



COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND

Connections

FALL 2020 LITERARY MAGAZINE

The logo for 'Connections' features the word in a serif font. Behind the text are two overlapping, semi-transparent rectangular shapes. Below the text is a stylized graphic of a spiral or swirl.

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COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND
Fall 2020 Literary Magazine

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Connections

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Cat Puzzle

Jennifer Polhemus

Fran fans
her hand through
puzzle pieces
in a box
on a table
in the community dining room.

She is so small
compared to the other patients
who stop by
to place a piece or two. The table
is too damn small, she says
in group therapy, like my
window ledge above the kitchen
sink. This is where
her cat, Reader, folded
his black body
and tucked white paws
on sunny days.

The edges are almost
done, and she sips
tepid water from a clear
plastic bottle, trying to cool down
from her walk
after lunch. Sweat dampens
the short, silver hair
at her temple and nape,
turning it a gleaming gray
like polished granite.
Her legs
echo the shape of a dancer's.



Sometimes Michael
sits with her and sorts
pieces by color. He is
from Italy.

She likes that. Her eyes
glide back and forth
over the emerging
picture of cats
the same way
she used to look
for Reader's tail
as he hid
under the bed
in the front room.

This one
looks just like
his eye, she whispers
to herself. She holds it
tightly
for many minutes.

3 Feet of Distance

Ian Golub

You and I lie on cushions of your parents' sailboat.
Me on one side of the cockpit, you on the opposite,
with three feet of distance between us, the sound
of waves in our ears, the scent of bug spray on our skin,
the nighttime collage of stars, ghostly clouds, a moon spilling
lunar light over the packed sail, your SAT prep book
propped against the galley stairs, and the bay's
ripples reflecting back the water's iridescent shimmer.

What was that?

What happened to us out there separated by three feet of distance,
moored in a protective cove, your voice blending with seagulls'
calls.

We sailed—off to some hideaway, as I stole glances at the way
your thin legs shone in the moonlight glow, up to the place where
your gray, sweatshorts ended and so dearly connected to my heart
which felt as if it bailed blood to relieve the drowning feeling
in my throat, desire certainly, but also love, I thought,
still think, sometimes.

Do you remember the time you and I got each other off in the
same briny bay?

Not here, but close by, standing up to our waist in murky water,
unable to see clearly what was clearly in front of us: desire,
distrust, and breaking the rules because your parents wanted us to
stay close,
but we wandered off to the other side of the sandbar, over squishy
land,
led by opportunity and hidden just enough by an outcrop of

shrubs

and sea grass where you and I tossed security to the wind, like spilled salt
thrown over our shoulders, sat on our knees, turning our fingers into instruments of pleasure as those tepid shore waves rode in, and how gentle your smile arrived, and how suddenly I came and submersion
did a number on my soul sending echoes of delight through my senses until
my toes unwound and I mumbled, “That’s good,” and you said, “now me—”

My wife of twenty years reminds me firmly, “We need more toilet paper.”

*She’s right, but I’m in the middle of this moment
when you and I didn’t use toilet paper to clean up, just the water and our hands,
which seems kind of dirty, but I never felt guilty, just nostalgia for a time
suspended on the horizon, the sun decadently pink, no witness, besides God,
who you believed was always watching, a constant struggle for you to do what was right
and what was right.*

I always sensed forever was a fantasy: some things, I knew, can't be replicated. That's what I mean by nostalgia watching us, and afterwards, returning to the boat, I felt gravity unkindly abandon

its buoyancy from my body, for I was sinking into the sand, into the depths of despair for time ticks away with that awful feeling: you and I would not last forever, because everything you clearly wanted

was more than half of who I was, and I sensed in those waters our undoing, and didn't like myself, as you cherished yourself—as you should—but we could never be truly together because of it.

That night on the boat with your parents in the cabin below, you did crawl over to my side of the cushions, and lay with me in spite of the risks of being discovered, and maybe yes, God, I wish I had been who I was. I wish I had said to you how much everything we had together meant to me, how cocky I acted out of insecurity, diminished by my own lack of faith, blinded by beautiful things, a great knife of fear I held by my side ready to slaughter anything that bloomed.

The toilet paper, for the record, I retrieve from my car and place on the ring in the bathroom wondering why I continue to love too silently, love from a distance, which is no way to love at all. But I have on occasion loved the right way: raw, exposed, ridiculous, the way I once said to my wife through tears, "sometimes I want to disappear." And she closed the three feet of distance between us, wrapping her arms around me with tender assurance, knowing in that moment, we would never run out of this thing we call love.

Routine

Olivia Wright

My eyes flutter open at 6:03 on the dot, right on time as usual. I wait for the alarm to beep seven shrill times before turning it off and then on again three times over. After folding the comforter over to a perfect angle, I touch my foot to the soft carpet, starting with my left one—but that doesn't feel right, so I lift my foot off the carpet again, then back on—no, no I need to start over. Beginning the day with my left foot isn't good today, it's an even day of the month, who knows how a mistake like that would make my day go? I just want to brush my teeth but I can't go into the bathroom without flicking the light on and off until it feels okay. I should just move into a new place and start fresh with a new set of routines. Finally in front of the mirror, ugh, my reflection paints a disheveled mess of a woman. My hair's too curly to properly brush and the dark spots under my eyes are slightly more visible than they were yesterday. The only excuse I have is that I kept missing the odd numbers on the clock, so I couldn't turn the light off, how anyone could turn off the lights on an even number is beyond me.

I'm so sick of Wednesdays, it's the middle of the week and nothing seems to happen. It's not close enough to the weekend to be excited and it's too far from the start of the week to be refreshed... or hungover, whatever way it turns out for me. People don't tend to make dentist appointments for Wednesdays, or on Wednesdays for that matter, not often anyway, so I'm never really busy booking appointments or signing people in. I'm not going to be devastated when I eventually leave this job; it is just a job, after all. I just don't know if I can rip myself away from the main consistency in my life. I've been doing the same exact thing every morning for almost eight years and I don't know if I can function outside of that. Where would I be without a set routine?

I don't think I'd miss the sticky notes decorating the monitors or the scent of blue rubber gloves trailing down the hallway into my desk space, but I will miss a job I can rely on to be the same thing day in and day out. The only reason I've stayed a receptionist this long is the crippling anxiety of "new." The job was fine for the first three years or so, but now I'm just squeaking by. Every bill that comes in sparks a new panic attack and every paycheck is just as disappointing as the last.

