
Connections

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Entrance, by Diane Payne



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The logo for 'Connections' features the word 'Connections' in a serif font. Behind the text is a graphic consisting of two overlapping, semi-transparent rectangular shapes. A black spiral line starts from the bottom center and winds upwards, passing behind the text.

Connections

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O Que Não Mata/ What Doesn't Kill You

for Arthur Medeiros Aguiar

Christian Aguiar

My mother and uncles started saying the old man had gone crazy when he accused *vavó*, who had been dead for a few years at the time, first of moving around his tools without his permission, then of stealing his tin of octopus and jars of olives. They figured it was dementia, the kind of thing that happens to old men who've spent a lifetime drinking and working and not much else. They went about it with shrugging certainty, using whispered phrases like “had a good life” and “mind like a steel trap” when the old man wasn't in the room.

I knew better, though. My grandfather didn't have dementia. He could still hustle anyone at pool, myself included, even if the stakes were just a can of beer stolen surreptitiously from the tub out back. What's more, he could recite stories from the old days in minute details, down to the color of the band he wore in his fedora or the particular scent of a woman down at the Biltmore.

No. My grandfather didn't have dementia.

Mom dropped me off to help him clean the house the summer I turned fourteen. I had been itching for a job—begging for something that would get me money for sneakers that weren't blue light specials—and since nobody could hire me for real for a few more weeks and we didn't live in the kind of neighborhood where there were lawns to mow, the best I could manage was an offer from the old man to help him out with some house work for five bucks an hour. Mind you, an old Portagee offering to pay his grandson anything for anything is worthy of the six o'clock news, so I wasn't about to point out that minimum wage in Massachusetts was

six-fifty. As soon as Mom pulled off in that beater of a Merc, the old man looked at me with the eyes of someone assessing an animal, figuring out how much work they could get out of it.

“We’re killing rats,” he announced, like it was the most normal shit in the world to say.

I’m sure my eyes doubled in size, but he didn’t seem to notice. He started rolling up the sleeves on his shirt in that careful way he had, making each segment perfectly flat before bending it upwards, so I knew he was serious. I thought back to all those stories I’d heard from my aunts and uncles before they started whispering about the dementia, stories of how the old man had broken my Uncle Jay’s nose because he gave him backtalk; just up and punched his own son in the face. I swallowed my objections before they could sneak out.

“Rats?” I asked.

“Rats.”

I looked out from the front porch towards the road. A GATRA bus rolled slowly by, right on time. I swear I could see the bus driver waving at me, laughing. There was no way out, not for another hour anyway.

“Where are the traps?” I asked. Like I said, I wasn’t giving the old man any backtalk. If he broke his son’s nose, you can imagine what he’d do to a grandson.

He held up his hands, big palms shiny with callouses and the kind of dark spots that you had to suspect were machine oil that had gotten in so deep under the skin that it had become a tattoo. He waved them around a little, just in case I wasn’t getting the message.

“We’re men,” he said. Then, finally noticing my dinner-plate eyes, he added, “I’ll give you a bottle of whiskey if we get ‘em all.”

“I’m fourteen,” I said.

He shrugged. “I was already working when I was your

age,” he said. Then he smiled, a disarmingly kind smile like the principal has right before they kick your ass out of school for a couple of days. “I won’t tell your mother.”

An hour into our quest to beat the rats to death with a broom and dinky-looking tin dustpan, I called it quits. I leaned against the dusty windowsill in the front room, my back dragging the communion-wafer-thin curtains down, put my hands in my jeans pockets, and watched the old man stomp around in the back parlor.

He hadn’t been kidding about the rats: there were a lot of them. We could hear them in the walls. The thing about rats, though, is that they’re smart enough to stay inside the wall unless they really need something. They’re not like people who have some sick impulse to jump off of things, to throw themselves out of planes or rocket down rivers in little inflatable boats. Rats don’t need to defy death. Those rats stayed put.

“Can’t you just buy traps?” I asked when he looked my way.

The old man stood there with his arms crossed. I could see the sweat stains on his shirt, a half moon under the collar, two big suns under his arms. He jiggled his jaw absentmindedly the way old men do, though he hadn’t gotten that old yet: back then he was still working, fixing really old cars that didn’t have computers or fuel injectors and didn’t need any kind of inspection sticker. He sucked on his teeth, narrowed his eyes, then barked.

“What did you just say to me?”

Here was the meanness I had heard about. The old man had earned his high school diploma—and his citizenship, the rumors go—by volunteering to go to war. He had been crazy enough to reenlist—twice!—after the war was over, just because he liked the smell of the Army.

I didn’t shut up, though. Call it genetics.

“I said buy traps.” I found my hands were out of my pockets now of their own accord, dancing around to illustrate my points. “Jesus, are we really gonna beat rats to death with a dustpan?” Here I made a motion like Peter Rabbit bopping a field mouse on the head. “We can’t even see ‘em.”

The old man shook his head. He went into the kitchen and came back with a bottle of clear liquid with no sticker in one hand, two shot glasses in the other. There was a big old wooden coffee table in the middle of the room, the kind with legs like moorings. He put both glasses on the table, filled them to the brim, then beckoned me over. It seemed like a trap.

“I didn’t mean to yell,” I said, watching his hands.

He held them both up, doing his best Jesus on the Mount. “You spoke your mind,” he said. “There was a time I woulda knocked your mind out the right side of your head for that.” He held a hand up. “Where did that get me? My own sons think I’m crazy.”

I nodded. I had always liked the old man. He struck me as a reasonable person, deep down.

“What is it?” I asked, pointing at the bottle on the table.

“It’s rat poison, dipshit,” he said, not betraying a hint of sarcasm. “Drink up.”

This was the first moment of courage I think I ever showed – not the heroic kind, the kind where you run into a burning building to save a child, and not the wise kind where you stand up against injustice. This was the more common kind, the kind where you know what you’re about to do could kill you but you do it anyway, not because there aren’t any other options but because you’re worried what taking one of those options would say about you. It’s the kind of shit you know rats don’t do.

