



# Connections

COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND  
**Spring 2015 Literary Magazine**

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COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND  
Spring 2015 Literary Magazine

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*Lemuel at Rest* by William Poe

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# Fallen Father

*Cathy Berish*

The presence of American flags began to appear through the trees. Glorious flags greeted us as the wind gently lifted them with a patriotic salute. They graced the edges of the roads that twisted and turned throughout the grounds of this honorable resting place. As the string of vehicles came to a stop, I sat in the back seat of the black limousine for a few minutes and watched family and friends make their way out of their cars and walk around. It seemed as if nobody knew where to go. They mingled in circles with glazed-over faces, finally ushering themselves to the cemetery's pavilion. As I peered out of my window, in the distance I could see my dad's casket. I didn't want to get out of the car. I knew once I did, it would start: the final stage of the inevitable, his funeral and my final good-bye.

My uncontrollable shaking hand slowly made its way to the door. Feeling numb and nauseous I pulled on the silver handle opening the car door. With my heart pounding in my chest, I met my mother and brother and walked onto the pavilion floor, taking a seat in the front row. I sat there like a stone statue on an ice cold marble bench. I sat motionless, giving the feeling the bench and I were one. The sounds of faint whimpering and sniffles from those around me filled my ears as if they were in surround sound. Their sobs echoed through the beautiful cedar pavilion. The smell of funeral flowers perfumed the air, and every gentle gust of wind carried their scent past my nose. Beyond the noise of weeping, I was suddenly aware of the sound of footsteps just entering the pavilion. I didn't turn around to connect the clicking heeled shoes to the unannounced guests. I couldn't. My body felt stiff. Maybe it was from the brisk cool air that hovered around

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me, or maybe because every muscle in my body was as tight as guitar strings. Whatever the case, I just sat there, unable to move.

I gave special attention to the sounds of their shoes, every step in sync as they slowly, with precision, walked onto the light grey concrete floor of the pavilion. Their footsteps cut through the silence of the thick atmosphere like a knife. Their flawless dark blue uniforms caught my gaze. Three men in military uniforms took their place in front of the casket. Just the mere sight of them made me want to change my posture. I could feel my slouched back straighten to attention. Shoulder to shoulder they stood, neat and clean, from their well-polished shoes to their white-brimmed hats. Every move they made was in unison. Not a word was spoken, their silence confirming their reverence and pride of country and service. I jumped slightly when the sound of “Taps” began to play on bagpipes behind me. Their bellowing notes sent chills up my spine and the pit in my stomach grew ever deeper. Two of the three men turned and placed themselves on each side of the casket. Slowly, delicately, they lifted the beautiful American flag that adorned the top of the casket. Every color shouted its vibrancy: crimson red, brilliant blue, and the purest of white. Its star-spangled glory, now hovering over the light brown, chestnut colored coffin as the men began to fold. Each fold, precise and purposed, they kept the flag taut and without wrinkle. Each bend of the flag drew them closer to the front of the casket. Now a tight, carefully folded triangular flag, at its final fold.

One of the men held it over his heart, paused, and with both hands, pressed it into his chest. As he embraced this symbol of freedom, he slowly turned towards my mother. Lifting his foot, just high enough for the toe of his shoe to touch the floor, he turned, shifting his position and walked toward my mother. Bending down on one knee, he handed the flag to her. Placing one hand over hers, making steady

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eye contact he said, "I'm sorry for your loss; he was a good man." The young man's voice began to break. Maybe because of the overwhelming emotions of the moment, or maybe he was broken to see my mother's beautiful face so weathered from grief. "America appreciates his service." With great compassion lingering behind his hazel-green eyes and his brow heavily drooped downward, he spoke to her as if it were his father who died. The reality was more than she could bear, and my mother's whimpering became uncontrollable, gut-wrenching sobs. Her husband of 39 years was gone; the calamitous cancer had won its vicious battle.

The three men in uniform lined themselves in front of the funerary box, and slowly gave their final salute. Together, in one motion, they raised their right arms, bending at their elbows until the tips of their forefingers touched the outer edge of their right eyebrows. After standing in a saluted position for what seemed like an eternity, they made their way to the back of the pavilion. They stood in a straight line; still, so still it appeared as if they were not even breathing. A pastor slowly made his way to the front of the open pavilion to speak to those gathered there. The woeful look that settled itself behind his eyes confirmed the utter sadness he was hiding in his heart. After all, he was Dad's best friend and Army companion. As the pastor spoke, the sun was just beginning to appear from behind a cloud. Beams of radiant sunlight were blinding my tear-filled eyes.

It was starting to warm up a bit; the sun was taking the morning chill out of the air. Its incandescence felt good on my face. Like a warm mask, drying up the wet tear streams left behind from my sobbing.

"Jo, do you have another tissue?" my mother asked with a broken whisper. Mom looked woebegone. I could clearly see the depth of her suffering; she wore it like a veil. As I turned to hand her another handful of clean tissues, my eyes caught the landscaping of this military resting place. In the



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distance I noticed blindingly white crosses in perfect rows. Each one of them was the same shape and size. As far as my eyes could see, there stood a multitude of headstones, making a declaration of remembrance, of bravery, of sacrifice, of duty, and of love for country. My husband, John, placed his hand on my shoulder to comfort me. As I continued my gaze into the distance, the voice of the pastor and the sobs around me slowly began to fade and my mind was transcended to memories of when I was a young girl.

So vividly, I could almost see myself, a young five-year-old walking with my father, holding his hand. My tiny hand seemingly lost in his. I recall his hand feeling rough and strong. I remember looking up at him; he resembled a giant in comparison to me. Dad was 6 feet tall, with sandy brown hair and crystal blue eyes; the kind of eyes you could get lost in. Wherever he went, I was never far behind. He called me his little shadow. Dad had a servant's heart. After the Vietnam War, he joined the police force. I remembered a time when we were on our way to the local police station; Dad, a police officer, had to check in, and as usual he took me with him. He tossed me up onto his broad shoulders as we entered the police station and he whirled me around onto his desk. One of the other police officers gave me a piece of gum and tried to teach me how to blow a bubble while Dad was busy at his desk. I watched intently as the fellow officer chewed his piece of gum, and then made a bubble. I was amazed at the large pink bubble that almost covered his face and I wanted to try to make one too. I did exactly as he showed me and I blew as hard as I could. A small pink dome started to form at the edges of my tiny lips, and in my excitement I blew a bit harder and forced the gum out of my mouth. It shot across the room like a bullet. Dad was laughing so hard he held his stomach.

As I sat there on the cold marble bench, still aware of why I was there, I allowed my mind to continue to wonder. I was desperate. I didn't want to forget his big bright smile that

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lit up the room, the way his eyes seemed to overflow with joy when he looked at me, his infectious laugh or the warmth of his love. I could still hear his laugh ringing in my ears. My heart and mind wanted to be back to those times when Dad and I were always together. I was quickly jolted back from my wandering thoughts by the sniffles of my mother. I looked at her hugging the triangle-shaped American flag; her body slumped over, her eyes puffy and red, and her nose chafed from all the wet tissues and constant wiping. I placed my hand on my mother's arm and whispered, "I love you." I squeezed my eyes shut for a moment and hung my head down. I became keenly aware of the massive throbbing in the temples of my forehead, as if my brain was actually pulsating and ready to burst. "God, I can't believe I'm here," I thought to myself.

The pastor was just finishing with a prayer but my mind felt so detached that I couldn't remember what he had prayed. "In Jesus' name, Amen," closed the pastor's prayer. As the pastor began to console my mother, I sat there, still unable to move, as if weights were keeping me in my place; my body felt heavy and my legs almost numb. Family members and friends were slowly making their way from under the pavilion and onto the cemetery grounds. For a moment, time seemed to have slowed down, even conversations among others seemed to be drowned out and inaudible. "God, how did this happen? Why now? Why him? Please give me the strength to get through this," I prayed quietly. As I sat there, I placed my hands on the bench and closed my eyes. Rubbing my hands back and forth, I could feel the coolness of the marble; it felt smooth on my fingertips, like glass.

