

COLLEGE of SOUTHERN MARYLAND



Connections

Spring 2026 Literary Magazine

SPECIAL FEATURE: Honoring Neal Dwyer,
Beloved Professor and Co-founder of
Connections Literary Magazine





COLLEGE of SOUTHERN MARYLAND
Spring 2026 Literary Magazine

volume 33 number 2



Untitled, Neal Dwyer

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E m

Wayne Karlin

For Neal Dwyer

Near the end I sat across a table from you in a *phở* restaurant and I called the waitress *em* to show off my sketchy Vietnamese,

a language in which pronouns shift by relationship so that a person may be *anh*, older brother, a younger person may be *em*, younger sibling, but *anh yêu em* is a man saying I love you and *em yêu anh* is a woman saying I love you, as lovers say to each other, and *anh* can be lover or older brother and *em* can be lover or younger sister, or younger brother, or younger friend or the young server nourishing you or all the bittersweet tastes of those human connections shaped by our mouths into *em*, into love and pride and pain and delight and disappointment and all that brothers and sisters are to each other.

When we first met, you were *em*, Neal, younger brother *em*, offering words cupped in your hands as if you had scooped them from a box of treasure you could open and run your fingers through its golden coins and spend them as if spending your heart, scatter the shining of them to your students and friends and to your lover, scatter them and shine with them.

In the *phở* restaurant I spoke to you as *em*, spoke as *anh*, silly with wisdom and worry, spoke about the ways love can be twisted into pain about the ways love can stop being love about the ways bad love can devour the lover about the need to let go and find that golden box inside yourself again.

You looked down into the bowl of soup, made the way the Vietnamese prepare their food, so the truth of the bitter can always be tasted in the sweet and the steam rose up and softened and shifted your face so I watched it lose its form as you spoke down into the bowl, spoke the sweet without the bitter, spoke the lies given to an older brother that would allow you to leave that table intact with your disease, holding it in your chest as if it were a treasure box full of poison.

You were *em*, younger brother. I loved you as that and I lost you as that, lost the sweet and the bitter of you, lost the truth and the lie of you.

Dear Neal

Phil Metres

March 8, 2026

Dear Neal,

It's been too long.

You first emailed me in 2015 after your travels to Belfast, Northern Ireland, where you met the poet Sinead Morrissey, a mutual friend, who recommended my book *Sand Opera* to you. The world became smaller.

After your visit, you and your colleague Wayne Karlin were talking about planning a program to Belfast, meeting with former combatants, considering reconciliation and healing. You were always bursting with ideas, and possibilities, and hopes for making a more just and peaceful society.

I came to read at College of Southern Maryland in October, bringing my nine-year-old daughter Leila. Everyone was so ready for the visit—the hale and enthusiastic crowd (a real crowd at a poetry event!). It was a testament to your attention to detail and to creating community. Your introduction was prodigious and impassioned. You spoke about the need to find something “worth loving in the world,” and how poetry can be part of that search.

Thanks to you, I'd come to meet Pádraig Ó Tuama a couple of years later, who was a little-known mediator and peace worker. Little did we know what would come next for Pádraig, who has become one of the most visible advocates for both poetry and peacemaking. You were always a connector.

It's appropriate that the CSM literary magazine was called *Connections*. That was your holy work.

I came back to La Plata in 2019 to read again. I remember the long drive we had from the airport, talking about the turn of the country under Trump—how even the signs along the highway spoke of peoples' hurt, and who they blamed for that hurt. The country is so full of hurt, and it's hard to know what we can do about it except to keep reminding ourselves of the fundamental dignity of each person, whatever their background and history, and how poetry can be part of that practice of attending to what beauty and hope and possibility are all around us.

When I came to Baltimore for the big writing conference in 2026, I'd been thinking about you. A few months before, I actually googled you to see what was new, but didn't find a new trail. I wished that I had emailed, sorry to hear that you had left this life. Thank you for connecting, for your fire for change, for your belief in poetry, and for your friendship. Rest well, Neal. You are now part of the great poem of the universe.

Phil Metres

What Is Peace

Phil Metres

But a horse breathing in a field.
Behind her shoulders, invisible
Wings fold like umbrellas
Waiting to meet the rain.

Behind each of us, invisible
Futures hurry to catch our train,
As we stand to steep in rain
Descending to greet the field.

Conceiving to end its name,
The cloud simmers and stews
As it bends to feed the field
And turn the hard earth soft again.

The cloud shimmers. Snows.
The law that life obeys is change,
The whole earth circling again.
How to abide apocalypse?

Life obeys the law of chance.
Fate, we imagine, is choice
Hiding in apocalypse,
Even when we crave clarity.

The fate we imagine is choice
Folded like umbrellas. Like wings.
Inside me, always now,
That horse breathing in a field.



Walk for Peace, Mona Weber

Letter to Neal

Ema Heinhorst

If I was asked who Neal was to me, I could give a complicated answer because it was that, complicated. I know he loved his job and he loved my mom and loved creating eye-squinting art and would write using letters that looked like they came from his imagination. He threw some paint and could label it “world peace” but then again if you were to ask him anything he would come back with “so, what about world peace?” — in a way to show humor but also, yeah, what about it.

The pictures of journaling here show scribbles but I’ve been there in the Olive Garden booth with him and my mom. He asked the server if he could buy the glass dish hanging on the wall. When I was a teenager, I looked past those things like crumbs on the floor, when he saw them with meaning, like creating a backstory from the present moment he saw, which is funny because he wrote “life is too long.” When he made someone else’s present seem so important.

I hope wherever he might be, he finds that life, his life, meant something. And I hope he knows that no matter how short or how long life is, no one will ever have an answer for world peace.



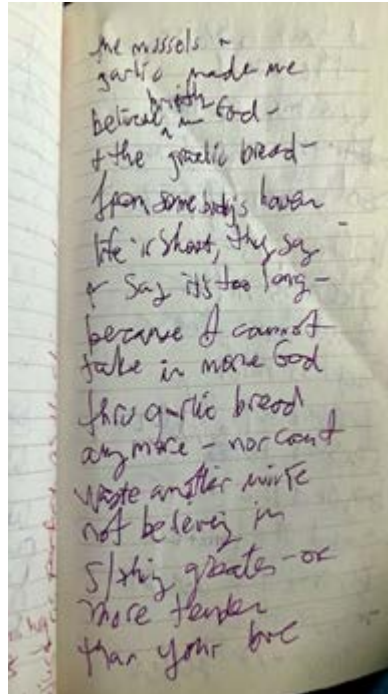
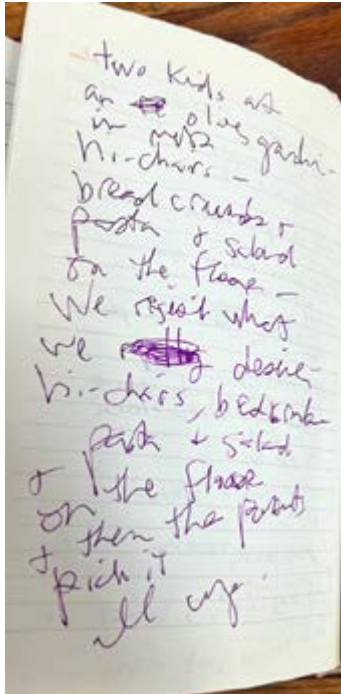
2021 - My Sixteenth Birthday

Things I would tell Neal now:

- Tatum and I moved to North Carolina by ourselves
- I'm still in school but changed my major (again)
- I still wear the ring you gave me
- My mom and I think of you often
- Maya lives too far away
- Dylan is still Dylan
- Thank you

Things I would ask Neal:

- So, what about world peace?



Scribbles and Olive Garden

Feeding raccoons is illegal in Central Park

Joanne Van Wie

This is news to me,
yet I find even the wording of this law poetic,

perhaps because of the small size of their foraging hands,
the image of their fingers grasping hold of misplaced kindness.

Even now, I feel the need of my own heart to extend
something neatly packaged like sardines, or sliced bread,
or cartoned milk.

I would be aware of their dark eyes like measuring devices,
their mind of escape tunnels.

I would approach them warily as I approach my own
reflection.

I would extend myself as though a photograph,
a picture of symmetrical hunger that understands
this fear on both sides of the reaching

a little more, a little farther into the crevice I can't see
past this very real danger of never offering.

