

COLLEGE *of* SOUTHERN MARYLAND



Connections

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Connections

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Table of Contents

POETRY

Sweet Stories She Tells When There is no Sleep, Sherbie Corazza	6
February 15, Jennifer Polhemus	9
Water-bound, Fisk Tyler	10
Since Then, Joanne Van Wie	12
Gravity Hill, John Kulikowski	14
Lost in Thought Are We, Richard Weaver	24
I Have Written Lately From a Fear, Patrick Allen	27
Hampton, William Lowe	28
Excuses, Rudolph Woodward	43
Good Morning, Kiersten Walker	44

CONNECTIONS FEATURES

The Magician's Assistant, Alan King	31
What's Unsaid, Alan King	33
Stride for Tolu, Alan King	36
Agent Orange, Teresa Mei Chuc	40
The Girl in the Picture, Doug Rawlings	41

PROSE

Location, Location, Location, Larry D. Thacker	15
Invisible Does Not Mean Imaginary, Syanne Centeno	45

PHOTOGRAPHY

Untitled, Anthony Obedoza	1
Tree in Gulf, Joanne Bechtel	8
Freedom, Lynn Polhemus	11
Fallen Hero, Diane Payne	26
The Wave, Gardy Domenech	41
Hanging On To Life, Michelle Brosco Christian	42

CONTRIBUTORS

CONTRIBUTORS	50
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Sweet Stories She Tells When There is no Sleep

Sherbie Corazza

I wish we met at 19.
I'd make you peanut butter jelly sandwiches every day.
I'd pack your Snoopy lunchbox. Always with a note.
Even if we were late. A note with hearts. Always hearts.
We'd both work minimum wage jobs and own only one car.
A Volkswagen van. Some bright color. To fit all the unloved
animals we'd bring home from the shelter.

We'd take turns dropping the other off at work. With a kiss.
Even if we were late. A kiss and a smile. Always.
You'd never wonder if you were loved.
I'd never leave you guessing. I'd never leave you searching.
My hand would always be open.
Behind the small of my back. Up every staircase.
Knowing. You were reaching out for me just the same.

We'd eat a lot of ramen. Snap peas from our garden.
But we'd be so full, baby. So full of all the good things.
People would sense it on us. That something different.
They'd wonder what it was – from their windows – at their tables.
While they ate their steak dinners – watching.
As we peddled down side streets on bicycles we found
behind a dumpster after all the tourists flew home for winter.
We'd live somewhere salty warm with enough space between
buildings for the sunshine to find us and play with our hair.

We'd grow toward the sun. Together. In the same direction.
Like sunflowers. Swaying. Bold against the deepest blue.
I'd always be gentle with you. All of my words and every touch.
Gentle.
Until we melt away. Your legs wrapped around me.
Petals intertwined.
Trust-falling soft into a summer breeze. You will be my only
Home.
No matter what form we take next. I will come to you.



Tree in Gulf, *Joanne Bechtel*

February 15

Jennifer Polhemus

The wild horses of Assateague Island
Are running tonight.
Beneath a full moon,
They carry our sister home.
 We sit with her body
 Cooling now, going pale.
And the horses snort
And neigh her name.
To a mysterious and endless sea
They bring her,
Leaving the sheltered bay behind.
 Two attendants
 From Eastern Shore Cremation Services
 Cover her body
 With a green and white checkered blanket.
 We feel like a picnic on a rainy day.
And when the sun rises,
Dancing fire across the water,
We begin our grieving with patient smiles.

Water-bound

Fisk Tyler

As I voyage the vast blue expanse
Searching for a shoal
A great flock catches my glance
The riches beneath untold.

A purity like no other
Where sea transcends to sky
To ease the labors of my mother
I must turn the sea red dye.

As I search for striper
With tact and haste
I gripped my lance with great hyper
For oil slicks, I could taste.



Freedom, Lynn Polhemus

Since Then

Joanne Van Wie

I no longer write about cloud formations as though there is a blue sky holding them,

as though there is a you.

And even the simple act of dishwashing is different than it once was, now, mostly about standing in front of a window and staring out.

Out became a word that meant the same thing as *why?*

Why became the only word that mattered.

Do you think it will ever stop – the pain, I mean?

The way everything else has stopped? Like breathing deeply, like unfurling.

I never feel it anymore, but I know it's there, the pain, I mean.

Like a deeply-burrowed sliver, like the hardness of the sidewalk underneath.

I never feel it,

The way water becomes ice that shatters inside, the way the smile evaporates like steam.

I've decided love is a lot like water, in that it has identifiable states of change. It is scientific proof of something I can't seem to grasp.

They say pain helps us grow. I imagine this strange photosynthetic combination: *pain, water, sunlight, sidewalk* – funny how they all mean the same thing as *why*.

Gravity Hill

John Kulikowski

Parked sideways on a back-country road,
engine left idle. Headlights
beam against a moonless midnight,
shining toward September rural nothingness,
searching for what resides just ahead.

Answered by dried-up cornstalks
opposite stiff, sharp remnants of twice-cut
hay. Windows down, doors flung
wide open, no resistance to classic-rock
radio blaring into a wonderfully windless night.

Crisp-air assistant, two weeks later
my sweatshirt still held close
your daisy scent, blended with autumn
earth. We lay among shadow-less stalks and stubble,
shoulder-touching-shoulder, hip-touching-hip.

Smoked up in our own contemplation
of overhead stars blanketed by our cooperative silence,
your smile cock-eyed and inviting me
to pass back a dwindling joint.
My hand to yours, yours back into mine.

