the bless-ed Sav-ior...*

Building to crescendo, each member swayed to the choir music. Otha was startled once the cadence shifted and Lucy's throaty croak scooped the choir's sound from the floor toward the rafters. The preacher stirred: Amen Sister!

*Call-ing the oppressed-O ye heav-y.*

Otha felt his soul stir, lost in the revelry until Casey elbowed him as a man in a suit ran toward them from the front of the church.

"Show's over Otha," he said.

Once outside, Otha saw the crowd of parishioners flow toward the exit in conversation as Casey and the man exchanged money. Lucy passed them, running with her legs bent, teetering towards Casey to snatch the money from his

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hand. When the deacon saw Otha approach, he forced a smile and left quickly.

“Otha, let’s go,” Lucy said.

He squeezed her shoulder.

“You sounded good in there,” Otha said,

“They didn’t want to pay me. You believe that? My goddamn money.”

She beckoned Casey to the car as Otha took his seat and slammed the door shut.

“You sing for the church. That’s good,” Otha said, lingering in her steps.

“When they *pay* me, baby. Then it’s good,” she said. They rode back to the house where Casey escorted her to the front stairs. “They steal. You see that Casey? A bunch of goddamn thieves. They worse than my ex-husband. Otha you going to listen to me sing tomorrow?”

“Where you going to be?”

Lucy coughed for a good two minutes and gave him a hug. Casey opened the door to the house.

“I’ll be around,” she said. “Sooner than you think. They pay me to sing, not for my good looks.”

Back in Goochland, Otha removed his shoes first when he got to the house that night. The building had settled quiet; not even crickets chirped in his backyard garden. Removing his clothes and washing his face, he recalled the low growl of Lucy’s singing. It tugged at his insides, cinched the nape of his neck. He showered until the scent of her perfume was gone and slipped into the bedroom next to Ronelle’s warmth.

*Hear the bless-ed Sav-ior...*

He lay mumbling the words, until he fell asleep.

Early Sunday morning Otha woke with the crows. Rain pelted the roof and streamed down the windows. Somewhere in the distance, the roar of an airplane scraped the sky. He got

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up and walked to the kitchen while his wife slept; setting his hands in the bucket of water where his beets soaked, he felt for them and scooped them into both palms before setting them onto a plate near the stove. His hands were inked rouge from the rose-colored water even after he wiped each finger with a dish towel. Through the window, he peeked at his garden and imagined the soil satisfied by the rain. He opened the fridge, sipped orange juice from the carton, and sliced off a block of cheese.

“Otha?” Ronelle embraced him as he left the kitchen.

He kissed her on the cheek, a bounce in his step, making a beeline to his room to get dressed. He emerged wearing jeans, a hoodie, and an umbrella tucked firmly under his arm. “Otha you know what time it is?”

“My garden’s flooded”

“What you going to do about it? You going to box God over the rain?”

He put on his rain boots, tucked his pant leg cuffs all the way in and slid the screen door to the backyard open.

A grey sky with light clouds firmly padded the dark ones. *Like shaving cream in sink water*, he thought. *Suds spiraling into the drain*. The leafy stalks of his vegetables sprouted in neat rows and were pooled in liquid that collected around the saturated soil. Silent and foreboding along a telephone wire, birds stared down at him in judgment. He used his boot heel to shove a mound of the wet dirt that he had left in the corner of the yard with is foot to flatten it out. *Nothing I can do*, he thought. Leaning on his right knee, he pondered Lucy, who sang in choirs for money. Sunday morning, but he was not going to church. He went back inside the house, careful to remove his boots, and put them on again at the front door. There was too much rainwater to walk around the house outside and he did not want to fall. Once Otha got into the truck, it rained harder and he barreled through the downpour.

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At Lucy's house in Richmond, Otha could tell right off it was empty because the blinds on the window were gone. He tapped on the front window anyway for good measure and peeped inside. The walls were bare and the hue of stained wallpaper, a golden rust color, accentuated the barren quality of the room. Otha checked the door knob. Locked.

"Can I help you?" A voice behind him.

Otha turned quickly, his hand still on the knob. A man, lean and gaunt, as yellow as brown can get. His eyes were magnified in his glasses, but it was easy to catch their sadness. Dark suit. No tie. Shined shoes.

"I remember you," the old man continued. "You were with them the other night."

"You're from that church," Otha said. "Man with the money."