Can they please just play a different set of songs? I can't stand the Top 10's list anymore, but the radio's the nicest part of the job. The radio isn't constantly saying, "Kathrine file this; Kathrine write this down; Kathrine take this phone call," Kathrine, Kathrine, Kathrine. Today is different, though. I walk in through the front door without instantly being assigned a slew of tasks. I walk over to my desk and there's a younger woman sitting in a chair next to mine, confused; I look to Angela. She's been here longer than I have, so she must know what's going on, this isn't just a new receptionist, they get their own spot; this new one is in my spot. I take Angela to the side and ask if she knows why my one-person desk space suddenly has two chairs. She only offers a shrug in response, but she won't look me in the eye and has yet to say a word. Something is off and I don't like it, this isn't in the routine. How am I supposed to stay on schedule the whole day? I don't know if I can do this, I can't think oh my god, my chest is tight. Angela looks fine, so why is my heart beating out of my chest? My body feels like it's screaming inside, this is not normal this is not in the plan; this is new and I don't like it.

I need to find my boss, Sam, and ask him about the new lady, she seems nice enough but then again, I haven't even said hi. Leaning on the wall before I go talk to Sam, I calm my breath and try to force the flush from my cheeks. I blink repeatedly and rapidly in bursts of three while I tap the tip of my shoe on the tiled floor until I can gain control of my heart rate. I don't want

him knowing how badly I deal with change.

I quietly ask, “Hey Sam, quick question, uh, who’s the new lady?” He blankly stares at me for a second until it clicks.

“Oh, you must be talking about Rebecca. She’s just new, been thinking about adding some new blood to the office. Don’t worry, she won’t bite.” He bumps my arm as he walks away. I stare at the coffee maker and tap my index finger on the edge of the counter five times; it has to, has to, has to be odd. What do I do now? Maybe just... go to work? I make my way back to the front of the office, and walk behind the counter towards my spot at the long, corner-shaped desk that two other women, well, now three, sit at from 7:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. I guess I should introduce myself, I tell her my name and she just... nods. She doesn’t even tell me her name in response.

“Sam-well, Samuel, he only likes people he knows calling him Sam. Anyway, Samuel told me your name is Rebecca,” I say through a forced smile. She looks nice, her dark hair is smooth and barely curled at the bottom just about shoulder length, a constant smile pulls up the corner of her lips, her nose is slightly upturned like there’s a string holding up the tip. Her polka dotted dress fits her small frame nicely, her skin is almost perfect; she looks like a doll. Talk about new blood, she looks like she stepped out of a Burberry magazine. Meanwhile, I look like I just walked out of a thrift store; I look down at my loose-fitting floral blouse tucked into my brown pencil skirt. Am I “old blood”?

My handset rings for the first time this morning. I reach for it but before I can pick it up, Rebecca picks up the extension and helps the caller make an appointment. My hand doesn’t move from its spot hovering just above the phone while Rebecca takes down the appointment information. She messed up my routine and took my call; doesn’t she know that newbies shadow first?

She hangs up the phone after a few minutes while I'm still processing what just happened.

“Why... why did you take that call?” I ask her with a sharp tongue and a sigh while my fingers tap on the sides of my thighs in unison with the tapping of my toes on the floor.

“Oh, Sammy told me to take over this phone for today, he said we'd see where it goes—oh excuse me.” She gently pushes herself over to my keyboard, forcing me to back up while she punches in the information she had just taken down. Also, Sammy? I've never heard anyone call him “Sammy.” She refers to him as if he's a small boy that she babysits on the weekends, her tone is almost reminiscent. They aren't related. I would have heard of her by now and Sam doesn't have any siblings, so who is this woman? I glance up at the waiting room and scan back to the hallway where I see no other than Sam himself leaning a shoulder on the doorway to the back rooms, coffee cup in hand as he looks over the front desks. Our eyes meet over the brim of his mug, my eyebrow raises at him but he, mid sip, turns back into the safety of the back of the practice.

Everyone goes about their day as if a shiny new toy isn't planted in my air space, even the mailman noticed her, yet no one in the practice seems to be affected by her presence. I feel like I'm being forced to take the back seat on my own job; it feels like I'm shadowing the new girl. This isn't the routine I expect. I knew I should've started with my left foot this morning. I have yet to answer my own phone today, I have nothing to do except clean off the flyers for events that happened two months ago from the bulletin boards around the office, clean every surface until it's spotless, and tap, tap, tap. I don't think there's an edge in this office that my finger tip hasn't touched today, it's the only thing I can really control right now. The constant forced blinking is starting to give me a headache and I can't stop straightening

just about everything; I feel like I'm losing control of today. The whole office is treating me like a temp; not just the other receptionists, but the dentists and hygienists too. I've been here longer than some of those hygienists. I've watched them take the spots of some of my good friends. They became my friends over the year, but now they're handing me a file without even looking at me. I think I've turned invisible. The young dentist is acting chummy with Rebecca, but he's usually chatting with Jenni at the other side of the desk. Rebecca seems to have it under control; if she needs me, she'll have to ask for my help. She's new, there's no way she can go the whole day without needing help.

As the last few patients wait for their cleanings and fillings, I still haven't done my actual job. The magazines are straightened and the cupboards are organized now, which is actually nice because making coffee usually stresses me out, but that's not what I'm getting paid to do. I rest my elbow on the, now sparkling, countertop of the break room as Angela walks in and picks up a mug.

"Angela, I'm only here for half an hour more, I gotta find something to do, you have any spare chores?" I question my co-worker, desperate for an activity.

"Go ask Sam, he should be back in his office. You've been buggin' out all day, just go talk to him," she motions to the back rooms with her coffee mug.

I head to the back, keeping my eyes on my shoes to make sure I'm not stepping on any lines in the linoleum. Once I reach his office, the door is closed. It's not out of the ordinary that it would be pulled to, but it's never closed, even when he's not in

it. My pace slows as I lead with my ear. The practice is mostly quiet now, seeing as the day's almost over. I hear mumbling that I recognize as Sam. With my ears straining, I knock on the door with a hesitant knuckle, all too curious about the sudden closed door. Something bumps on the other side while a throat clears closer to the door. The door opens to reveal a sheepish dentist who won't meet my gaze. His white coat is hung on the hook next to the fake plant in the corner. He won't fully open the door so I ask to come inside. He stutters a shy, "Uh, y-yeah, sure." I walk in, and there stands Rebecca with her hands folded in front of her. She glances at me through her fake eyelashes but keeps her lipstick-smudged mouth closed.

