



TOBECO

2016 LITERARY ARTS JOURNAL

CREDITS

The Tobeco staff would like to thank the writers and artists who submitted to this year's journal. We would also like to thank PAGES, Student Senate, English Club, Sigma Tau Delta, Reading for the Cure, Michelle's Café, designer Brenda Stahlman, and the university's students, faculty, and staff for their support.

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Tobeco Literary and Arts Journal is a student organization that strives to enhance the literary and artistic life at the university and within our local community by accepting submissions of poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction, world translations, and artwork. Through this publication, we hope to raise cultural and artistic awareness and to advocate a comfortable and creative environment for writers and artists alike.

The name "Tobeco" is taken from the Native American word for the Clarion River. Through this connection, we are reminded that art is as timeless as the river itself.

We are currently reading for next year's issue. Please send poetry, fiction, nonfiction, or art to: tobeco@clarion.edu

Cover Image by K. Ellinger

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“WHY DO YOU WRITE?”

SAMANTHA BEAL

I write to aspire, to inspire, to conspire.
I write to devastate, recreate, habitate, necessitate,
to mitigate.
To violate, integrate, resuscitate, incorporate.
I write to contemplate.
I write to instigate.
I write to deviate.
I write because I can, because I should, because I
would, because I could.
I can, I should, I would, I could.
I do, I have, I will, I did. I am.
I write. I write and write and write.
I fight. I blight, I smite.
I light. I write to light.
I have that right to light. A God-given right to light.
And to Smite.
And to strike.
And to right.
And to write.
Why do I write?
Who writes?
Who sees the right?
Seeks the right?
Needs the right?
Pleads the right?
Earns and achieves the right?
And then writes?
I do. I write.
I write because I need to feed that right.

BLACK AND WHITE

TESSA REYNOLDS

Victoria's afternoons were black and white. The black and white of the piano keys, the black and white of the sheet music, and the thought of the black and white of the ancient formal dress she would wear on recital day.

The dress was ugly, but Victoria's mother did not care. "Do you know how many Reiners have worn this dress on their sixteenth birthday?" she would ask. Of course Victoria knew. They had this conversation every afternoon when she got home from school. And every day her mother said the same thing: "Your grandmother wore this dress. I wore this dress. Annette and Louisa wore this dress. Your aunt Katheryn wore this dress. Every female Reiner in the last thirty years has worn this dress, and that isn't going to stop with you." To her mom, that was the end of the discussion. Tradition always won.

Victoria smashed down a particularly vicious chord at the thought, and the music room reverberated with the sound. She pounded out another one. It felt good to play them so obviously wrong. Her mother was running errands, but if she had been home she would have stopped and poked her head through the door to point out that volume wasn't everything.

Victoria imagined the conversation in her mind, her mother's perfectly smooth perfectly blonde hair swinging around her chin as her head came through the doorway, eyes wide with the horror of a misplayed note. Piano isn't everything, she retorted to her imaginary mother. The black and white family heirloom wasn't everything.

Her fingers continued to play, calmer now. They knew the piece by heart. Victoria thought that she could play Chopin's "Funeral March" in her sleep without a hitch. She'd better be able to. The recital was sure to be boring enough to send someone off to dreamland.

But of course, playing all the notes wasn't enough for her mother. No, she had to emote. "All the great pianists emote," her mother said, almost as often as she said, "Volume isn't everything" and "It's not a race."

But Victoria didn't want to be a great pianist, and she thought that the wanting was one of the key components of being one.

Too bad she didn't have a choice.

She started again at the beginning of the hateful song, wondering idly as her hands sought the heavy chords whose funeral dirge she was playing. Was it the death of her social life? Perhaps the death of her own hopes and dreams.

More likely it was the death of her relationship with her mother.

She had tried to explain that she didn't want to play. Back in middle school, when she'd been allowed to spend her free time with friends instead of the hulking grand piano, she'd become enamored with the shiny brass instruments that her friends played in the marching band, with their tomato-colored uniforms and tall military hats.

But—"Do you know how many Reiners have played the piano?" That was it. Tradition, as usual, had decided her fate. No Reiners had played an instrument except for the piano and that was the way it would stay.

"I'm not a Reiner!" she'd shouted. "My last name is Armstrong!"

Her father didn't interfere. By that point, on his third daughter, he knew that it was futile. He might not understand his wife's traditionalism, but he had a fearful respect of it, the way one might feel about undertow currents or a tiger shark. It wasn't something to be messed around with.

That was when her practice had been upped to four hours a day. Her mother had thought that if Victoria just played enough, she would learn to love the piano as her sisters and aunts and grandmothers had before her. Victoria's mother was a firm believer in Stockholm syndrome.

She lifted her hands from the keyboard for a moment, listening to the empty silence of the house. Empty like a grave waiting for the casket.

She pressed her fingers down on the keys again (...faded yellow keys like so many skeleton teeth...), and considered the future.

Her mother was already sending out college applications for her to the schools with the best music programs in the country. She was going to be a piano major. She was going to follow in the illustrious footsteps of her female relatives. Her sisters had been docile, willing, but not talented. Both of them were acceptable enough as pianists, but Victoria's mother was convinced that her third daughter was her ticket to stardom.

That was how her mother looked at the future. Victoria looked at it differently; she had ever since her father had come and sat on the end of her bed, looking ghostly pale compared to the black walls and drawn shades.

