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The theme for the fall edition of *Connections* is “HOME”.

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THE MIDDLE

Fiction by Nancy Forest

When they brought her in, she was combative and angry – screaming expletives, resisting efforts to get her to a room. She is a street person, I think, because of the over-sized, ratty camouflage sleeping bag wrapped around her – in August. Faded blond hair, green eyes, 47 years old. They sedated her of course, and when I arrived for my shift, she was asleep. No one spoke of her or went in her room; she was just a body in the bed in room 7.

The ER was busy that afternoon; all the rooms were full, and patients were stacked on gurneys in the hall. There was barely room to negotiate the narrow path between gurneys and medical equipment to get to the patient rooms. It wasn't quite chaos, but it could have descended into chaos with just a little more stress on the system.

From the nurses station I saw her standing in the doorway of her room wild-eyed, and I thought she had the potential to lose control of herself again.

She wanted to be taken back to her bed, and she wanted to know her name. She told me the communications board was down, and she wanted to know where all the voices were coming from. In the midst of telling me about the broken wires from the communication board, she screamed out, “Fuck you, bitch! Fuck you!” She told me she had been running for a long time, she was tired, and now they had gotten her.

Her hair had been recently washed, her face was clean, and her nails were manicured. Her appearance was the biggest nonsequitur in the room.

She was intensely focused on the broken wires on the communication board, and then she looked at me and her face lit up, and she said, “We’re communicating, aren’t we?” I told her we were. “Forty fucking ten,” she said.

I gave her a chocolate chip cookie and helped her drink some juice and went to check on other patients. When I returned both her arms were stretched stiffly in the air, each hand holding part of the cookie.

Continued on next page.

The communication board had gone out again, she said, and the wires were filling the room; she was frightened that the wires would pierce her skin, and that the pain would be unbearable. Clearly she was in trouble; I just didn't know how long her panic would last.

A few minutes later, as if the storm in her head was too fierce to be contained in consciousness any longer, it retreated to another place in her mind, and she said quite calmly, "We're going to tell my story, right?" I told her we were. She said, "We're going to tell the beginning, the middle, and the end."

"How does your story begin?"

She said, "Once upon a time..."

And my heart broke open right there in room 7 – for her, for me, for all the women who have lost their stories along the way.

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Nancy Forest and her husband live halfway up a mountain in Front Royal. With them live 150 pounds of unmitigated joy and love, disguised as two golden retrievers.



TREES

Photograph
By Larry Yates

Trees in a Mesa, Arizona city park.

Larry Lamar Yates has lived in Virginia since his high school years. Since then he has been active with nonprofits and social justice movements, including currently the movement against mass incarceration. In 2012, he published two books, The Scalawag Scholar's Notes on Virginia and a novel, Bloodroot Cantons. Larry is also an amateur botanist who takes an inordinate amount of digital photographs in search of powerful images. Larry has been a member of UUCSV for about 10 years, has served on the Board, and was UUCSV's Treasurer in the early period of the Great Recession.

AT HOME IN THE HARBOR

By Sandy Lore

What a soothing name--Harbor Place. In this case it is the dementia unit of the Naperville, Illinois nursing home. Even if you have learned the combination to punch yourself out the locked exit, you will have forgotten it by the time you get to the doorway. You wonder why you are here and why your children did this to you. Mom's repeated question was, "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

Mom asked it often during the time she spent in Harbor Place. She no longer could live by herself for all the reasons you've already heard about — forgetfulness, fire, and falls. My education about nursing homes and dementia increased rapidly.

"My daughter is coming to get me out of here." I knew that's what she wanted and expected, but she wouldn't think of coming to Virginia to live with us. Her excuse was "I'd never understand those southern accents." After Dad's death, she had managed to live on her own longer than she should have. She finally adjusted — not to dementia — but to Harbor Place, her last home.

Mom was now safe. She got her meds every day although she told the nurses she didn't take pills anymore and offered them to whomever was stuck with making sure she took them. She was always pleasant, smiley, and outgoing, and had developed verbal tics to get her through most situations. "How nice to see you!" or "I didn't know you were coming." She also often repeated, "Don't get old — I'm too old to cut the mustard anymore."