"Sam, would you mind if we talked in the hallway... alone?" I request while gripping the sides of my skirt tightly. I try to make it as clear as possible that I do not want Rebecca there as I motion with my eyes to the open door. He turns to look at the pretty little thing in his office once more before turning back towards me. Leaving Rebecca alone in his office, he closes the door behind him, as if he's hiding a skeleton in a closet.

The left side of Sam's collar is crumpled and his wedding ring is probably thrown in a drawer somewhere in an empty envelope. I have to confront him.

"Sam, what's going on? How come I haven't worked my own job today?" He opens his mouth once to respond before closing it and becoming more interested in the floor.

"Look," he starts, "I didn't think I'd have to tell you today, but we're gonna have to let you go." My heart sinks into my stomach and my head gets fuzzy. I stare at him, waiting for further explanation but I'm offered a cowardly, "Why don't you go clean out your desk? Becky's moving into your spot tomorrow."

“I—can’t believe this,” I shake my head and look at the floor,
“How can you—”

“Kathrine, just go do it, before you cause a scene,” Sam states, getting more impatient with every word spoken.

Becky, Sammy, it makes my stomach churn. My feet are glued to the floor and I’m worried my knees will fail me. Beads of sweat trace my hairline as my breathing becomes shaky. A dentist office scandal, how romantic. I’m gonna have to go back to Colorado and ask my parents for a room because the rent is too high for me to stay here while I’m between jobs, all because Sam can’t keep his dick in his pants. My life is ruined. I have a daily routine and it’s all changing, my world is on its head because I’m being replaced by a goddamn modern-day pin-up doll. I don’t believe this, I’m not even getting fired for something I did or didn’t do, I work harder than anyone in this place. All those years, and for what? For the spot that I’ve held for over seven years to get handed to a discount Zooey Deschanel without so much as a warning? I would sue if I had the money for a lawyer and I would take it to the media if anyone cared. If no one cares about a little practice in the suburbs, why would anybody care about me?



Sup-port: Verb; Give Assistance To, Hold Up, Elizabeth Pruitt

Strength in Me

Ashley Groves

I'm pretty sure there are no things
I can't bare.
I have watched many give me the unwanted stare.
I look down with pain in my eyes,
I remind myself their victory begins if I cry.
No I'm not perfect but I can hardly be,
But there is still strength within me.

A man tells me I have no worth.
Honey, I know my purpose and it started from birth.
I sit in my room counting every lie,
I remind myself that God made me built to fly.
No I'm not perfect but I can hardly be,
But there is still strength within me.

A fear of my dad's opinion in me,
My dad had to leave this earth when I was three.
I look at my dad in photos and family memories;
I know his love for me could go on for centuries.
No I'm not perfect but I can hardly be,
But there is still strength within me.

Depression whispers in my ear;
Depression whispers that I don't belong here.
I pick up my crown and wipe away every fear.
I clean my face and push back every tear.
No I'm not perfect but I can hardly be,
But there is still strength within me.

Every sword can come my way,
My strength is when I bow my head and begin to pray.

I ignore every thoughtless word that tries to pierce my
 beautiful head,
I remind myself I belong in a queen bed.
Hate is absolute disruption,
I won't let my life end without an eruption.
I'm my own knight to rescue the day,
I need no one to remind me that I bring a new iridescent ray.
No I'm not perfect but I can hardly be,
But there is still strength that lives in the woman in me.





Rain On Me, *Mona Weber*

July

By Sarah Meador

I watched July step out of the calendar
To become a person
Her kisses were the sweetest sunburn
(Some things I will never learn—
I always let her worsen)
I'm pink with her touch
Even when it's too much
I watched July leap into the massacre

I watched my heart step out of the vascular
To become a person
Her veins tightened around my throat
(I can't remember what she wrote—
I always let her worsen)
I'm high on her touch
When the pain's too much
I watched my heart leap into the massacre

I watched your body fall into the lavender
To become a person
You ripped the flowers from the ground
(I'm grateful you were finally found—
I always let you worsen)
I'm stuck with your touch
When the love's so much

I watched your body leap into the massacre

El Greco

Jack Stewart

Outside, the butcher's son is selling
Chickens to the cook.

Down the hill

The three men digging something

Don't look up.

The grass is only lighter tan

Closer to the river.

The air gathers there at night.

In the morning, now,

It climbs back up the hill,

Barely.

She laughs again.

Last night their voices trailed away

Like everything trails away from Toledo,

Slowly toward the river.

Startled skirts of birds

Rose and crossed and settled.

She spread her dress like a moon

For them to lie down on.

In Toledo people marry in the river.

He watched her wring out her hair.

The water made a light tapping on the ground.

Now he kisses her
And says he will come back in the afternoon.
He is to meet some friends later
To talk about a place to live.
She goes inside.

Across the river a man is herding goats.
He has five of them.
Everything slopes toward the river.

To the imagination,
The goat bells clink, "Toledo, Toledo."
I will go walking this afternoon
And think of a man and woman
Pressing their bodies together in the river.



Honey

King Serenity

At the bottom of the hill, honeysuckles in the shade of the garbage bin.
Caterpillar nests hung over the branches behind them.
Like the ceramic cats posted on the counter of a Chinese restaurant.
Positioned to ward us away. Settling in the intent.

I always reached for the yellow honeysuckles. You always reached for white.

With one swath of the arm, you'd bring a honeysuckle to your nose. Your nostrils would flare almost wider than the cockatiel's home in the hollow of the pine tree behind us. Then, you would tell me your thoughts on the scent and wait for me to tell you mine.

The descriptors that would leave my mouth were resolute to me as the pollen shaking from the stems if tugged too sternly. I hated when the pollen settled in my nose. Loathed it settling in my glasses.

My tongue would tell you half-truths layered in honey. But the caterpillars read the ridges of my lips and they knew this braille better than the lining of their own nests.