With my eyes tightly closed, my mind wandered away again. I fondly remembered when Dad would take me to the park where we would spend hours walking or sitting on a park bench feeding the birds. Sometimes we would just sit and watch people coming and going. We would bring a blanket and lie down looking up at the clouds, finding different shapes

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that resembled animals. Along with us we carried a picnic basket. Mom would pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and a special dessert that Dad and I shared. Going to the park was my favorite thing to do with Dad. No matter how busy Dad was or how old I grew, we always found time to visit the park. As I aged, our time was spent differently. Chess playing and deep conversations of intellectual discussions took the place of cloud watching and bird feeding. I could talk to Dad about anything, everything. He would always say we were two peas from the same pod or we were cut from the same cloth.

“It’s time,” John said. He sat down next to me, placing his arm lovingly around my shoulders. He embraced me tightly, and pulled me into him. My head rested on his shoulder, still whimpering softly as he handed me another tissue. “I...I don’t want to leave; I didn’t get the chance to...” I burst out in uncontrollable tears. “Dad knew you loved him. I know this is hard, but you have to believe he knew,” John tried to console me, but there was nothing anybody could say that would dull the pain. We got up from the marble bench, and with weakened legs I made my way to the casket. John braced me by my elbow; I placed my hand on the casket and leaned forward until my lips almost touched the top.

“I’m sorry Daddy. I love you... always. See ya later Pop,” I softly whispered. I kissed the top of the casket and John led me to the rest of the family who were waiting in cars and limousines.

Leaving the cemetery, the car was quiet, not a word was spoken. I gazed out of the window and took notice of the sky. Shades of pinks melted together with blues and burnt oranges that complimented the billowy bright white clouds as the sun cast its rays through the vast horizon. Taking a deep breath I thought, “Dad would have loved the sky today.”



*Journey to the Sun by William Readen*

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# The Majesty of Trees

*Sherbie Carson*

She extends herself into the depths of the earth.  
Through layers of rock and clay, into the subsoil  
She grasps for nourishment—  
Iron, Oxygen, minerals of strength.

She searches for deeper waters  
Far below the faint raindrops of approval that trickle from  
heavily-guarded lips,  
Rations selectively dispensed at fleeting will.

5 – 10 – 50 feet below the surface where the feet of mortals  
clumsily tread  
and take notice of themselves only on a linear plane.  
She reaches far beneath both the well-worn and less-travelled  
paths of men.

From the depths she draws sustenance—  
Defiantly facing the resistance of gravity—  
and the natural downward pull of all created things.

She stretches her arms unto the sky  
Her fingers to the clouds—  
She watches the Heavens linger and drift through her open  
hands

The first to greet the morning,  
Her gilded leaves embrace the golden rays of the Sun  
Knowing that He dances with the willing.  
Expectantly she stands, with outstretched arms in eager  
anticipation of His arrival.

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She yields her fruit to Him only.  
She trusts in the Sovereign hand of time to mature and soften  
the hardened places within her yet uncultivated seed offering.

With patience, she waits.  
Carefully presenting the tender fruit of her labor  
To be ripened and enjoyed at the proper time.

She does not boast or place hope in her own strength.  
For she has felt the mountains quake the dust beneath her—  
She has watched the mighty river redirect its course with the  
passing of each storm.  
Yet she stands, firmly resolved, in the place where she has  
been planted.  
Unshaken.

She does not retreat beneath the weight of the burden of  
another.  
While men of thinner skin withdraw into the walls of their  
own design and comfort—  
She braves the wind.

Fully extended, she welcomes the change of seasons, one-by-one,  
Without lowering her arms in an attempt to self-defend  
or cover the shame of her winter brokenness.

She does not fear the drought of summer.  
Nor does she hold fast to the memory of winter's pruning  
For it was only months ago that she stood naked and exposed,  
stripped by the biting winds of change.

She offers the best of herself into brightly colored leaves,  
Catching the eye of a passerby for only a moment—  
Her selfless expressions of Love, radiantly painting the world,  
for the length of only a single season.

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She graciously hosts winged wanderers who find shelter  
in her arms.

Without seeking reciprocation, she valiantly offers the intimate  
vulnerability  
of whole-hearted fellowship.

She honors the inherent freewill of the birds who desire her  
company but for a season, without attempting to hold them  
within the cage of her will.

Mercifully, she forgives the man who seeks to carve his name  
upon her flesh.

She chooses to overlook the pain, and rejoice  
in the intentions of his misdirected love.

Though she momentarily quivers beneath the violence of  
his blade, her Hope  
is undeterred by the fear and scar of man.

She watches her love leaves fall onto the hardened ground  
With confidence, she stands firm—  
Knowing.

With every leaf crushed under foot,  
The soil around her becomes,  
ever so slightly, softer.

The next seeds that plummet from fearful heights,  
Only to land between the broken crevices of earth  
May find themselves beneficiaries to her life-long legacy of  
selfless soil enrichment.

For her, this is enough.

Oh, that my Life may exemplify the Majesty of even the  
smallest of trees.

---

## Sixth Life Crisis

*Samaria Khan*

Ambition is the window which I like to meet  
Determined to get it right  
Average does not succeed  
Crumbling away, someone record this episode  
Confronting the anxiety  
I have finally cracked the code  
Spent time with an addict  
Got to learn his past life  
Met a girl with a face that she cut with a knife  
Recovering from happiness—unattainable high  
Checked into isolation  
Rode my bike throughout the night  
The emotional roller coaster  
The scars began to fade  
Some joy has been offered, some love taken away  
A story wide open  
Only one key can close  
The manageable time  
Yet the answer is always no





*Dad – Arlington Cemetery by Jim McDonald*

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# The Blood of My War

*by a Bleeding Veteran*

I was walking toward a classroom about a couple of weeks ago. It was a walk I had become very accustomed to. I typically would arrive just about on the top of the hour, I would say hello to a good friend, open the classroom door, and turn on the lights. My good friend and I would normally banter back and forth, talk about how we were feeling, and wait. This time it was different.

I walked into the foyer of the school and noticed something different this time. There was a family sitting in the chairs just outside the classroom. As I walked closer to them I saw something horrible. Something I hadn't seen in a long time. The man, he was just sitting there, bleeding. He was bleeding profusely. His family, sitting by his side, were covered in his blood. Their clothes soaking in blood and dripping on the floor all around them.

I first thought, "Why aren't they helping him? They're his family for God sake!" Recalling my military training in first aid I recalled what they had taught us, "In combat, you STOP the bleeding first." So my muscle memory took over from there. I rushed up to him and first tried placing pressure on his wounds. I quickly discovered he was bleeding in more than one spot. I used my other hand and placed it over another wound, but he continued to bleed.

I tried the last resort, a tourniquet. I took off my belt and wrapped it around him, pulling it tight against his body. It too did not stop the bleeding. I looked down at the floor, covered in a darkish red, and saw something more. I noticed my pants and shirt were covered in blood. Although I was careful not to get too close to this man, I couldn't figure out why I would have so much blood on my own clothes.

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I examined my pants and shirt. I then realized it was not his blood covering my clothes. It was my own. I was bleeding as well. I couldn't figure out why. How could I walk around, go to work, hug my wife, hug my children, and not have one of them notice I was bleeding so badly?

I looked up at the man's wife and kids once more. I told her, "I'm bleeding as well." She looked back at me, staring into my eyes and said, "I know. You are wounded as well." I replied, "What? What are you saying?" She moved closer, "Your wounds. They bleed like my husband's do. Sometimes it stops. Maybe it stops for a moment or two. But then it starts. He bleeds. You see, the blood on my clothes, the blood on our children's clothes, it's from his wounds. It happens every time we try and get close to him. He doesn't see it. He believes it is just he who bleeds. His blood has splattered us as well."

I looked back at her, amazed by what she just said, "So... Where does this blood come from? How did we get these wounds?" She replied in a matter of fact way, "Just like my husband did of course."

A puzzled look came over my face, "I'm not following you."

She quipped, "You were over there? Weren't you?"

"Over there? You mean in the war?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean."

"Yes. Yes I was. But I wasn't injured."

She looked directly at me once again, "Neither was my husband. I mean, he wasn't shot. He wasn't blown up by an IED, he has all his limbs, and he has all his fingers and toes."

"So if he wasn't injured where is all this blood coming from?"

I looked over at the man, still sitting there in the chair directly across from me. His wife looked at him as she spoke, "He was wounded in a horrible way. He saw things. He witnessed the carnage of war. The blood of the battlefield."