"*Without* the money you mean," the old man said, taking a breath. "You see any of it in there?"

Otha stepped away from the door as the man came forward with a key.

"Church bought this for Lucy, so she always has a place to stay. I mean, it was *mine*, but I placed it in her name. She wanted it that way. Was the only way she would sing for us."

"How often?" Otha asked.

"Once a week. Four times, sometimes. Whenever she want, basically. The people ask the pastor to make sure she come. We do what we can to keep her here, since she only come but every few years." The man lowered his head. "Now she gone, though."

"Where to?" Otha asked.

"Wherever they pay," the man said. "Name's Deacon Whaley."

"Otha."

"She said something about heading south. Said they appreciate a voice down there."

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Deacon Whaler stood in the open door. “Otha, stay away from her. That sonova bitch Casey, too. They like the devil and his doer.”

“Singing ain’t a crime,” Otha said. “She sing like you said, didn’t she?”

“Sang the change right out my jar and out of my right mind,” The deacon said. “Church money almost gone and my wife along with it.”

Otha asked: “How much you pay?”

The deacon pushed up his glasses and entered the house. It looked so dark that the man disappeared soon as he went inside.

“It’s not the money we paid; it’s the cost of it all. What we owe,” the deacon said.

He shut the door.

Otha took the highway instead of the back road to reach the church he visited the night before. The off-ramp was a short one that led to a crawl street. The Short Pump Mall was only five minutes away, but Otha felt like he was in an altogether different neighborhood. In the daytime, the church, without the aid of the outside lights, created the illusion of a spectacle. Now it looked shrunken, a stone structure orbited by knotted shrubs and a crumbling concrete walkway. Otha stopped the truck at the main entrance where a gentleman in a maintenance jumpsuit picked at the lawn with a rake, barely making a scratch into the thatch of crabgrass surrounding the building. Rolling down the window, Otha spit the words. “Lucy still here?”

When the man lifted his head to speak, he turned towards the cloudy, stained glass windows

“Gone forever,” he said.

“But how?” Otha asked. “Where to?”

The man waved him away, then came forward thrusting the rake towards the car. The man’s dark skin glistened from

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the drizzle, his mouth in a permanent frown that barely let him parse his words. “Y’all brought her here. Ain’t you done enough?”

Otha put the car in park and leaned to the window.

“What do you mean?”

“Best you go now and leave her be,” the man said. “See that church? Used to be my home before she come here and took it up.”

Back in Goochland, at the gas station, Otha found a bag of fertilizer to give his seedlings when the water drained away. Vic stood outside the door. He greeted Otha when he came in. His bottle was in a brown bag as usual.

“Otha, how them beets?”

“Red.”

“Uh, huh.” Vic said, chugging his drink. He wiped his lips on the arm of his rain slicker between gulps. “I hear Lucy move on...found another place to be.”

Otha set the soil bag on the wet asphalt between them.

“What do you know about that, Vic? About her?”

“You ain’t the only one that know’d her, man. And be lucky ‘bout that. She no good to be ‘round for sure”

“Where is she?” Otha asked. The red slicker made Vic look like an open flame, the way he jittered about back and forth.

“She left,” Vic said. “That divorce she got? I hope the poor man’s family ain’t gone too, know what I mean?” Vic started to walk away.

Otha grabbed his shoulder. “Wait!”

Vic stopped momentarily. “She survives off the will of good people, Otha. This bottle ‘bout all she left me.”

When Otha got home not five minutes after his conversation with Vic, the aroma of cooked meat stirred the air, clutching his nostrils. He removed his boots and fell to the

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couch, exhausted. That was when he noticed a church bulletin next to the lamp. It made mention of a church in Florida and the featured performer, Lucy Williams. Thumbing through the program Otha was on his feet before he knew it. Ronelle called him from the kitchen.

“Otha, I got the beets ready. They’re perfect with the meat.” She peeked into the living room. “Oh, you see that?”

“Where you get this?” He demanded. She plucked it from his hand and put it on the kitchen table next to his plate.

“A lady come by with her friend. Said they want us to see them sing.”

“When?”

“Sometime this morning, after you left.” Ronelle scooped the food onto his plate. “They had lunch and I was delighted to write them a check to support them in their effort.”