I won't keep you here for too long. I wanted the chance to tell you: The yellow honeysuckles were wilting and smelled every bit as bitter as the notes of duplicity in the branches. The ones you chose, those honeysuckles were sweet and white and iridescent. And the scent was exactly as you described them, that:

“Honeysuckles.
They smell like
a campfire
before
the rain”





CSM, Edgard “Gardy” Domenech

Passing the Fire

Wayne Karlin

(A chapter from his novel *A Wolf by the Ears*, winner of the Juniper Prize for Fiction)

It is no more than six miles from Bladensburg to Washington City and the late summer twilight still lingers as they come in sight of the twin buildings of the Capitol, its sandstone blocks glowing red in this last light, rows of windows dark and ocular against it. They stop at a crossroads just before the complex. Mansions line the street, and their windows are dark as well, though in one Towerhill thinks he sees a candle flare up and go out, like a blink. Cockburn nods to him and he in turn nods to Neb, who walks forward into the road, holding a white flag of truce. They need to be certain, Scott told him, that the town has surrendered. Towerhill had wanted to carry the flag himself, but Cockburn had forbidden it, told him not to be absurd. For a few hours that afternoon, camped at Bladensburg, he had been afraid he would be robbed of whatever sense of culmination his entrance into the capital would provide, afraid, at first, they would bypass Washington altogether or that only the white troops would be allowed to enter the city. But General Ross had made it clear how he wanted to use the black marines. “It will be fitting,” he said to Admiral Cockburn, “if Sergeant Towerhill and his Colonial Marines lead our parade into that—what do you call it, George?—that ‘nest of bugging vipers.’”

Scrapping their eyeballs with the sight of black men with guns, their nightmares unbound into their waking lives. Just say it, Ross, he had thought, tightening his lips to keep the words in. Seeing in his mind the plantation he had burnt to free himself, all the plantations and houses and towns after that, a pyre to commemorate and incinerate the years of his enslavement, a line of burnt offerings that would end here.

Now Neb walks into the street. At first he simply struts, but then, as some of the white soldiers laugh, he begins bobbing and dancing, waving the flag vigorously, acting—to Towerhill’s anger—the fool for them. But the shot that cracks through the air does not come near Neb. It strikes Ross’s horse. For an instant, there is complete silence, the British frozen in a tableaux. The horse whinnies once, not loudly, and a shudder travels through its flesh. It collapses slowly, as if allowing its master time to safely dismount. During the day’s fight, it had been as untouched and unflinching as its rider, charging with him into the thick of combat. Towerhill knows, has been told repeatedly, that this horse carried the general through all the fighting in Spain and France.

Now he sees Ross kneel by it, holding its great head in his hands and murmuring to it, tears running down his cheeks as his aides stand by uneasily. “There will be no punishment unless there is resistance,” Ross had ordered. Towerhill feels a surge of gratitude towards the animal. Its death will burn a city.

All of them standing and watching Ross’s farewell to his horse as if it is a stage play. Another shot rings out; he sees the flash from the window of one of the mansions lining the street. A soldier from the fusiliers falls, clutching his stomach. More shots. One rips a hole in Neb’s white flag; he waves it with more energy, still dancing in circles in the street, jumping up and down and laughing. Another strikes near Cockburn’s horse, the animal rearing, and then two more soldiers go down; his marines and the British are firing back now, squads running into the mansion. Towerhill yells at Craney to follow him; he runs to the other side of the Capitol in time to see a group of Americans, none in uniform but all armed with muskets, laughing and clapping each other on the back like schoolboys playing a prank as they run down the hill in the direction of the White House. He stops, shoots, his people opening fire also; one of the Americans clutches his head, spins, falls. His comrades, no longer laughing, scatter, abandoning him. For an instant Towerhill considers

following them. But then he feels the heat of the flames behind him. When his squad comes back to the street, the shooters' mansion is on fire, and George Evans is battering at a padlock on the Capitol doors with the hilt of his sword. The lock swings back and forth, undamaged, until Evans curses, steps back, draws his pistol, and shoots it off.

Some of the marines rush forward into the south building, following Ross and his aides. The House of Representatives, Towerhill recalls. He had studied the plans for these buildings when he had been hired out to the architect William Boulton; he had been taken to Washington to see the start of the construction. Whose black hands had finished the task? Another Towerhill, Towerhills, building in servitude for another American patriot feverish with visions of freedom and blind to the hypocrisy of framing it on enslaved black bodies. Or, worse, aware of it. Towerhill studies the tangible buildings themselves now, coldly, methodically, only his sixth finger twitching, as if it is the gauge of some inner turmoil. The two structures are made of enormous blocks of sandstone, and their roofs are iron. But between them—he knows the plans are to join them under a great dome—is only a connecting wooden passageway. It will burn. The rest must be put to fire from the inside out.

Cockburn and Scott enter with some of the fusiliers, who are carrying a tripod and several Congreve rockets; the admiral, apparently, has become fond of them. A mistake, Towerhill thinks. He hurries after them. Just inside the door, an old slave dressed in silk pantaloons and a white wig tries to block his way. “Where you going, boy,” the old man demands. Towerhill grabs him by the two sides of his vest, lifts him, and puts him aside. High firestone columns rise to support a vaulted ceiling and glass skylights, with red silk curtains hanging ceiling to floor, and creating what seems to his eyes a jarring opulence against the elegantly simple architecture of the room. A huge carved eagle, wings spread, and a marble statue of a woman holding a document stand above and behind the rostrum at the head of the

chamber. The Constitution of the United States of America. He remembers Cedric Hallam, Jacob's father, standing as he read the document to Jacob and himself. A believer in educating darkies, if not freeing them. His eyes shining, his lips trembling. Reading to his captive audience in the book-lined sanctuary that had been his study. The sanctuary of lies. The repository of lies.

Cockburn, laughing like a schoolboy, has set up the tripod and—before Towerhill can warn him—sets off a rocket aimed at the ceiling. It bursts in a flower of red, showering sparks and shrapnel that ricochet off floors and tables and, surprisingly, do not kill anyone. Cockburn, his face blackened by powder, looks uncharacteristically embarrassed for a moment, but then recovers himself, and stands on the speaker's chair at the head of the room. "What say you, gentlemen?" he yells, his voice echoing. "Shall this harbor of Yankee democracy be burned? All for it, say aye!" Most of the men laugh, and yell aye, a wave of giddiness running through the room.