Your mother expects you to be a piano major," he'd said quietly, musingly, almost as if he was talking to his reflection in the mirror instead of her. "But most people change their majors a few times before they settle. I had four, myself."

She was curled like a shell beneath her lumpy quilt, hiding the tears of the most recent screaming match, hiding the secret anger that was feasting on her soul.

Her father looked at her then, his kind, sweet eyes like warm tea behind his glasses. His hair was a curly brown and his eyes were a sparkling brown, and everything else was freckled. She loved her father with a love that made her heart ache and eased some part of the hatred that she nurtured. She knew in that instant that if her father asked her to be a piano major, she would say yes. She would hate every minute of it, but she would say yes for him.

But he didn't ask that. He did not even suggest it. Instead he leaned over and kissed her forehead, right at the frown that nested between her eyebrows. "I'll pay your tuition no matter what major you choose," he said.

Victoria couldn't say anything for a moment, while she watched her father's eyes. Then, "I'll wear the dress," she whispered. "I'll do the recital."

Her father kissed her again. He didn't say anything else, and neither of them had mentioned the conversation since. But Victoria harbored it in her mind like a sailboat of solid gold.

She would play at the recital; she would wear the dress. She would hate it, but she would do it. And then, afterwards, she would go away to college and she would be free. She let the final chord hang in the empty music room for a moment, could almost see it shimmering in the empty air, and imagined a life free of piano music. The funeral was the piano's own.

JUDGE NOT

MONIQUE DICKENS

People have such difficulty accepting what they're not used to,
yet the only things guaranteed in life are death and change.

Why can't we come to terms with those who are not like us?

Closed minded as we are, yet we claim to be

loving and accepting of all people.

Lies.

God told us to "Judge not, lest ye be judged"

but we all do it.

From the moment that we become aware of our conscious
we subconsciously scrutinize everyone and everything in sight and automatically form an opinion.

We are like flesh-covered machinery,

taking in information,

observing and concluding,

often making asses of ourselves by spewing stupidity from the sides of our necks.

But listen:

Although we can make an effort to reduce the amount of stupidity emanating from our craniums,

the fact of the matter is...

it'll never end.

The root of all judgment is ignorance and hatred,
lack of knowledge and the unwillingness to dismantle preconceived conceptions planted within us by peers,
environments and the media.

Oh, but our biggest influences stem from our parental units,

just in case you didn't know.

Children do not have the capacity to hate naturally;

they are taught.

Those evil, venomous thoughts are leaked from the lips of those who raise them.

And until the cycle of ignorance is broken, the hate will never end.

We need to teach our children love, compassion and acceptance of all creatures:

obese or petite,
tall or vertically challenged,
Argentinean or Ethiopian,
“gay” or “straight”,
disfigured or able bodied.

I pray for the day when God’s vision of all His children loving not only one another but themselves
comes to fruition.

Why?

Because one can’t accept another without accepting thyself.

One day, it won’t seem odd for a girl to kiss her lady,
a teenage mother won’t be chastised,

a Caucasian woman can date her African American boyfriend without fear of disownment from her mother
and the stares will subside when a legally blind student walks around campus with a zebra walking cane.

Life is meant to be lived to the fullest without fear of judgement from those who haven’t walked in your shoes.

Live.

Love.

Laugh.

Enjoy your life.

Feel free to be whoever you are and don’t worry about the spectators and haters

’cause all they can do is jeer from the sidelines;

they’re not running this race for you.



GOLDEN GIRLS

YOUNG LOVE

CASSIDY BLACK

romanticize the coffee she drinks
until she remembers to leave.
curl your fingers around her skinny
wrists and kiss her knuckles
so she makes your heart her
home. don't forget to keep her
warm if she forgets to breathe.
trace her spine with your lips.
she says your name but you don't
feel its familiarity anymore.

FINALLY YOU UNDERSTAND LIGHT

CASSIDY BLACK

I believe in boys with avalanche
throats and rattlesnake tongues.
I believe in weaving our golden veins
together until our wrists bend like
a dozen wilted roses. I believe in
sinking into myself the way each
sunset melts into a sapphire sky.

I believe in our tiny existence.
and I believe in waiting for even the
smallest sparks to ignite.

THE WORST PERSON AFTER COFFEE

TREY KNARR

You turn into the worst person after coffee. I've heard about men becoming brutal, savage, antagonistic animals after a few pitchers, but you are none of that sort. At least they have the excuse of incoherence – you are fully aware. You know what you did, all the things you said.

No, you turn into that other sort of animal. You get bitchy, twitchy, arrogant and accusatory. You say, “Oh, I'm enjoying this. I like the lighting. I couldn't dream of being anywhere else,” all the while obsessing over the time with a yawn and a wink to your watch.