Twenty-seven segments

Joanne Van Wie

How she folds to fit in his middle-aged palm
as he says, *where have you been all my life?*
and she really doesn't know

the way a woman can become a grain of rice
or even a bowl of water.
How he's doing that thing with his eyes again.

How he tells her, *I don't know how to love you
anymore.* How she is expanding slowly. *No,* he says,
how to love you any less.

How the hand, itself, is twenty-seven useless bones
unless it learns to feel.
How the difference between love and hate

is only another reason to dig around inside.
How she opens her own hand and sees
she's a contortionist. She's bending as if broken.

How she still wants to be friends one day perhaps. How he
wants to love her but doesn't. How the years wash up
onto the shores of her kitchen island: how she stands there

alone. How he has become just bones lately. How a man
can't make sense of his own hand that can no longer
hold on. That can't let go.



Hand Woven, Richard Taylor

Whistling Past Graveyards

Patrick Allen

For Neal

Go In
Lay upon the markers of the passed
Embrace that the dead know nothing

Go Out
Intent upon creating meaning
Howl your truth at the Harvest Moon

Breaching

Patrick Allen

*“If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree,
sometime or other, cherish very nearly the same
feelings toward the ocean with me.”*

– Melville

You have to know how to hold your breath
To dive to where the shining blue
Becomes an inky black.
At that depth you are alone
Floating in the silent space between
The echoes of your own beating heart.

I begin a slow recitation
Of the markings on my dorsal hump
Of the latitudes and longitudes
Of the waters that I travel
Between the Great Oceans

“I am Dappled Grey Rostrum
Left Flipper Bitten By A Ray
Slow Swimmer Not Far Behind,
Born of White Belly With Crooked Black Fluke
Of The Western Waters.”

“I am Dappled Grey Rostrum
Left Flipper Bitten By A Ray
Slow Swimmer Not Far Behind,
Born of White Belly Crooked Black Fluke
Of The Western Waters.”

From a distance
A low rumble “sotto voce” begins to take shape.
Soft chanting grows louder and caresses me
A swelling chorus surrounds me and bathes me
In the primal songs of the families of my Family.

Then
Enthralled to unbearable Joy
The music impels me up from the deep
In pure rapture
I break the surface
Leaping,
Twisting,
Exultant in this proof of my very Being.



Untitled, Gemma Van Wie

Crime Season

Sarah Lovell

“I’m telling you Margie, it’s an outright disgrace!” Phyllis was worked up and drawing looks from the other diners. “I’ve been coming to this buffet every Sunday all my life, always been seated in the front room and now!? Here we are sat right back by the ding dang kitchen!” She wailed. Marjorie’s beady eyes darted around as Phyllis’s voice turned shrill. “And I can’t get into my salon!” She whined. “You make one damn rush decision and suddenly the salon “doesn’t have any openings” and all this nonsense. Where’s the loyalty?!” Phyllis shrieked on as Marjorie made polite smiles at the worried glances being sent around her. She could hear the other patrons of Rusty’s Roundup starting to murmur about Phyllis’ agitated state. “My mama went to that salon and her mama too and you know how I liked how they would really focus behind my ears? Now what am I to do? None of this is my fault!” Phyllis complained loudly. “I don’t even know why I said it. They tell you to go with your gut if you’re ever in this situation and that’s what I did. My gut was wrong and now I’m a pariah!” she cried as the other diners watched.

Marjorie certainly felt sorry for her friend; Phyllis did not look well. Her hair was patchy and turned a dull brown, even gray in places. She looked like she’d slept for 100 days. Marjorie hated to say it, to even think it, but it looked like Phyllis had lost weight. Granted, they all did this time of year, but not this much. Marjorie didn’t blame her friend, in fact, she blamed the whole system. A system built by men and really wasn’t that the real problem? Majorie didn’t trust men and she wasn’t ashamed to admit it. So what if they were the

ones in charge? She knew there were ways to get back at these men, ways not talked about around tables at Rusty’s Roundup for fear of others hearing. There were moles everywhere just waiting to rat out any troublemakers. And now here they were, shunning a dear sister like Phyllis simply for making the wrong choice. Some people are just so stuck in their ways, Marjorie thought. Putting all their hopes and dreams into this silly old tradition. Maybe if the men had given Phyllis just a little more time to make her decision? Maybe if they had told her beforehand that she would be the one they were depending on. But to just show up out of nowhere and ask her like that? In the cold? So early in the morning with no notice? And we all must abide by what Phyllis sees? No, thank you sir!

“Frankly, the whole thing is very rude” Marjorie assured her friend. “Don’t you worry about these sniveling voles, they’ll be on to the next story in a day or two. Marjorie could sense the stress rising in her friend as more diners were openly staring now. Marjorie looked at her with empathy, met her quick-shifting gaze and held it. “Phyllis,” she began, “none of this is your fault. Only idiots and old timers still follow that nonsense.” Phyllis’s eyes grew wide before she burst into laughter. “You know, I don’t think my eyes were even open the whole time, what a crock!” She laughed. Phyllis felt a weight lift from her. Of course this wasn’t her fault. The more she thought of it the angrier she became. Marjorie could sense the change come over her friend. “How the hell are they still even doing this barbaric ritual?” she began in a low voice. “Do you know I was sound asleep when they knocked on my door? Sound asleep! And they misgendered me” Phyllis seethed. Marjorie struck while she saw her chance “beyond rude really. Criminal if you ask me. Sure would be satisfying to get them back, wouldn’t it?” Phyllis’s tiny eyes gleamed at the thought of revenge. Marjorie continued “What if I told you there’s a

way to make those men pay for what they put you through. A way to get revenge and be a hero to everyone you know?" Marjorie knew when Phyllis slowly began to smile that she was in.

The *Underground Times* documented every violent hit that season. In June, an article reported that each red radish from City Treasurer Reynold's garden vanished without a trace, along with every new asparagus stalk emerging from the ground. His lettuce appeared to have what one witness described as "nibbles" all over it. The heat of July saw more reports of significant theft around town. Councilman Angus's pole beans were picked right off his homemade trellis. The reporter heard Angus say how he had watered the beans in the morning like always but they were gone by the same afternoon. Down the street, Fire Chief Means woke to his tomatoes stolen right off the vine. Over 200 tomatoes by his estimation. But that was nothing compared to August and September.

Vegetable crime the likes of which Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania, had never seen gripped the area. The burrow reporters could hardly keep up. Every single council member's garden was stripped. Not even a perfectly crafted, fancy raised bed was safe when such expert thieves were terrorizing backyards. A live report covered the massacre of Mayor Alexander's garden. There he stood, head in hands, crying over the vines that no longer held ripe zucchini, the holes where dozens of carrots were yanked out, the pumpkins missing off his cattle panel, stolen cucumbers meant for pickles, potatoes snatched from the soil, blueberries that grew along the fence, all gone. "What have I done to deserve this!" he cried out.

Phyllis set a perfectly styled vase of bright purple lavender in the middle of the long table and asked Majorie to fill the

glasses. With their guests expected any moment, Marjorie took a minute to study her friend and how the summer had changed her. She looked stronger, thicker, her brown hair shiny from all the legumes they snuck on those late-night raids. They were both fatter and rounder than they had ever been and others jumped to tell them how peak their form was. Phyllis had a distinct light in her eyes too, having really taken to her new life of crime. She had gotten creative when hitting the Mayor's house, using her sharp teeth to climb the fence to get to the blueberries herself. Marjorie was quite proud of her protege.

As a long line of neighbors began to arrive proclaiming their thanks and hellos, Phyllis called out to welcome them. "There's plenty of food for everyone!" she said, "Pumpkin pie, roasted potatoes, glazed carrots, blueberry cobbler, cucumber salad, blistered tomatoes, so much more. Come, eat your fill!"