A hand claps Towerhill on the back; he spins, bringing his rifle around, nearly shooting the white soldier smiling at him. "Here be even hotter than blooming Africa, ain't it, Blackie," the man says in MacDougal's voice, his face and form blurring for a moment, and then coming back into focus as the tall, lean soldier from the 21st, the man offering him and Neb tea before Bladensburg. Towerhill brings his rifle up to the vertical, in salute, and turns away. The soldiers are piling up furniture, lugging in desks and cabinets and chairs they've dragged from the offices along the corridors, slathering them with gunpowder paste, giggling and giddy. "Leave the bloody corridors clear," he hears Scott shout. Cockburn himself ignites the fire; it shoots up to the ceiling, a wave of heat fanning out. "More!" he yells. "More fuel for Mr. Monroe's bonfire!" He spots Towerhill. "What say you, my good sergeant? How shall we proceed? What more do we need to feed this republican blaze?" He lifts and lowers himself on his tiptoes, excited as a child, the flames reflected in his eyes.

What they need comes to him. “Words,” Towerhill says.

He turns, searching the chamber, spots the old slave still near the entrance, and strides over to the man, calling for Craney, Mingo, and Neb to follow him.

The old man looks at him defiantly.

“Where’s the library?” Towerhill asks.

“Call the Library of Congress, here,” the old man says. “And *the* library of *this* Congress ain’t a place for no traitorous trash like you.”

Neb has his knife at the man’s throat before Towerhill can say a word.

“You take us, old man, or I carve you another smile.”

“You do that.”

“Leave him,” Towerhill says, suddenly weary. “I remember where it should be.”

He leads them down the connecting wooden corridor to the North Wing, passing the Senate on the first floor, then the Supreme Court Chamber, where other soldiers are already piling furniture into a huge pyramid, then upstairs, following his memory, where he flings open the heavy oak doors. Shelves, with thousands of books in them, stand above him on all sides. Hallam’s study writ large. As his eyes brush the leather spines, he feels the words stir all around him, squirming on the pages, scurrying to slyly configure themselves to the prospects notched in his mind. Pretending to shape the world into beauty. Millions of words. A tower hill of lies. A little black boy, his brain crawling with insectoid words, spewing them from his lips as if they were his. As if he could own them. As if they could save him. The freak of nature. The terror in their lives. He goes to the shelves, and begins gathering armfuls of the books, throwing them onto the floor. *This harbor of Yankee democracy*. Neb grinning at him. Cap’n Book. Laughing at him. Laughing with him. He laughs with Neb, two black men laughing together in the face of lies. *Debates of the British House of Commons, Journals of the Lords and Commons*. Law books. Glanvill, Hale, and Coke. Boswell’s

Journal of a Tour of the Hebrides. Bertram's *Travels*. History of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay. John Locke. *The end of law is not to abolish or restrain, but to preserve and enlarge freedom. For in all the states of created beings capable of law, where there is no law, there is no freedom.* Shakespeare. *Hath not a negro organs, he will proclaim to Neb, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the same winter and summer, as a white man is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.* Jefferson. Cedric Hallam standing like Moses descended from the mount, like God in his heaven, reading down to them. We hold these lies to be self-evident.

"You going read them all, Book?" Neb asks.

An analogy, Towerhill thinks. Neb is to Towerhill as Bertram was to Jacob.

Craney looks at them worriedly. "Admiral is waiting on this, Towerhill."

"Let him wait," Neb says. "Cap'n Book *reading*."

Towerhill points at the shelves. "Craney, you, Mingo; you remember the day the north barn burned?"

Craney looks at him, puzzled.

"You remember how we made a line, passed buckets?"

"Sure, Towerhill. Put out the fire."

"You get the others, get the British too, form a line, here back to Cockburn."

Neb laughs, seeing it. "Going to pass the fire."

Craney nods. "Sure, Towerhill. We can do that."

"Then go."

At first, they pass the books along the line of men stretching from the library back to the South Wing, but this is too slow, and soon soldiers are taking armloads, throwing some into the now-

burning Senate Chamber, running more over to Cockburn in the other wing, throwing books onto the bonfire, the heat blasting back into their faces, woolen uniforms growing hotter, sweat soaking into the fiber, steaming, so that little clouds hover over their shoulders as they run. Other soldiers have found documents in the clerks' office downstairs and throw them into the flames as well. Towerhill tears down a damask curtain from an anteroom near the library, fills it time and again with load after load of books, running back and forth, panting, breathing in lungfuls of hot smoke from the burning pages, tasting their ash on his lips.

Finally the room is empty, and he runs with the last load and flings it onto the fire. The books flare as they hit the flames, burst into flame themselves, pages swiftly blackening and curling. The heat has grown unbearable, and some men scream in pain as they inadvertently touch metal buckles or buttons. Fire runs up the silk curtains; the glass of the skylights melts and drips, molten glass falling on one man's back, threatening to torch him as his comrades roll him on the floor. Ross, sweat runnelling his blackened face, finally yells at them to evacuate the buildings.

Outside Towerhill stands with Cockburn, Ross, and the others watching from a safe distance, their features strangely animated and fluid in the light from the fire. It is full night now, but the flames shooting up from the two buildings and from the fires across town in the Navy Yard—set ablaze by the Americans themselves—illuminate the sky with false daylight.

Towerhill walks away from the laughing Englishmen over to the silent formation of his own people, standing in solemn witness, each of them, to a man and woman, understanding what the British will never understand about what they are seeing on this night. He walks back further, until he can take in all of the picture. But as the buildings burn, it is only the image of books flaring like moths drawn into a fire that he sees in front of his eyes, the books and a room where three children sit surrounded by other books, entranced by lies and promises. He wants to rejoice, to flicker and elongate and dance like a flame himself

at this culmination for which he has been waiting and killing, his life a line of fire moving inexorably from the flames of the plantation's manor house to this blaze lighting the sky over Washington. Something loosens in him at this moment, a fist that has been squeezing his heart for so long he no longer knows it is there until it suddenly releases its grip. He has come to this place and has done what he has needed to do; he has liberated the words and now he can see them rise phoenix-like from the flames, their letters twisting and writhing, shaping into forms unforeseen by those who had fashioned them, released now into the world like unwrapped promises.

In the White House, the smell of roasted meat fills his nostrils. In the dining room, the table had been set, as if in anticipation of their arrival: a damask tablecloth, matching napkins, fine china plates, crystal goblets. Now the light from their torches sparks gleams of fire from the silverware and crystal. For a few seconds, the small crowd of British officers, caked with ash, dust, and sweat, stand stunned. And then erupt into laughter. How good of Madison to prepare a feast to celebrate their victory. Will the famous Dolley attend them? One hears she offers quite a spread. Ah, madeira wine; what aristocratic tastes these democrats have. The beef too rare, what? Not to worry, it will be Cockburned to a crisp soon enough.