As my little brother Mike was a policeman in the town, he stopped by daily to visit Mom during his lunch hour. Undoubtedly, the staff pulled up their socks by mid-day if they weren't pulled up before then. The place was full of characters — staff and "inmates" (Mom's term) alike. Before anyone else had finished breakfast, one woman left the dining room to go "shopping" in other residents' rooms to pick out some new clothes. She probably had some distant memories of police as she stayed in her room when Mike stopped by.

One of the most memorable residents in Mom's new home was an African-American woman named Jimmie. Upon waking every morning, Jimmie asked, "Where am I? How long have I been here?" The answer to the first question was always the same. The second changed as the years rolled by. When I last saw Jimmie in 2008, she had been there six years. In good shape physically, she could read any crochet directions and spent most of her daylight hours crafting rainbow-colored scarves and doilies for her room.

In addition to the "thief" and Jimmie, an Italian woman of short stature who spoke little to no English lived in Harbor Place. Her one sentence was, "I'm an Italian girl." She was shy, always stood in the background and didn't engage with others even during mealtimes. That changed one afternoon.

On visits from Virginia, I often carried my fiddle along. On this particular day, my niece's boyfriend and I played music in the dining room after lunch. Michael was a professional musician and proud of his dual Irish and Italian ancestry. He could play all kinds of music, and when we played "Old Joe Clark" that afternoon, Jimmie joined in and sang one verse after another. I didn't know the tune had so many lyrics. On and on she went. Mentally, she had returned to her former life in the south. I had finally mastered a bluegrass tune, and this one never ended. By the time Jimmie finished all the verses, I could have played it backwards or forwards.

When "Old Joe" finally ended, Michael smiled at the lovely, quiet Italian woman, and she once again repeated the English words she knew, "I'm an Italian girl." He looked her straight in the eye and replied "I'm an Italian boy," and serenaded her with "That's Amore." What a delicious moment! The "Italian girl" grinned "from wrist to wrist" and looked like she had never been happier. Although she wouldn't savor the memory long, Michael provided her with moments of immense pleasure. Mom smiled the whole time Michael and I carried on. She hadn't lost her long-term memory. I thought I knew what was going through her mind—I'll bet she wished I had stuck with classical violin music.

When I reminisce about that afternoon I believe Michael and I carried all the residents back to a happier time in their lives. Although they now lived in Harbor Place, Jimmie returned to her life as a sharecropper's daughter; the Italian girl may have fallen in love all over again; and Mom wished I had practiced more as a kid. For a short while they *did* go home again.

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Sandy Lore was born in Sterling, Illinois in the last century. After marrying her peripatetic husband 50 years ago, she got to see the world courtesy of his work with the U.S. State Department. Four continents later, she still speaks some English and writes for her own pleasure. She and Mark have two grown children and one almost-grown, way-above-average grandson. Retiring to Winchester in 1999 after they learned there was a neighborhood UU church, they have lived happily ever after in the same house.



A LONG GOODBYE

By Teri S. Merrill

My mother, age 85, was diagnosed with Stage IV lung cancer in April, 2013. It wasn't a total surprise, as she smoked for her entire adult life. My mother's reaction, however, was total denial. She was shocked that she had the "C" word, and in fact, couldn't even say it out loud for weeks.

Her doctor couldn't give her an estimate as to how much time she had, but we all assumed it would be months, not years.

Now, more than a year later, and my mother is beginning to feel some pressure and pain from her tumor, which she chose not to treat. By the time this piece is published, it's probable that she'll be on oxygen and pain killers. We face a very different fall and winter than we faced last year, as we all know that she likely won't be here next summer.

Her diagnosis has made me think about death more extensively than I have before. My father had several massive strokes eight years ago, and he died within four days. We didn't have time to think about his death or plan, we simply reacted.

With my mother's diagnosis, however, I'm seeing how death can be a process for an individual and a family. Where once we talked about children or gardens or weather, conversations with my older sister, who lives with my mother, now often get right to the point: "How is mom doing?"