I picked up the shot, paused a second to make sure he was going to drink his, let him get in a quick “*salud*,” then shot it down. I felt a ribbon of fire from the base of my tongue

straight through to my anus, an uninterrupted burn that made me shiver.

“What the hell was that?” I asked.

“*Aguardente*,” he said.

I blinked again.

“Fire water,” he said. “You make it from the skin of the grapes.”

“Did you make this?” I asked. I could just about believe that he had made this devil liquid.

“You see a vineyard lying around here?” he said. Then he picked up the broomstick: back to work.

“Kill the son of a bitch,” he yelled at me.

I had managed to corner a mouse—I realize now they weren’t really rats because rats wouldn’t have let themselves be cornered and beaten to death; they would have jumped out at us, would have tried to bite our legs or do something other than cower and accept death—in one of the upstairs bedrooms. I’d gotten this old wooden soup paddle I’d found in the basement pressed up against the wall so the mouse couldn’t move, but I didn’t know what to do next. The mouse kept pressing itself against the wall, but the house was old with thick wooden boards running along the bottom, so there was no way out. I looked at that mouse and knew that he didn’t deserve to die, not like this. More importantly, I didn’t have the first idea how to kill him.

“Hit it with the paddle,” the old man said, like he could read my mind.

No amount of guilt or beer was going to make me smash in a mouse’s head with a giant soup spoon. I had grown up on Tom & Jerry; looking down at this mouse furiously trying to make his body teleport through the molding, I could just about imagine the life I would be taking from this mouse: the little house in the wall, the girlfriend with her little mouse lipstick, the four-post bed he had made out of a matchbox.

“Why don’t we just get some traps, *vavô*,” I said again, trying to warm him up. One of my cousins whose very white father didn’t allow Portuguese in the house called him grandfather. Everyone else just called him old man or the S.O.B. Not very nice. “I can walk down to the hardware store.”

The old man started to say something, but instead he just nodded, looking at the wall behind me like there was something written there. I scanned the wall myself.

“Why do we need traps?” he asked after a moment. “You got the mouse trapped.”

“I don’t wanna kill a mouse with a paddle,” I said, a little surprised to hear that particular string of words come out of my mouth. “I really don’t.”

He seemed to consider this for a moment. He nodded his head a little bit, took a few steps across the room, looked at the mouse. Then he took the dustpan in one hand like a spear and slammed it down on the mouse, so quick I couldn’t even manage a gasp. I swear the thing squealed; I don’t know how good your hearing has to be to hear a mouse scream, but I swear that damn mouse screamed out a curse on our family to the third generation.

I looked away while he cleaned up the mess, feeling the same burn as the *aguardente* ran from one end of me to the other. I watched the old man calmly tap the dustpan back into place, pick up the broom, and sweep the mouse up like a pile of dust. Then he went out of the room.

After I threw up, *vavô* helped me clean myself up, then made me a grilled cheese with *chouriço*. He was surprisingly cool about it: from everything I’d heard, I’d expected him to harangue me, to say lots of shit about how he used to have to fight the Italians up and down North Main just to get to school, about he had to fight the Italians again all through Sicily just to get the high school diploma he hadn’t been able to get back in Providence. Instead he treated the whole thing

like it was natural.

“It’s good you don’t want to kill things,” he said to me once we were back out on the front porch, sitting in lawn chairs, drinking beer. He kept wiping his hands with a chamois cloth the whole time. Even when he was into his third beer, he kept picking up the cloth absent-mindedly to wipe his hands.

“I want to learn how,” I said. “Everyone thinks I’m soft.”

He nodded, very slowly, watching the cars drive by. He worked his jaws around a little bit, too. The sharp black wires of his chest hair poked through the wife beater he had stripped down to, contrasting sharply with the bits of white hair that clung to the side of his head. He held up a fist. It was brown, speckled in places like the shell of an egg, with big, bumpy knuckles.

“When I was a boy,” he said, “the city was all neighborhood. You had the Russian neighborhood, the black neighborhood, the Italian neighborhood—you get the idea.” He stopped here to take a sip of beer. He usually looked at me when he told stories, waved his hands around a lot, made a big show of things. He didn’t do that now. “My neighborhood was Portuguese. White Portuguese,” he said, gesturing towards himself, “black Portuguese. But all Portuguese. So the Italians, they called us—” He paused here, uncharacteristically short of words. “You know when I went down to North Carolina for basic, everything was segregated. Terrible.” He paused again, drank a little more beer. “Anyway, we fought. It was a stupid reason. So what? Who gives a shit what they think?”

“Did you win?”

He shrugged. “You don’t win.”

I shifted in the lawn chair. That wasn’t the answer I wanted.

“Did you kill anyone? I mean, not here, over there.”

He took another drink, slowly lifting the can up until it

was nearly upside-down. He didn't answer the question. He just tapped the empty can against the side of the lawn chair, his eyes following the cars as they went by. When he finally spoke, it was like the last few minutes hadn't happened.

"If they call you soft, they call you soft. Most people who talk like that are like a hardboiled egg anyway: squeeze the top a little and the yellow pops out." He picked up another can of beer, popped the top open so that a long hiss of air came out to fill the silence. "They talk, let 'em. They try to hurt you, you hit them as hard and as fast as you can. Keep your head down."

I nodded. "Can you show me?"

"No," he said. Then he smiled. "Ask your uncle Jay. I taught him to fight once."



Come into my Parlor, Ginette Krantz

Hearing a Perseid Meteor

Kate Lassman

in sky clearer than a mirror
deep as absolute zero
skims a blue-lit fragment
close enough
to show an oblong shape
and it passes with a
soft slow alien whoosh
not quite like the wind

The Bridge

Teddi Custer

Crossing over life's broken bridge,
I try to get to the other side,
steps over broken planks,
lessons I've learned,
some accomplishment
until the next broken plank,
a little more worn,
the other side in sight,
but the bridge shakes,
broken planks fall –

One step at a time –

I am trying to cross,
trying for solid planks,
never forgetting the broken ones.

Crossword

Joany Nazdin

Doing a puzzle in my crossword book, I got stumped by 14 across. I had to come up with a six-letter word for people that love you the most. “Clique” did not fit well, “gang” was too short, and “group” still did not have enough letters.