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## Contributor Notes

**PATRICK ALLEN** is the division chair of the Social Sciences and Public Services Division at CSM. “I write poetry that seeks to understand how we are driven by the force of our belief into action,” says Patrick.

**JUDITH ALLEN-LEVENTHAL** lives in Southern Maryland and teaches literature and writing at the College of Southern Maryland.

**SANDRA LEE ANDERSON** graduated from college as an English major, history minor. She served with the Peace Corps in Turkey, then worked as a career employee in the central administration of the D.C. Public Schools. She lives with her husband, Charlie, in St. Leonard. She found her writer’s voice attending the Memoirs class at the Prince Frederick Public Library, and continues to participate there and with the local Bayhill Writer’s Group. She also writes for *Bay Weekly*. Her interests in writing and history find focus in this historical fiction account of her great grandfather, Lafe. Her story is taken from a forthcoming book, *In the Crossfire: A Mountain Boy in North Carolina’s Civil War*.

**JUDY ANGELHEART** lives in Southern Maryland; however, this winter, she is wishing she lived somewhere warm. While waiting for spring, she fills her time and imagination reading books, watching movies, drinking wine, and bidding the muse to come.

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**JEFFREY BECK** is a published author and poet, although his day job is as dean of the Nathan Weiss Graduate College.

**ALLISON BURNETT** is a 32-year-old mother of three boys, prior Army, married to the military. She is enrolled at CSM to finish working on her associate's degree in Spanish. She plans to transfer and study earth sciences, specifically paleontology.

**SHERBIE CARSON** is sustained by the power of Unconditional Love, and Infinite Grace.

**LESLIE DICKEY** is a semi-retired, on again/off-again student at CSM. Still young enough to have questions, but old enough to know there are no answers. The search is everything.

**ETHAN FUGATE** is a 24-year-old working class poet from La Plata. For the past five years, he has been living in Baltimore finding a unique voice for his pieces. Currently, he is working on a collection of poems that recall English and Irish literature in modern context, both directly and indirectly.

**RACHEL HEINHORST** teaches English courses at CSM's La Plata Campus. She believes poetry screams loud and clear, pure examples of human experience.

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**BRENDA JONES** is currently the production specialist in the Marketing Department at CSM and has been an employee of the college for over 26 years. She enjoys taking pictures as a hobby and at family events and says that she loves it when an opportunity presents itself to take a very unusual or interesting photo. She would like to pursue her love and passion for photography when she retires.

**ROBIN KARIS** lives in Maryland and enjoys reading, photography, and writing. She also enjoys working on her family tree, in the hopes that she'll find a relative who lives in a land far, far away, who maybe has a castle she can visit.

**WILLIAM "ED" MORONEY** is an assistant professor at CSM and coordinator for the Criminal Justice and Homeland Security curriculums.

**SHARON MROZ** is a first-year student at CSM, and a devoted mother of three. Writing about life is one of her passions. She is dedicated to helping others receive freedom through the power of forgiveness.

**WILLIAM POE** is the author of *African-Americans of Calvert County* and a contributing writer for the *Chesapeake Current*.

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**ANNA READEN** is a student at CSM majoring in business administration. She is interested in various styles of photography and she has been taking photos since she was a teenager. Now that she is in her early twenties, her passion for photography has only grown.

**PEYTON REYNOLDS** is a freshman student at CSM working towards earning an AA in Applied Science and Technology. She also runs for the school's Women's Cross Country team. She says that she has been writing for as long as she can remember and has loved all of the arts. She was highly involved in arts as a high school student, including participation in musical, literary, and theatrical arts programs.

**AHMAD WRIGHT** is a former New York-based freelance book reviewer (*Los Angeles Times*, *Library Journal*, *Publisher's Weekly*, *Upscale Magazine*) who is excited about writing short stories. He has participated with Hilma Wolitzer in the Key West Literary Seminar, and, recently, with Evelina Galang in a VONA (Voices of Our Nation) Workshop in Miami. He has published stories in *African Voices Magazine* and *Dark Dreams: A Collection of Horror and Suspense by Black Writers*. He is currently an adjunct instructor at University of the District of Columbia Community College and is a graduate of the City College/CUNY Creative Writing Program.

**RUSSELL YAFFE** is a multi-disciplinary creator from Bethesda, Maryland, who loves telling stories through writing, music, and filmmaking. He studied film and Spanish at Northwestern University, and he has lived in Buenos Aires and Madrid.

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