While I saw my mother at least once or twice a year in the past, I've taken to going back to Illinois every few months, just to spend time with her. And I've kept my activities and commitments here fairly flexible, should she become bed-ridden and I need to get back quickly or for an extended period.

Both our grown children will be flying out to see my mom this fall, knowing it may be their last time to see their beloved "Grandma B" up and about.

All these steps are part of what I recognize as a long goodbye. I see that, in some circumstances, we mourn and struggle and make peace with death long before our loved one is actually dead. I know that's what I'm doing.

My trips back now are a way for me to say goodbye to my mother and to my past. I know that death, when it comes, will take more than my mother. There will be fewer reasons for me to visit, fewer trips to see sisters there, fewer family gatherings. My mother was our cohesiveness. Without her, I'm not sure my three sisters and I will make it a point to see each other as regularly.

I know I won't be going back to the area nearly as often, and when I do go, the place won't feel the same again.

So I'm doing my mourning now when I go back and visit. I take my mother on drives through our hometown of Woodstock, Illinois, making visits to our former church and elementary school, old homes and neighborhoods, the city park, the Catholic high school where all four of us graduated, the Chinese restaurant where I spent hours as a waitress.

My mother loves those drives, and she's content to sit in the passenger seat and let me go where I want, stopping to pause in front of an old building that has been renovated or to marvel at a new subdivision that has cropped up in the country. We chat and laugh and reminisce and enjoy our aimless afternoons, just driving around with no point and no destination.



These are special moments that we've both come to cherish and look forward to. After all, you see...she's also saying goodbye.

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Editor's Note: Teri's mother died September 23, 2014, after a rapid decline. She was lovingly tended by her four daughters. Teri is eternally grateful that she had time to say goodbye to her mom.

Teri S. Merrill is a freelance writer who moved with her family from Dallas, TX, to Winchester, VA, in the summer of 2009. She writes religion and occasional gardening stories for the Winchester Star, is a master gardener with Virginia Cooperative Extension, and is a board member with the Winchester Education Foundation, dedicated to raising funds for the public schools in the City. She has fallen in love with Winchester and the Shenandoah Valley with its four beautiful seasons, and she is very thankful to have found the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Shenandoah Valley.

BOY POWER

By Liz England

Cairo, Egypt, July 6, 2002

For a long time, boys have been on my mind. Maybe as young as nine, when I found out that my last sibling was a girl, I knew my mother had had it with trying for one – a boy, that is. Our new baby sister would join my other two sisters and me in our family making four girls. I figured out that day that I wouldn't ever have any brothers. And so, I decided to find out more about boys. For years, my boy-friends accused me of trying to make them into my brothers. Little did I know then that one day, I would have a son and that he would teach me more about boys than his father, a half-dozen suitors, or my cousins. My boy cousins, especially the three who were older than me, enchanted me with their violence, their freedom, and their sense of being carefree – qualities which I did not possess then.

My son is a power guy. He has power. His talk is the power most often noticed by girls and by me, his mom. He is very careful in the way he talks and writes. He tries hard to figure out the right word, to say the right word at the right time. Once, when he was applying for admission to graduate schools, he wrote, "I want to be where there are people who care about writing." I found that to be a very powerful thing to say. Who really cares how well anyone writes? Well, Sam does; and when it came time for graduate admissions, it seems to have worked that he told them this powerful message. Sam also has physical power. He and many of his friends work out regularly. They all have physical power.

About 15 minutes ago, I hung up from a 30-minute international phone call with Sam. I am in Cairo and Sam is in Urbana, Illinois. He was celebrating his father's wife's birthday. I had requested an appointment to talk with him on the phone. That's the way Sam likes to arrange things. We had a pleasant, crackly conversation, in which he told me about his plans to move to California to start his graduate program at Berkeley, about his summer job in St. Louis, his trip to Morocco with his girlfriend last month, and about our two dogs, now living in St. Louis.

I was thinking in that conversation about how powerful Sam is. In fact, I was thinking that, in all these years of knowing him, all 25 years of his life and most of the nine months that preceded his birth, I have known that Sam is one powerful boy. But it was in the conversation with him tonight that it hit me between the eyes: "Power!" It was in his voice, his use of English, his sense of purpose and control over his own life. He has power over himself and over his world. I think, when it comes right down to it, power was something that his father and I somehow gave him more than anything else.