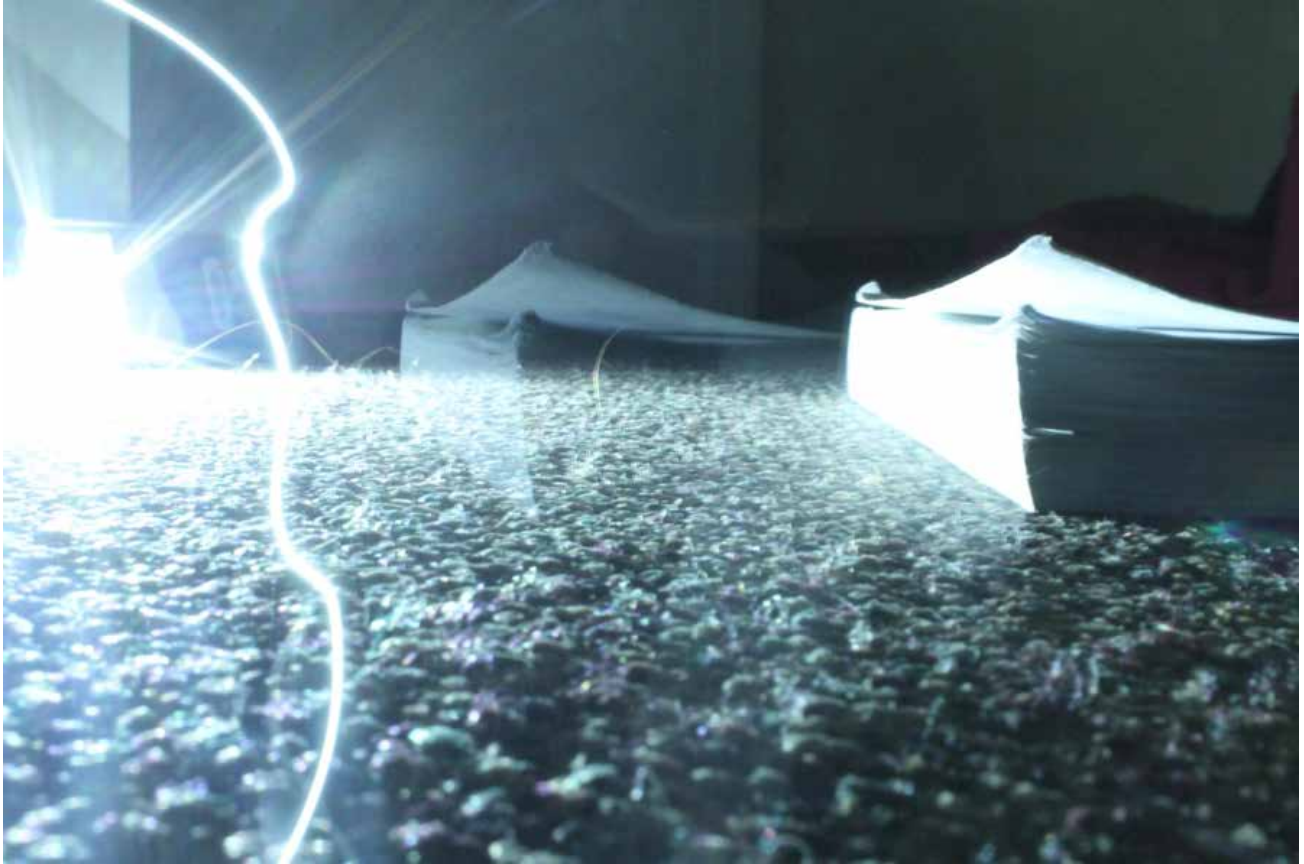
But it's not like I don't like you. You have impeccable tastes in music and fashion. Was that you who told me it was better to go with a solid blue than stripes, regardless of how complimentary the colors were? I believe you also showed me there was more to Bowie than just “Changes” and *The Labyrinth*. For that alone I'll never meet another better.

I remember the first time I realized what coffee does to you. You pounded on your chest like a rabid King Kong, berated all the old men in their beige, underestimated slacks, nursing home pallor compounding the urine-and-vitamin aftershave. You might have whispered something between idle threat and vague sexual offer (actually, you did, but that took a backseat; I forgot which it was closer to). The photos of jazz luminaries and downbeat writers pecking away added a subdued respite from the density of beards and square frames.

When the barista got to us you barked, “Two tall café au laits, no whipped cream.” Did you forget – I prefer a latte with whip? I doubted things could get any worse. You proved me wrong, almost getting us booted in the process. I get that these business meetings can be stressful, but when you pressed that fiver onto the counter and slid it forward, I thought that Formica would be ground to a pulp.

I used to accept the adage, “Don't deal with me till I've had my coffee.” The aftershocks of that first sip still ring in my ears and play in my dreams like some deleted scene from a Director's Cut. You raged about the “ethics of merging” and the “repercussions of buying out,” yet your cognac eyes panned with such force that either you're naïve or plain ignorant. After that first cup, and a never-ending polemic denouncing the “left-wing enemies of corporate personhood,” I'm not sure I'm a good fit for this organization after all.

I'd still like to meet up for that game of Ultimate Frisbee, though – you say you start at two, Thursdays and Saturdays?



SUCCESS

BROOKE TOMI WAMSLEY

Bright white lights on a jet black canvas,
Clouds, envious of their gleam,
Try to cover them up so they can no longer glisten.
The stars will still find a way to sparkle through,
Through the opaque night sky.

INTERWOVEN FABRICS

KAITLYNN SASS

Life changing encounters are a daily occurrence. This I learn early, looking from the eyes of my four-year-old self, an explorer seeing the rainforest or ocean floor for the first time. My play group friends do not understand why I choose to skip story hour every Thursday to go see Miss Mary. I never call her Miss, but I make them use the formality, like a permanently attached prefix. First-name only is a special privilege reserved for me alone.

My friends do not understand that I have my own special story hour, spent uncovering photos and letters eighty years older than me. Paper, I think, is not meant to be that fragile. Like the eggshell I bit into the Easter before, not understanding that the outer cover should be peeled away prior to being consumed.