“The word you’re looking for is ‘family,’ stupid,” said Rita, who was one of my least favorite members of my clique, group or gang. “That is so obvious.”

“Maybe to you,” I said. “I hardly even remember my family. Seriously, I don’t even want to remember my family. Every time I think of them it’s like being haunted by bad spirits.”

I was only 14 when I left home, and that was quite a while ago. All I do remember is that we didn’t love each other at all, let alone love each other the most, like a family supposedly should. I don’t think anyone even looked for me when I left. I sure did not see my face on any milk cartons.

Family. What a concept. Since the big change, I was quite skeptical that anyone left even had a family group of their own, loving or not, that they were born into. No one would have been that lucky. Everyone just sort of clumped together in ways that worked now, but never would have worked before.

It is not like in the movies, because when the world ends, you don’t just get left with the young, attractive, smart and resourceful people. You get stuck with people like your pervert ex-boss and the 16-year-old guy that used to wash the dishes in the strip club you used to work at. If they weren’t creepy, then they went the other extreme, like the lady who picked you up hitchhiking that one time, and as long as you kept asking questions about Jehovah, she would keep driving you towards where you wanted to go. There was not one person left that

you would choose to hang around, but everyone knew if you did not have someone to watch your back, you were toast, so we all cliqued up pretty quickly. Our group hung together, but not because we loved each other the most. We all just wanted to survive, plain and simple.

We found each other right after it happened, or rather, Randy picked us right after it happened. When the world pretty much stopped being the world anyone would recognize, it seemed all the people left had gathered in every big-box store still standing in the world. It made sense at the time, as it provided food, shelter, and other people with information. There were about 60 of us in our little corner of not-paradise when Randy walked in the door.

Back then there was a greeter at the door, telling us over and over as people wandered through to enjoy our shopping experience. Randy didn't even say thanks to the poor guy when he walked in. I felt sorry for the greeter-guy, as I always made a point to tell him thanks and have a nice day. I guess I was a nicer person back then. I just hope the greeter-guy wasn't expecting a check on payday.

Randy may not have been polite, and the bad first impressions did not stop there. Randy is a really big guy with lots of bad prison tats, someone you would notice anytime he walked into a room. Everyone noticed him, and everyone hoped he did not notice them. Stupid me, though, I have a habit of talking to the worst-for-me guy anywhere, and the world ending didn't change that.

Randy was wearing shorts, and the first thing I noticed was that he had an address tattooed on his left leg.

"What's up with the address?" I asked.

"Just someone I didn't want to forget about," he said, as he looked me over. "I didn't have a pen at the time or a piece of paper." I could tell he was not really seeing me, as I have

never been one to stand out in a crowd because of my looks, but as he worked his way through every good-looking young girl and then the good-looking not-so-young girls, he finally came back to talk to me.

“I think we should move to the feed store down the road a bit,” Randy said. “In about two weeks, everyone in here is going to start killing each other for the last can of tuna. At least at the feed store, we won’t be around many people, and we can use the stuff there to grow our own food.”

It sounded way too much like *Little House on the Prairie* to me, but I could see he was right. We were going to be out of food soon, and then what were we going to do? At least Randy was big and had a bad attitude, which made him normal to me. I figured at best he would protect me from everything but himself. He picked up three other women and girls, had us make a chain of shopping carts and told us to load them up with stuff so we could get out of there.

I filled my cart with shampoo, toothpaste and some food and thought I had done good, kind of like the same stuff I would get if I went shopping.

“Dump that stuff and get something useful,” Randy said.

Useful to him was batteries, kerosene lamps, candles, camo, and lots of canned goods. Lots and lots of canned goods. He cleaned out what was left in the camping section.

Luckily, I don’t listen really well when people tell me to do stuff, so I did throw a bunch of shampoo and soap back in the cart. Us girls still have the bottles, and every once in a while, I will catch someone taking the cap off of one, and just taking a whiff of what once was.

But anyways, we actually made a good choice for once. The feed store was in the center of the place where all the Amish people had their farms, so no one there was desperate. The only thing that changed in their world was that there was less of them now; but still, since they usually don’t associate

with many outside people, their communities were way healthier than any of ours. It is not like they had to figure out stuff like lights and food and transportation without gas and electricity. They had already been doing that for centuries. I wonder if we had been a little nicer to them when we moved in, and if they would have been a little nicer to us, that maybe they would have taught us something useful, like canning or something. Or at least talked to us.

I know at first when we ran out of clean clothes, we would just go and throw the dirty ones out and loot some more. For the first year or so, there was so much of everything. Now, five years later, I would kill for a pair of socks without a hole in them.

You see, my feet have not been warm for months. And you can only darn a pair of socks so many times. When I say I would kill for a pair, I don't mean I really would, I would just get Randy to do the killing. He is not shy about killing anything.

Like in the beginning, there used to be four of us, but when Sara had the stroke, he just dragged her off in the woods and she never came back. I don't know what he did to her, but the next day buzzards were circling around the part of the woods where he dragged her off to, and even though we never mention it, not one of us girls walks that part of the woods anymore.

So anyways, now when we need stuff you would never think that you would miss in a million years during the before, we have to take it from somewhere, which usually means stealing it.

Our neighbors caught on real quick to us very early, as when we ran out of stuff before, and they had it like hanging on a clothes line or in an unlocked barn, and we would just take it. That lasted about three times, and then a group of the elders came and talked to Randy. Whatever they said, he told

us we could not go back there again to take any of their stuff. It wasn't like Randy ever had good neighbor on his resume anywhere, so I don't understand why he listened to them. We had guns and they didn't, but Randy was real funny about keeping good neighbors.

People passing by, well, they were fair game. I know we used to just invite people for dinner, and they would actually come in and believe that we were nice enough to share. This may have worked for about a month or two, but then everybody somehow knew to take the long way around our place. There were hardly any people left to rob just strolling by, and we never had time to hunt anyone down for the stuff that we needed, as if we left our place, someone would move in while we were gone, and that would leave us with less than what we started with.

But I wanted warm feet and new socks.