And so on.

As the officers sit at the table, Cockburn waves a leg of lamb at Towerhill, motioning for him to join them. But he remains in the doorway. He is repulsed by their hilarity, though he cannot understand why. The faces—Cockburn, Ross, Smith, Evans, Scott, Glied—all familiar to him, seem transformed, as if some devil beneath their skins has been unfettered. Scott spreads his hands, his gesture taking in the table, all the silver and crystal finery. “A feast worthy of the champions of republican freedom, what?” he says, directing his statement to the stray American they'd dragged in with them, coming across him as

they walked to the White House. The plump young man is seated next to Cockburn, terrified and trembling, his white wig askew. He blanched when he'd been told the admiral's name. Now Cockburn throws an arm around his shoulder, pushes a wine-filled goblet under his nose with his other hand. "Come, good Yankee...what did you say your name was?" The man mumbles something. "What?" Cockburn shouts. "Speak up, lad! Display some of the boldness and courage your countrymen exhibited at Bladensburg!"

"Bold as rabbits," Evans laughs.

"It's Roger Weightman, sir."

"Of course it is not. It is Jonathan, yes? Roger Jonathan. Jonathan Jonathan."

The others at the table chant the name. "Jonathan, Jonathan, Jonathan."

"And what is your standing in life, Monsieur Jonathan?"

"Sir?"

"What work do you do, idiot?" Scott calls.

"I'm a bookseller, sir."

Cockburn laughs. "And I'm a book burner. Isn't that right, Sergeant Towerhill? Where are you going, sergeant? Stay. Stay while we make a toast."

He stands, dragging the bookseller up. Raises his goblet. "To peace! To peace with America and to hell with Madison!" He drains the goblet, fills it again, makes Weightman drink. "That's it, Jonathan. Quaff it like a man! Quaff, quaff!" "Quaff, quaff," the others call.

Cockburn releases the bookseller, lifts himself up, and pulls a cushion out from underneath himself. "Know what this is, Jonathan?" He doesn't wait for an answer. "Took it from your queen's dressing room upstairs, to have me a small souvenir of our presidential feast." He raises, kisses the cushion. "Belongs... no, belonged to your queen herself, Mistress Dolley, wife of the rather swiftly vacating James. I will keep it to remind me of her..."

seat.”

The British roar. Except, Towerhill sees, for Ross. A faint look of disgust passes over the general’s face.

“And now let’s have a dance. Show our American representative here how John Bull spins!”

Smith and Scott get up from the table and dance, an exaggerated minuet, singing to each other, their voices pitched high:

*A landlady of France,
She loved an officer, ’tis said,
And this officer he dearly loved her brandy, O!
Sighed she, “I love this officer,
Although his nose is red,
And his legs are what his regiment call bandy, O!”*

“Come join us, my dear sable friend,” Scott calls to Towerhill. “Show us how Blackie can dance as well. No? Why not? Come back! Desertion is punishable by hanging!” He wags a finger at Towerhill, and George Smith sings to him, extending his arms:

*Fifty I got for selling me coat, Fifty for selling me blanket.
If ever I ’lists for a soldier again,
The devil shall be me sergeant...*

Towerhill leaves the singers. Enters the kitchen. The place must have been abandoned moments before they arrived. Spits with joints of meat are still turning on the fire. A black man sits on a stool in front of the grate, singing softly to himself, drinking from a silver goblet. He turns to look at Towerhill, takes in the singed red uniform. His eyes are yellow and bloodshot.

“What are you doing here?” Towerhill asks.

“What’s it look like I doing?”

Towerhill waves a hand at the kitchen. “All this. Who was it for?”

“Who you think lives here? It’s for the president, when he come back.”

“You’re free, man. You can leave.”

The man snorts. “Where to, Mr. Red Coat? I’m American. I’m here.”

Towerhill stares at him, their eyes locked.

“Stay,” he says to the man. “Stay and burn.”

When he returns to the dining room, it is crowded with men from the 20th Fusiliers, Cockburn’s sailors, and some of his own Colonial Marines. One of the white soldiers has piled all of the silver, plates, and goblets in the center of the damask tablecloth; he and another bring the two ends of the cloth together, creating a sack for the loot. Ross, his face still serious, tells the man to bring it all outside. He spots Towerhill.

“Come, help us, sergeant,” says Ross. “There is still work to be done this night.”

The general picks up a chair, puts it on the table. Swaying slightly, the other officers, including Cockburn, follow his example; along with the soldiers, they pile all of the furniture in the room on the tabletop. They tear down the curtains and add them to the heap; then the fusiliers spread on the gunpowder paste, as they had done in the Capitol.

“Towerhill,” Cockburn calls. He is holding a torch. Towerhill walks over to the admiral. Cockburn hands him the torch, looking into his eyes, all drunkenness seemingly vanished. Towerhill raises it to him in salute, turns, and puts the torch to the edge of the tablecloth. It bursts into flame. A cheer arises, and the others begin throwing their torches onto the pile.

“Are your marines ready?” Cockburn asks, as they move towards the door.

Before Towerhill can answer, they are outside in the humid August air, which feels cool on his face after the blast of heat inside. He sees Neb, in front of the company, next to another company of white marines and sailors. The men in both groups



hold long poles, topped with plate-sized balls of cloth smeared with gunpowder paste. They surround the White House.