Distant sound cuts the moment, approaching
headlights get us up and running,
arm-in-arm halfway back to dome-lit safety
you slipped and you stumbled,
but I was the one who fell.

Location, Location, Location

Larry D. Thacker

It was after my bad marriage breakup in my mid-thirties
when I got convinced that, yes, finding the ideal mate took
patience – my lack of which being the cause of my ending up
married and divorced within a year – and that, to borrow a wise
phrase from the booming real estate market at the time, “location,
location, location” was the answer to my perpetual loneliness.

This had worked for my buddy, Rice. The way he figured,
men with our predicament at our age suffered from what
he called, “Wide Pattern Disorder,” whereby we get a little
too desperate and end up searching just about anywhere and
everywhere to find the right partner.

He’d recall, “Dude, remember how I used to surf three or
four bars a week? How I’d spend so much time roaming around
three grocery stores in one weekend? That shit’s expensive. I’d
go to church one place on a Sunday morning then another on a
Wednesday night. I was run ragged, man. Like, my distribution
was way too wide, like shooting a 12-gauge from too far off. I
needed to close in my pattern.”

I understood the shotgun metaphor.

“If you’re all over the place, how the hell is your perfect girl
supposed to find you? Or you find her?”

That appealed to my lazy streak if nothing else. I’d been
guilty of spreading my exposure too thin. It got me nothing.

“You mean quit eating breakfast at McDonald’s, Hardees, and
IHOP and settle on one?” I asked.

“That’s right,” he said.

Continued on next page

I was also particular to the Days Inn Rise-N-Shine Bar up the street from the house. You didn't have to stay there to eat there, though it cost another dollar if you weren't a guest. "That'd be a good sampling of some out-of-towners and conference attendees, right?"

"Right," Rice agreed, "and there's something to be said for getting to make your own waffles. There's some reward in it."

"Agreed. Like all the butter and syrup you want. I feel stingy when it's my own. And I could quit changing the days of my therapist appointment," I added. "Plenty of women come and go in the waiting room."

"That's right," he agreed. "And pick a hardware store, would you?"

"Copy that."

I was a regular at the flea markets. Gilley's Family Flea. Po Dick's Vintage and Flea. The Fletch Flea. My ex hated them. I figured next time around I'd find me a girl that loved to flea as much as I do.

Rice said, "That's your problem, man. You spread yourself all over three or four places. If one of those cool vintage chicks did vibe on you, how would they find you again? You're all over the map. For every spot, there's a set of regulars. You wanna be the regular or the constant stranger?"

He had a point.

"Pick one and haunt the shit out of it, right?"

I'd take Rice's advice. I had a garage full of pickings. The garage was too full of junk to get my truck in there. I needed to get rid of this stuff and quit living like a hoarder, at least concerning my garage. A table at one of the markets would set me up in a single, regular place, that way the ladies could get used to seeing me in one spot on Saturdays. Maybe Rice was on to something. But which flea market?

Gilley's Family Flea was the oldest. The most well-known. Po Dick's Flea was the biggest. The most crowds.

The Fletch Flea was the smallest, but with the prettiest, hippiest lady folk. It was closest to where I lived. It ran from eight in the morning to three in the afternoon in the city parking lot on Saturdays from the first weekend of spring through Halloween weekend when they threw a big vintage trunk and treat.

Each flea had its own style and clientele. If you wanted rusty tools, deep fried pig skins, fishing tackle and knives, go to Gilley's. For bootleg DVDs and VHSs, designer nursing scrubs, comics, and outdated potato chips, hit up Po Dick's. For hippy stuff like leather vests with fringe, turquoise jewelry, old albums, and carved Buddhas, you had to go to the Fletch Flea.

I'd fit right in.

I had a few hundred of those oversized psychedelic 70s art ashtrays. I heard they were making a comeback. At least that's what I told people. And by the looks of my booth, I wasn't lying. I had some boxes of kitschy Gatlinburg souvenirs, salt and pepper shakers shaped like outhouses, real corncob pipes, and early Dollywood bumper stickers. Another box of Knoxville World's Fair items.

I'd also been hoarding up hanging macrame plant holders. Some of these were real intricate, with loads of webbing. Enough to support heavyweight. That might be why people mistook them for sex swings on occasion.

"Look, baby! Just like we used to have, remember?" a tall lithe woman with a distinct gray streak through her long red hair and wearing a tie-dyed sundress said to a silver-haired gentleman in jeans and a deadhead t-shirt. He inspected the weave, as if his glasses hardly worked, looking nostalgic.

"That's right. I wonder if that sex shop's still open after all these years?"

"Oh! The one in Asheville?" she asked, suddenly very excited. I suddenly morphed from a macrame plant holder salesman to a sex swing dealer, just like that.

Continued on next page

“You mean Screw Tape’s Special Intimates?” I asked, snagging a sex shop name out of thin air, hoping a few decades of weed and LSD had destroyed that mutual memory between them. They paused, nodded to each other in a shared ah-ha, and grinned a grin only they fully understood, I guess.

“Yeah...I think that was it, man,” the gentleman said.

“Yep, that one’s from them. Its new old vintage saved stock from when the owners retired back in the day.”

I was so full of shit.

“Lucky us,” the lady giggled, digging in her leather-tasseled handbag.

They bought two of them at a hundred apiece. As you can suspect, these are getting scarce, especially with wear and tear. They couldn’t leave the market fast enough.