I got a brilliant idea. I went down to the old church and took a priest outfit. I figured if Randy wore that, then who would doubt the hospitality of a priest?

I did not factor in the part about most priests must have been short and Randy was about six-and-a-half feet tall. So the outfit came just about to his knees. If anyone was suspicious that Randy may not have been a real priest, well, I am sure they also may have wondered about a priest that came with a return address tattooed on his leg. I am sure when they saw us with Randy wearing our usual hooker-camo combo style of dressing, they would know something was up. But as they say, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and I wanted the next pair of socks off whoever strolled past our place.

Then the two most unlikely people left in the world happened to walk by our place. First off, they were clean. When I mean clean, I mean you just wanted to get close to them and smell them, it was so rare to smell clean people with clean clothes. And their clothes were neat and matching and

looked new. The woman had socks on that looked about the right size for me. So they were ours. And they were toast.

One was a young woman, and the other was a much older man. I had Randy put on his priest robe and us girls put on whatever we could that looked the nicest, and we went out and started talking to them, asking them where they were from and where they were going.

They had just left the place down the road where all the rich people had built a big underground colony, and supposedly it was all self-contained. The rich people could live there and be safe from the world and from people like us and keep riding their polo ponies or whatever rich people do. The only problem from the start was that the rich people did not want to feed and take care of their polo ponies and cut the grass and cook the food. So the rich people who bought-in also went and gave jobs to the brought-ins, basically the hired help.

Everyone wanted those jobs; I know everyone applied for them, but I guess my skills may not have fit their needs at the time, so I did not get hired, along with almost every other human left alive.

The only trouble was the colony could only support a limited number of humans, so if there was a birth with no death, then someone had to volunteer to leave.

Usually I heard they just kicked a gardener out or a maid when someone got pregnant. But lately with the rich people's kids getting into their teen years, the gardener might be a rich person's daughter's baby daddy, which tended to complicate things.

We did not ask the people anything but to join us for a meal, as we really did not care what their names were or where they came from. A person with no future also has no past.

"You guys are so nice to invite us in for a meal," the young female one said. "My dad and I have been walking all day,

and we are down to our last protein bar. We don't even know where we are going to stay tonight. Do you guys have any ideas?"

"You are staying right here with us," Randy said, as he pointed his gun at them. "That is, unless you give us everything you have, including the clothes you are wearing. Then we might let you go."

All of a sudden, getting socks was not so important anymore. There was a real live family right in front of me. Ever since that crossword clue, it got me thinking about families for the last several weeks, the mystery of them, and wondering how they really worked, and feeling sad for myself that I would never get a chance to actually observe a family and figure out the secret to a happy one. And then one just popped up at our place.

The girl one, I guess the daughter, just gave Randy a real evil eye look, but the old man did not seem to notice that there was a gun on them.

"Dad," the daughter said, "Why don't you just relax right now? Just lay your head down and rest." She said it so soft and sweet, and all I could think of was that if it was me, I would be scheming to save myself, not trying to get someone else comfortable.

I don't know why, but I just kept staring at them as the daughter kept murmuring to her dad, "That's it, just rest. Just lay your head down."



Silk & Water, Richard Taylor

The Opposite of Real

Christopher Wilkins

A catafalque showing hands
in prayer not grasping themselves,
unlike a child screaming
so as not to die, is,
for this reason, untruthful –

and the opposite of real,
we must now admit this
tells us, is futile.

Mary

Alexander Heresy

It is impossible to tell the story of my life without mentioning my mom. From a young age, my mom has done her best to dominate not only every aspect of my life, but also those of both of my siblings. If you asked my sister, she would tell you our mom “would be the perfect mother if none of her kids had negative emotions.” Any display of sadness, anger, or anything other than pure happiness and joy will lead to an argument. Everything leads to an argument. Everything. She is a woman who cannot be disagreed with. She is always right 100% of the time. Always and forever. She forces people to repress all their negative emotions and opinions until it builds up and they explode. She has never done a nice thing just to be nice. Every “kind” act has come from one of two places. The first reason would be to keep up the appearance of being a kind, loving mother. She can’t actually be those things, but hey at least she can fool the people around her into thinking that she is. The second reason is to gain power. Everything is a power struggle with my mother. Literally everything. She does nice things so she can hold it over your head later. Then when she does or says something incredibly wrong or immoral, she can ask, “What do you do for me?” As we all know, doing nice things for someone completely negates any awful thing you might have done that may have deeply hurt them. Criticism does not exist here. Any constructive criticism of her behavior, regardless of how fair or valid it is results in a tantrum. The land of delusion and falsehoods is all held together by one simple thing: fear. My mother makes people fear her. That’s how she wants it. That’s how she needs it. It’s the only way she can survive. She wants to yell at you. She wants you to know how little you are. How powerless you are compared to her.

She wants to wear you down. If she does it enough, eventually you'll stop arguing with her and just give in. Give in to her will. Give in to any delusions or lies she may tell about you or anyone else. If you don't, just look at the result of her wrath. Me. The scapegoat. I'm what you get when you refuse to conform to her religion, way of life, and most importantly her will. You end up with a kid who has no actual ties with most of his family because they have all, in some way, taken part in his torment. They either ignored it and acted like it wasn't happening, or they took an active role in berating him. So much so that it became a common family activity. Everything is his fault. Every fight. Every argument. Everything. No matter what the circumstance. She constantly compared this boy to his father, a man who abused his family both physically and emotionally, and then abandoned this boy when he was three years old. She isolated him, and then got the people who make up his family to support the lies and injustice to try and make him feel as though he were going insane. THAT is what you get when you're not what my mother wants. But hey, after all, this is her house and she is the mother so that makes it all perfectly okay right?