Of course, I also gave him a trip to Egypt when he was seven years old. We lived in Cairo from 1984 until 1986. Sam and I both fell in love with Cairo and we both still love this amazing city.

About 15 minutes before connecting with Sam on the phone, the doorbell at my apartment rang. I was slow to respond and it rang again. When I finally answered, two boys were standing at my door - one about fourteen, the other about thirteen. They were carrying a very long, thin box and a big garbage bag filled with something. These boys had been sent by someone to install my new curtain rods. Their father was to have been here at ten o'clock this morning for the same purpose; but he never showed up. Of course, he is a man, their father, not a boy. And to me, he doesn't have the power I am thinking about here. Now, two hours after their arrival, these two boys are still here. They're almost done removing the old curtain rod, installing the new one, adding the traverse rod, and hanging the drapes.

Gabriel and Ramani, two Egyptian teenagers, have managed a task that, in the US, would have been performed by a drapery expert with a large toolbox and a big bill. These two teenage boys had one screwdriver, one pair of pliers, a pair of shears, and my fresh-off-someone's-sewing-machine drapes. That was it.

In two hours, they have managed to complete the task with no errors, no mess and no smudges on the drapes. I was just asked by them, for the sixth time, if they could use the sink to wash their hands. Each time they change roles - from carpenter to drapery hanger - they thoroughly wash their hands. They are both bare-footed and they both have shiny, curly black hair and huge black eyes. One is wearing a wedding ring. Neither of them speaks one word of English and yet are able to communicate well enough with me to determine on which side of the wall I want the traverse rod control, how I want the drapes to look, and where to wash their hands. Neither of them ever asked to use the bathroom in the two hours and a little more that they have been here. Sam may well have asked to use the bathroom in that period of time, even if just out of curiosity – to see the hawaggah lady's hammam.

They speak softly and briskly to each other and they work as a team in ways that would impress the most highly critical HR trainer. They are neither friendly nor unfriendly. I would call their demeanor "professional." These are two very young professionals. They move quickly and purposefully. They don't fall off the little kitchen stool they use (instead of a proper ladder); and they don't smoke. They interrupt me only when necessary and know what to do next to complete their task. No one has to tell them what to do.

How did these two powerful young men learn these skills? Did they watch their father; even assist him, since they were old enough to walk? Are they genetically predisposed to this work? In fact, they seem incredibly well suited to what they do. They are, indeed, powerful, too. But they are not powerful like my son.

My son is sassy; these boys, I can imagine, are also capable of being sassy. They communicate a sense of purpose and confidence in their work. This is a characteristic of my

son. Sam is quick with words. As a gifted academic, he knows what word to choose and he chooses it, like a shot. These boys are verbally sure, too. Sam emanates a positive, open spirit; and indeed, these boys have an openness, a naïveté, befitting their age and station.

Sam's intellectual power can be viewed through his imposing physical stature: lanky, tall and imposing in any room. Someone once noted, "Sam seems to know how to work a party. He hasa 'social power.'" And indeed, my son does have this quality.

By contrast, these boys are wiry, thin and small. They hold their heads down when they speak to me. I don't remember when Sam last held his head down.

The future for these boys holds less potential for power than it does for Sam, who has great promise for bringing better understanding to the world through academic research and teaching. Gabriel and Ramani will most likely disappear from the world in the way that millions of young Egyptians do. Even I (who record here their existence in this little narrative) am not planning to ever see them again.

Still, in their way, these boys have as much power as my son. They represent the future and the sense of good, invisible to most of the world, here in Egypt. Every day. In every neighborhood. The power of civility, purpose and confidence is theirs.

The biggest difference between these two sweet Egyptian boys and my son, Sam, is neither their intellectual power

nor their lesser or more fortunate birthright. This would be the easy answer. The real difference between them is the future. Through the path that he chooses in the world, Sam will open the eyes and minds of thousands. He has already done it with published writings listed in his resume. These boys will hang drapes. These are boys who have the power to change the world. But they never will.