Mary, at eighty-nine, is the oldest person I know, making her a rarity. A unicorn among a cluster of horses. I absorb her every word.

"I don't know why I kept this one," Mary says, confusion deepening the wrinkles around her soft brown eyes. She is holding a faded letter, written in sloppy print. Attached, a photo of a young man and woman, dressed in old fashioned clothing like what I would put on my paper dolls.

"Who are they?" I ask.

"That's me!" she exclaims. Shock dominates my face. My childish brain, lacking worldly experience, has never considered that she must have been young once. "The man is someone I once went with. That means I dated him." She whispers the last five words to me conspiratorially, like it is a secret of national importance.

I think that over. "Why didn't you marry him," I drawl, meaning to embarrass her, or elicit another wonderful story. Instead, her face reddens and she seems to lose her ability to form coherent words.

"Well... I... Um..." She clears her throat and laughs. "I considered it, but I realized we just weren't right for each other. It was like fire and ice, the two of us together."

"Why didn't you marry anyone? Didn't you like any of the boys you went with?" The phrase sounds odd rolling off my own tongue.

"Can I tell you a secret?"

I nod.

She seems to choose her words carefully. "I've found that I don't much like any boys."

I nod again. Only later do I realize the meaning hidden deep inside her words and the enormity of her sharing this with me. She introduces me to the realm of grown-up thoughts.



RECREATION OF JOHN PIKE'S *DUBROVNIK, OLD CITY*

PETALS

ALYSSA MARVA

Petals, carefully placed.
Their soft blends of lavender, cream
Silk threading, intertwined
In gracious hugs, peaking
Between evergreen speckles.

Bouquets with simple ribbons
Lined perfectly in rows, like baby ducklings,
On display in the back of the church,
In hues too bright for the mourners
Clothed in layers of dampened sweaters
And suits.

Flourished cards soak
In the arms of the perfumed flowers,
Whispering affectionate memories
Of sweeter times.
Extravagance equating
Condolence.

EARTHLY DESCENT

KAYLA SHAFFER

Hanging on a thin branch,
Waiting for the perfect moment to
Plummet like a parachuter from
Its perch in the sky.

Like molasses dripping
From a tablespoon, it begins
Its descent. The final life
Slipping out in one
Fell swoop while thudding
On the cold, damp ground.

Lying there in all its
Red glory: a bright flash
Against sick grass, this
Ruby red gem has one
Purpose. To break down
Into nothing, returning to
The Earth from where it came.

UNFRIENDLY ENCOUNTERS

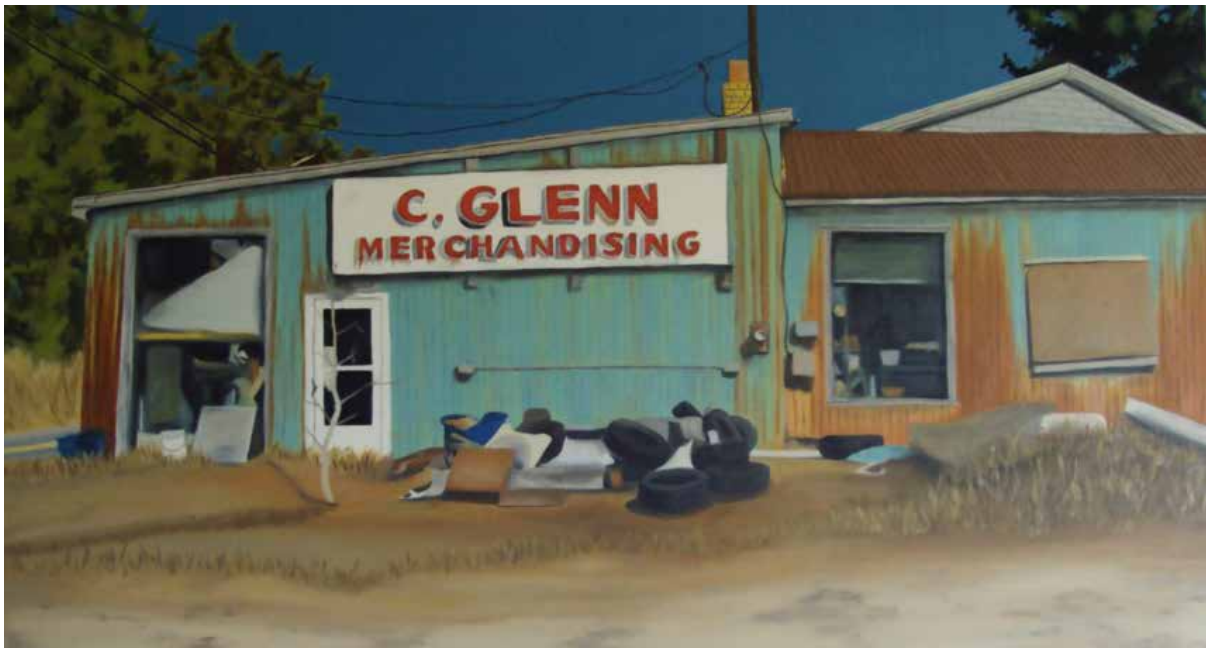
KAYLA SHAFFER

I sit, amazed
At the continuous
Babbling of words, as
They spew out like lava.

My silence means nothing.
There seems to
Be a broken piece
In this flesh colored machine
Casually resting across from me.