Phyllis smiled as she collected plates at the end of the night. She would remember this meal in a few weeks when her heart began to slow for her long sleep. She'll recall the loud toasts, the outrageous tall tales told, the compliments to the food and all the laughter. She'll remember all the faces around her full of food she provided through her skill and her trickery. She'll remember how her dear friend brought her back from the brink of shame and showed her how to decide things for herself. But mostly when she's all curled up in her safe and warm burrow, she'll dream of that feast and how not a single groundhog mentioned her stupid shadow.

homecoming

Randy Bridgeman

my father turned from his workbench
poked the tip of his screwdriver
in my chest and said
poetry is for faggots and lonely women
and i believed him
i loved my father for what he wasn't
a liar
a cheat
a quitter
to love him for what he was would
have been self-destructive

the day he returned from the war
i hid in the backyard behind
the tool shed
in my Sunday best
starched white shirt under bib overalls
my mother calling from behind
the wheel of his 48' ford
on the drive to the bus station
i thought about his letters and how
they made her cry
and how the next-door neighbor
was always hanging around
he's 4 F my mother said



Waldorf Warehouse, Diane Payne

on the drive back from the bus station
my mother sobbed
my father sat quietly his eyes following
the road and the barbed wire stitching
the fields
he'd glance at me in the rearview mirror
their voices as low
as church people



Steeple, Michelle Christian

Irish Goodbyes

John Kulikowski

The first time we hung out you stuck me with the check. We went to a local bar with our visiting author and a few others, drinks and food, stories of fun and adventure in countries across the globe. Some were theirs, most were yours, and your eyes were alive in the moment; I wondered how many doors those sharp baby blues had opened, or how many times they bailed you out of trouble. Quite a few, I'd guessed. When I left for the bathroom the party was in full swing, when I came back everyone was gone. The waitress, fearful of getting stiffed, held a frown and the bill. I paid it, caught up to you at the reading, and you laughed and apologized. I was pissed, but those damn eyes and that grin told me it was just part of the ride.

They stood in line at your funeral waiting to pay respects and say farewell. Many were still in shock; they hadn't seen it coming. Holding on to one another, sitting together, shoulder to shoulder, wiping away tears that wouldn't stop falling. I wasn't there. My wife was in a car accident the day before. She was ok, mostly; a bit of whiplash and a back injury that got worse as time went on, but thankfully still here. I wanted to be there, to mourn with our colleagues and your children. But I wasn't, and you weren't either, not anymore.

That last year we texted often but spoke sporadically. I'd ask you pointed questions and you'd give vague non-answers, about health, where you were, where you were going, all deftly deflected. By then I'd gotten used to it. The Neal experience contained many multitudes. There was a melancholy, but

also hope, with a generous splash of charming aloofness. You'd text me and tell me how vivid your dreams were getting, shaping your paintings which had recently taken the place of writing. We'd talk politics, education, places we still wanted to visit, and what could save us. You were always filling the conversation with exaltations of the beauty and power of writing, of art, of being human, and the perfections in and vulnerability of the present moment, of our wine and our bummed cigarettes; Fallen Catholics staying close to God.

I was tasked with cleaning out your office, which felt like a tour of your travels and career. Countless awards, dog-eared copies of Irish lit texts and French dictionaries, underlined passages and notes that were illegible, at least to me. Letters from students who had gone abroad, and some who had just gone. A history of *Connections* through old contacts, contracts, and back issues; proof of your passion and work, some of it still unwrapped. Untouched and unopened, or packed away and forgotten like the Dwyer for Treasurer button I found stuck to a drawer-bottom. I decided to keep that, of all things, for the sheer absurdity of you being elected to handle the money of some unknown entity, for you even wanting to. When I told you that I was getting your office you seemed pleased. And pleased that I'd fought for it. I asked if you wanted anything saved and you said only if something stands out. I asked where to send it and you paused — "I'll let you know. I'm not sure where I'll be."



Remembrance, Heather Christian

A Seat at the Table

Sherbie Corazza

“Artists can feed each other – lonely as we are...”

–Neal

He prepared a feast for the willing.
Set the table for those who would come.
Words feeding images, images feeding words.
A memory of something that feels like home.

She spoke to us of *Angels*, and Michael,
and our stomachs were filled
with more than love –
the way she notices pale yellow flowers,
thrift store treasures, bird song floating free
upon the crispness of winter skies above.

Every poem – both offering and sacrament,
to nourish those who would travel alongside.
Bread for the Journey. An invitation to life –
Grilled cheese sandwiches with pickles,
Vanilla ice cream melting atop warm berry pie.

Those of us who remain need never go hungry.
Long as we accept the invitation,
to join the company of artists already feasting.
Offering gratitude for the honor
of bearing witness to such fullness of Life.

Meeting

Michael S. Glaser

First published in *The Threshold of Light: Poems, At Hand*
Poetry Chapbook Series, No.4, 2019

We gather in silence.
Lilies sit on a small wooden table
in the center of the room.

In the breathing stillness
our spirits
slowly open.

Within this circle of light
nothing is perfect
everything's right.



Kīlauea, Sue Strickland

Two Poems, One Journal

Rachel Smith

I miss writing with Neal, which we did often. One of us would start then pass the journal to the other, same title, different outcome. These two poems, typed up for the first time, are an example. I hope I drafted his (the second poem) in a way he would have agreed with.

Just After Sunset (*Rachel*)

Wind chimes, sprinkler,
an August evening,
front porch,
wine, candle,
journal, bug spray –

We asked for it,
this moment,
while we worked
on daytime things,

things we tried to fix,
can fix, can't fix on our own –

The roof is good,
walls are sound,
but the deep cleaning
end of summer
finds all the stuff
tracked inside,
or just uncovers
what's been put off
while we've been having fun –

Either way,
we worked the day
to sit the front porch
proudly
with all of it,

especially,
the wind chimes.

Just After Sunset (*Neal*)

She sips wine
from a glass –

and you could say
it's a spot of heaven:

tilt the glass,
angle of the right hand –

but what would be closer
to the truth
is
she dribbled it
all over her shirt
and her lap
which is more than
a spot of heaven –

that's heaven itself.

Woodmore

Chelsea Whitt

My father transformed Rachmaninoff into black music.
He enunciated “Piano Concerto No. 2 and 3” in a jazz burnt
voice
Dispensing musical dreams from his God-made repository.
He could have been a history professor, a famous musician,
a traveler admiring the pebbled streets of La Coruña.
But, he chose Christ, and occupied his time with
documentaries about The Holocaust.
He walked up Waterford Road in Silver Spring, Maryland,
reading a thick book and a woman yelled, “What is that,
the Bible?”
We gathered like dark grapes on the vine, to study the
symphony of his rage and holiness gushing through his
mouth like sap, turning his blues into sweet macaroons.
Every night he unleashed the midnight sirens of The
Manhattan Transfer; Birdland, Tuxedo Junction,
“Operator, give me Jesus on the line,” as we chased cats
around the house and let them bring dead birds to our
porch to show their devotion.
And between the dead birds and the passing of our cats, there
were human losses that were heavenly in its grief.
The punch of the play button, sizzle of the cassette, and the
blare of
Earth Wind and Fire’s *Chicago Blues*, that gave us the
strength to clean the dirty dishes.
He tells me about the time he played with The Manhattans on
The Midnight Special and *Don Kirshner’s Rock Concert* in
1977, back when he was almost famous.
I search on YouTube sifting through the starry liquid pixels,

trying to find my dad’s young face beyond this world.
There were times when I read *Amazing Grace* and flew into
the sky like Peter Pan over downtown Silver Spring
While my dad fixed computers and *Tar Beach* twinkled in the
school library.
I remember the smell of chicken and ballet
Then on the ride home Igor Stravinsky’s *Firebird* spread
through the darkness of our vehicle like a conflagration of
creeping beauty
Mom and Dad, cobwebs of love and woes bridging their
shoulders over the center console.
I reach out and stroke my mother’s fake nails the color of a
mermaid’s moon
And then we are home.
As I hold on to dad’s leg, I feel the rhyme scheme of his dance,
pain love work, pain love work
And we all hang from his aching branches
Strong enough to belt his favorite song.

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

These two poems, both meditations on poetry and on being a poet, published in her book *The Secret of Hoa Sen*, were dedicated by the poet and writer Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai for the occasion of this issue of *Connections* remembering Neal Dwyer. Quế Mai remembers Neal's warmth as a host when she came to the college, and his passion about poetry and the power of the written word.

At Casa Luna

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

In Bali at Casa Luna, a woman stepped out of a wall. The
perfume of her
stories flowed through my tongue. The wall between us
vanished. I heard
the flowers on her hair whisper. Their colors grew onto my
skin. They
spoke my language. My pen was listening

Revelation

Nguyễn Phan Quế Mai

If lines of poetry could be chopped into bread
or grains of rice for the hungry,

if verses could bring smiles
to the desperate,
and fill the sad with hope,

if no tree would be cut
to print books that gather dust,

then I would feel happy when you call me
a poet.