I must tell this story to my sister. I must. I have no other choice. I have no choice but to tell her the story and to tell it often. This is a story that has repeated itself and will continue to repeat itself over and over again. If I don't, everything that she had told me not only about myself, but about the world becomes true. I must tell her because I need someone to understand what has happened to me. I need her to understand what it is like to grow up in a house in which you feel isolated and out of place. A house that you don't call a home. Telling her my story helps me heal because it is a reminder that there are people I can trust. It helps me learn how to have a genuine connection with another person without constantly feeling on edge. Maybe I could

learn what it feels like to be normal. What it feels like to be human. I need someone to tell me that I'm not just making up what happened or being delusional. I need someone to help me preserve whatever is left of my sanity. That I'm not what's wrong. I need someone to tell me that despite everything I've been through, I'm going to be all right. That I'll make it through everything. Enough time passes and who knows, maybe one day I really will be. My sister is a constant reminder that I am not going through everything alone, and that truly makes all the difference.

Resistance is Futile

Elizabeth Prather

When I was four years old,
They told me I could be anything.
Now that I've chosen my path,
They tell me I can't follow it –
Just because I'm not who they want me to be.

When I was seven years old,
They told me to change the world.
Now that I've acted on my vision,
They tell me I shouldn't meddle in things I don't understand –
Just because they're afraid.

When I was ten years old,
They told me I have a voice.
Now that I've spoken my mind,
They tell me my words mean nothing –
Just because it goes against their agenda.

When I was thirteen years old,
They told me I could make my up my own mind.
Now that I have my personal opinions,
They tell me that I'm wrong –
Just because I disagree with theirs.

There is no way to win.

Maryland Young Writers

**High School Student Winner:
Poetry Category**

Num b

Heather Christian

I'm here, but I'm not.
Misguided
Led into a dreadful world.
Confused
Wondering why I'm here.
Used
By the wrong people.
Reserved
Unable to trust another.
Worried
That everyone will leave one day.
Forgiving
To all the wrong people.
Disgusted
At what I have become.

Bang.

Taylor Baker

Cami's family had recovered many things that were left behind by travelers, each item stranger than the last. Take, for example, the pair of pink sparkling tap shoes that had been "rescued" from a campsite the other week. Or the porcelain teapot in the shape of an elephant atop a ball.

But in Cami's eyes, the most unusual item was the painting. It wasn't odd in itself. The odd part was the fact that someone would carry it with them all this way only to abandon it in the mountains. Her parents had hung it up in the run-down living room.

When it had first appeared on the wall across from the couch, Cami had basically ignored it. Things came and went all the time here. Why should she pay special attention to some old painting?

But as time went on, she found herself drawn to it. She couldn't quite figure out why.

Maybe it was the child who was the focus of the piece, and how he didn't look much older than her little brother. Maybe it was the trees in the background that stirred memories within her of the home she'd left behind. It might've even been the way the boy held the gun. Like he was able to deal with anything. Like he could just point the weapon at whatever bad guy or problem came his way, and it would disappear when he pulled the trigger.

Bang. And the monster was gone.

Cami formed her hand into a gun, like the kind used by the kids living at the base of the mountain whenever they played cowboys. If only she could make her own problems disappear at the pull of a trigger.

She pointed her hand at the walls of the ramshackle

house. Bang.

Then the sofa, taken from a dilapidating cabin.

The creaky, leaky ceiling.

The stupid mountain that had first inspired her parents to move them all here.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Everything that had made her parents so happy, and her so miserable. Cami's mother and father never seemed to catch on to her bitterness, or they never seemed to care. Perhaps it just wasn't clear to them.

Well, Cami would make it clear.

She got up quickly, and rummaged through the boxes of stuff on the living room shelves until she found a sheet of paper and a big blue marker.

I have no friends here, she wrote in big letters at the top of the page, then just under it,

I hate our house, and

I miss our old home.

Once she'd started, it was easy to find more reasons why she wasn't happy here. She filled up the paper, then looked around for something to use to stick it to the wall.

A thumbtack. That would work. She stuck the paper right beside the painting.

The boy looked down at her, his expression now seeming disapproving rather than determined.

"Sorry, but you can't solve everything with a toy gun," she told him. "Sometimes, you have to actually do something." Now she was talking to paintings. Maybe she should add that to the list.

Later that afternoon, Cami had settled herself into a better mood with the help of a book. Books were great. They were one of the few things that stayed the same, no matter where she was.

“Camille, what’s this?” Her mother’s voice interrupted her reading. Cami sat up and closed her book.

“What’s what?” she asked, even though she knew what her mother was talking about. She was holding Cami’s list when she entered the room.

“You’re really that unhappy here?”

Cami looked down. Up to this point, she’d felt no shame for her actions. But now, seeing her mom upset, and upset for Cami, no less, she felt a little regret. “Well, yeah. I miss home.”

“Camille, this is home now.”

Cami huffed. “Then I miss the old home. I just want to go back.”

Her mom sat on the bed next to her. “Sweetie, you know we can’t do that.”

“And why not? Seriously, what’s stopping us? I mean, I had no idea that there was an impassible rock wall separating us from—”

“That’s enough. And you know that’s not what I meant. We just don’t have the money to go back to Pinedale.”

Then why didn’t we stay in Pinedale? Cami wanted to ask. She didn’t see the point in doing so. She already knew the answer. “Because, sweetie, there wasn’t any work for us there.” Like there was good work here. Her parents collected forgotten junk and pawned it off for a living. Cami’s mother pursed her lips thoughtfully.

“Well... I don’t know if it’ll make you feel better, but you can take a nice, long walk down to town if you want. Clear your head. Dad or I can come to pick you up later.”

Cami sighed to herself. It wasn’t much, but at least it was something. “All right, I’ll take a walk.”

All the way to town, Cami’s thoughts kept going back to the painting. What she wouldn’t give for a magical gun that could zap her back to her old house in Pinedale. At least there she was familiar with everything. At least there she had

friends.

She reached the outskirts of town and made a beeline for the old ice cream parlor that she knew to be close by. Maybe Cami had no friends here, but she did have enough for a hot fudge sundae.

The ice cream lightened her mood a bit. This place may not be great, but at least it was home to some pretty delicious frozen treats. And, well, her new house might not be great, but at least it wasn't like the dilapidated cabin they'd gotten the couch from. Cami got up to get a napkin, having her spirits once again dampened as she crashed into someone carrying a strawberry milkshake. Cami gasped as the freezing cold drink spilled all over her shirt.

"Oh my gosh, I am so sorry!"