Egyptian boys cross paths with an American professor hanging drapes in her house.

American boys wow people and change them, with their articulate words. Boys – such amazing and wonderful creatures.

Oh, one more difference: hopefully, when Sam leaves people's houses, he – unlike his Egyptian drapery hanging counterparts – doesn't offer to empty his pockets and have the hostess search his bags for goodies that he might have stolen from her house, an offer they made and I declined.

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Liz England is a long-time UU and joined UUCSV in 2006 when she moved to Winchester following an appointment at the American University in Cairo, Egypt (2001-05), and one year in Hong Kong (2005-06). Her son, Sam, who inspires this piece, is currently assistant professor (Arabic Language and Literature), University of Wisconsin-Madison, where - as it happens - he was born and dedicated at the UU Church by Rev. Max Gaebler!



BEARLY AWAKE

Photograph
By Nancy Ticknor

A grizzly bear relaxing in the warm sun, Denali National Park, Alaska.

Nancy Ticknor has been a UU since 1989, first at the Fairfax Congregation then at UUCSV since 2003. She is an avid hiker, dedicated Blue Ridge Hospice Patient & Family support volunteer, stronger supporter of Winchester Little Theatre, a member of two choral groups, and a former school psychologist.

THE LANGUAGE OF MUSIC

By Claudia Martin

Claudia Martin recently narrated two concerts by the Cranberry Chamber Ensemble. She submitted the text of her remarks at the concerts for the enjoyment of Connections readers. Here is a reprint of her introduction to the concert.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow once said: “Music is the universal language of mankind”. Why? Because music is the language of human emotions which all cultures share. Brain scans show multiple centers for music in our brain, but no scientist can explain why a certain melody or harmony touches our souls, evoking the whole rainbow of emotions from joy to sadness.

The language of music has a lot in common with spoken words. Both are based on vibrations originated by a sender and recognized by a receiver. These vibrations are sound waves which have many different frequencies and are carried by an atmosphere. There are no songs on the moon!

Both spoken language and music convey meaning by combining individual sounds into phrases, sentences, and even stories. When spoken language and musical sounds are combined in a song, emotional impact is added to the words. Spoken language is formed by combining vowels and consonants. The language of music uses higher and lower pitches forming melodic patterns, and duration of sound, which forms rhythmic patterns. Pitches can either go higher or lower or stay on the same level. From these three choices the infinite universe of music is created. Both words and music have written representations, to conserve the fleeting moments of passing sounds.

Music has one advantage over spoken language: When 7 people speak loudly all at once, it is chaotic. But when seven musicians sing or play together, it can create pleasura-

ble consonance and harmony. Music structure proceeds both horizontally in melodies and vertically in harmonies.

Certain sound combinations evoke specific emotional responses in us, some soothing, some sad, some exciting or frightening. The latter seek to be resolved. There is a plain physical explanation for this: Sound waves with simple ratios of vibrations are more pleasant to hear, sound waves with complicated ratios tend to be exciting or jarring. Some sound combinations form consonant chords, some form dissonance. Some examples: A doubling of vibrations sounds to us like a similar pitch, just exactly high or lower. We call this an octave, in considering the eight note system of a Western scale. Sound waves of a ratio of 4/ 5 form a fifth, of 3/ 4, a fourth. The pitches in between create the motion towards the chord tones, they are action tones. Going up 7 steps creates an exciting, jarring sound, based on the complex ratio of 17 to 18. Western ears are accustomed to a division of sounds into so-called half-steps within an octave. It is called a chromatic, or colorful 12 tone scale. Other cultures are conditioned to hear and perform so-called quarter steps within an octave, a wailing sound. Animals also prefer simple vibration ratios in their music. Each pitch which we hear also contains secondary vibrations, which we call overtones. This produces the different tone colors of various instruments, strings, winds, percussion and vocal chords.

From here, Claudia followed her introduction to more specific remarks on the individual pieces that were played by the Cranberry Chamber Ensemble at their concerts.

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Claudia Martin, a long-time Unitarian, has been a member of UUCSV for forty years. She is an accomplished writer of essays and short stories.



HOME

Photograph

by Mary Carter Haskins