Stranded, Heather Christian

George Evans

This poem was published in *Connections* after a reading the poet George Evans did at the College of Southern Maryland. Evans asked to have it included in this special issue in tribute to Neal.

At Point Lookout Civil War Prison Monument, Maryland

George Evans

The water has risen, everything above it
as quiet as heat on the saw grass. Thousands
died here. A marsh now, the bay swept over
the camps, clawing the land back to sea. All
those men. We tell ourselves about the past,
and when we're old enough to understand,
realize we are the past. Our hearts sink
in marshland. Places that once held buildings
and dreams are swamped by our mistakes,
overtaken by the sweep of what we've done
in the name of anything, not all of it necessary.
That much we know, but only when the water
claims us, our hair is falling, and the light
that was our eyes is flooding away.

Friendship

Christopher Wilkins

“We hope you get well,” friends of mine write,
“and soon. Everybody misses you.”

Do not create more dependencies
than you have to or when you have to.

We thought we’d be safe and sound if we
did our best in school but it’s not true.

Thirty-four years together and we
still laugh, worry, and raised good children.

Four lawyers. Two doctors. Five teachers.
Three engineers. One poet. One died:

At our next-to-last reunion, we
swear we’ll see each other more. We swear.

As You Stop to Rest

Christopher Wilkins

for Neal

Blue sky cloud-wisp high, pond
water just warm enough to swim in,
rank cicadas still against the noon;
and air that for once does not feel like
soup: late-August Baltimore wanes
as a crescent moon waxes, teasing
through the Amazon of our minds.

Blackberries ripen with the rhubarb;
oregano goes to seed; rosemary, sage,
and thyme grow like weeds. New rabbits –
wild, but born in the nearby willows –
look thin but they’re okay, full of sniff and nibble
where the fox trotted by this morning,
no other word for it, how she bounces straight
one way and looks the other behind.

Not far from the power lines but far enough,
cherry seeds the squirrels planted against winter
sprout or maybe redbirds dropped them,
no way to know. Let them, my wife says,
grow, and in three years we’ll have more
sour cherries to jar and shade there, too.



Juxtaposition, Lena Hancock

Green Lawn

Mary Ellen Bailor

Is it possible to say goodbye?
Not enough tears have been wept.
Not enough memories have been made.
Yet, one might say it's been a lifetime.
For me a lifetime, at 47?
I think not.
For you?
A possibility.
Although,
One such as myself might say,
Selfishly I still need:
The *Do you remember when-s?*
The *When you were little...*
I doubt you remember
But when you were their age...
Being married is not so easy,
When your father and I...

However, on a hillside we stand.
Amongst rock carved, edges sharp
Dedicated to loved ones,
Bleak gray,
Bland in many a way.
We sneak-in to plant flowers with you one last time.
Some rules meant to be broken.
One most definitely
Can say with you here,
This place will no longer be gray.

Wondering how is it possible?
To leave you in the dirt?
Maybe with a mole, a groundhog, or a gopher or two?
Do they dwell near where you lay?
Maybe they will share a story or two with you.
Maybe you will reply:
My daughters, my son and husband left me here.

I remember when
They wept so many tears,
All shed for me.
86: what a lifetime I had.
Now you eat the root of the flowers
They planted secretly just for me.
Just like the garden at home
My family planted with me.

Now, you little buggers
Stop eating my dandelions, poppies,
Daisies, black-eyed Susans,
Hollyhock and forget-me-nots.
Those are my flowers!

And damn this place,
For not allowing my Irish terrier
Or all three
To be next to me, to enjoy
A mole, a gopher or two, maybe a groundhog,
To enable my flowers to grow.



Anxiety, Gabriel Rodriguez



Muted Alarm, Lena Hancock

Orbs

Peter Santoro

I run through a shallow gulch as fast as I can. Small shrubs prick at my pant-legs as I push through the rough. I can hear my pursuers closing in from behind. My legs are exhausted, and I haven't eaten a decent meal in days. When I round a wide bend in the gap, I see an old fence, and a small bunker peer out from the right. A few soldiers begin to exit the structure, taking positions to aim in my direction. I frantically wave to the small figures, as the cracking of small arms burst past me from all sides. "Faster, Niko. Run faster!" I tell myself. There is no point in looking back, as I try to stagger my approach to avoid being hit. I hear the high-pitched cracking of bullets smacking stones beside me. I am almost there! A single deep boom rings out amongst the rest. I feel a sudden smack run through my back to my stomach, and a lack of air reaching my lungs. The momentum of running carries me forward two more steps, before my body gives way to the dusty ground. My head slams the dirt only steps from safety. I lay there gasping for air that never comes, watching puffs of smoke as muffled shouts call my name. My vision fades. The ringing in my ears passes to a whisper. I think I hear the air escaping my body!

I spring awake, smacking my head on a hot water vein in the rafters above my bed. My eyes are swollen and I'm stiff all over. My left shoulder is on fire. The taste of recycled air and generic cleaner sticks to my tongue, and my throat is dry from the shared oxygen in this artificial environment. It dawns on me then; the fading hissing sound in my dream was not the decompression of my chest, but a leaking pipe — a small reminder of this precarious new reality. I have abandoned my

war-torn home to become a stow-away on a strange craft, the likes of which I have never seen. I wonder where I am going and if I will ever see home again.

With a deep breath, my eyes slam shut. Two racks up, I drop to the painted metal surface below. The berthing shelters most of the ship's crew. They stand three bunks high — four in spots where they can be crammed in. Row upon row of bunk beds line each side of me. There is just enough room for me to walk through, without hitting too many of the crew's dirty laundry sacks. With another painful yawn, my wary fingers force my clothes and boots on, anticipating what yet another boring day brings to my illustrious cruise. As I set off to walk to the end of a cramped passage, recycled air vents block my vision every few steps with wisping clouds. I habitually dodge a metal box that has already left two tears in my jacket. I have made this small journey so many times now that my mind is transfixed on the narrow hall. The pale light makes the grey gangways nauseating. I have never missed the sun so much in my life. The morning's coffee aging in the brewer and stale smoke from years of respite permeates the recycled air of this confined space.

I entered the galley to see half a dozen crew members smattered around the mess: two in the corner playing a card game — a few more walking around filling their trays with the protein of the day — goat flavored today, I believe. The chef — who recently became so after the previous volunteer went mad with void-fever and pulled a knife on a crewman for taking an extra spoon-full of the day's dessert — sits behind the chow, smoking with word puzzles on his neurogram. I watch him telepathically put the translucent green letters in place in the hologram. Though he doesn't need to, he very subtly moved his empty hands, as if picking up real board pieces. He looks as if he is asleep, swimming through his own

mind. It is one of the few things that brings a condescending smile to my face. "My small little universe," I think to myself leaning onto the edge of the table with my forearms and bite my cheek. I don't really know what to think, so my mind races through everything all at once. So much has happened; so much is yet to happen. Time stands still aboard this ship. Nothing changes except the daily flavor in the food, which rotates every 5 days. Occasionally the chef changes it up with some sort of soupy leftover concoction. If I live long enough to laugh at this, I'll never forget the taste of this poorly stocked menu.

My chaperone, warrant officer Argyr, sits down blocking the excitement of the chef's lucid pastime. "I see you're well acquainted with the first-aid box outside the berthing." He jokes, pointing to the tears in my jacket with an annoyed expression. You're not a guest on this vessel, Niko. Brave little stunt, I'll admit, but damn foolish. I suggest you don't wander about the passages. You already see how dangerous it can be. We don't need you to put the entire crew at risk, because you're bored, or eager to get off. Be grateful we don't lock you up, and hand you over to a magistrate once we make port. You have nowhere to run. Sit back and enjoy the ride." He nods at me. "You are stretching our rations thin." He hints at my stowing away. "Little does he know" I thought. I ran to this ship to follow Pene, after that other ship snatched her and took off. Here I am somehow on a ship full of federated mercenaries. "So much for being a hero." My lungs empty at the thought of it all. "I apologize, Sir. I only meant to stretch my legs." My grim expression speaks louder than my shallow voice.