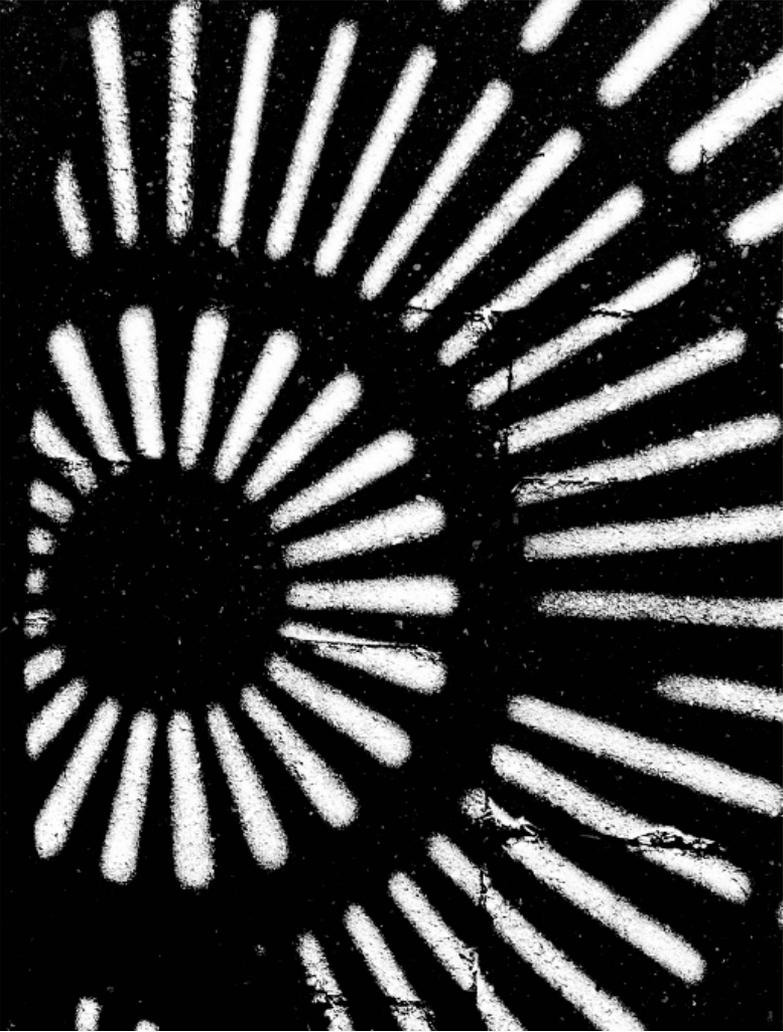
“They’re ready, sir.”

Cockburn nods. “I owe a certain debt to you, sergeant. This evening’s work is my first payment on it.” He nods towards the building. The flames inside make the windows glow red. “You may proceed.”

Towerhill walks over to one of the windows. He can see the flicker of flame inside, the shadow of fire playing on a corridor wall. He raises his rifle, smashes it butt first into the glass, a shard cutting his cheek as it falls, his tongue spontaneously licking out, tasting the blood on his lips. “Like that,” he says to Neb.

“Break them up!” Neb yells, and the marines surge forward and smash the glass with their muskets. Mingo stands nearby holding one of the fire poles. Towerhill remembers him felling Adams with an iron bar, on the day of the revolt, the day of a beginning that has brought them here. Towerhill strikes a match and nods to the smith, who grins and lowers the pole. He touches the flame to the gunpowder-smeared ball. It flares. “Light them!” he shouts, and Mingo touches the flaming ball to the next pole, and the next. When all are aflame, the men throw them through the broken windows.

Fire finding fire.



Waiting for Download, *Diane Payne*

I Know of a Place

Sean McNutt

I know of a place where all can move and yet
Feel still, down a narrow path between two buildings
That opens to a landing looking out over everything
This world has to offer—as long as it is found within
The dip of its valley and height of its trees.

I know of a place where all fears disappear and
Courage is so abundant it is currency. Where the
Creatures small and big, existent and imagined
Feel the weight of this place as they frolic and
Flutter through meadows, bushes, and brambles.

I know of a place where hands can be held and
Shoulders are stained with tears sad and happy.
Where the words shared between those under the
Canopy of unknown and beautiful trees contain
All there is to know and learn of this universe.

I know of this place.
It is my past.
It is my future.

Second Child

Erica Clark

1

During the labor day I tried to deny that
it's time.

I closed my eyes tight to resist the agony as she
eagerly aimed to be with us.

I fainted each time the high intense pain reached MY threshold.
She entered this world like Superman flying in the sky with one
arm out straight
leading her way through.

No sign of nerve damage a few weeks after
Supergirl crossed the threshold of HER world.

2

I am animated when we watch my favorite child movies together.
She loves movies so much it won't be hard to catch her up on
today's flicks.

Nap time I became Sleeping Beauty as she was the Little Rascal.
From one Goonie to another, like the Addams,
we are a happy family with our loving values.
She can stay Home Alone now
so, there's no Nightmare Before Christmas.

3

What do you have a taste for?
Shrimp, but I thought we are having nachos.
Bibbidi Bobbidi Boo
Creative action in motion to have our taste
buds rejoicing is the holy grail.
We dance around each other as we conceive ideas
to place on these tortilla chips.
As we sit in excitement and gratification of our creative work,
we say grace in Harmony.

The Dandelion You Trust With Your Wishes

Sherbie Corazza

She is. An unexpected Cheeto in the mouth
of the craving gull. Chocolatey cookies
to the blue-furred monster. Never-ending sunset
from an airplane window above tangerine clouds.
The bravery of early November Christmas lights
twinkling in the darkened streets. The moon that follows
no matter how far you go. Sliced oranges at halftime.
Clean laundry. Warm towels straight from the dryer.
Saturday morning bacon wafting upstairs to wake
sleepy eyes. Lemon sundress twirling in summer sun.
the first touch. the first kiss. the first time
you truly knew. The pureness of the virgin snow
falling among pines. Calm vanilla bean specks
and gooey cinnamon rolls, slightly undercooked.
Curls on a couch-sleeping doodle. The strength
of gale storm winds on the shore. The spirited wave
that draws you in. Candles in the deep purple night.
Sips of sleepy wine, as you melt together beneath
the blanket. Fields of flowers that turn to feel
sun-warmth on their faces. The insides
of floppy bunny ears, smooth against fingertips.
Serendipitous daffodils eagerly rising through
February's chill. 27 blocks of green lights
In Atlantic City. New Jersey blueberries—mostly
Sweet. The dandelion you trust with your wishes.
The steady hand gently sliding into your back pocket.
She is every unexpected sweetness
you didn't see coming. The happy ending
you almost stopped believing in.

Dancer

Zoila Vidal

The sound of the drum slowly beating; makes her hips sway side to side. Her arms move like waves as if she is dancing in the air. She smiles and gives you her full attention; making you feel like you are the only one that exists in her world. Her shoulders move secretly from the rest of her body as if commanding only that part to be of pure movement.

She wears a traditional Middle Eastern costume of black bra with gold coin hanging from the edges, and a sheer black skirt. Purple glitter on her body that shines with the light. Those gold coins are clinking, as her dance becomes more exotic. Her hair is not long, yet her highlights of purple give hints of a free spirit. Moving towards you she raises her hips; as her belly rolls in waves slowly, or fast depending on the drums. She is dancing only for you, regardless of gender.