I was keeping to my newly focused schedule. It was easier. I thought I’d get bored, but really, I didn’t miss the stress of having to make so many choices. I ate at only the same few places. Shopped the same stores. Drank at the same place. Had therapy on Wednesday mornings only. Bought my hammers and nails and glue at Home Depot. Sold weird stuff on Saturdays at the Fletch Flea. Easy. It was so easy and nice, I almost forgot I was lonely. I’d been setting up for the flea since mid-summer and it was already fall. Rice was right, of course, for every spot there’s a set of regulars. I’d become one of them; the guy selling vintage whatnots. I was even letting my hair grow a little. I’d never had a ponytail before. Maybe now was the time for hair experimentation?

One of those early October days when the temperature is so mild that dealing with the weather is an effortless act. Not too cool. Not too warm. The tree colors aren’t quite at peak, but enliven the mind through the eyes. It was a day to fall in love. The day might have contributed to my state of vulnerability the Saturday Laura walked up and was taking her good time inspecting a box of late-19th-century photo postcards. Old photos are making a comeback, have you heard?

She was almost as tall as me, long-limbed, long-fingered. Her nose was long. Her lips were thin. Her hair was long and a little curly, the same color as the row of turning burnt-orange maples lining the far side of the lot. Light grey-blue eyes. There was a start of grey at her temple. She looked familiar. But I would have remembered her. Yes, I very specifically would have remembered seeing her here.

She took her time on the box of postcards with those long fingers. Her nails were done in a dark red, so red they were almost black, even in the sun. If she didn’t play piano, she had the hands for it. She held a few photos then moved to my table of 70s ashtrays.

She lifted on that was cobalt blue tie-die and big enough to accommodate ten smokers at once with those little built-in C-dips to hold individual cigarettes.

“You a smoker?” I asked, walking over.

She nodded no. “I like these for holding earrings and bracelets.”

She handed me the photos. One was a death card of a toddler. You could tell from the sleepy look in the eyes and the stiff neck and how the other child, probably a sibling, was holding her like a stiff doll. So she was the morbid type. The other photo was a man and woman, neither smiling, darkly clothed. The man’s beard was thick and a foot long. The woman’s hair was long, but up in a tight bun. They must have moved when they shouldn’t have during the photo setting, blurring just a little of their faces around the eyes. Very haunting. Yes, she was a morbid girl.

“These are nice,” I said.

She’d moved to the macrame corner. She looked a few over, glanced my way, and commented quietly, “Are these the only, um...intimate swings you have left, sir?” I could tell she was making a joke.

I laughed, at least hoping she was joking. Of course, it hit me then why she looked familiar. She could have

Continued on next page

been the younger sister of the woman who had been there earlier in the season with the man and bought the two macrame hangers/sex swings for a hundred apiece.

“My mom said I could probably find you here. She said you’d looked like a regular vendor. You been doing this long?”

Thank you, Rice. Thank you.

“Only this season,” I said. “I work at the college for a day job. I teach English. I do this to meet interesting people,” I laughed.

She laughed at that. “How’s that working out?”

“Off and on, but pretty good as of today,” I flirted. Why hold back, I figured. “I’m Fremont,” I offered.

“I’m Laura,” she offered. “By the way, my father looked it up. He can’t find a place called Screw Tape’s Intimates ever being in Asheville. Or any place for that matter,” she said.

I was caught.

“Would you rather I have said Silky Sue’s Sexy Stuff?” I asked. “Or Knobby’s Knickers and More?”

“No. No more, please!”

“I’ve got more,” I threatened.

“No, I’ll tell him you were mistaken and that he needs to search for Silky Sue’s instead.”

While I was embarrassingly aware that the underlying issue at hand was her parents possibly already having mistakenly tested out a fifty-year-old macrame plant hanger as an implement of sexual enhancement, I tried to avoid the fact.

“I could use one of these,” she said, “for a philodendron I’ve been wanting to hang.”

“A fellow who you’ve been wanting to what?”

She laughed, but I don’t know if she found that as funny as I did. She did at least ask when I’d be wrapping things up. She said she might swing back through and that she might be in mood

from some supper by then if I was maybe interested?

I told her I thought that was a lot of maybes, but I thought I could manage.

“I’ve never played piano,” she said, as I watched her almost cross her fingers easily around an entire Outlaw Burger.

“Shame,” I said, “you’ve got a good octave-and-a-quarter reach it looks like. Not even the fiddle?”

We’d gone to Lonnie’s Grill, one of only a very few sit-down restaurants I was letting myself frequent lately.

“No instruments,” she tells me. She’s an architect by training, part of a firm in the Asheville burbs. “But my range and control on a protractor is legend,” she joked.

I’d had no luck here at Lonnie’s, which is just as well since sitting here with a sort-of date would have been awkward had I made a connection here that happened to show up.

I thought the topic of my having adopted Rice’s philosophy for “meeting the woman,” as I put it, might make for good small talk. I told her about the Day’s Inn breakfast bar, only drinking at Everette’s, handsaws from Home Depot, bread and milk only from Food Town, and Whole-istic Foods.

“And, of course, the flea market,” she added.

“True. I used to pick all the fleas. Now I spend most of my time at my own booth.”

“Where do you find your inventory,” she asked.

“My garage. For now.”

“What happens when you run low on stuff and you need to start finding new things. You gonna only pick the Fletch Flea?”

I mentioned how I hadn’t thought that far in advance but that it was one of the best questions I’d heard in a while. “You ever been to Everette’s? It’s a mix between a jazz lounge and a

Continued on next page

roughhouse saloon. They serve boneless wings and chicken liver pate if that tells you anything.”She said it didn’t and that she hadn’t. We met there for drinks at eight.