Argyr hints sympathy in his eyes looking down, clenching his jaw. "There are perils in the void far more dangerous than any of us." With a pause he continues, "Have you ever heard

of fairies?" I looked up. "Fairies?" He nodded. "Little ladies with wings, and magic dust?" My eyes peer out the thick glass port hole, into darkness. "They come without warning. Some think they are demons, coming to steal our souls. Others suggest that some cosmic life force is attracted to the cores of our ships and feed off the crews. We only hear from ships that are recovered, and the men and women on board are dead. Some ships are left derelict. The ones that are found; the bridge computer records the screams of sailors as they die. Their food stores, and cargo are left completely intact." Argyr stares into me. "I always carry this, just in case." He presses his hip and bolt gun: a five-charge pistol meant for shocking anything in direct line of sight up to 15 paces away. The charge can be powered up to cause temporary paralysis on even the strongest person." He and the captain are the only crew members with access to the armory, issuing weapons to the crew only if the vessel is boarded, or they intend to board another.

Argyr continues, "Due to the nature of space warfare, it is not wise to use kinetic weapons in small craft. Damaging the hull is a death stroke for everyone. Sure, we all have pressure suits, but a small hole will cause a smaller vessel like this one to stray its course or be overturned. Imagine the chaos of fighting a boarding party then suddenly the art-grav fails, a hole causes the ships pressure to drop and immediately the room begins to spin around you: men and women tossing around like jumping beans. There is a tear in your jacket: now you only have a few short moments to patch it and continue to defend yourself. The continuous motion of the ship altering your sense of direction, causes vertigo. You vomit in your helmet. Now you're blind, and the air is still escaping. You're now deaf; pressure loss causes sound to cease. You panic. The air in your suit is cold and thin. You're only choice: try

and slow your breathing, causing your body temperature to drop further. The tear in your suit fills with sweat and bile, and begins to freeze, making a quick patch more difficult. Your hands are shaking and your feet are thrashing for gravity. Time is running out faster than you can react. Then: nothing. Your fight is over. You float on for eternity with your shipmates and enemies in your shared monument to the futility of Man." Argyr is conveying to me how dire a life aboard a spaceship can be. He accomplishes his ends, with terrifying precision. His eyes relax in a way that is very familiar to me. In this moment I realize the depth of Argyr.

Argyr passes the time telling me stories of space battles between massive ships and swarms of small, manned interceptors, planetary siege, and defense. He tells me he was a decorated veteran of the Imperial Tagma. The Empire's most feared Shock troops. These higher ranked forces, that form the backbone of the emperor's personal armada, specialize in ship boarding and planetary invasion, some wearing giant mechanical suits of armor. When his service ended, he was abandoned by the empire he proudly fought for. He was given his discharge with honors, and cast back into society, a free man. Argyr was free to go home, if there were one. He was free to find a job, were he not a trained warrior. Argyr was free to fall on his face, with no help from the exalted bureaucrats he gave so much for. He wandered aimlessly, gaining debt, going from place to place in search of a life he always wanted. Authorities picked him up sleeping in an alley on some world. They gave him the choice between prison, or paying his debts aboard the Theodora: to become an indentured servant of the state. Joining the Theodora, he rose quickly in the crew to become the warrant officer. Most of the people who serve or have served on the Theodora do not have as glorious a history as Argyr. He says, "Most of these wretches are blood

thirsty criminals. Lucky for them, war feeds off wickedness. Mercenaries make a hell of a force against weak armies. Give them a few cred, and they will throw themselves straight into hell, for fortune and glory.” Argyr fell in love with the thrill and adventure travelling the stars. Seeing all that the galaxy could offer him. A fighter for hire, he was at home. “War makes a person incapable of peaceful life. 90 percent boredom, five for anticipation, and five in the heat of combat. Peace is exhausting. You always know a new fight is coming. You never know where. You never know when.”

After many hours learning about how these people came to inhabit the stars, and an endless war with something called Sol, Argyr and I are the only two who remain in the galley aside from the cook — smoke still hovering about him, flowing softly into a vent on the wall to the right. A woman in a grimy sleeveless shirt walks in: “Ay Phoma, what’s on the menu, shoe chef?” She blasts. “Cock-a-doodle-doo, Isa-poo!” He jeers back from behind to the counter. “Awe, did you get stiffed again, wordsmith? Your charm won you a front row ticket to dish duty, I don’t imagine it works too well at the pub, either!” The tension in the air is stifling. “Nothing smells as high class as hydraulic fluid, and axel grease. Maybe clean up before you infect my kitchen,” He says with ash dropping from Phoma’s mouth. “Just fill the plate, Blowhard” I’m trying to contain laughing when Argyr lashes out, “both of you shut the hell up. Isa, grab your food and get out. Phoma, if you don’t learn to show this crew some respect, I’ll launch you out the damn cargo bay.” He commands so much respect, that all it takes is for him to speak, and the entire crew snaps their ears to him. “you’re the boss” Phoma jabs. “The word you’re looking for is chauvinist,” Isa shouts back as she leaves the mess. Phoma chuckles through his breath, “well how about that. Hey Argyr, let Isa know I owe her a drink when we make port!”

Turning back to me with an annoyed grin, “He’s had a crush on that girl since he came aboard. She’s the best tech on the ship, and one of the only loyal hands we have. She shut him down at a cantina on one of the core worlds, about a year ago. They have been at it ever since.” I smile at the absurdity. “There it is! Niko, I wasn’t sure you would come around.” Argyr jests. It feels good to be able to relax for a change. The pressing thought of Pene being dragged aboard that second landing craft, breaks my confidence. “You okay, kid?” Argyr asks. “Yes, Sir.” The only words I can muster. He doesn’t seem a threat to me, but if I open up I could endanger Pene in ways I cannot foresee. So, silence is my best friend.

Suddenly, everything turns dark. Emergency lights shine dull red. As worry begins to set in, my heart begins to race. My eyes widen as my body sits there motionless. “All hands, this is Captain Feros. There is no need to worry. Life support is still online. Internal comms are still in order; but the ship’s external comms, and navigation charts are temporarily offline. We will need to reboot the ship’s computer. Art-grav will remain online. 15 minutes for reboot. On my mark.” The lights flicker for a moment, when Captain Feros says, “Mark.” The only light in the mess is the light from Phoma’s game, glowing pale green. We both see his shadowy figure take another drag as he lets out, “here we go again. I can’t wait to get off this heap of shit.”

The reflection of pale light causes Argyr’s dark eyes to shine, as he scans the room. He’s wary of what’s happening. “Something isn’t right, Niko. Stay close to me.” In those words, is not a man telling stories to frighten me. His words are of a much more familiar tone. It is the tone of a man sitting still in the trench, as the explosions stop, and you begin to hear the footsteps of an approaching army. He senses what is about to happen, even if he does not know what will. It is a sense that

kept me alive half my life. “Yes, Sir.” I breath out quietly as I think to myself, that the terror of impending doom is the same as if I were on real Ground. I cannot move, but if I cannot bring myself to react, I will put myself and these strangers in danger. I take a very slow deep breath. My chest feels like a boulder, but passing of air soothes my numb limbs.

A bright light shines through the port holes on both sides of the vessel. Everything flashes brilliantly, burning our eyes shut accompanied by a sudden, loud ringing in our ears. The sensory overload passes as Argyr whispers to get down, drawing his bolt. I kneel as Phoma vaults the counter to gain vantage on the port leading to the command deck. He is mouthy and crude, but I can see a fighter in him. It is no wonder he’s here. I’m glad I am not his enemy, I think to myself. I get the sense that all hands on the Theodora are doing the same thing at this moment. The crew is too small for cowards to waste air and food. The emergency lights kick on shining red light on dark, gray, cramped spaces. Five minutes have passed since the call was given. “Niko, right now the captain is arming the crew on the quarter deck. We may be boarded. This is the best place we can be. Room to move, in the center of the ship. If we are attacked and they survive this far in, they will likely be out of energy in their bolts. I still have a full charge. They have one passage to enter.” Argyr says pointing to the hatch Isa Disappeared into. “But we will still have to fight by hand.” Phoma chimes in, “nothing but shitty plastic spoons on this rig. Hope you charged your fists, kiddo. It’s about to get fun.”