Cami looked up, intending to give the person a biting remark before storming off. But the genuine look of horror on the girl's face stopped her short.

"Don't worry about it. There's not any real harm done," she said.

"Ahh, let me get you a napkin. Or, well, eight. Sorry, I'm just kinda clumsy like that."

"It's okay, it's okay." Cami accepted the napkins, and started mopping the mess up from her shirt.

"I can make it up to you somehow," the girl said once she was finished. "Maybe I can buy you a sundae?"

"I just finished a sundae," Cami replied. "But I'll buy you a shake. I mean, I crashed into you as much as you crashed into me, so..."

The girl smiled. "Really? Thanks! Well, maybe you don't want a sundae, but will you at least let me lend you my sweater to wear over the shake mess?"

"Are you sure?"

The girl nodded. "Yeah."

"Thanks, then. I'll be sure to return it later."

“I’m Molly, by the way.”

“I’m Cami.”

“Cami?” Molly tapped her chin. “Oh, you’re the new girl, aren’t you?”

“That’s me.” Cami smiled, almost ruefully, but Molly didn’t seem to notice.

“I haven’t seen you around town much.”

“Yeah, that’s because we live further up the mountain.”

“You live on the mountain? That’s so cool!”

Cami guessed she was right. “It kind of is.”

“So...” Molly sat down at one of the tables. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“Uh, I like to read. And draw or paint.”

“What do you like to read?” Molly asked.

“I really like the Divine Dreams series,” Cami replied.

“No way! Those are my favorite books.”

“Really?”

The girls talked for the next few hours, all the way up until Cami’s dad came to pick her up.

“Did you have a good time?” he asked her on the way back to the house.

“Yeah. Yeah, I had a great time,” Cami replied. In truth, she did have a great time. She was pretty sure she’d made a friend.

“I hope you’re feeling better now.”

“I am. And I’m sorry if I upset you guys earlier.”

“It’s all right. We can understand what you’re going through. I imagine it hasn’t been easy for you.”

She shrugged. “I guess it hasn’t been. But I guess maybe I just need to stop being so pessimistic about it.”

Her dad nodded. “That’s a pretty good idea.”

That night, she stood in front of the painting with her arms crossed.

See? she thought. You can't make your problems disappear with a toy gun. You have to actually go out and do something.

Cami glanced around the messy living room. Or maybe just do something about your bad attitude.

The piece of paper she'd written on earlier caught her eye, and she smiled, forming her hand into a gun and pointing at it.

Bang.



Point of View, Paul Toscano

Away with the Tide

Carol Harvat

You cracked this crab's shell
On the shore of Chesapeake Bay
Nibbled away bits of shell
With your kindness and conversation
Your laughter, your love.

Now pieces of shell just fall off
In every phone call,
In every memory,
In every day.

Pieces of shell
Lie on the beach
Waiting to be taken away with the tide.

The crab, now soft shell
No longer needs to hide.

It only needs the love
That broke through its shell.

No One Survives Hospice

James Burd Brewster

No one survives Hospice.

Though we wished for a different outcome, my father didn't either. My father allowed himself to be wheeled to the Hospice Wing of St. Peter's Hospital on Oct. 26, 2016. He knew that within four days he would be dead.

My father's wife, two sons, and one daughter were present and in agreement and knew that in four days it would be over.

My father's doctor and nurse knew it too!

My father was dying of congestive heart failure. It would have killed him had he just stayed alive long enough for it to do it.

My father asked for this and we agreed to it, because to stay alive was too painful.

My father did not die of congestive heart failure. He died from willful and purposeful starvation and dehydration. When you think of it, how cruel is that?

My father knew he'd be drugged and not feel a thing and when it was over would wake up in the presence of Jesus, his Savior. His wife, three sons, and three daughters knew it as well.

For four days we stayed with Dad in a darkened room, talking to him, praying for him, playing his favorite music, moistening his lips, cooling his face with a damp cloth; telling him one last time through acts of kindness and gentleness that we loved him.

I detest physician-assisted suicide because it is the willful cessation of life, before natural causes take their course, by licensed medical professionals who have taken an oath to do everything in their power to keep people alive.

So is Hospice, at its core, just a slower version?

I find it harder to be dogmatic the older I get.

For four days, my father's sons and daughters shared stories, remembered favorite times, thanked God for my father's love and kindness, and reminded each other how blessed they were to have Dad as their father. We all agreed that this process was a wonderful way to go and had been good for us.

Willful and purposeful starvation and dehydration?

At 1 a.m. on October 31, 2016, my father's oldest son texted, "The King is dead! Long live the Queen!"



Fringecoa, Robin Karis

Kissing, Deeply

Karen D. McIntyre

Every Tuesday and Thursday, Nora lunched at the Moonbeam Café. One day when the café was busy, she found herself sharing a table with a distinguished-looking man named Tom. He was dressed to the nines, in a natty suit and a camel-colored felt hat. Nora was a put-together package, in a pencil skirt and a jacket with a narrow waist and wide shoulders. Tom and Nora met time and again over the next few months, and they discovered they shared similar tastes in music and books, often discussing the works of Christie or Doyle. What started as a simple friendship soon blossomed into love, as they continued to meet every Tuesday and Thursday for lunch. One Thursday, Tom seemed distracted.

“What’s the matter? Nora asked softly. “You seem upset.”

“Not upset, just ...” he stopped. Pulling a sealed manila envelope from his coat pocket, he pushed it across the table. He stood, his chair making a screech on the floor. “Look ... if I’m not here on Tuesday, open this and follow the instructions.” He turned, rapidly walking out of the café.

Nora and Tom usually met at noon, but that next Tuesday, Nora arrived early. She was anxious, having worried about Tom all weekend. Now, she wanted to give the envelope back to him and find out what was going on. Of course he’ll be here, she thought. This business with a sealed envelope to be opened if he’s not ... just silly drama to intrigue me. Perhaps I need to make my feelings clearer ...