By the time we were an hour into our drinks at Everette’s, I felt as if I’d known her for a lot more than a few hours. I wasn’t about to tell her that. That’s a great way to ruin an otherwise unmarred date. It was open-mic at the bar. A young fella was playing George Benson’s “Breezin’” on the nose flute. That only required his holding the instrument to his nostrils with his dominant right hand, leaving his left to gyrate to the grooves as if he were conducting his own invisible jazz orchestra. Laura was in the middle of explaining how Everette’s building was a testament to mid-century cold war architectural elements when Rice walked in.

Laura, Rice. Rice, Laura.

“So, this is the modern-day relationship geo-philosopher, Rice?” Laura asked.

Rice looked a little out of his depth and ordered a shot of cheap tequila. I commented on his choice for beginning the evening. He raised his shot glass, as did we. “To Fremont, and his lovely new friend, Laura. May you always recognize good advice when you get it, my friend.”

Rice was playing pool when Laura asked if he took his own advice. I asked what she meant.

“Well, you’re here with me and he’s here by himself. Does he employ his own tactics?”

I reckoned he did. He talked like he did. But she had a point. I didn’t see the strategy working too often for Rice.

“Maybe people meet whoever they’re going to meet no matter their strategy if it’s the right one.” She ordered another Jack and Diet Coke.

“How do you know the right one when you meet them?” I asked. “You ever had that kind of luck?” I ordered another Makers.

“You don’t know it until you know it. Look, we could go in circles forever with that kind of logic. Is there such a thing as a right person? Are there soul mates? Do you find them no matter what?” she wondered.

“Is it driven by fate? Can you miss them and never know it?” I added.

“Right. See, too many maybes. Why manipulate the whole world just to make this search easier? What if it’s supposed to be hard? A challenge? To make it worth it.”

“No matter what it ends up being?”

Laura smiled and nodded. Lifted her glass. I did the same.

“How about we head somewhere you’ve never been before,” she suggested.

That sounded just fine to me.

Lost in Thought Are We

Richard Weaver

meaning me and the you that is me, my wife having sent us the two of me to gather from the market, one of the daily farmer's markets here in Baltimore that sprout up around town like I don't know what. But they are here and I am heading there on foot, one foot chasing the other, determined to find

what must be found, and we are as well like weeds almost, around always, except we need them. You want what they have and are willing to give them shiny objects and pieces of paper in exchange for green and yellow and orange and purple and maybe even red things that reek of dirt but are born from star debris.

And perhaps some other colors that slip in under the spectrum. But they are ours to be had for what you have if you think that what they have and what you want is worth your having it. Higher math if you know what I mean. And so you stand and maybe you talk and perhaps you touch things

in front of you but not in an overly friendly way, so as not to bruise or cause harm or injury in such a way that might involve the police or social workers. **BUT NOW YOU REMEMBER:** your mission, your purpose was to hunt and gather, to buy Leeks. But not just any leeks. The recipe called for those

preferred by the Emperor Nero, either in soup or sautéed in oil, and not just any oil. Oil not left over from battles and not hurried over walls. Preheated yes. But not burned. And these leeks are to be the centerpiece of a dish your wife, the woman who cups your testicles, is making for someone whose name you have

forgotten since you left wherever it is you think you live. And so you have gone in search of the national emblem of Wales though you are ignorant of emblems and Wales and even leeks. Even so you would not be caught alive or dead

wearing one on your head. Still, leeks it is and leeks it must be. You soldier onward

and outward, elsewhere and elsewhen, beyond and because, and finally arrive at the farmer's market, the one that grows under the Jones Falls Way, where booth after booth, and stall upon stall, are all filled with the greenest and whitest of leeks. You are amazed. Dumbfounded. In fact, dumb was founded exactly where you are standing with your eyes wide and your mouth open, open enough for flies and gnats and mosquitoes and the odd moth to enter. You are in leek nirvana. You have only to choose and be released. Your purpose, your life's mission is nearly complete. All that remains is to find what the Emperor preferred;

after-all, what was good enough for the Emperor might, just might be good enough for your wife, your mate, your significant other, other half and/or better, rib, lady (old or otherwise), mate, bride, helpmeet, woman, wedded one, goodwife. If only you could remember her name. Or where you once might have lived.



Fallen Hero, *Diane Payne*

I Have Written Lately From a Fear

Patrick Allen

I have written lately from a fear
That somewhere
Right at the stroke of eight
An unannounced train will begin its journey.
But I will arrive at a quarter past the hour
A dusty Dime Store Indian holding an empty cigar cup
Shaking with a raspy tubercular cough.
Then I hear
The unexpectedly high tenor voice of a traveling bluesman
Calling in the distance.
How long
How long
Has that evening train been gone
How long
How long

Hampton

William Lowe

I love you and I hate you, Hampton –
you who gave me succor from the plague
yet long drank the sweat of the enslaved,

staring down from high atop your rise
at the weeds and chipped paint on the privy,
proud in your Georgian symmetry
with sunlight shining on your cupula
tipped to the sky like an upturned nose.

I have tramped every inch of your acreage,
dug the foundation of my house deep
in a patch of your long-discarded dirt,

peered through the cracks of your spring house
and sang a dirge and listened as the water
purged the echoes and walls of their griefs.

I have stood at the gates of your cemetery
and stared through the bars at shadowed stones
and queried the bones of your ancestors
and listened to the silence of their repose.