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The helplessness one feels as they watch their friends leave the FOB and never come back. The constant reminder that you have come back and they have not. The constant reminder that the war is still going on. Good people are dying and you can't stop it. My husband, just like you, suffers every day with this pain, the unseen wounds of war. I'm sure, if I were to see your wife and your children, they would look exactly like me. Your children would look like mine do. They would be covered in your blood. Blood they share with you every time they try to get close to you. Every time they try and put pressure of concerning words on your wounds. When they try to place a tourniquet of words around you. Just as you tried with my husband tonight."

I gave a shocked look at her and the husband, "So why are you here exactly?" She replied, "We're here for the mental health recovery and support group that you and your friend have started." She continued, "We're here because this is what military spouses and their families do. When times get tough like this, we gather around each other. We support each other. We ignore the blood. We persevere regardless of how big the challenge is. We help each other."

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# Rough

*Chris Laurie*

Granny and her kin were as poor as a third world country.  
Kids and dogs ran wild and hungry.  
Laundry hung limp on the line,  
dusted by wood-fire ashes.

Granny and her kin had an outhouse,  
rough as a corncob.  
Nighttime treks were adventures,  
with feet as naked as the moon.

Granny and her kin had no money.  
Pop earned enough to buy cabbage and potatoes.  
Brothers Meat and Doll, young as shoots in spring, labored  
for pennies to buy bread.  
Everyone used smelly, homemade soap of fat, lye, and ash.

Granny and her kin ate lean  
suppers of sauerkraut and mashed.  
There was an orange at Christmas and candy cane.  
Having meat was a Sunday Noel.

Granny and her kin had love like the heaps of firewood  
they gathered.  
Nicknames—a sign of knowing  
each other's hearts and dreams  
carried forward someday to their own.



*Ghost Town by Sean Frost*

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## **A Soldier's Reality**

*Bill Buffington*

*In honor of Mr. Lemon Moses and all who fought before me!*

The darkness I walk in  
The fog that hangs over me daily  
Something you will never understand  
But you think you know me  
The freedom you have is mine because I fought for it  
And you have the nerve to ask me to face reality.....  
Real to me is the buddy I left behind  
The stories I will never be able to tell  
A living hell unexplained  
Now that I am home  
I find myself missing  
And you have the nerve to ask me to face reality.....  
Where are the promises that were made  
The apple pie and Chevrolet  
My forty acres and my mule  
Where is my freedom  
I guess I will find it  
When I face your reality.....  
Thank you for your service

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## Night Aviary

*Ethan Fugate*

I laughed when you  
Couldn't believe that  
You were hearing bird  
Songs, off in space—  
Cascaded trees blocking  
Echoes and hills rolling  
Beyond our perception.

I laughed when you  
Asked if I believed  
In the birds—as if they  
Are in stagnant imagination,  
In lee of dark, cool night.  
“If you wait it out ‘til  
Dawn—they only disappear”

I laughed, in a quest  
For the sun; filled of  
Empty spatial voids—  
Forgotten and still  
Black water. I took  
Ribbon from your hair,  
To find my way back.





*Placidity by Mary Prather*

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# The Arrival of Spring

*Rachel Heinhorst*

Birds flock the tops of trees, thousands  
perched on snow cleared branches,  
under a morning sky of sun,  
not squawking, but praising this day  
with their crowd of voices weaving energy,  
as if an audience waiting for the announcement  
of something spectacular.

It is their winter's end festival,  
their way of deciding the songs they'll sing  
for spring's equinox,  
and I stand in the middle of this,  
turning circles, thankful  
for this walk, and anxious  
to spread the news.

---

# I Woke Up in a Car

*Carly Wedding*

My alma mater has had quite the history.

Established in 1927, La Plata High School was constructed to replace an elementary school of the same name that was destroyed by a tornado the year prior. The new school was built to house students in grades first through twelfth, making it Charles County's only secondary school at the time, with the exception of Indian Head High School. That site was the home of La Plata High School for nearly 40 years.

In 1964, the school was relocated to a new building in a different part of town to accommodate its increasing level of students. La Plata High School remained there until the establishment of a middle school became necessary. When Milton M. Somers Middle School was founded in 1979, La Plata High School then moved again to its current location on Radio Station Road.

Throughout its existence, La Plata High School has served as a source of quality education for a number of notable alumni. Football player Matt Dyson was selected by the Oakland Raiders in the fifth round of the NFL Draft. Hall of famer Don Money played for the Philadelphia Phillies, the Milwaukee Brewers, and the Kintestu Buffaloes throughout his baseball career. The original lineup of Good Charlotte consisted of members who all met at that high school.

The point is that La Plata High School has quite a story. My story, on the other hand, didn't begin until 81 years after the school was founded.

I started high school in 2008. Like most kids fresh out of middle school, I was awkward as hell. My friends were no different. Because of this, our friendships became stronger. This story in particular focuses on my good friend Emma.

---

Throughout our four years at La Plata High School or prison, as it was referred to in “The Anthem” by Good Charlotte – Emma and I spent much of our time listening to music. I made her countless mix CDs throughout those four years, filled with tracks by Neon Trees, Brand New, Matt & Kim, Manchester Orchestra, and Something Corporate. Out of all of those bands, I think Emma would agree that we bonded over Something Corporate the most.

Our senior year, I was voted to the homecoming court. Because of this, I had no choice but to attend the homecoming dance, though I probably would have been persuaded into going anyway. My friend group took the typical homecoming photos: all of the girls in one picture, all of the boys in one picture, and one group picture of about 30 kids who were uncomfortably assembled together in order to make the shot. When the photo shoot came to an end around 8:15 p.m., Emma and I decided to start the two-minute trek to our high school.

Once we got in her Volkswagen Jetta, Emma said to me, “I don’t feel like going to the dance yet.”

I agreed with her. Homecoming dances were all the same – girls trying to defy the dress code by wearing unflattering dresses, boys showing the rest of the student body how big of a douchebag they could be by wearing white tuxedos, and school administrators fussing at the two groups for dancing provocatively to outdated, less-than-appropriate music handpicked by an overpriced disc jockey. I had to be at the dance by 9 p.m. so I could participate in the traditional crowning of the homecoming king, but until then, the sweaty, bright-lit gymnasium was the last place I wanted to be.

“Yeah, I don’t either,” I told her. “Let’s just drive around until we have to go to school.”

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And with that, we hopped in her sedan and drove around the town of La Plata. I've always been a bit of a control freak, so I insisted I pick the music. She told me to pick a disc from her collection. I picked her burned copy of "Leaving Through the Window."

Ever since I bought it off iTunes (I know, I can do better), I've loved "Leaving Through the Window." The lyrics are introspective, the music is phenomenal, and the songs never get old. The album is perfect for pop and alternative fans alike, so naturally I forced Emma into becoming a fan. My assertiveness proved successful, and by September 2011, she loved the band like a college student loves a curved test.

We drove up and down route 301, listening to the sounds of 2002. Due to time constraints, we only got through the first three songs – "I Want To Save You," "Punk Rock Princess," and "I Woke Up In A Car." We may even have thrown "IF U C Jordan" into the mix and replaced "Jordan" with the names of kids at school we didn't like. We were always a mature pair of friends.

Out of the four songs we listened to, I remember the moments surrounding "I Woke Up In A Car" the most. I had heard the song hundreds of times before, but it had never meant as much to me as it did that night.

*I woke up in New York City from my sleep behind the wheel,  
caught a train to Poughkeepsie, and time stood still.*

The song is four minutes and 13 seconds long, but I swear the clock on her dashboard was stationary for the duration of the song. All I could think about is where I'd been, where I was, and where I was going, which I admit was a vast amount of information for my 17-year-old mind to process in less than five minutes.

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I thought about the past three years of my life, and how I could have (and should have) tried harder in my classes. Don't get me wrong – I earned fantastic grades. But I could have been a straight A student instead of a B+ student.

I thought where I currently was in life. I've always had terrible anxiety, and not the self-diagnosed Tumblr style of anxiety. I was like Double D on Ed, Edd, and Eddy – always worrying about something. At the same time, I had made a great life for myself. I had wonderful friends. My family was incredible. I was well-liked enough to be voted to the homecoming and prom courts my junior and senior years. I could pretend to be mentally ill *a la* the characters in *Girl Interrupted*, but that would make me a fraud.