Are you ok? plays
Like a song stuck on repeat,
Echoing against the
Gray blue bricks.

Barely glancing up,
I mumble out words
Without realizing
How easy it is to
Shut feelings off like
A light switch, putting
People in the dark.



BUILDING



TANKS

THE STREET

SAMANTHA BEAL

It's amazing. Sometimes you see people who are bad, and you know nothing about them. You blame them, you reject them. You swear they're the dirt of Hell. But then you sit down beside them and you offer them some candy. You talk to them. You come to see where they went wrong. Sometimes, even why they went wrong. And you forget. You forget they're the bad people, and you're the good person. You forget you loathe them. You forget to reject them. You just forget.

You walk on two sides of the street only to realize you've got to cross the same crosswalk. Though you pass each other, though you're looking in opposite directions, for a split second, you're on the same plane. Yes, you've both made mistakes. Yep, you've both gotten into trouble. You pass each other, you look at each other, you recognize this. You understand.

And then it's gone. You have to walk on, you have somewhere to be. But for that one second, you are no better. You are no worse. You are exactly the same. You were and are and am and will be. You regret, and they regret. You don't, and they don't. It's all the same. You both understand. And when you walk away, you chose not to. That's fine, it's not a wrong thing to do. It's what we do, it's what we were meant to do: To have our differences, to think, "We're right," and, "They're wrong." We're all criminals and we're all innocents. We are all man, and man's greatest enemy.

I don't know. Maybe it's not true. I think it's true, though. And in the end, that's what it comes down to: the verdict. Who's right, who's wrong? If you chose to be wrong, then you are wrong. If you chose to be right, you at least have a chance to be so.

Make sense?

No?

Well. We must have already walked on.

POEM TWO

TREY KNARR

Inhaling until it gives them headaches.
Sucking in until they can't breathe anymore.

What do you do?
When you get bored and frustrated
and time seems to drag on
Call it a game.
The way the night takes its time to reach
the end

But keeps you wide awake in its grips.
Feeding a tragic conclusion
caught up in its hands
broken and frail like talc.

Sitting by the market,
lending grace to madness, falling out of love
You've been warned, time and time again
to only come around in cold sunlight

Or when the flesh-toned majority are at
the peak of their powers

TRAVELING

THERESE HOLZAPFEL

"Wadaya want sweetie?"
Black-lacquered nails
drum on the counter.
Coils of cigarette breath
blend with the tendrils
of frayed red hair.

"What
Do
You
Want?"

As if I am slow,
corrupted air
snaking from
the sloppy red slash
of her mouth
with every word.

I want gasoline to not be my dinner.
I want the sun to come out like in the song.
I want the car radio to work.
I want it to be my car.
I want to go home.

I nudge
two wrinkled ones
onto the
cracked white counter.

Black Nails raises
threadbare eyebrows.

"Mountain Dew please, ma'am,"
I say,
and make a smile happen.





THE RUNNER

MICHAELA BUSH

My midnight-blue Charger ripped a hole through the fall night, kicking up crumpled leaves along the road. Behind the wheel, I was being completely immature; I knew this. Running away would never solve problems, it never did --except for that time I outran the neighbor's German Shepherd -- but here I was.

The back roads granted a guaranteed desolation, so before I could miss my turn, I slammed on the brakes and my poor car skidded several feet before yanking itself from the asphalt and up into the hard dirt. Back here, the only living beings I would come across would be me, myself, and I, so I wouldn't get caught by the police for speeding quite as easily. I punched my accelerator and felt a snippet of satisfaction and calmness when the car's speedometer ticked to a 100-degree-angle and then past it.

As a baby, I'd been given up to the state for adoption. Fifteen foster homes gave up on me; I was a runner. Breaking a mug would send me running for hours; fights between the foster parents always sent my feet pointing towards the nearest highway that could get me the furthest. My first girlfriend, when I was fifteen, was a typical 'bad girl' and when she wanted me to go clubbing with her one Friday night, I balked, and then I ran from her, too. When my second boss wrongly accused me of stealing from their rather tumbledown convenience store, I ran instead of getting to the bottom of the issue. I never found out *what* the bottom of the issue was, either.

Remembering my second boss made my foot compress the accelerator more, and now the woods flanking the dark dirt road were just blurs dimly lit by my headlights. A long, straight expanse opened in front of me, not devoid of dips and lurching humps

that nearly sent my car airborne. I'd been a runner for the family that finally adopted me, too: when I didn't get accepted to their first-choice college, I ran for five hours before getting so lost I had to call their oldest daughter to come find me. My adoptive family had not been abusive, far from it; but I'd been so scared of disappointing them that I would run anyway. It seemed to be in my blood; to flee just like my biological parents had fled responsibility over me. The one time I'd succeeded in my escape attempts? When I'd thrown a ball at the neighbor's house and broken their window; *that* was when I'd outrun the German Shepherd. They never did find out the culprit, either.

I shivered at the thought of the snarling monster, saliva dripping from its fangs as it reached to grab me. Kind of like the reality that tried to grab me. As a thirty year old who had finally managed to stop running for once, today was a punch in the gut.

The manager at the local gas station had pulled me aside today. When the ritzy-dressed, rotund creature emerged from his den, it usually wasn't a good thing.