The silence leaves the ringing in my ears deafening, when suddenly screams echo through the bulkheads. The sound of bodies being thrown against walls, railing out like dull gongs. One by one the 30 crew members can be heard

screaming in desperation and rage. Something sounds like tools being knocked over from the deck below us. Phoma lets out, “how in the hell did they get into the engine bay, without passing through the berthing? They should have come straight through us.” A man shouts out “hel-” as his voice trailed out, from somewhere off down the ship. Sounds on the Theodora are normally contained to each room. The subtle vibrations of the ship, and the bustling of the crew and its inner workings usually provide a sort of sound proofing that allows a degree of privacy. With the reboot on its ninth minute, sounds of people echo throughout the vessel, letting us know just how small we are in the vacuum of space. Bolts ring out briefly through the walls, followed by shouts. One screams out in a loud war cry, “be my guests in the fires of hell!” as the entire ship shutters. A pulse grenade. Argyr looks down whispering, “Feros, you glorious fool,” giving a sign of prayer. A girl screams down the hall, as the struggle draws closer to the entry of our defense. The clanking of heavy boots striking the metal plated floors moves swiftly towards the entry. Louder as it approaches, we begin to hear the Labored breathing of a man. “No!” he shouts. “No, no, no,” sounding softer as he forgets to breath. With a final desperate blow from his lungs to let out only a throaty wet sound of his last breath.

If minutes have passed, they have been lost in a black hole of fear. My mind is racing through so many thoughts: my lost friends, family, Pene, this ship, and its crew. There is a galaxy of people I never knew existed. “What else is out there?” I finally think as my head begins to swell and feel hot. Fear keeps me still, but my curious eyes are fixed on the port to the bridge: the direction of the screams. There is no more sound. Argyr is a statue in garnet against the lights. Phoma, armed with nothing but his hands, takes a smoke-enveloped serpentine pose close to the ground ready to spring out at

whatever is preparing to come through the hatch. He is the image of a demon in the shadows. Argyr, crouched next to me, breathes slowly. He is magnificent in his discipline: strong, and still. He breathes slowly, and his eyes never flinch.

Phoma cries out to Argyr, "Isa is down there. We gotta to do something." Argyr, whispers back, "so is the rest of the crew. If you move, you do so on your own. Let them handle their posts. You fight with us, we live." Phoma breathes out a cloudy sigh, "screw this, we have to help." I can feel my heartbeat slowing. "Argyr is right. we must stay together." I add, as I feel sense coming back to me. "No one asked you, test-tube!" What? What does he mean test-tube? I shrug off the question confused, as I hear a disembodied whisper in the dark corridor, "Phoma." The cook looks over at us, and I return a glance. Argyr doesn't seem to notice anything. Suddenly the cook creeps towards the door. Argyr hisses at him, "get the hell back!" But he doesn't listen. It's as if he can't resist. As he steps to the threshold of the port, the cigarette still lit falls to the ground. For an eternity Phoma stands there staring as if hypnotized. Slowly cocking his head to the right, he lets out a yell that has no end. He just keeps screaming louder and louder, longer than any human can draw breath. He doesn't move, incapable even from fainting from the lack of air. A burning light eclipses his figure. His cries escape him as though his breath is being drawn from his body. His figure withers immediately, just like a thirsty plant dry in the sun. His head and body never move, but his limbs begin to crush towards the center. Cracking like wet timber, and the crumbling of paper. He implodes into a flash of darkness in the piercing light of whatever is coming through the port.

Argyr, breathless, raises his bolt to the entry. As the blinding light dims, a small orb illuminated and formless is revealed. It floats carelessly into the room, followed by two

more slightly less brilliant beacons of light. Argyr, lets out a yell and tries to aim his energy-pistol to shoot the leader, but is drawn stone solid; unable to move. Fighting to raise his bolt, he is flung across the room effortlessly, by some invisible force. I look at him to see if he is still alive, but I am frozen still. Shallow breaths escape me, as I stand there helpless. My arms and legs are numb. My heart is pumping through my bones, but curiosity grips me to watch. The orbs come to me, and something changes. I feel sorrow creep over the fear. All my anxiety seems to pass, as tears build up in my eyes. I hear a voice in my head repeat several times, "Niko. Placentia. Hyperborea." I work up the courage to ask, "wh-what are you?" I feel that we are somehow connected to each other. I feel like I am meeting a family member for the first time after many years. The ball of light speaks into my head, "Venusian." Now confused and excited, I ask, "What is a Venusian?" Before the strange word finishes its final sound, the orbs float back and disappear before my eyes. I am left there in the red light of this strange spacecraft. The tears begin to pour from my eyes. My mind races back to Pene. I pray she is alright.

The power of the ship is restored. Argyr lays dormant stooped over a bench. Checking his pulse, I find he is still alive. I lift him and carry him away to a small medical bay down the violent corridor. As we pass through, I notice that there is hardly any sign of violence in the ship. No blood or carnage. There are things strewn across the floor, but no bodies. Nothing that gives the impression of what we just went through. With Argyr resting, touring the ship seems all I can do. Nervous at first, I round each corner, bolt in hand, raised to an alert position. Muscle memory from battles tells me to do this, but after a few rooms with nothing but silence, I drop my guard.

After searching for any remaining crew, I pass through

the bridge heading back to Argyr. He is my only hope. Taking a step through the threshold of the bridge, I look up to find a pistol pointed directly at my chest. Not a bolt. A kinetic weapon not-so different from what I am familiar with. The girl is terrified, with fury etched into her brow. “Who the hell are you?” she says as I slowly draw my hands to the air. “What did you do? How did you do this?” Trying to make sense of what she went through. “Isa. That’s your name, right?” Hardly letting me finish, she yells out “what did you do to Phoma?!” It dawns on me that she cares as much about him as he did her. “You saw them. The lights. They took him. I’m sorry. I don’t know what they are. I don’t know who you are, or what I am doing here. This ship and another landed on my planet. They took the last person I had in my life and left before I could get to her.” Pausing to breath, “I snuck on to your boarding ship to try and rescue her, thinking you were heading to the same place. They stole my best friend, and now this happens to us.” My heart is whaling in my chest. “I am so sorry for Phoma and the entire crew. I don’t know what happened.” I say, letting my hands fall slowly fall to my side. “Before you landed on my world, I never knew any of this was real, only stories. My parents are dead, and likely my sister. Pene is the only thing in this world – universe – left in my life. I have no intention of giving up on her. That’s the truth.” I look into Isa’s eyes. She lowers the pistol. I hear the safety engage. I’m too exhausted to move.

The days have passed into weeks. I have lost count. I don’t think Argyr, or Isa have any idea either. We have spent most of our time gathering resources for our voyage. Maintaining the ship is our priority. Isa has taught me quite a bit about life support, and anti-grav. It amazes me that my civilization was not capable of such tech. Sadly, Isa is not well versed in star maps and navigation. The calculus for such skills is beyond

her. Argyr can pilot the ship, but he has never had the training to plan star voyages. Only drop-ship simulations during his service to this strange empire.

I walk up on Isa and Argyr sitting on the dark bridge, looking out into the widest view of emptiness anyone from my world has ever seen. It’s a dream. From the surface of a planet the stars look like they are covered by a haze of clouds, and light always distorting the clarity of their magnificence. In deep space, everything is dark. The bridge of the ship is left dark to reduce glare from lights of the computers and system panels. The stars are incredible! Tiny dimly colored lights shining like beacons in an ocean of otherwise emptiness. Unlike on ground looking up to stars in the distance, we are surrounded by them, visible on all sides. I always saw the stars as little dots of light that spied on our lives, but now I see that we are floating in their universe. I wish I had taken more time to look up at them. They truly are an amazing mystery, waiting to be solved.

“Phoma called me ‘test-tube.’ What was he talking about?” Argyr and Isa share a look with one another. “Placentia Coloniae.” Isa says after a shared silence. “Placentia. The light put that word in my head. It also said Hyperborea. What does that mean?” Isa turning to face me explains, Placentia Coloniae is a very ancient thing. It means the ‘Pleasant Colonies.’ You are from an embryo world.” I hesitantly ask, “what is an embryo world?” Argyr looks on as Isa continues, “thousands of years ago our people could not travel the stars. We are all from a Planet called Earth. In the first few thousand years of space exploration, an idea was created to spread life throughout the galaxy. You are from one of these worlds. Scientists created ships called Embryos to populate planets thought to be able to support life. So, they gathered up all the DNA from the three worlds that life existed, around

Sol — the star that Earth revolves around — to allow life a chance to thrive on its own.” The stars out in the void, don’t seem so distant suddenly. “What about Hyperborea?” I ask, lost on what I just heard. “That is a very, very old myth. Before Earth-humans had technology, they used to tell stories about their Gods and fantastic creatures that they thought existed beyond their known lands. Hyperborea were the lands to the far north of these people. It was said to be out of reach. They believed it was a utopia, where all their storied creatures lived. That is about all I know.” I noticed her voice drastically changed. “What were you going to school for?” She replies, “pre-galactic history.” Argyr adds, “I wonder what that means though. How did that light know these things, and why did it share it with you? Why did they kill the rest of our crew? Why not us?” No one has an answer.