Nora sat at their customary table, sipping her way through several mugs of tea, for almost two hours before she acknowledged that Tom wasn’t coming. Reaching into her purse sitting on the floor by her feet, she pulled out the manila envelope Tom had given her. Before she could open it, she

felt a prickle of unease, as though someone was watching her. Trying to look nonchalant, Nora cautiously glanced around the café. Nothing seemed amiss. Then she noticed a Chinese gentleman in a dark suit, sitting by himself. He was staring intently at the envelope in front of her. When he caught her looking at him, he stood quickly and left. That was odd. Oh well, let's see what's in this mystery envelope, shall we?

Nora slid her red lacquered nail under the envelope's flap, breaking the seal. Inside the envelope were three things: a folded piece of typewriter paper, and two coins. Opening the paper, she read, Heathcliff on the village green. She laughed. "What's that supposed to mean?" The coins turned out to be one large silver German coin, and a Chinese coin. Actually, it was only part of a Chinese coin, having been cut in half. "How very odd! I think Tom has given me a mystery to solve." Nora gathered her things and left the café, anxiously scanning the sidewalk for any sign of the man who'd shown an interest in the envelope. She saw none.

Tugging on her gloves, Nora contemplated her next step. The only "Heathcliff" she knew was a character in the classic novel *Wuthering Heights*. Deciding that her next step would be a visit to the public library, Nora started to cross the street. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a large black sedan speeding toward her.

"Watch out!" came the shout from behind her, and she felt herself yanked back, out of the path of the speeding car.

"Oh! Thank you!" Nora turned to her rescuer, recognizing him with a start. "I saw you in the café."

"Yes, Miss. I eat there often. Are you okay?"

"No harm done. Just a reckless driver." Nora allowed the man to escort her across the street, and they went their separate ways.

At the library, Nora quickly found their copy of *Wuthering Heights*. Taking it to a table in the Reference

Room, she began looking through the book, searching for a clue. Between chapters ten and eleven, she found a small folded piece of paper. Opening it, she read, 7:30, tonight. “What’s that supposed to mean?” she said, not realizing she’d spoken out loud until the librarian loudly hushed her.

It was a frustrated Nora who let herself into her apartment a short time later. She felt fairly certain that the clues meant she was supposed to be on the village green at 7:30 tonight. But she hadn’t an inkling as to the significance of the two coins. No amount of pacing in the small apartment yielded up clarity, and by 7:00 she was no closer to a solution than she had been hours ago. To make matters worse, her emotions kept bouncing between worry for Tom and anger that she didn’t know what was going on. A little after 7:00, Nora put on her stylish black wool coat, grabbed her purse, and headed out. In for a penny, in for a pound, she thought.

It was almost 7:30 when Nora reached the village green. It unnerved her a bit that there were no other people around, but she leaned against a flickering lamppost to wait. At precisely 7:30, a large silver Mercedes rounded the corner and pulled to a stop near her. Eyeing the German car, she wondered if that was what the silver coin had meant. The driver’s door opened, and out stepped the Chinese man from the café.

“Evening, Miss.” He pulled something from his pocket. “I believe you have the other half of this,” and he held up one half of a Chinese coin.

Nora fumbled in her coat pocket, pulling out her piece of the coin. The man laid his piece next to hers in the palm of her hand, and they fit together perfectly. “Okay, so you’re from Tom. But what’s going on? Where is he?”

“Please, if you would just get in,” he said, opening the car’s back door. “It will all be made clear.” She hesitated, then stepped around him and slid into the backseat of the car. There sat Tom.

“Nora, darling! I’m so glad you figured out my message. I had to be so careful.” He enveloped her in a hug, and they kissed, deeply.

“But, Tom,” she managed when she finally came up for air, “What’s going on? Why all the secrecy?”

“Nora ... I’m an agent, a secret agent. I thought my cover had been blown, and I just couldn’t risk” That’s as far as he got before Nora once again kissed him, deeply.

“I’ve never known a secret agent before. How thrilling! Who do you work for? The FBI or Interpol or ... can you even tell me?” It was Tom’s turn to stop her words, kissing her, deeply.

“For the Treasury Department, my darling. I winkle out counterfeiters and the like. Very hush-hush and all.”

“Oh, Tom, that’s thrilling!” Nora climbed up onto Tom’s lap, again kissing him, deeply.

“Nora, my darling, come away with me. We can get married in Europe, or upstate New York – wherever you want.”

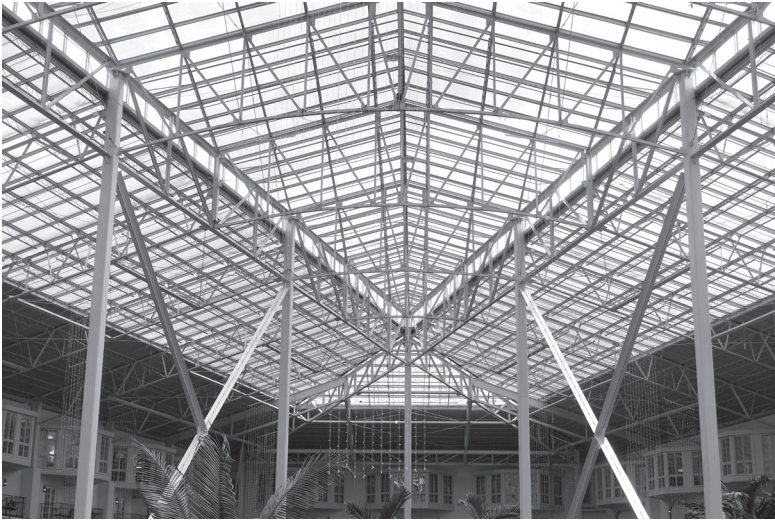
“But what about your secret-agenting? Will the Department even let you ...”

“I don’t care about that, only about you.”

“Oh, Tom”

“Oh, Nora ...”

The silver Mercedes drove sedately away from the village green, and neither Nora nor Tom were ever seen there again.



Overhead, William Moroney

The Beekeeper's Daughters

Jennifer Polhemus

Jenny?

I think Dad is gone.

148 miles away

and I can feel the nearness of death

dissolve in my mouth

like the sandy fruitflesh of a summer pear.

There will be no honey harvest late in August.

Untended hives will eventually be abandoned;

workers and drones gathering elsewhere

around a new queen.