I have strolled the paths of your French gardens
and kneeled on the mulch to smell your peonies
while a thousand miles west a man of law
scented death with a man's neck under knee.

I have paused on your lawn just before dusk
as the sun turned your beige walls blood red
and been unsure whether to snap a postcard photo
or hold a match to your columns and set you on fire –
there's something in you that stirs both desires.

I love you and I hate you, Hampton –
down to the dust on your stained cornerstone.

Note: Hampton was among the largest slave plantations in Maryland at the turn of the 18th and 19th century. At the peak of its financial power, the Ridgley family owned more than 25,000 acres of land north of Baltimore and more than 300 enslaved people.

CONNECTIONS FEATURES

Spring 2022 Readings

A Selection of Poems from Award-Winning Writers, Alan King,
Teresa Mei Chuc and Doug Rawlings.

To view videos of each event, please go to
<https://www.bitlylinks.com/J64DmZLyq>

The Magician's Assistant

Alan King

All you needed was a broken cap seal
and a finger left of Henny –
the bottle you hadn't touched yet –
to know it was me.

Never mind I was known
to pass on beer and wine
for a Sprite or seltzer water,

that, once - when I mistook
your Coke for mine, when what I tasted
had a darker flavor than
what the fizz promised –
I spat it out.

You laughed when I cried:
Now, I'll never be alcohol-free!

You needed a reason to suspect me,
that aha! for every empty assumption
swarming your mind, anxiety stinging you,

like that time you knew
I had to be gay. Why else would
I fly to San Francisco
during Pride Month?

Never mind I was going to a workshop,
that I'd never been to the West Coast
and the opportunity flashed
like a gold door
below arching vines –
a door through which
several bright paths waited to carry me
to every untraveled place.

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You needed something
to put your finger on, the see, I told you
for every time you claimed,
that boy ain't right

because I read a lot, because I hung out
with older men, because I wasn't eager
to spill my pollen on every flower
that offered their nectar.

You thought you had it –
your “proof” that always went poof
before the smoke cloud and you
reeling with bewilderment,

like that time you smelled weed
and thought that's it!
before you confronted me.

You with your cocky scholar's grin –
as if, having studied me for so long,
I was no longer the trick
that dumbfounded you.

That was enough
to puff out your chest,
the way you did that night
in the living room – my brother and I
standing before you and mom,

you watching me the entire time,
pointing to the empty bottle, demanding
one of us tells the truth.
And then your evidence
eluding you again
when my brother said,
Sorry.

What's Unsaid

Your father calls and asks you
to help him order something online.

He thinks it's cool that,
with your account, he gets
next-day delivery.

You laugh at how he treats it,
as if instead of a membership,
he's talking about the television
when it first came out,

when those who couldn't afford it
went over to their neighbors' to marvel
at the monochrome moving images.

The irony snaps you back.

What your parents comfortably spend
would throw your family's budget into crisis –

your folks who own three homes
and considered buying another
just to have it.

He's a lifetime away from
the skinny 20-year-old
who landed here from Trinidad
with his mom and four sisters,

the guy who worked
as a union electrician
to pitch in with the rent.

Continued on next page

Even now, when he talks about it,
he squints, watching those early years
slip beyond his field of vision.

So, he couldn't have called just
for help ordering holiday gifts –
the smart scales that show your BMI
and connect to your smartphone.

He asks about his granddaughter
who's putting her dolls down
for nap time in the living room.

You both laugh when he asks
if your wife is behaving
and you say: for now.

That laugh takes you back
to a sunny place in your childhood –
those summers and winter holidays
you spent lugging his work bag
and running to his truck
for switches and fixtures.

Didn't you live for those moments
in his work van – the one he bought
when he left the union
to start out on his own?

He could imitate anyone –
the racist white foreman,
the other Black electricians
who threatened to kick his
“funny-sounding ass.”

You wanted to be every bit
the playboy he was –
the brotha so stealth
old heads back home
had him hollerin'
at sistas for them.

You laughed a lot then –
only disappointed when
it was time to go home.
That was before
he questioned you being a poet,

before the insults and arguments
that nearly came to blows,
and the six months he went
without talking to you.

You watch your daughter
painting on a table in your den
before she climbs in your lap
and snuggles up with a smile.

That was once you –
resting against your dad on his bed
while he flipped through the papers,
reading the real estate section.

Your nearly 4-year-old, listening
to her grandfather on speakerphone,
says: Poppa, I love you.
A dam breaks inside you
when your dad's choked voice
cracks back, I love you too,
Sweetheart.

Stride for Tolu

*When you run the marathon, you run against the distance,
not against the other runners and not against the time.*

Haile Gebrselassie

I don't remember when it happened, he says.
All I know is one day, Eli put himself to bed.

You watch your brother-in-law with
an envy you haven't felt since you were 16,
when you learned your little brother
lost his virginity before you.

You remember feeling like he crossed
the finish line before you started the race –
your brother far beyond the horizon
of that milestone.

You're just as far behind your brother-in-law,
wishing you could breeze the distance to him
in this full marathon called parenting.

Even now, he's disappearing
from your field of vision as he goes on
about his kids sleeping in their rooms,

while your 3-year-old holds
your bedtime hostage – demanding
another story, crying and jumping
when you say it's sleepy time.

She's taken over your California King,
doing mixed martial arts in her sleep –
the toddler with the elbow and knee strikes,
with the jabs and overhand punches,

your bonnet-donning pajama kid
tests your limits when each sleepless night
leaves you like a runner at Mile 20 –

hunched over, gasping, glinting
with sweat, muscles blazing –
but this is just the starting line
of a long-distance test of patience.