"I'm your boss, Riley – you know that. And I have *my* boss. Well, ah..." The man had shifted uncomfortably in his seat, which had creaked. I wanted to jump up and leave right then, but I'd been stuck to the seat. He cleared his throat and continued. "My boss's twin daughters are entering the job force, and he needs two positions cleared for them; he won't have it any other way. It seems like you were on the list. This is your two-week notice. I'm sorry."

I had stared at him for a moment before wordlessly nodding and leaving. Corruption at the office, typical. I'd been driving since then. I didn't know where I'd run, if I'd even leave the area I resided. I just needed to get away.

As I considered deciding exactly why I was fleeing, I let my attention drift back to the long stretch of road and saw a sharp curve, which seemed to speed up to meet me. I slammed on the brakes, using every centimeter of the single-lane road, skidding on clumps of leaves that were still wet from yesterday's rain. The rear of my car swung around and dropped harshly to the left side, and the rest of my car finally stopped, resting partway into the ditch. My seatbelt, almost in a delayed response, grabbed my shoulder and hauled me backwards against the seat. The shaded outline of my hazel eyes focused in the rearview mirror, and I sat in shock for a few minutes. When reality came to hit me upside the head – if anyone else came barreling around that curve, my car was as good as obliterated – I forced my short legs out of the door, which would hardly open because of the awkward position of the car. I squeezed out of it and huffed, watching my breath puff into the chilly air. The clear night sky above the road was flanked by nearly-bare tree branches that reached to cup the stars. Shakily, I pulled my cell phone from my hip pocket and called a coworker – well, ex-coworker.

"Hey, Jeremy?" I asked, thankful he picked up. "Do you think you could come pull me out of a ditch, or do I need to call a tow truck?"

The voice on the other end of the phone sighed. "Yeah. Where are you?"

"That dirt road off of Baker Street," I said.

"Okay, be there in fifteen. You weren't running because of what happened, were you?"

"Maybe, maybe not," I shrugged in the dark. "But hey – thanks, man. I owe you one."

"Maybe this is a sign you should stop with the running business," Jeremy grumbled before he hung up. And maybe Jeremy was right.

THE LEFTOVERS OF A ROOMMATE

JOHN DOBSON

Red Indoor hammock
Stolen smoking robe
Scratches on the couch
Litter box from the worst cat
Light box with paint spilled over it.

17 jello cups hot glued together
A plastic case full of used paint
Three pairs of dirty shoes
Sugar skull vodka full of ants
A Box of empty condoms.

Broken ink jet printer
“Borrowed” bike with no chain
A peace pipe embedded in the door
Piano bench with flask inside
A Fishbowl full of bottle caps.

MUSIC BOX

CAITLIN MEANS

Naptime with grandma has a ritual.
We would wind up her cylindrical, glass, mirrored, music box
To help put us in the mood for sleep.

The mirrors would take the room in, as the box would spin.
An unnamed melody would fill the silence;
Like the song of a merry-go-round.

The crystal hummingbird on top floated above the
Glassy surface of a pond, reflected.
A flower turned in its spot, patiently
Waiting for the hummingbird to take a sip.

As drowsiness came over us, the box
Would know, and the melody
Would slow until we fell into sleep.

Now the box sits and waits to be wound.
The hummingbird has a scar of glue where it has been
patched
From the several times it snapped off its base.

On my dresser, it collects dust, like
The haze of the distant memory of my grandma and me
Asleep in her bed at naptime.

A SUMMER'S PAIN

BECK MULLEN

It was the summer I fell in love for the first time.
It was also the summer I got surgery for the first time.

I remember the taste of the red popsicle on your lips.
I also remember the taste of the stitches in my throat.

I remember your sweet scent as it rushed through the warm air between us.
I also remember the scent of the overly Cloroxed room as my feet touched the cold floor.

I remember the feeling of how high you put me in your life.
I also remember the high from the codeine infused medicine.

I remember the pain of you leaving.
I remember the pain of not breathing.

I wish I had only gotten surgery that summer.



I don't
feel
like
ME

WILLIAM

CHRISTINA MEYER

Doing stupid things wasn't a habit of Shay's. Yes, pushing someone down a hill or licking a frozen pole until her tongue burned were never good ideas. However, this was something else entirely. Her mission was not only reckless, devious, and every kind of sin her teacher could come up with to yell at her for during recess. It was treason.

Her conscience had warned her, of course, numerous times. Shay still didn't budge. William was more than her friend. He was special. Her conscience of all people should know that friends don't leave friends behind.

The rescue plan was simple really. Just lift the hinge and they would be off down the side roads to her base at the warehouse. The tricky part was timing. Stink was usually home when she got back from school, so Shay would have to wait until his cursing would fade off into loud snores. A master trouble maker would have no problem with this plan. Unfortunately, while Shay was a master at getting into trouble, past experience had proven her not too well at getting out of it. Her hands were clumsy enough on their own without the added nervousness to soak her hands.

Despite this, she had to try. She wouldn't be able to live with herself if she didn't.

One could smell the enclosed yard before seeing it. It was relatively small and to the left of a dirty brick house. Through the rusty iron fence, random broken objects created a palace around a small crate seated on a slab of concrete. A single crooked tree shaded the entire yard, hiding whatever junk that could not be seen upfront. Shay's eyes locked on the small white pile of fur sitting in a pile of garbage by the house. That was William.

Every ounce of reason attempted to hold back Shay's legs only to be torn away by her determination. Jitter bugs danced in her throat and she froze. What was she thinking? She couldn't do this. From across the dirt wasteland, William lifted his head to watch her with his dull eyes. There was a silent understanding between them, like two lost sailors finding each other in the ocean. He was just as lonely as she was. His tail twitched then laid still.