To quote Motion City Soundtrack, the future freaked me out. I hadn't thought about college at all. Emma had been looking at various schools in Ohio and Maryland. I knew I liked writing, and I was damn good at it, but I never thought it would be possible for me to make a career out of it. Emma was really into politics, so her goal was to major in political science. She had taken a plethora of AP classes; I had only taken one, and it wasn't even English related. I was in no way prepared for the future.

*I'd never been so lost. I've never felt so much at home.*

I shook away the obnoxious thoughts and got back to screaming the song at her dashboard. I had all the time in the world to worry; homecoming night wasn't the time. Regardless, listening to that song with her made me realize I could come to Emma with my problems, whether they were bigger than a Honda CRV or smaller than the tip of a fine point Sharpie.

In *Almost Famous*, the band and crew travel to their next tour date the night after Russell takes acid at a party. Young journalist William Miller tells band aid Penny Lane he can't

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stay on the tour longer than he initially planned, and that he has to go home. Penny Lane responds that he is home.

I see Penny Lane's point. Some people just feel like home. Emma is one of those people.

*And maybe I could live forever, if not ever I had known that you'd be waiting there whenever I am all alone.*

To add to my last statement, Emma is one of those people that I know will always be there for me. Denison University is approximately seven hours and 437 miles away from my house in Southern Maryland. That hasn't affected our friendship at all. I'm awake all hours of the night, so she knows she can text me when she's bored and can't sleep or when something is troubling her. Her sleep patterns are more stable than mine, but if I text her in the middle of the night, I know I'll get a response in the morning.

*I woke up in a car.*

That night of the homecoming dance, I realized that I was in no way alone. The friends I had in high school are still my friends to this day. They've always supported me in my ridiculous endeavors, and I know they'll continue to. September 24, 2011 was the night of my final homecoming, but that epiphany has been stuck in the back of my head since then.

After high school, Emma went to Denison University to study none other than political science. As I write this, she's studying abroad in Dublin. We still talk on a daily basis.

When I graduated high school, I started attending the College of Southern Maryland, the institution formerly known as Charles County Community College. When

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I get my associate's degree in May, I'll be transferring to a university. I haven't decided which one yet. It's between Virginia Commonwealth University, Stevenson University, Towson University, and St. Mary's College of Maryland. But the uncertainty doesn't bother me. I'm not afraid of what's to come, because I have incredible friends like Emma that will be with me every step of the way.

*Here I am.*



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# Pain

*Gabby Tancredi*

We think pain is the worst thing to feel.  
We couldn't be more wrong,  
We need to feel pain.

Nothing.  
That is the worst thing that can happen,  
What if we feel nothing?

We have to feel.  
Even if we feel like shit,  
We have to feel something.

What if we feel nothing?  
What if we become so desensitized to the world around us, that  
We grow numb.

To feel is to know you are alive.  
I would rather feel pain,  
Than to feel nothing.

Even with everything that is happening.  
I would rather feel pain and agony,  
Than to grow numb.

I would rather feel hopeless.  
I would gladly feel like my heart has been ripped from my chest,  
Rather than live as an empty shell.

We think pain is the worst thing to feel.  
We couldn't be more wrong,  
We need to feel pain.



*Line by Kathryn Didier*

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# Brutus

*Joany Nazdin*

Brutus and Chief Strong Oak (whose real name was Mario) had worked together since they were teenagers. They knew each other as well as any two creatures ever could. After all, they had done thousands of shows as a team. For more than 20 years, three times a day, (well, two after Mario stopped being able to do the morning show due to his drinking and subsequent hangovers) they entertained tourists from all over the world. Then Brutus bit Mario's hand off.

Mario knew it was most likely his fault that the alligator chomped his hand off. He had been out the night before, and was talking to an especially pretty little blonde, a college girl from New Jersey who was down for spring break. He left her for a few minutes to go to the bathroom, and the girl and her friends did not notice him at first when he came back to rejoin their group. It was his 38th birthday, and he was drinking a lot more than usual.

"Why are you talking to that creepy old man?" the less-attractive brunette asked her far-prettier girlfriend.

"Free drinks," the blonde said, "and he is kind of cute."

The brunette snickered.

"I think it is so corny the way he keeps asking you if you want more firewater, like he really believes he is an Indian," she said.

The blonde just laughed.

"Well, he did promise us all free tickets to his show tomorrow," the pretty blonde said. "You know, I never dated an alligator wrestler before. I guess that is kind of like show business, isn't it?"

The not-so-pretty girl smirked.

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“Yeah, if you consider the freak show at the circus to be show business, then I guess it is,” she replied.

Mario did not let on that he heard them talk about him. After all, he had already invested quite a large portion of his paycheck into getting the blonde drunk, and he thought he was tough enough to take what anyone said about him. As long as the blonde kept laughing and eventually went home with him, he really did not care what her friends thought.

Except in the back of his mind maybe he really did care what they thought or said. He would think about it all later. Now, he really had a reason for getting drunk: his birthday, and the fact that at 38 he had become a creepy old man.

He woke up the next morning in his car, no money in his pocket and no blonde in sight. His hangover was one that would rank in the top five of his life. Maybe the remarks the girls made did sting, because even though he drank and got drunk every day, he had never drunk so much that he could not make it home.

“Creepy old man,” he thought. “Freak show in a circus.” He shook his head, but he could not stop thinking that maybe there was some truth in what the girls had said. Alligator wrestling was an uncommon career, even in Florida, where people earned paychecks by being Disney Mice or Snow Whites.

Becoming an alligator wrestler was actually a promotion in his opinion. He first started at the gator farm cutting the grass and cleaning the pens. It was only after he finally grew into his height and grew his hair long enough to wear in a braid that Chief Strong Oak evolved.

Mario had come from a town in the south of Mexico with his family when he was 14 years old. He was not sure what kind of Mexican he was, but he was quite sure he was not the “Last of the Seminole Indian Chiefs” the gator farm advertised him as. He did not really understand why his family

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left home, only that his dad kept saying that the family was going to stay in America just long enough to make money to buy a home, and then return to their village and live like kings for the rest of their lives.

The American dream became the American nightmare in Mario's opinion. The family worked like slaves, most of them working two and sometimes three jobs, and never returning to Mexico except for a vacation once a year. The family never realized that the dollars they worked so hard for were only enough to keep the family afloat, and there was never enough to save for the house that his parents dreamed and sacrificed for. Any extra money they did have soon disappeared after they went back for their visits to see the relatives that were still at home in Mexico.

After his parents passed on, he never returned to Mexico.

It was hard enough for Mario to keep a roof over his head and to make his paycheck last from week to week. He was not proud of the fact that he more than once brought in a dead animal off the road for the bonus the gator farm paid.

The gator farm was run on a tight budget, and meat was meat, no matter what animal it came off of. It was all the same to the gators, who would eat anything tossed in their enclosure. If you brought in a dead rabbit or squirrel, they slid you an extra dollar, for a good-sized dog like a shepherd or Doberman you would get three, and for a deer you got an extra five bucks in cash under the table.

He was especially not proud of the weeks when he was drinking more than usual, and it was his road kill bonus money that kept him in food and beer till the next checks. He had really hit rock bottom last week, when instead of putting on the brakes when he saw the handsome black Labrador, he sped up.

The gators did not care the dog was someone's pet. They ate the dog, collar and all. The dog's name was Bella, and

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some gator in the park had her tags with her name and her owner's plea to "Call if you find me" in their belly right now. He thought of himself as an animal lover, since after all, he and Brutus were best friends, but money was money, no matter what you had to do to make it.

Sometimes he wondered how it got to be like this.

He never in his wildest dreams thought when his family settled into their small house close to the gator farm that he would end up working there. They were so close to the gator farm that you could hear the gators bellow all day and night. He used to love to tell his friends back home that the gators they heard in the background as they talked to on the phone were actually wild ones that lived right outside his door, and he would make up great stories about how he saved different family members from being attacked by the "biggest gator anyone had ever seen in these parts."

While cleaning his pen every day Mario slowly grew attached to Brutus, who actually really was the biggest gator at the farm. Gators don't have feelings, they will eat their young and not think twice, but for some reason Mario thought the large gator was fond of him. He knew Brutus must have really been annoyed that his partner came to work hung over so often. Mario was sure his hangover was what gave Brutus the inspiration to take advantage of him the day he bit his hand off.