It's how your parents must've felt,
especially your poor dad.

It couldn't have been easy
being the only foreigner
at his job, trading barbs with the other
black electricians who rified on his accent
and the extra shit he got
from the white foreman.

It couldn't have been easy
trying to keep it together – verbally sparring
with guys he was smarter than,
then coming home to your attitude.

How many times you almost broke
his patience, when he nearly came out of himself
to give you a piece of his mind?

Luckily, he never broke his stride.
If you learned anything from him,
it's enjoying small victories, even
in the moments that seem hard.

It's a lesson your brother-in-law takes
in strides. His stories about his kids
are his way of coaching you
to keep running.

Two Writers in Viet Nam

Teresa Mei Chuc and Doug Rawlings have never met in person. Yet it is through their poetry that a deep connection has been forged as they both still grapple with the American war in Viet Nam and its aftermath. Doug was with an artillery unit in the Central Highlands of Teresa's country before she was even born. Teresa was living the life of a war refugee in California while Doug was pursuing a teaching career in Maine. But they were both writing and writing. Then they connected through friends a couple of years ago and found a real bond – much of their poetry was covering the same ground. Hence, the idea of publishing this volume of poems – *Cau Tre: Bamboo Bridge* – as a way to share that discovery and to help others get a deeper sense of the ravages of war and the resilience of its survivors.

Teresa: Here is my poem about the effects of Agent Orange. I returned to my birth city of Saigon, Viet Nam a few years ago and visited the Peace Village where many children affected by Agent Orange stay, including newborns in an intensive care unit. The visit was very moving and heartbreaking. I wrote this poem a few years prior to my visit to Peace Village.

Agent Orange

Teresa Mei Chuc

It's difficult to be alone, without
a mother's touch, in a crib like a
baby except one is not.

A son taught to live with a thirst
for a mother who loves her child though
one of his legs is too short, the other too long.

He sits, arms bent and limp, but do not
avoid him; he wants to interact. His swollen eyes
and misshapen head leans back. In a dream
Mother holds him close, as if by her embrace alone,
she will somehow right the wrong.

The chemical traveled through her placenta,
to the womb where small limbs that needed
to form couldn't, where the tiny body,
the size of a fist, no longer knew what to do.

It was named for the orange band
around each fifty-five gallon drum.

Orange as a sunrise that permeates one's soul,
how its rays cover the sky
and the earth with a deep orange,

rising as those bodies also rise.

The Girl in the Picture

*Doug Rawlings
for Phan Thi Kim Phuc
"Whatever you run from becomes your shadow."*

If you're a namvet, a survivor of sorts,
she'll come for you across the decades
casting a shadow in the dying light of your dreams,
naked and nine, terror in her eyes

Of course you will have to ignore her –
if you wish to survive over the years –
but then your daughters will turn nine
and then your granddaughters nine

As the shadows lengthen.

So, you will have no choice on that one night
screaming down Ridge Road, lights off,
under a full moon, she standing in the middle of the road,
still naked and nine, terror in her eyes

Now you must stop to pick her up, to carry her back
home to where she came from, to that gentle
village where the forgiving and the forgiven
gather at high noon. There are no shadows.



The Wave, Gardy Domenach



Hanging On To Life, Michelle Brosco Christian

Excuses

Rudolph Woodward

Mom, we need you
"I'm not feeling good."
We need you
I'm tired
We need you
Always the Excuses

We call you
But there is no answer
We call you
All we get out of you is what do you need?
We call you
"Can I get \$10.00 for cigarettes?"
We call you
But you will not come to be here for us.
Always the excuses

Your grandkids want to spend time with you
I have no way there
But your grandkids want to spend time with you
He will not let me come
Your grandkids want to spend time with you
I have no gas to get over there
Always the excuses

Mom, I graduate tomorrow; I would love you to be there
I have nowhere there
I need you there to watch me walk the stage
I have no gas money
But I need you there to watch me receive my diploma
He won't let me come
Always the excuses

Good Morning

Kiersten Walker

i've never been a morning person.

the silence before the sun rises, when the morning air feels heavy,

like a weighted blanket, keeping the twenty-four hours from running away.

i love skimming my hands over a worn page, allowing myself to get lost in another's mind,

switching out my heart for a different one is a gift only some can pry from the words of a stranger, printed over a thousand times.

something only 6am can give, being a character in another's life,

or just the calming feeling of being ahead

opposed to being behind.

yet here i am again at 3am, unable to escape into another mind,

always trapped in the movie of my own crimes,

waking up to someone saying "good morning"

immediately feeling the rush of another short day in this life,

the air crisp and dry

the sun already sitting in the middle of the sky.

i curse myself each day for not waking up before my mind,

but the truth is,

each time i try, a late night comes along and i'm back in the process of being behind the sun.

i wish i was a morning person,

but i can't help but wonder if they do it for the same reasons as mine?

just faking the love of mornings to try and break away from the anxieties of running out of time.

Invisible Does Not Mean Imaginary

Syanne Centeno

Initially published in Southern Maryland Woman Magazine

Five years ago, I had the privilege of gracing the cover of Southern Maryland Woman Magazine for my activism with mental health awareness. In that photo, I was wearing a black dress and was standing on my own two feet. There was no wheelchair, central line in my chest, or nasal cannula helping me breathe. So, what happened? In a wild turn of events, everything I thought I knew about my body and mind changed.