Sudden clarity reached her. The sound of the chains coming undone were not as loud as the wretched howling that crept through her windows at night. Her fumbling hands were not as dirty as the hands that previously wore orange slime under the nails after scratching his head. Stronger than the others, the soiled concrete where he made his bed was not as hard as the anger in her heart.

At first, William did not help. For a furry four legged toddler, he was quite good at evading capture. Time was limited so Shay put into action plan B. The moment the treat had come out of her pocket, he was willing to cooperate. He was as easy to lift as a wiggly melon, but Shay managed to get him securely tucked in her arms.

"Hey you! What are you doing with my dog?"

Stink's figure was emerging from his den in all of his grizzled, sweaty glory and Shay had no time to think when she really needed to. Her feet took the lead, sending her through the gate and down the street. William squirmed, his long nails digging into her skin. Shay didn't care. No amount of prison time would compare to what Stink was going to do to her if she got caught.

Her grey neighborhood offered many places to go, yet every blocky building looked the same in her rush. Randomly Shay picked a street and pounded past something that looked like a thrift store. It was a reminder that the warehouse was close. Maybe it would all work out after all.

Life is a funny thing. It's selective of its victims like a temperamental shower. Whatever caused her to not tie her shoes that morning led to that shower going from hot to cold in a split second of pain and confusion on hot sticky pavement. If Shay hadn't admitted it during all those times before, she knew it now. Doing stupid things really was a specialty of hers.



TUESDAY

MONIQUE DICKENS

Staring blankly ahead.
 Absorbing everything
And nothing.

Sighing deeply,
 Choking back
 The thoughts,
Not wanting to relive them.

Slumps onto the bed,
 Buries face in fabric.
Screams unheard.

Chest cavity convulsing,
 Metal in hand.

5 O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING

WILLIAM VANBEEK

It was still dark outside when
I jolt awake to thunder upstairs.

It was a familiar sound,
walls being punched in, glass shattering all around.

Tripping out of bed, but keeping quiet as a mouse,
I quickly scurry to my brother's room across the hall.

An hour went by,
or so it seemed.

We were sitting on my brother's
small twin sized bed.

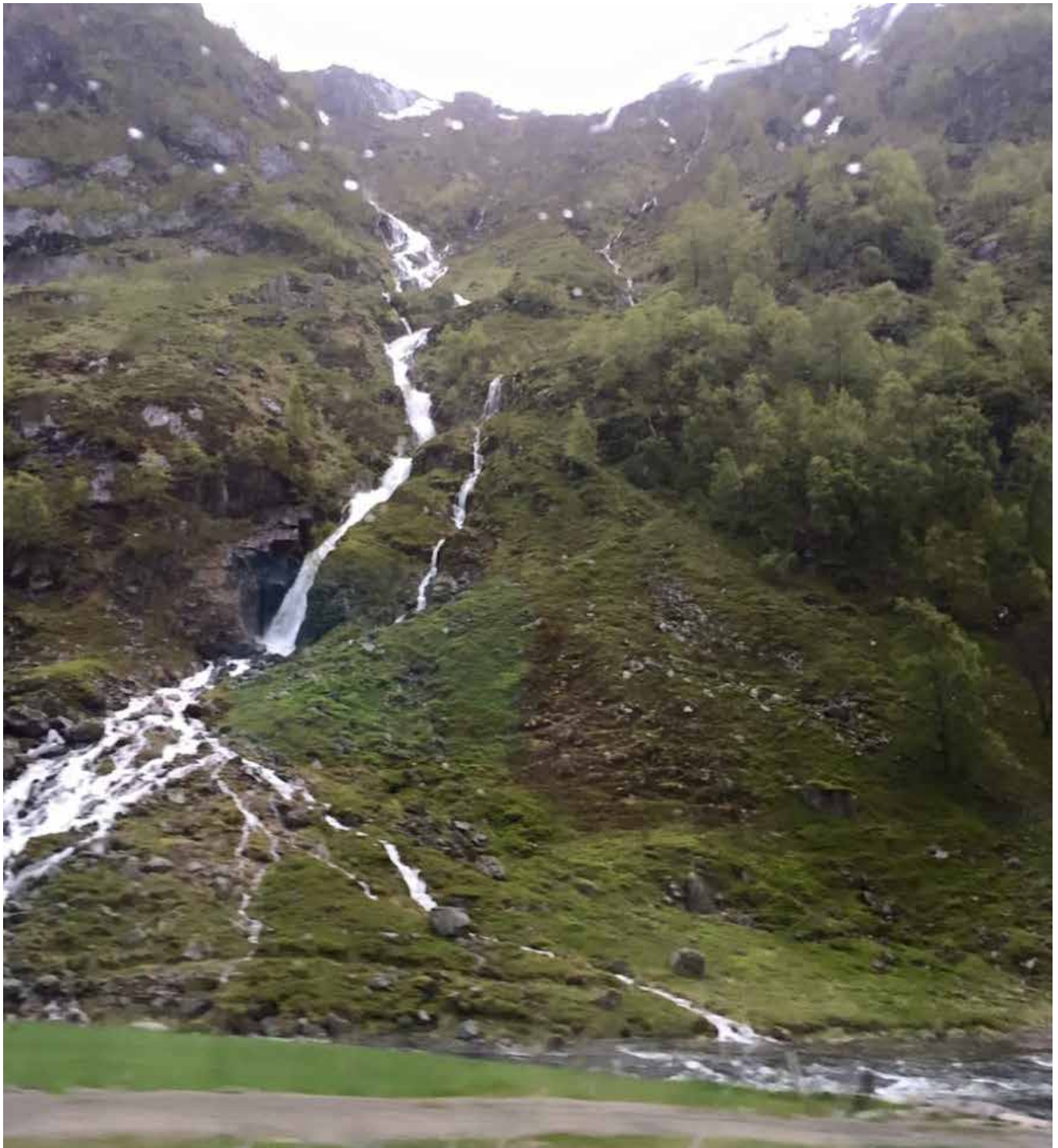
When a minute of silence came,
I held my breath to listen.