See how busy they are dancing out locations

of other clover fields.

Busy tending in the nursery.

Busy with life that always ends the same

but never quite expected.

How many times did you smoke them

away from upper frames

loaded with months of sweet toil?

How many seasons saw you swaddle

their hives with tar paper

and make sugar water

to sustain them through the winter?

I stay on the phone with you
until the hospice nurse comes
to pronounce him dead,
wash his body,
and dress him in new, flannel pajamas.
I listen to your steady, matter-of-fact voice
describe the scene... hear the zipper's voice
trail away on the body bag.

I Am Just a Shadow of Who I Was

Bill Buffington

Back in country now
Not sure if I should kiss the ground
Flags waving, music playing and the welcome home signs glaring
Born in the USA
I feel like a refugee
The return of soldiers from Vietnam enters my mind
I am afraid to hear what I have done
Or to be spat upon
For I am no hero
Truthfully
I am just a shadow of who I was...
Unidentifiable by the one who knows me best
Me
Confirmation soon to come
By those I left behind
Paranoia sets in
Where are my sand bags, my foxhole?
Left alone
I am just a shadow of who I was...
Looking through the crowd I now see her
A flashback of our last embrace
The echoes of please come back to me
The letters and pictures of freedom
Struggling to recall

Who I was...
Diagnosed
By those who don't have a clue
Not realizing what I am now feeling
The emptiness
My moral beliefs gone
Hey Joe
Purple haze all around me
Lost in the fog
People please understand
I am just a shadow of who I was...

Bread

Rachel Heinhorst

You thought a full loaf
would be too much
for just a couple days,

but we got it – whatever
we don't eat
we'll bring home –

and you were right,
it sat unopened,
atop the microwave

until we needed it
for the gulls
fishing the lake –

to bring them closer
to our side of shore.

Redemption

Patrick Allen

“Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found
him would kill him”

(Genesis 4:15)

I live with my shame

This.

Blessing transforms my shame

I love through my shame

Contributors

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

CHRISTIAN AGUIAR is a writer and educator. His stories, poems and essays have been featured in the Askashic Books Mondays are Murder series and in journals like *Anamesa*, *Alimentum*, and *Saturday Night Reader*. He is currently Assistant Professor of English at the University of the District of Columbia Community College.

TAYLOR BAKER is an aspiring artist and novelist. She takes classes at CSM to broaden her skill set and experience, and collects bits and pieces for her stories everywhere she goes.

JAMES “JIM” BURD BREWSTER is a musician, actor, writer, Christian, father, and husband. He authored the *Uncle Rocky*, *Fireman*, *Officer Jack*, and *EMT Morales* series of children’s picture books. Jim’s first publishing success was in 2012 when *Connections* selected “The Start” for its fall issue. Jim learned to walk in Albany, sail on Lake Champlain, and navigate a polar icebreaker in the Coast Guard. He and his wife Katie raised five children and live in Pomfret, Maryland.

BILL BUFFINGTON is a husband, a father, a veteran (Navy), and co-founder of the CSM Veterans Organization. He is also founder and CEO of VConnections, Inc. He loves supporting and assisting CSM Student Veterans and the Veterans and families of the tri-county communities.

HEATHER CHRISTIAN is a 16-year-old graduating early from McDonough High School by attending Charles County's Virtual Academy at Robert D. Stethem Educational Center. Her hobbies include writing, painting, and photography. She will be attending CSM in the fall.

TEDDI CUSTER is number eleven of twelve children. He says, "Growing up with such a big family taught me numerous things to take into my adult life, and as a parent. We fought, we laughed, and we cried. One thing my parents always said is, 'We will always have each other, and to love one another.' As a dad, I hope to pass that on to my children, to take into their lives."

CAROL HARVAT observes people, culture, and nature through poetic verse. In many works, she takes a first person approach perceiving other people's emotions. With a Bachelor of Arts in News Editorial from the University of South Florida, Carol's professional life has varied from news writing and environmental documentation to marketing and social work. She lives in Calvert County and enjoys being out on the water and communing with nature.

RACHEL HEINHORST teaches English at CSM.

ALEXANDER HERESY is a student at CSM.

ROBIN KARIS lives in Maryland and enjoys writing, photography and music.

GINETTE KRANTZ is a resident of Calvert County and an adjunct instructor of Criminal Justice at CSM.

KATE LASSMAN teaches English Composition as an adjunct faculty member at CSM's La Plata Campus. She holds a Master of Fine Arts in Poetry from George Mason University and lives in Waldorf with her husband and four spoiled rotten felines named Hope, Joy, Grace, and Zany.

WILLIAM MORONEY is an associate professor at CSM teaching criminal justice and homeland security.

KAREN D. MCINTYRE lives in La Plata, Maryland, with her husband and three cats. She retired after twenty-eight years teaching in middle and high schools. In the spirit of the Renaissance woman, she taught reading, English, social studies, science, math and art. Once retired, she finally had the time to write a bit. Karen is an avaricious reader of multiple genres, but her favorite hobbies are wine tasting, going to the gym, and traveling.

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

DIANE PAYNE is a full-time employee for Mail, Distribution, and Fulfillment Services in the Marketing Department at CSM as the mail electronic support technician and is a photography assistant for the Community Relations Department.

JENNIFER POLHEMUS graduated from CSM in 1999. She lives in Central Pennsylvania. Her fourth collection of poetry, *Balloons...and Other Things That Float*, will be released sometime in the next several months. Jennifer is currently editing an anthology of poetry, *Her Believing Heart*, about domestic violence in lesbian relationships. She has been publishing her work in *Connections* since 1993.

ELIZABETH PRATHER is a full-time student at CSM pursuing a degree in liberal arts and criminal justice.

RICHARD TAYLOR is a full-time employee for Mail, Distribution, and Fulfillment Services at CSM in the Marketing Department as the mail courier.

PAUL TOSCANO has been a serious photographer for nearly ten years. His work has been exhibited at several local galleries and in several publications.

CHRISTOPHER WILKINS is a poet, novelist, violist, and Episcopal priest living in Southern Maryland. He has taught at CSM since 2008.

Connections



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