Days later we hear a broadcast on our comms. “LSF Theodora, this is Imperial Battleship Augusta, responding to your distress beacon. Do you copy?” Argyr sprints to the comms, “Augusta, this is warrant officer Argyros Phobos, security officer and first mate of the LSF Theodora. Glad you stopped by. We read you loud and clear.” Minutes later the biggest man-made structure I have ever seen in my life pronounces itself from the darkness just off our starboard side. For no reason of my own, I look down at the star map. There are three glowing dots on the hologram. Theodora and Augusta in the center, but also a new one. A small pale dot way off toward the far edge of the illumination, with a set of coordinates next to it. I quickly write these down and shove the paper in my pocket. Argyr — or rather Argyros — looks at me, “Niko, you are not registered in the empire. Stay quiet and let me do the talking. You heard nothing. You saw what we saw.” I nod my head. Isa does not say anything. Misfortune weighs on us, but mostly her. Phoma meant more to her than

words can express. His absence becomes less a myth, and more of a reality now that hope has returned via the Augusta. I feel as though I am an interloper in a grand galaxy of self-titled Gods, my new acquaintances have treated me with more kindness than I could expect, but I am a creature made in a lab. There is no telling what this new cast will do with me.

Waiting for this new chapter in my life to begin, I only care about finding Pene. She is out there somewhere alone, scared, and lost. She is all that is left of my former self. I am all that is left of hers. I will search every star in the galaxy to find her. I hope these coordinates are a clue.

Please stay alive, Pene...



***Diamonds in the Rough**, Richard Taylor*

Mama

Giada Hicks

Summer.

You will always be summer to me: ice cream on the concrete and chlorine in your hair, shared experiences but separate times, beaches with clear water and sweet gelato that leaves memories on your tongue.

We laugh the same laugh and our eyes scrunch with love and affection as our twin flames burn brighter.

Whose memories are who's?

I remember when you stopped being able to breathe. Summer vacation was driving to D.C. to see you in the hospital. How come you can't be at home? When are you coming home? Can I be your little girl again? We've always been sisters, twins, best friends. The car is cold, the air is blowing. Am I your mother now?

Look, there you are in the sky, Canis major. Canis minor follows from above. We used to be the same size, now we question our tastes.

Home is your warm smile and good cooking, happy tears when we say some mushy shit, and sitting at the backyard table while enjoying Instagram reels. Home is when the sun shines so brightly and your arms start to burn, you can't help but enjoy it – it's meant to be.

Summer is home is you.

I don't think I can say enough to how much our relationship

has been beneficial to me, my well-being.

I'm glad we ended up like this, and I don't think I'd change anything. Thank you for being such that I can be myself around you. The people pleasing was probably inherited trauma, I'm getting over that, I promise.

We'll always be intertwined. Day 0 to the end. A cosmic kind of together forever.



Beach Walk, Michelle Christian

Dear Neal

Christopher Ankney

If I was your lover, I would be jealous
of the way you talked about poetry.

If I was your lover, I would want that gleam
in your eyes when you'd sigh

before getting lost in that far-off utopia;
the euphoric sound I imagine took you

to the Irish coast, France, Montana, anywhere
but here, this world you believed

poetry could, if not fix, renovate
into something that passes for beauty.

If I was your lover, I would imagine
I would need utmost patience, waiting

for you to look at me – *Look...* –
whenever you paused and resettled your feet

I felt the ocean surface pulling
at you, the undercurrent of where

were you going, often about poetry
as a balm to replace bombs,

about its power to build communities
out of the rubbles of our division.

If I was your lover, I would want you to see
what I see, friend, when I tried way too hard

to flatter you. We were standing outside
the library, talking about, obviously,

poetry. I barely knew you more
than I'd ever really know you, but

I said, *If I am here in twenty years,
you are the kind of professor I want*

to be. Immediately you shot back, naked
as a lover, *Are you fucking with me?*

Maybe I was, Neal, but I didn't think so
then. This is a world in which the mirror

always flips the story around, glares back
at us with everything we don't like

about ourselves. I think poetry does that, too.
I was looking in the mirror, Neal, and I want

what all of us want when we look ourselves
right in the eye – we want the poem to love

what it sees.



Untitled, Jennifer Polhemus

There is Such a Thing

Jennifer Polhemus

There is such a thing as the sunrise in your eyes
on the winter solstice
in a cave that did not fill with light
because clouds hung thick and threatening.
I turned to you and talked about hockey
and what made it different than soccer.

There is such a thing as a line of poetry
that evokes the scent of a garland in your hair
and the sound of a supernova in the sway of your hips.
I sit too far away from you
to see the hole in the seam of your dress
and the skin not so far beneath,
yet within my brain the image is conjured
and trickles down my throat
into my chest that twitches.
I speak to you of classrooms full of blank faces,
ears that hear but do not listen,
and hearts that have forgotten what compels them to beat.

I do not intend to be a voice of wisdom.
I just tell stories

Believer

Jennifer Polhemus

I am grateful for you,
my friend
for your quiet, questioning passion
and the way you believe
poetry will save us
if we only listen
to its rhythm and imagery
its swells and refrains
the way it is found
in a child's eyes
where eternity and wisdom
still linger
an expression
of Life's longing for itself
and when you think
my love will never come through
realize that it never left
you will always have it
in the whispered hours
of Sometime
and on the edgy knife
of Now

Connections Reading

Jennifer Polhemus

What brings you here
on this chilly, spring evening
in the spitting rain
when new green leaves splash brightly
against the darkness of wet tree trunks?
What makes you stay another year
when your villa in the south of France waits
with paint and pen?
Is it poetry?
Is it relationship;
the delicious entanglement of hearts
that draws you back once more into my arms?
Is it less than fruit and more than flowers
that wreath your head and garland my eyes;
bowls heaped with sweet, juicy flesh?
It is ...
You are ...
I am ...
Thank you for coming
and bless you for staying.

Let Me Tell You What I Love: A Collaborative Triptych

Krista Keyes

after Fanny Howe's ["I Won't Be Able to Write From the Grave"]

I.

Let me tell you what I love:
the smell of my cat's fur
the sound of snow crunching under my feet in the woods
 behind my house
the feeling in my shoulders when I'm laughing with my
 nephews
the taste of a cold pint at an outdoor pub in Dublin in June
the sight of my friends gathered around a table

II.

To me, the best pieces of writing feel like prompts. I recently came across a poem called, ["*I Won't Be Able to Write From the Grave*"], by the late Fanny Howe, which begins:

I won't be able to write from the grave
so let me tell you what I love:

Then, she lists some things she loves. To me, it's a perfect poem. It's simple yet urgent. It reminds the reader that they are alive and asks them to consider and put down the things they love. Wherever you find yourself, however hard your day was, and however awful the headlines are, this poem stops you and pulls you into a space of love.

This poem made me think of my friend and colleague, Neal Dwyer for so many reasons. He and I loved so many of the same things, like teaching and writing and Ireland. I think he would have loved Fanny Howe's poem too. I think he would have seen it as an opportunity to share the power of poetry with his friends, colleagues, and students, and I think he would have encouraged you to write one of your own.

III.

Use Howe's poem as a prompt and use the space below to write a poem of your own.

Let me tell you what I love:



In Memory Of..., Kimberley Donnelly

Contributors

PATRICK ALLEN is a retired professor emeritus, adjunct instructor in psychology. His goal in poetry for all these years has been to learn how to mean more by saying less.

CHRISTOPHER ANKNEY is a professor of English at CSM. His first book, *Hearsay*, won the 2014 Jean Feldman Prize and was a finalist for the post-publication Ohioana Award in Poetry. His most recent manuscript— *Dear Irreverence*, —was a finalist for the University of Wisconsin Press 2025-2026 Felix Pollak and Brittingham Prizes. His poems have appeared in *Boston Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *Pleiades*, and dozens of more places.