I was misdiagnosed. How could this happen? How could doctors miss my genetic illness and several other comorbidities? I don't doubt for a second that medical bias was to blame. My former doctors frequently parroted out phrases commonly heard by young women: "You're too young to be sick," "You look fine to me," and "You're just anxious." Despite the range of strange symptoms, doctors told me that my problems were likely psychosomatic even with abnormal test results. For most of my life, I was misdiagnosed as being mentally ill. But that wasn't entirely true. I was physically sick...because I was born ill. I just didn't know.

For as long as I can remember, I've had pain – pains in my stomach, back, and head...everywhere. The thing is, I thought the discomforts I felt in my body were normal. I cried inconsolably every day in my first month of life because my stomach was not absorbing my mother's breast milk. As a result, I was not gaining weight. As a 5-year-old, I had such dramatic nosebleeds that my clothes would look like evidence from a crime scene. At around 8 or 9 years old, I developed an aversion to food. The stomach pains I would get when eating further exacerbated the "perfect storm" in developing anorexia at such a young age. I moved from the U.S. Virgin Islands to Southern California, which was a

Continued on next page

significant culture shock – being the new, brown girl who looked different and even spoke differently made me the target of bullying. I now know that the trauma I experienced in adjusting to a new culture and being bullied was not the only thing that contributed to my eating disorder as a child. As I went into puberty, I started having recurrent bladder infections and strep throat several times a year and quickly caught common viruses. And even though I had the flu vaccine, I would still get the flu almost every year. Always being sick was such a regular thing for me, but when I did bring it up to medical professionals as a teenager, it was dismissed.

As I entered adulthood, my health issues worsened. I spent several years visiting neurologists who would perform one or two tests, give up, or diagnose me with migraines. I had some luck when one found that I was having partial, Jacksonian seizures and had an 8mm brain lesion – but my doctors didn't know why. They thought I had Multiple Sclerosis (MS), but the results were inconclusive, and they gave up after that. I had a gynecologist who performed exploratory surgery and found that I had endometriosis. However, her inexperience with endometriosis caused it to spread to my bowels, bladder, and appendix. Endocrinologists even discovered a small tumor on my pituitary gland. And with all that information and my symptoms, no medical professional thought to check for systemic conditions. Instead, they told me that even with those things, I still looked healthy. It wasn't until I ended up in the ICU following life-threatening complications from a second endometriosis surgery that doctors realized that my body wasn't like everyone else's.

Within weeks, I became a wheelchair and oxygen user and got my first central venous catheter (also known as a chest port). Although it seemed sudden to people outside of my immediate circle, this decline had been going on for years – and the months prior were particularly hectic. I had lost more than 30 pounds in six months and would sometimes sit on the floor at work because I would feel faint. Suddenly, everything I had been

experiencing for more than two decades made sense.

At 29 years old, I was finally diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome and Autoimmune Autonomic Ganglionopathy/Dysautonomia. Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) is a genetic connective tissue disease. Since everything in our body is constructed of connective tissue, Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome is a recipe for bodily disaster. Simply put, my body is like a house made with poor materials. Even though the floor was creaking, and the roof was leaking, it looked great on the outside. However, over time, the house made with faulty materials will eventually fall apart—the floor will give out, the electrical lines and plumbing will fail, and it will no longer function. In essence, my body is a poorly built house—many of the comorbidities that I have directly result from having defective DNA. The Autoimmune Autonomic Ganglionopathy (AAG) is likely related to my genetic illness. AAG is an extremely rare form of dysautonomia. It causes my immune system to attack my autonomic nervous system, affecting functions like digestion, respiration, heart rhythm, and dozens of other things we don't consciously think about. As you can imagine, it is relatively common for neurological conditions to affect behavior and mental health. Sadly, mental illness misdiagnosis in physically ill women is not uncommon.

Implicit medical bias about a person's age, race, gender, disability, sexual orientation, identity, and even mental health status leads to prolonged suffering, post-traumatic stress, and even death. An alarming 30-50% of women diagnosed with mental health issues really had a physical health condition (Floyd, 1997). The psychological diagnosis delayed an accurate diagnosis up to 14 times more than if they had been misdiagnosed with a physical illness. These statistics are even higher among women with an underlying neurological condition, frequently labeled as having hysteria (Miller et al., 1986). Once a mental health diagnosis is on your chart, the likeliness of being dismissed massively increases.

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Mental health stigma prevents medical professionals from seeing the patient as a whole person and minimizes any physical distress as a plea for attention or a complication of an unhealthy mind. Frankly, mental health stigma is dangerous to everyone, even if we don't suffer from a mental illness ourselves. Being a young woman of color, I understand the helplessness that arises when you're begging doctors to listen. It is a fight for your life of epic proportions. The medical professionals I see now (many from top research hospitals) do not believe that I ever had an anxiety disorder, borderline personality disorder, or even major depression. The licensed psychologist I have now been seeing for nearly three years disagrees with the labels I was given. I was diagnosed with those conditions after only one or two visits with a psychiatrist and then was pumped full of pills that never worked. Mental health conditions typically take months to diagnose. Still, I was diagnosed immediately – after talking about disassociation, mood swings, irritation, feelings of doom, and severe anxiety, which are common in neurological conditions. Instead, my psychologist believes that I am experiencing post-traumatic stress and grief from years of medical gaslighting and mistreatment. Ironically, implicit medical bias can create mental health issues that weren't present before.