Mario did not like to think about that day, but scenes from that day just kept flashing up at the weirdest times. He could be eating a bowl of cornflakes and suddenly it would all play out in his head again, like a bad horror movie.

The folks at the Workman's Comp place said it was PTSD. Mario thought it was payback for what he made Brutus do that day, and the chomping was the gator's way of saying he was not going to take it anymore.

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Mario was so hung over that day that he could barely see. It was the day after his disastrous 38th birthday party. It hurt to hold up his head, and the light made keeping his eyes open very painful. He and Brutus did their usual rolling around and play-fighting for the tourists. He had just tied Brutus's jaws shut with the rope and was sitting on him. Then came the chance for the tourists to get a shot of their loved ones (for only five dollars) sitting on Brutus with Chief Strong Oak. This was the part of act that Brutus disliked the most.

Mario knew he should not have let the lady who probably weighed over three hundred pounds sit on Brutus. After all, they were friends, and friends don't let friends get squashed by fat chicks. But he was not thinking fast enough to come up with a way to discourage the lady without being downright being rude to her, so she plopped right down on Brutus. Brutus bellowed like he was severely insulted. After the lady was lifted off Brutus by her family (she was too large to get up using her own power), Mario untied Brutus's jaw.

Untying the rope was the last thing he ever did with both hands.

The Workman's Comp people had to scratch their heads for a while and really think outside of the box to get Mario another job. It was not like he was any good with people or numbers or had any IT skills.

They finally found him a job in a big-box pet supply place, and at first he was a sales associate on the floor. He lost that spot when the managers caught him trying to educate the people that wanted to buy the small baby gators as pets. Mario just wanted them to know what it would take to actually raise a healthy gator to maturity. No one wanted to think that they were buying a potential eight-foot long pet that would need an enclosure the size of a swimming pool and a fresh goat and maybe two or three chickens a week.

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Mario now has to stock kitty litter and cans of dog food and is not let anywhere near the customers.

It is all fine with him, except sometimes he gets a little lonely. When that happens, Mario sometimes goes to the gator farm and visits his old work friends, and checks up on Brutus.

Mario always got in free; everyone there remembered him, and still called him Chief. If nothing else, the place was good for a free lunch. The gator farm would slaughter the old and runty looking gators and turn them into gator bites and alligator creole. Mario used to help skin and dress the gators between shows as part of his job.

When Mario placed his order for his lunch, he noticed the girl taking his order must have been new, because she charged him \$7.75 for an order of gator bites and fries. He didn't say a word to her; he just did not feel like explaining to her that he used to work there for many years and that his lunch was always free. It made him too sad to think about it.

He sat there and munched on the gator bites while he was waiting for his fries.

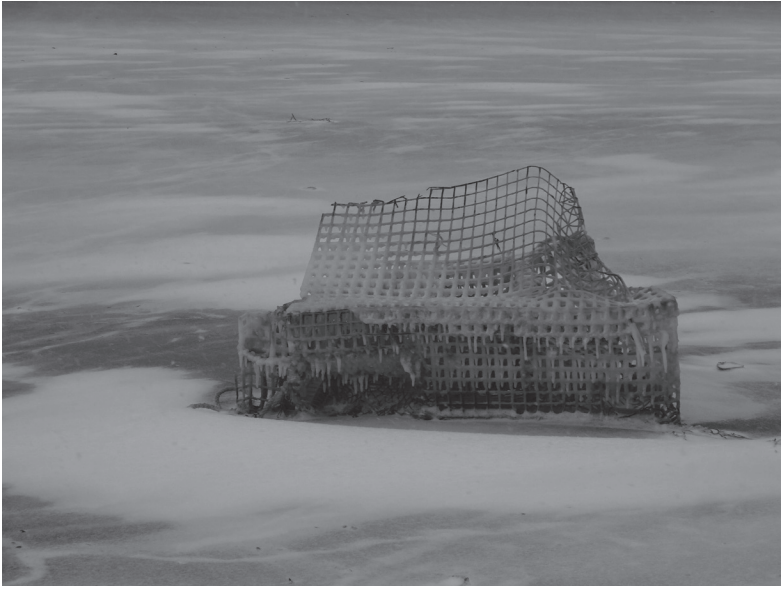
"You know, you are eating the meanest gator in the park right now," the counter girl said. "That is the famous Brutus you are chewing on. You know he actually bit a man's hand off a few years ago." She stopped talking as she looked at his prosthesis and kind of got pale.

"I'll have the fries right out to you," she said, as she scurried from the window.

Mario at first felt like vomiting. He could not believe his bad luck. He was eating his old friend! He almost tossed the food away.

And then he thought some more. Brutus ate his hand. Now he was eating Brutus. This is kind of like the circle of life, Mario thought. Mario took another bite. Mario put more ketchup on his Brutus-bite. Some days the gator eats you, and some days you eat the gator. Just like life in the food chain, he thought.





*Forgotten Trap by Kelsi Eiane*

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# Lay Aside Every Weight

*Desiree S. Glass*

I am  
overly dressed in layers for snow play,  
so restricted I can barely move my legs,  
let alone run and play and build a snowman.  
When I look in the mirror  
I see a form as round and pudgy as—  
heck, a snowman.  
I am pregnant  
with shame.  
Was it that long ago  
I admired my trim form in that same mirror?  
Didn't I do a double-take when I glanced at my goal image?  
Now I am  
undesirable, rejected  
imprisoned,  
longing to escape this padded cell,  
despising the crime that led to the sentence—  
that peek,  
that flirtatious banter,  
the promise of comfort,  
pleasure for pain,  
just a nibble,  
a few bites of  
the soothing salve,  
the remedy for  
my jambalaya of emotions,  
my stew of sorrow,  
simmering anger,  
the cravings of my endless cavern.

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My spicy, sweet, savory  
lovers made  
a Mardi Gras in my mouth—and  
left party balloons on my behind.  
Deceiving as the snake in Eden,  
my lovers  
slithered down with ease,  
but they have worn out their welcome.  
They have stayed too long,  
topping the pain with  
misery, regret, and defeat.  
In my mind I  
run, run, run,  
all the while peeling off  
layers  
of ill-fitting  
garments,  
freeing my legs to  
run, run, run,  
no longer ensnared,  
no longer immobilized  
by food poisoning.

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## Family Doctor

*Jim McDonald*

Black coffee, no cream, no sugar, just hot, like every other morning. Used to be cup after cup, after cup, if he finishes one cup anymore he's surprised and pleased. One cup and one spoon, yes a spoon to stir the coffee that has no cream and no sugar. The spoon is a habit from when he used to put whiskey in his coffee. One cup, one spoon, one window and one view. Later for lunch he'll have one plate with one sandwich on it, one bowl of soup and one glass of water. Well, there was only one of him in a one bedroom apartment, but he did live on the second floor. It never has been two and now he knows it never will be more.

The phone rang four times on the old man's wall, before he got to it. Getting up from the table and getting to the phone in four rings was a good day. He didn't move as fast as he used to, in part because of his big belly and probably his age also. "Hello," he said, while he walked back to his kitchen table. An average length cord was long enough to reach the table with ease, because the dining area and kitchen were combined in one small room.

The voice on the phone said, "Can I speak to..?" but the caller was cut off mid-sentence. When the old man said, "Speakin." That's all he could summon to say at the time.

"This is Dr. Burns' office." She said. "Can you hold for the doctor?"

"Sure," he said. While nervously tapping his pencil on the table, he grabbed a torn-open envelope off the pile of torn-open envelopes, then started doodling. The thirty seconds it took for the doctor to get to the phone seemed like an hour. The same thing day in, day out and it seems no changes are looming in his future. No unexpected pleasures,

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no unexpected thrills, joys or sorrows, just like every other day. Except maybe today's news. This was a call he'd been waiting for, but not looking forward to. Not just the pain, but the type of pain he started feeling last month is something he's never felt before. The powerlessness and disturbing thoughts rolling around in his head were enough to evoke fear in the toughest of people. He normally has a big smile all over face under his ball cap, but not lately.

A sound from the living room made him turn his head toward the TV. It was the sound of his favorite advertisement. The ad suggested that if you drank this wine you would end up with the hot girl and the fast car in the sunshine by the beach. Implication was, happily ever after, but he thought it was unlikely. He still liked looking at the honey and imagining him and her together forever. He had been with women before, but none made him feel the relationship could last more than a year.