MARY ELLEN BAILOR is a part-time student at the College of Southern Maryland. She has been writing poetry for as long as she can remember. This poem is actually dedicated to her biggest supporter in the universe, her mom, Peggy Bailor, who passed away in January.

RANDY BRIDGEMAN holds a Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts in English and Creative Writing. He is the recipient of the prestigious Edward T. Lewis Poetry Prize. His poems have been published in numerous poetry reviews and anthologies. He has authored five books of poems; *South of Everywhere* (2005), *Mechanic on Duty* (2008), *The Odd Testament* (2013), *The Poet Laureate of Cracker Town* (2015) and *The Not So Happy Hour Poems* (2025). He is currently working on his sixth book, *Plagiarizing My Self*, forthcoming in the spring of 2026.

HEATHER CHRISTIAN is a floral designer and CSM Alumna who finds inspiration in nature, photography, and the simple beauty of everyday moments.

MICHELLE BROSCO CHRISTIAN is a 1987 alumna of CSM and a communication faculty member at the college who sees art everywhere she looks.

SHERBIE CORAZZA serves on an international program supporting the U.S. Navy and Royal Australian Air Force. Her greatest loves are her wife and their six children. She is thankful for the opportunity to share small joys and linger in moments of gratitude with all of you.

KIMBERLEY DONNELLY has been a professor at CSM for 25 years. She does her best thinking when she is walking—on campus and in her neighborhood. She received the Faculty Excellence Award in 2023.

GEORGE EVANS has published poetry, fiction, translations, political commentary, and essays in periodicals, anthologies, newspapers, and online, nationally and internationally. His poetry books include *The New World* (Curbstone Press), *Sudden Dreams* (Coffee House Press), *Wrecking* (Shearsman), and *Espejo de la tierra*, a bilingual collection translated by Daisy Zamora (Casa de Poesía, Costa Rica). He has also published two volumes of translations: *The Time Tree*, by Vietnamese poet Huu Thinh, and *The Violent Foam*, by Daisy Zamora. Evans's honors include fellowships from the California Arts Council, the Lannan Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives in San Francisco.

MICHAEL S. GLASER served as Poet Laureate of Maryland from 2004-2009 and as a professor of English and creative writing at St. Mary's College of Maryland for nearly 40 years. He edited three anthologies and published eight collections of his own, most recently, *The Threshold of Light*, which won the 2017 Bright Hills Press Chapbook Award and *Elemental Things* in 2022. While at St. Mary's, he co-founded and

directed the annual literary festival as well as the VOICES literary reading series. He was a recipient of the Homer Dodge Endowed Award for Excellence in Teaching, the Columbia Merit Award, and Loyola College's Andrew White Medal for his dedication to the intellectual and scholarly life, and for his commitment to sustaining the poetic tradition in the state of Maryland. Glaser passed away on January 24, 2025.

LENA HANCOCK is a Maryland native and mom of two who leads marketing at CSM. Her camera never misses a moment, whether it's a glowing sunset, playful farm scenes, or her kids in action. Her work has appeared in *Connections* and has earned awards at the county fair.

EMA HEINHORST is just a girl with a dog, figuring it all out.

GIADA HICKS is a freshman in college. She's interested in creative and poetic writing, traveling the world, and putting her fantastical heart out into the world by whatever means necessary.

WAYNE KARLIN is a professor emeritus who taught at the College of Southern Maryland for over 30 years and worked with Neal Dwyer for nearly as many years on the *Connections* Literary Reading Series. He is the author of nine novels: *What Their Fathers Never Told Them*, *The Genizah*, *A Wolf by the Ears*, *Marble Mountain*, *The Wished-For Country*, *Prisoners*, *Lost Armies*, *Us*, *The Extras*, *Crossover*, a collection of short stories: *Memorial Days*, a poetry chapbook: *Drinking with the Enemy*, and three non-fiction books: *Rumors and Stones*, *War Movies*, and *Wandering Souls*. He has received six Maryland State Arts Council Independent Artist Awards in Fiction, two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Paterson Prize in Fiction, the Vietnam Veterans of American Excellence in the Arts Award, and the Juniper Prize for Fiction.

KRISTA KEYES is a professor of English at the College of Southern Maryland. She received an MFA in creative writing from University College Dublin and an MA in English from University of California, Davis. Her short stories, poems, and essays have been published in *Connections Literary Magazine* and *The Greenbelt Review*. She is working on a novel that takes place in Dublin and an essay collection.

JOHN KULIKOWSKI is a professor of English at the College of Southern Maryland and was Neal Dwyer's friend, colleague, and *Connections* co-editor.

SARAH LOVELL is attending CSM for media studies and is an avid gardener, chit-chatter, and Nationals fan.

PHIL METRES has written numerous books, including *Fugitive/Refuge* (Copper Canyon 2024). Winner of Guggenheim, Lannan, and NEA fellowships, he is professor of English and director of the Peace, Justice, and Human Rights program at John Carroll University, and core faculty at Vermont College of Fine Arts MFA program.

NGUYỄN PHAN QUẾ MAI is an award-winning author of 12 books of poetry and fiction, including the international best-sellers *The Mountains Sing* and *Dust Child*. Among many other honors, she was the runner-up for the 2022 Dayton Peace Prize.

JENNIFER POLHEMUS wandered into Neal Dwyer's life one crisp autumn evening about 33 years ago when she read the first poem she had ever had published, *A Child's Memory*, at the *Connections Literary Magazine* reading on the La Plata Campus of what was then Charles County Community College. Little did they know how magnificently their relationship would metamorphose from editor/poet to teacher/student and finally take flight as kindred spirits.

Jennifer's fifth book of poetry, *Her Believing Heart*, is dedicated to his memory and their cherished friendship. How she wishes that Neal could celebrate with her as she receives her Master of Science in Organizational Psychology this summer or talk together about her growing holistic wellness coaching business, Eclosion Mind. But perhaps he will celebrate in his own way, and maybe they will converse in the secret language of dreams...

DIANE PAYNE is a full-time marketing specialist for the Marketing and Communications Department at CSM.

GABRIEL RODRIGUEZ works in the world of fresh produce with a love for the great outdoors and is a photographer who seeks to capture the serene and striking moments nature offers – inspired by the arts and the stories they tell.

PETER SANTORO was born in near Chicago, Illinois. During the 1990s, he grew up dreaming about history, science, and mythology. At 20 years old, Santoro joined the United States Marine Corps to see the world. He's finishing an Associate of Arts and Sciences at CSM.

RACHEL SMITH is a professor of English at CSM, a mother, grandmother, friend, teacher, writer, runner, and she believes there can never be too many candles in one room.

SUSAN STRICKLAND is a professor emeritus of mathematics at CSM. In retirement, she enjoys traveling, walking, and spending time with her grandchildren and friends.

RICHARD TAYLOR retired from Mail, Shipping, and Receiving for Operations and Planning at CSM.

GEMMA VAN WIE is a dual-enrolled senior at CSM. She's lived in Southern Maryland her entire life, and enjoys scrapbooking, petting cats, and watching Pokémon.

JOANNE VAN WIE is a homeschooling mother of seven and a first time grandmother. She was inspired to first submit poetry because of Neal Dwyer and *Connections Literary Magazine* over 25 years ago. The magazine was never made to feel intimidating and Neal's approach was especially encouraging and supportive. This magazine, as an outlet, has brought healing and growth to so many. Joanne Van Wie is a poet who will always be so grateful to have known Neal.

MONA WEBER believes one should never stop taking a moment to appreciate the beauty of nature. She finds inspiration in travel, echoing Gustave Flaubert's reminder that "you see what a tiny place you occupy in the world." From discovering creeks, rivers, and mounds of history in Southern Maryland to embracing day-to-day journeys on Route 4 or 5, Weber sees adventure everywhere. For her, travel never ends—it's simply a matter of perspective.

CHELSEA WHITT graduated from Johns Hopkins University and is currently working on a collection of ekphrastic poetry for a local art gallery. She is encouraged by signs of God's divinity, her favorite Robin Williams movies, and learning to make quality education more accessible.

CHRISTOPHER WILKINS has taught English at CSM since 2008, and serves as the priest at St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Brandywine, Maryland. He lives in Laurel, Maryland, with his family, library, and cats.



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PROF. NEAL DWYER
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