So, what do we do about this silent epidemic of implicit medical bias? The most critical thing medical professionals can do is practice empathetic and active listening. Part of the problem is that medical students have learned that when they “hear hoofbeats to think of horses, not zebras.” This phrase means that when a patient comes in with symptoms, to look for the most common cause. Medical students become doctors who believe it is unlikely that “zebras” (those with rare conditions) will ever come into their offices. Unfortunately, rare and chronic diseases are grossly underdiagnosed because of this. Many rare conditions may not be rare; they're just rarely diagnosed. The most important thing a doctor can do is listen to their patients, and if they don't know the answer, it is their responsibility to help them find it - even if that means referring them to someone else. It is

doubtful that someone is lying or exaggerating their symptoms and making that unsubstantiated claim can have deadly results. Secondly, medical professionals must understand that illness does not have a minimum age requirement. If that were the case, children and young adults would never face illness. For perspective, 43% of children and teens have a chronic disease, so the idea that one can be “too young” to be sick is not rooted in fact. Third, appearance has very little to do with what is going on inside someone's body. Most people with chronic illness have an invisible disease - but invisible does not mean imaginary.

Lastly, American healthcare and societal views on illness and disability must change quickly. Socioeconomic status, for-profit medical systems, prejudice, mental health stigma, and ignorance make access to healthcare difficult. Substantial change only occurs when compassion and education replace stigma and bias. We also need to remember that medical professionals make mistakes. They are practicing medicine; it is okay to seek a second opinion outside of your local medical system and advocate for yourself. Keep all your records, take notes, ask questions, and request the tests you think you need. If they refuse, make sure you document that and have them write it in their records. No one knows your body better than you, and if something seems off, you're probably right. It shouldn't take nearly dying to finally be believed. I am very fortunate to now have an incredible team of doctors consisting of more than 14 specialists, who not only empathetically listen to me, but also do everything in their power to assist me through my conditions. I also have an amazing, home nurse who goes above and beyond each week that she sees me. There are excellent, compassionate medical professionals out there and they are worth looking for.

Contributors

PATRICK ALLEN is a retired CSM division chair. "I find my identity still to be wrapped up in how I defined myself for 30 years. I am exploring how to write fewer words, but trying to say more.

JOANNE BECHTEL grew up in Southern Maryland, and enjoys photography and music.

SYANNE CENTENO has an associate degree in English. She is pursuing a degree in political science and is considering a minor in art history. "My goal is to become a political analyst/writer but I also love creative writing. Recently, I wrote a children's picture book about disabilities. I am currently working on the proposal to start submitting it to publishers. It is definitely a difficult road.

MICHELLE BROSCO CHRISTIAN is a communication faculty member at CSM.

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

GARDY DOMENECH is the shipping and receiving coordinator for CSM. He has been working in mailing and shipping in higher education for 30 years. Taking pictures and woodworking are his favorites hobbies.

JOHN KULIKOWSKI is a professor at CSM.

WILLIAM LOWE teaches literature, Asian studies, and ESL composition at Howard Community College in Columbia, Maryland. Lowe is a poet, fiction writer, and musician. He has published poems and short stories in several journals, including Cold Mountain Review, Appalachian BroadSides, Silhouette, Wakenings, New River Free Press, The Muse, Welter, Little

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ANTHONY OBEDOZA is lead designer/CEO/COO of Southern Maryland Kitchen, Bath, Floors & Design.

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

LYNNE SPIGELMIRE VITI, J.D., PH.D. is a senior lecturer in the Writing Program at Wellesley College.

FISK TYLER is a CSM student.

LARRY D. THACKER is a Kentuckian writer, artist, educator, and reality actor, hailing from Johnson City, Tennessee, where he lives with his wife Karin. His poetry is in over 180 publications including Spillway, Poetry South, The American Journal of Poetry, and Appalachian Review (Appalachian Heritage). His stories and non-fiction are in past issues of Still: The Journal, Longridge Review, Pikeville Review, and Story and Grit. His three fiction collections include "Working it Off in Labor County," "Labor Days, Labor Nights: More Stories," and "Everyday, Monsters" (co-written with C.M. Chapman). His stories have been nominated for Best of the Net and multiple Pushcart recognitions. His books include four full poetry collections; "Drifting in Awe," "Grave Robber Confessional," "Feasts of Evasion," and "Gateless Menagerie," two chapbooks; "Voice Hunting" and "Memory Train," and the non-fiction folk history, "Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia." He is also a cast member of the new

Continued on next page

Netflix original series, "Swap Shop." He earned his MFA in poetry and fiction from West Virginia Wesleyan College. A veteran of the U.S. Army, Thacker has been involved in the field of higher education for 19 years. Visit his website at: www.larrydthacker.com.

JOANNE VAN WIE is a poet who has resided in Southern Maryland for over 20 years. She loves the change of seasons and the way it seems to bring new poems to life each year. Van Wie is the author of "Surfaces, Edges and Openings," a chapbook published by Foot Hills Press.

KIERSTEN WALKER is an English major in her last semester at CSM and plans on becoming an English professor in the future. "I have fallen in love with poetry thanks to a very special professor at CSM and I started writing it myself as an emotional outlet. I hope my words will resonate with you in some way as much as they do with me."

RICHARD WEAVER hopes to return as the writer-in-residence at the James Joyce Pub; his other pubs: Little Patuxent Review, Steel Toe Review, Southern Quarterly, Xavier Review, Loch Raven Review, Pembroke, and New Orleans Review. He's the author of "The Stars Undone" (Duende Press, 1992), and provided the libretto for a symphony, "Of Sea and Stars" (2005). Recently, his 160th prose poem was published. He was a finalist in the 2019 Dogwood Literary Prize in Poetry.

RUDOLPH WOODWARD is a CSM student.



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