The voice on the phone this time came from the doctor. He said, "Hello."

"Hi Doctor Burns."

Burns replied with, "We got your labs back and the news I have isn't exactly what we were looking for."

"I don't understand. Whatcha sayin' Doc?"

"The results didn't conclusively rule anything out. For that matter, it didn't really answer any of our questions," Burns said. "I need you to come back in for some more tests."

"When?"

"As soon as possible. Can I send you back to Marge to set that up?"

"Sure," he said, "but first, what's going on Doc? Ya gotta tell me somein'."

Doctor Burns said, "Anything else I tell you at this point would be conjecture and I don't want to leave this conversation with you thinking the worst."

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“I’m already doin’ that. Crap, give me to Marge.”

“How your diet is going?”

“That doesn’t seem to be that important to me right now Doc.”

“Maybe not, but if you would lose some weight it would be easier on your knees, lungs, heart and your diabetes.”

“Well it’s not going so good right now, but I’ll try to do better. Thanks”

He walked toward the front door to put the phone back on the wall after he and Marge made an appointment for early next week. Forced to lean on the old fridge to catch his breath had become routine. A few seconds later, after grasping a lungful of air, he headed back to his coffee. The coffee was cold by now, but he didn’t much care if it was hot or cold. “What now,” he yelled, while thinking, two more weeks of anxious worry, wondering about the outcome.

He had grown accustomed to the view through his kitchen window. It was one of the few perks of his second floor apartment. He loved looking at the park and watching all the action, kids playing kickball or catch and then the families out for a picnic or a stroll. He would make up stories about their lives and often inject himself into the tales. Some of the stories comical, some not so much. Lately though, it seemed he just stared out the window, daydreaming.

He could turn his head slightly to the right and look through the five-foot opening leading to the living room. He knew that one of his addictions was the TV and it was in perfect view from his kitchen chair. This gave him another way to fantasize about being part of a family. The box sat on the living room floor; it would give him mysteries to figure out, comedies to laugh with, and news to talk about.

The phone rang and he answered it saying, “Hello.”

“What’s going on man?” Bob asked.

“I’m watchin’ the tube thinking about hittin’ a movie.”

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“What’s playing?”

“*Chisum*’s playin’ at 12:40. Wanna go?”

“That’s the new John Wayne movie isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” said the old man.

“Let’s do it.” Bob said. “I haven’t heard from you in a few days. I called yesterday and you know when I call, it’s your job to answer,” he said jokingly.

“Sorry ‘bout that. The doctor called the other day with no news, so I’m going back to see him Tuesday. I’ll tell you about it when I see ya.”

“How about I pick you up at noon?”

“Sounds good. I need some smokes, so I’ll be at the Exxon. You want anything?”

“How about a soda.”

“See ya then.”

A few days later he was down at the 7-11, which was on the other side of the Exxon. He was waiting in line to pay for his milk, eggs and a few other items, when he noticed a couple of kids in an aisle to his left. They were screaming and bugging the woman in front of him. One of the kids yelled, “Please mommy, please!” Mom was determined not to give in when the dad came in and asked, “What’s going on over there?”

Mom said, “They want some candy and I told them it’s too close to dinner.”

Dad said, “Come on Mama. One piece can’t hurt.”

Then the kids went back to their pleading and momentarily won the battle. Until she said, “You can choose one a piece, but you can’t have it till after dinner.” One kid knew what she wanted and grabbed it immediately. The other couldn’t make up his mind, so Mom said, “Get it now or you don’t get one.” The kid grabbed some chocolate then went to the counter. Mom then paid for the gas, candy and water. The dad was holding the door open, while the kids went running into the parking lot jumping for joy, while the mom shook her head.

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The old man said to the cashier, "They seem happy."

The cashier said, "Yeah, I guess."

On the way back home he stopped at the gas station for some more smokes. Before he walked in, he sat on the bench next to the door to catch his breath. The bench faced the park giving him a slightly different view than from the kitchen.

He walked in and said, "Can I get two packs of smokes please?"

"That'll be sixty cents," Bobby said.

"They went up again? When they get to forty cents a pack, I'm quittin'."

Bobby laughed and said, "See you tomorrow."

"I'm serious." He said with a slight frown. "See ya."

Back in his apartment he had to sit before he could put his groceries away. Sitting had become a big part of his life not just to catch his breath, but also for the window of dreams. That's what he called the window next to the kitchen table. The table sat between the avocado appliances on the left and a wall that separated the kitchen and living room on the right.

On that wall was the only picture in the apartment. It hung on two six-penny finishing nails and it measured twenty inches high and three feet wide. Inside the frame was a portrait of a two-story house sitting on a slight hill by a half-acre pond. An older lady was resting in a rocker on the covered front porch. She had something in her lap, but it wasn't quite visible what it was. An older man was fishing near some bushes in the only cleared area around the pond. Small mouth bass are the only fish in the pond, which end up dancing on the end of his hook. Nearby, there was a small wooden boat in the pond. In it were two kids, one girl and one boy; the boy had just pushed the boat off shore and hopped back in. The girl is about 8 or so, while the boy looks to be 17 or close to it. He has always thought of himself being the man fishing. This daydream or fantasy has become all too familiar,



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a regular part of his daily existence and to think he got the painting for a dollar at a yard sale.

He did have one other picture and it was in his wallet. That picture was of his mom and dad, no other family members. He had no other family to speak of except his aunt and uncle. He met them decades ago. They might not even be alive by now.

Sundays seemed to arrive quicker than once every seven days. He looked forward to his morning paper, smokes and water in the sunny setting of the park. He went more often than once a week, but Sundays the park was full of action. Softballs, footballs, volleyballs and frisbees flew everywhere, families enjoying picnics; others just hung out enjoying the sunshine or maybe just a stroll through the park.

He got up from his coffee and headed toward the door and down the stairs. He often wished they had installed handrails on both sides of the stairs instead of just one. With his left hand on the handrail he cautiously took one step at a time, careful not fall. His sponsor always told him one step at a time. He quit drinking and drugging decades ago and it was the best thing that had ever happened to him. He laughed when he thought about the parallels between the two views. Although he would have reached the bottom a lot quicker if he took all of them at once. He “laughed” when he thought that wouldn’t be wise or fun. By the time he got to the bottom he needed a rest, so he sat in the chair that he put there for that very reason. As he sat there, he remembered what his doctor told him a year or so ago. “Yep,” the doctor said, “your warranty has run out.” He remembered laughing so hard he almost peed himself. It didn’t seem so funny now though. He got up and headed to the Exxon to see Bobby.

Once he got to the gas station, he sat on what he considered his bench, to the left of the door next to the soda machine. While he was resting a soldier pulled up and started

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pumping some gas. When the soldier walked towards the station he said, "Morning."

"Morning to you, Army. How are you?" the old man said.

Army said, "Great. Just got back from overseas."

The old man slowly got up to shake Army's hand then said, "Thank you for protecting me, my freedom and my way of life. I never served, so thank you for serving in my place."

"Thank you for your support. I normally don't get that kind of reception."

"Yeah, I guess not after Vietnam," he told him. "Well, I appreciate your service, Army," he said as he sat back down.

When Army left the old man went in. Bobby said, "Two packs of smokes, Sunday paper and a water, anything else?"

"No, that'll be 'bout it. Ya think ya know me, huh?"

"Some things I guess. Over the years I've seen you talk to a lot of soldiers. What's that all about?"

"Well I never went to war, but my dad did and when he came home he wasn't all there."

"I'm so sorry," Bobby said, "I shouldn't have asked."

"You didn't know. It affected my mom more than it did me anyway. Our guys go over there and some don't come back at all and some don't come back all there."

"Yeah I guess I understand." Bobby said, but he wasn't able to look him in the eye when he said it. Now he didn't know if he sided with the students at Kent State or not. Now he thinks if you don't have a dog in the fight, you might not be able to understand the fight.

"See ya Bobby."

"Later."

He waited till the semi passed and waved at the driver before he started across the street to the park. He noticed no one was sitting at his bench, so with his bag in hand he sped up a little, which wasn't much faster. If he got there early, he had a better chance of getting what he considered his bench.

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Sitting on his bench put his back to his apartment building, which was maybe two hundred feet away. This way he had the same view just closer to the action.