She winks at you, shows off her moves, how she commands her neck, her shoulder, her arms, her belly, her hip, each part plays a different role, or just stays still as the other shows its skills. Your fingers touch your lips, your wedding band you try to hide, as she sees what you are doing. Her grace tells you her demands, yet her eyes show a hidden sadness that she hides with makeup and a smile.

Even the lights up on the stage cannot keep up with her dancing; she loses herself. She smiles; only in her dancing she is free. She forgets her pain and enjoys the attention that she naturally does not get. Her back arches as she looks at you, her smile captivates you. Licking her lips inviting you to an adventure. Then standing on her tip toes, her calf moves fast, up and down, up and down; gives a motion of hips bouncing; as her belly rolls, as in waves.

Coming close to the tables, many men and women would like a closer glance at you. Swaying her hips, she dances in front of a woman, who loses her mind in her turmoil. She pauses and smiles as she sees you. Happy to have any attention given to her, she sees that her belly is close to her face. The crowd claps as the woman licks the purple grape glitter from her stomach; winking at her, blowing her a kiss, the dancer sways to another table.

Heading towards a couple who have not once lost track of her movement on and off the stage. Shimmering side to side, side to side, her cleavage exposed. She moves between chairs moving her hips as they stare. The woman puts the money in her mouth, as she presses her lips between your breasts, the husband glides the back of his finger on the curve of her hips. She kisses the woman and blows a kiss at the man, the crowd claps.

She spots a man in the far corner; this man is always there, a fan or an admirer. He is in his mid 50s, yet he feels young and handsome in her eyes. She comes close to him as she arches her back, then stays there as her hips move side to side. He hands her a flower, as it lays on her belly. Her stomach remains still, as her hips run, but the rose does not fall. Holding the rose, she places it between her breasts and gladly gives him a soft kiss on the lips. Crowd cheers as they wish it were one of them.

Dancing back to the stage, she twirls around; her feet barely touch the ground. The drumbeats stop; in silence, she rolls her stomach one more time for her admirers to see. Then she ends; takes a bow, and leaves, graciously. The room fills up with screams and applause. Gifts are thrown; at the stage, she picks up another rose, money, and jewelry.

Sitting down, taking her makeup off, she stares at the mirror. Smiling at the admirers that enjoyed her art. She has always had a golden rule, to be an exotic dancer. To grace and conquer with her unusual ways. Quickly her smile fades, and sadness takes over. Her heart never comes to see her. She gets paid well for a single mother, but it's never enough.

She hides a desire that breaks her heart just thinking about it. She cries and suffers in silence, for no one wants to hear her talk about her pain; they just want to see her dance. She is most happy when she dances, smiles because she is free. She dances for the gods, and she holds to another day in solace and joy.



Contributors

ERICA CLARK is a CSM student.

EDGARD “GARDY” DOMENECH joined the CSM family as the new mail services, shipping, and receiving coordinator in November 2019. He has worked in mailing and shipping in higher education for 28 years. His favorite hobbies are taking pictures and woodworking.

IAN GOLUB grew up in Maryland and spent many years in Mexico and the midwestern United States. He recently returned to Maryland. He loves to combine universal questions with the specific memories, details, and atmospherics of all the places he has lived, shaping them into meaning through poems.

ASHLEY GROVES: is a CSM student. She wrote “Strength in Me” to help connect with people of all kinds in the belief that even though life has its obstacles, you can still get back up. Groves says the poem is for anyone who has risen from an obstacle. The objective, she says, is to show that she still stands strong even when life is hard and her mental health gets the best of her.

WAYNE KARLIN is the author of eight novels and three non-fiction books. He has received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Paterson Prize in Fiction, The Vietnam Veterans of America Excellence in the Arts Award, and the Juniper Prize in Fiction for *A Wolf by the Ears*.

JADEN LONG is a student at Salisbury University. He was born in Great Mills, MD, where he received his education at Esperanza Middle School and Leonardtown High School. He is currently studying Spanish and marketing. His interest in poetry developed in kindergarten after being gifted the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe from his mother. His dream has always been to write poetry and short stories under the pen name he created in sixth grade. Since becoming homeless mid-2019, his poetry focuses on the emotions associated with melancholy and introspection. He writes poetry under the pen name King Serenity.

SARAH MEADOR is a freshman at the College of Southern Maryland. She finds her personality falls in places that don't quite make sense; her love for poetry is partnered with a love of calculus. She writes to show that sometimes writing doesn't have to make sense. Sometimes pretty words are enough.

SEAN MCNUTT writes from time to time.

DIANE PAYNE is a full-time electronic support technician for the Marketing Department at CSM.

JENNIFER POLHEMUS is an alum of CSM (class of 1999). Her work has been published in *Connections* Literary Magazine since 1993 and she recently became an internationally published poet. She was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize in Poetry.

ELIZABETH PRUITT moved to Southern Maryland three years ago. She enjoys traveling and capturing memories while in the moment.

JACK STEWART was educated at the University of Alabama and Emory University. From 1992-95 he was a Brittain Fellow at The Georgia Institute of Technology. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The American Literary Review*, *The Dark Horse Review*, *The Southern Humanities Review*, and other journals and anthologies, most recently in *New Welsh Reader* and *Image*. His book, *No Reason*, has just been published by the Poeima Poetry Series. Stewart lives in Coconut Creek, Florida.

RICHARD TAYLOR is a full-time courier for Mail, Shipping, and Receiving for Operations and Planning at CSM.

MONA WEBER is the Associate to Bachelor's Degree in Nursing coordinator at the CSM.

OLIVIA WRIGHT dabbles in arts of basically all kinds. Her first love was painting but she branched out from there into drawing, sculpting, music, and writing.

SHERBIE CORAZZA is a local photojournalist, barefoot mural designer, picker of wildflowers, and overall seeker of silver-linings. She loves her wife and their six children with the whole of her heart.

ZOILA VIDAL is originally from Lima, Peru, and came to the United States in 1987. She lived in Connecticut until she joined the U.S. Army in 1998 and traveled around the world, the Army way. She has lived with her family in Southern Maryland for the past 11 years and graduated from CSM in May 2016. She has been writing stories and poems all of her life and is very humbled to have one of her poems published in *Connections* Literary Magazine.



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