He sat on his side of his bench, and he started reading his paper. He's needed reading glasses since he was forty. Now he had bifocals that hung around his neck all the time, because it seemed he always needed them to read everything and anything. A half an hour or so passed before he was interrupted by an elderly lady who seemed to be about his age. She asked, "Do you mind if I have a seat next to you on your bench?"

"Of course not. Please, be my guest. How did you know this was my bench?" he said with a smile.

"I notice things. Today I decided to sit next to you. Is that alright?"

"That would be nice," he said.

She sat down and said, "Thank you." A full five minutes hadn't passed before she started feeding the pigeons, then she pulled some yarn out of her bag and started to add to her scarf.

He always thought it was his bench, left side was his side and the view was his, now he shared it with this woman and the pigeons. He didn't care much for the pigeons, but it was nice not sitting by himself for a change.

"My name is Mildred," she said.

"Nice to meet you Mildred. Oh crap! One of those pigeons just shit on my shoulder." Another reason to dislike the pigeons that flew all over the place.

"I guess that's my fault," Mildred said.

Ya think? Is what he thought, but what he said was, "I wouldn't worry 'bout it."

"Here, let me wipe it off. It's the least I can do."

He thought, you could wash it, but he didn't know how to be so forward. Only in his thoughts could he be that bold. He said, "Alright."

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Mildred said, "I know I have something in here that will do the trick." She started digging in her bag for something to wipe the bird crap off his shoulder. About that time he was hit on the ankle by a soccer ball. As he tried to lean down and pick up the ball, a young girl somewhere under the age of ten said, "Sorry mister. Can I have my ball?" She was a little blond girl in pigtails. Dressed in a frilly little pink and white dress, which went down to her knees. Her white socks started just below her knees and turned into her Sunday go to church shoes. He thought she reminded him of someone, but he couldn't place who or where.

"Sure," he said. "Can you hold on a minute?" He was still trying to lean down and get the ball, when Mildred grabbed him and started to clean his shoulder.

"Hold still." Mildred said.

"Yes ma'am!"

About that time she noticed the little girl. She said, "Oh how cute. What's your name?"

"Sally," said the girl. "I'm not supposed to talk to strangers."

Mildred still had a hold of the old man's elbow, when he asked, "What about the bird crap? Did it get in my hair?"

"No. It missed your pony tail by a mile."

"Good."

Just about then, he found himself sitting in the shadow of a teenage boy. The boy asked, "Do you have any spare change sir?"

"I rarely have any spare change!" he replied, while thinking how rude. "But I have some I'll give you."

"Thanks, gramps."

No matter what he thought he said, "Yeah sure. Can you wait a sec?" The whole scene seemed all too familiar, but he couldn't quite place it.

The teen said, "Sure." He was wearing some ragged shorts with a dirty tank top and a sweat-filled bandana. His long hair

---

looked rather un-kept much like the old man's. It was apparent his clothes needed to be washed. Looked like he did too. "I need a burger or something."

Mildred heard that and said, "Aw. What's your name young man?" She thought so sad, while she went into her bag again. Then said, "I might have something for you. Let me see."

He said, "Chuck."

Mildred found a pack of crackers and leaned behind the old man to give them to the teen and said, "Here Chuck."

While she was doing that the old man was giving Sally her ball back and said, "Here, catch."

Precisely at that moment, a young man with a camera hanging around his neck walked up to them and asked, "Do you mind if I ask you guys some questions?" They were all a little started and looked at the young man at the same time. Almost as if it were planned.

The old man said, "'bout what?"

"My name is Sam and I'm an English student at the college in La Plata. I have to write a short story for one of my classes."

Mildred asked, "What's the story about?"

"The choice was mine and I choose to write about the different aspects of the American family. Their activities in the home, stores, and in the park are of special interest to me."

The old man started to say, "But we're not a..." when the teen started to laugh and say "Gramps, what about that change?"

A wry smirk came across the old man's face when he said, "Yeah right."

Mildred went back to her stitching and Sally caught the ball, when Sam said, "Can you guys stay right where you are? This is going to make the perfect picture for the park portion of my story."

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# Arlington – October 26, 2014

*Brandon A. Scott*

7:55; the cannon goes off...  
...and we're moving! About a half hour before  
Our corral makes it to the starting arch...  
Just gonna shuffle...hey! We're at the arch!  
Running!

Mile three: that downhill becomes an uphill  
WAAAY too quickly. Dave and Greg  
Took a Number 1, they catch up to me  
At the bridge at Mile 5.

Mile 7: My Number One.  
What's my pace? Not important...  
Just keep running.  
Steve's long gone. Stay with Dave and Greg

Mile 12: The Blue Mile.  
Slow down. Remember the fallen.  
Brothers who went the last mile.  
Brothers who gave all.

They don't get to run anymore,  
Much less laugh, cry, dream, feel, do...  
You're hurting? Think about their last moments  
And the price they paid. Run for them.

Mile Fifteen: The Revolt of the Thighs  
My thighs burn; they remind me  
That this is my first marathon  
"Miles to go," Frost once said...

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Mile Sixteen: this isn't the Super Pax Run  
Or the Woodrow Wilson Half  
This is a longer road than you've ever travelled  
Dave and Greg, don't wait for me

What are the landmarks? Where are the monuments?  
Not worried right now, my thighs scream for relief  
The search is for the next water station  
Or the next orange slice vendor

I don't remember the monuments, or the landmarks  
But I remember the people  
So many runners to exchange greetings and encouragement  
So many strangers to cheer you on

Mile Twenty: THE BRIDGE!  
I Beat the Bridge! I'm going to finish!  
No one's going to pull me off the course!  
Going to run this mile!

On the Fourteenth Street Bridge: so many people  
Walking, a sea of faces struggling to just  
Keep moving...not me. I want to run.  
I need to run this mile.

Mile Twenty-two...Dave and Greg, they waited for me.  
The definition of friends in a marathon.  
Doing alright...only four more miles.  
Oh, look, the second wind.

Mile Twenty-Three: Downtown Arlington.  
Great big crowd, and a nice water mist,  
Yet I'm annoyed; where's the end already?  
No more loops, just point me towards the finish!

---

Mile Twenty-Four: Donut Holes?

I am grateful, but is there some drinking water  
To wash down the gobs of cake that have  
Sucked the last of my water from my mouth?

Mile Twenty-Five: hey, remember that real fast  
Downhill start when you launched from the starting arch?  
Yeah...the last hill is uphill. We're almost there.  
Gonna finish together, one last finishing kick...

Mile Twenty-Six...and down (up?) the stretch we come!  
Round one last corner...climb one last hill...  
There's the last chute...the finish line...everybody online...  
**WE'RE DONE! WE MADE IT!**

Afterwards. A Marine in cammies awards us our medals  
(No picture with him/her? Maybe next year)  
We limp back to the hotel for  
Epsom salt baths, and a fine Italian home-cooked dinner

That was the last good day, and the last  
Weekend of the year that I had any worries.  
The last true moment of fun that I would have  
For the Year of Our Lord Two Thousand Fourteen.

Fall became winter. The running stopped.  
One light went out. Ties quietly cut.  
Two Thousand Fifteen is all about Damage Control  
And settling the ledgers, and finishing the course.



---

Last Friday, I put my name in the lottery again.  
I will find out on my birthday next Wednesday  
If they will allow me to run again this year.  
And I have not begun my training for this year.

No matter. I will go back to Arlington,  
With Dave and Greg and Steve.  
I will find a way to run again this year.  
I will get back in the gym and back on the road.

We will have that one good weekend, that one  
Great day, where we ate and drank like kings  
And ran like gazelles. We will run and tell  
Of the victory of the Greeks at Marathon...

...and we will LIVE.

---

**On  
“Hills Like White Elephants”  
by Ernest Hemingway**

*Rachel Henn*

The best way  
to kill an elephant  
is not  
to drown it  
in alcohol.



*Stare Down* by *Lena Hancock*

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# Time

*Lana Bella*

Within an ever ebbing sense of time, you stood  
in a forgotten place,  
but never a forgotten thought.  
The time before now and the time before that,  
you had lived in poor pockets of void:  
slept under torn tapestry of sky,  
dined on meager bowls of dirt  
scooped out the dregs of life  
with a plastic spoon;  
tumbling, weaving, panting, drowning  
at no time to have been absolutely sure  
that life from which wrinkles are born,  
shall lend you mercy in this vain enterprise.  
You have spared no mind to the ilk of pride,  
you have grown as a pauper, no smaller than a mite  
held fixed in doubt, clad thin by the pinches of salt  
and lost lullabies.  
Always strayed far from the world's pearly gate,  
never a guest at its cozy dinners or fancy balls.  
But, the person you were and the person you are:  
the half-lost and half-whole  
the half-woke and half-dreaming,  
doubled over with hunger when it  
spawned and gnawed into your belly  
like an infected cancer.  
So you slackened your legs, spilled your virtues  
and gave yourself leave to  
throttle life and drink from its gilded spout.  
Your eyes shut tight, your mouth unfurled  
whose lips swigged clean all the bitter poison  
and honeyed wine.

---

# Sepsis

*Christopher Wilkins*

*In memoriam: M. Sgt. Charles K. (U.S.A., ret.),  
an uncle of mine and a leukemia survivor, who died of a  
ruptured appendix that went undiagnosed and untreated for  
several days in a veteran's hospital in Pittsburgh.*

1.

Death, swift as an adder coils,  
rests in the sun, still poised,  
while life spits and lasts, ready now,

get ready now, for death stung  
at him like an adder used as a whip, then still  
in an instant, but still fanged—

and that was that. We wept  
as we stood, helpless,  
while his body demanded to die.

This after it had shot its way unbemedaled  
through an ambush *im Hürtgenwald*  
he often didn't talk about, then home to

make steel again at J&L until he got  
old, retired, then stared marrow-rot  
down for the rest of his days

in the VA building that finally killed him  
with something else. We are stunned,  
stunned, not that he is gone,

but at the manner of his going: shot  
out from the inside all at once,  
the same way he'd shot that *Oberleutnant*

---

then split his company and his skull  
with the steel that's still there  
once the bullets are gone.

2.

Every year at Christmas he was silent,  
eating ham. Gin-and-ginger was given  
in exchange for a cheap Kentucky rye

no-one drank there but, at Easter, he,  
and gruff grunts for little children.  
Turns out there was even less to say

than that, although I was surprised  
to learn from his obituary  
something about his being a golf pro.

I do remember Milton Berle and the *Wild Kingdom*  
shows he loved, a seamless faith in the wide,  
winding American road. Not a word or a hiss,

though, for that Carpathian coal-dale  
his mother had fled with him for the slags  
of the Mon valley; not a one.

Just as well. He never hunted Bambi's mom,  
and the medals for manslaughter came forty-eight  
years too late. There were five. He bore them

Ajax-straight, aged and crisp in his Class A—  
we buried him in it—while a beardless subaltern  
read words out slowly, like he had a right to stand

over this man in authority who believed utterly  
in God and his new country, the faith of his mother  
in his wife, in his dreams, in his son.

---

3.

Now, these sometimes clashed,  
which perplexed him. Chess, too,  
was obscure, and the lifelong war

of wits his wife and son waged  
at my precision-fitter father  
over longhairs, Kennedys, Martins,

Nixons, and whether a young draftee  
might not do better to spend his summer  
of '69 in Copenhagen or Montréal so as

not to have to go blow Charlie's head off,  
or have Charlie blow off his,  
in some rice-and-viper paddy neither'd

ever heard of. Such fuss—"Duty!  
Do your duty!"—puzzled the Old Catholic  
master sarge from Monongahela,

but his iron faith that Right would win  
on courage alone *if* people would just do  
what they were s'posed to—full stop,

period, end of line—did not. In the end,  
that failed, too. We will never see  
him again, and his wife going mad.



*Stairway to Heaven* by Anna Readen



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## Contributors

**CATHY BERISH** is 42 years old and returned to college after 23 years. She has two wonderful adult children and is married to her best friend, John. She moved to Maryland almost one year ago, from New York. It has been an adjustment, but she loves living here, and she enjoys writing.

**LANA BELLA** has poetry and flash fiction published and forthcoming in a number of journals, reviews, and anthologies. She lives in the US and Asia, where she is a wife and stay-at-home mom to two wonderful children.

**BILL BUFFINGTON** is vice president of the CSM Veterans Organization. He recently won the 2015 Creative Expressions Award, presented by the NAACP and the CSM diversity office for the poem “If People Change Colors Like the Leaves in the Fall.”

**SHERBIE CARSON** is a recent graduate of the Communications program at the College of Southern Maryland. Her greatest loves are serving as a missionary overseas, friends who became family, and those who call her Mom.

**KATHRYN DIDIER** has loved photography since she was born; it is one of the biggest stress-relievers for her. She loves showing people her perspective through her lens.

**KELSI EIANE** is a photographer who lives in Annapolis.

**SEAN FROST** is a 21-year-old student at the College of Southern Maryland.

**ETHAN FUGATE** “always talks like a depressing romantic, man.”

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**DESIREE S. GLASS** is a high school teacher with over 25 years of experience. Her writing has appeared in a variety of magazines and newspapers, including *Connections*. She earned her MA at Notre Dame of Maryland and her BS at Salisbury University. She has three grown children and a lapful of grandchildren. Her favorite pastimes are spoiling her grandbabies, blogging, and playing Words with Friends.

**LENA HANCOCK** is the marketing coordinator at the College of Southern Maryland. She enjoys taking pictures around her in-laws' farm in La Plata as well as capturing special moments for her family to remember for years to come.

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

**RACHEL HENN** is contributing to *Connections* for the first time.

**SAMARIA KHAN** is 18 years old and currently in her second semester at the College of Southern Maryland. She plans to earn a master's degree in psychology and become a child psychologist. Her favorite things to do include reading, being outdoors, and writing poetry. She has been writing poetry since she was fourteen and plans to keep doing it as long as it makes her happy.

**TODD KRUDER** teaches English at CSM and is a disabled veteran. "I wrote 'The Blood of My War' the day after I co-facilitated a NAMI support group in Southern Maryland. These thoughts were in my head as I drove to work the following Tuesday morning. I showed up at work, took my jacket off, and sat down in front of the computer. Within 10 minutes, I had written down everything. There are veterans like myself who suffer daily with the illness of depression and PTSD. Not many understand or will understand. As my story states, this is simply a voice of our veterans," says Kruder.

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**CHRIS LAURIE** lives in Central Pennsylvania with her poet partner, a College of Southern Maryland graduate. She earned her liberal arts degree from Shippensburg University and works as a supervisor in the local community mental health center. She is compiling a long list of women champions who have influenced her life-starting with her grandmother, Nellie Gardner.

**JIM MCDONALD** is a 60-year-old disabled carpenter from Charles County, Maryland. Attending CSM has been a long-time ambition. His goal is to become a writer. He recently lost his home and had to get rid of his puppy. Now he's living on his houseboat at a local marina and beginning the next stage of his life.

**JOANY NAZDIN** is a registered nurse and lives in St. Mary's County.

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

**MARY PRATHER** is a dual-enrollment student at the College of Southern Maryland. She has an interest in photography, history, literature, and writing. Upon finishing this semester at CSM, she will transfer to Liberty University to pursue a degree in professional communication with a minor in business administration.

**ANNA READEN** is a student at the College of Southern Maryland, graduating with her associate's this spring and transferring to complete her bachelor's for the fall of 2015. Black-and-white photography is her favorite medium because of its simplicity, and one is only limited by their imagination.

**WILLIAM READEN** is an outdoor photographer and adventurer and has traveled extensively throughout the Western United States.

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**BRANDON A. SCOTT** has been attending the College of Southern Maryland since September 2012. He is studying for a bachelor of science degree in Electronic Systems Technologies at Southern Illinois University. He is a retired US Marine who lives and works in Patuxent River, Maryland. The poem “Arlington—October 26, 2014,” is about running his first marathon, the Marine Corps Marathon. The marathon, known as “The People’s Marathon,” is run in the area in and around Washington, DC. The poem is not about what he saw, but who he was and how he felt.

**GABBY TANCREDI** states that writing is her coping method and escape from the world around her and that writing gives her more satisfaction than anything else in her life.

**CARLY WEDDING** has fingers that allow her to do activities such as write, play guitar, and smoke cigarettes. She hopes that if she keeps it up, she will one day have cigarettes for fingers.

**CHRISTOPHER WILKINS** teaches English at the College of Southern Maryland.



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