The faint sound of old stairs
and my entire body began to quake.

WANDER

JUSTIN YATES

The Earth moves beneath my feet,
Each step a mantra to stride
Forth towards unknowable knowledge.
I'm not looking for anyone nor
Is anything seeking me on this
Dusty Road, Quiet Wood, Breezy Meadow.
I Wander and Wonder with Eyes,
With Soul, the magnificent
Creatures and Sites that each
Mile shows. On the Sidewalk
I see Families, Students, People
Who Wander like me but
Step towards the Future,
Not seeing the Now and Here.
If they slowed their pace they
Wouldn't glance at blurs but
Admire the Masterpiece Hiding
Right in front of them.
Those Stars, Moonlight, Lampposts
Glowing in Night's elegant Veil;
Or Dawn's painting of the sky
Soft hues of Pink, Orange, Blue.
Parting of the Silver Frost from
Green Grass as Morn splits
The entwined lovers. The Lake
Once a seamless Night Sky
Mirrors the radiant Sun.
Others call me Aimless,
Vagabond, "No Where Man,"
Blind to Society. But Society is
Blind, if they could see this
Life wouldn't be a Mystery.
I Wander because my One Life
Was empty, Now I've lived
One Thousand times Full,
Feeling the Heartbeat of the World:
The wind, the tree, the water,
Everything with Emotion breathing
Life. Search thyself with Wander
And see Wonders surround
You.



YOUNG MAN

JENNIFER NUTTALL

Why don't my friends want to play with me anymore? Don't they like me? Did I do something wrong? My mama is crying all the time. Big fat tears that plop on the newspaper as she reads it. Papa is always angry. His jaw clenches at the same time as his fists as he yells into the phone when talking to his friends back home. My friends stop inviting me to play with them. I watch them out the window like a punished puppy while they run to the park down the street without stopping to ask if I want to go. I am not sure what I did to make them feel badly, but I hope I can fix it. I will do better, I promise myself.

I clean my room better than I ever have before. Papa loses his job and becomes angrier. I take out the trash every day for a month. Mama cries harder and calls home more often to talk to her sisters. I take treats to school for my friends. They don't pick me to be on their teams and they stop coming over to my house to play.

I am confused. I am not sure what I can do to make everything better. As my mama, papa and friends seem to get sadder, angrier and more distant I begin to notice other odd things. The people on the sidewalk that move to the other side of the street instead of walking past us; the neighbors not waving at me when I go out to walk to school; the teachers giving me worried guilty glances. It is all so strange and I cannot piece together what I have done to cause all this.

I had a girlfriend. My very first. Her name was Marie. She had long straight blonde hair that hung like a perfect yellow curtain down her back. Her eyes were the blue of the ocean mama and papa took me to see when we first got to America. I liked that when she smiled at me those eyes sparkled like the flecks of glitter left on the classroom floor after our Valentine's Day party. I liked how she smelled of lemons and sunshine.

She passed me a note the other day that said "I can't be your girlfriend anymore. My mom said your kind is dangerous and I have to stay away. I am sorry." I don't know what my kind is. I don't think of myself as especially dangerous. I have always heard my mama tell people I am her stick figure boy. All arms and legs, but no muscle. Like a colt, is what Papa always says.

Now I am more confused. I have made up my mind to ask Mama and Papa tonight why everyone is upset and no one likes me anymore. I hope they are not crying or yelling when I get home. Then it happens, in the hallway after school, I hear a teacher talking about me. He says that he knows how hard things are for my family, but that we had to expect it just months after September 11th.

I know I have heard that date before. I am not sure where, but maybe the television, or Mama and Papa. I head home determined to get to the bottom of this. I ask my mama when I walk in the door what this September 11th is. She looks at me for a long time. Her eyes older and sadder than I remember. For the first time I notice the fine grey hairs like silver tinsel peeking out of her beautiful black mane. I notice the wrinkles on her face like the pages of my notebooks when I pull them from the bottom of my backpack. She tells me to wait until my papa gets home. I hear her whisper to him when he walks in the door and he calls me down to the kitchen.

I am afraid. I don't know why, but I fear that whatever I am about to hear will change things for me forever. I want to tell Papa not to tell me. I want to pretend that I know nothing and continue on with my life as it has been. I fear this speech, but at the same time I feel this urgent need to hear it.

My Papa tells me of the day of September 11th. Of the men who highjacked airplanes and took human lives. The more he tells me the older he looks. His eyes get dull, his shoulders slump and his voice gets very soft like the old men I hear sitting on the bench outside the barber shop. This, he explains to me, is why everyone is treating us differently. We are from the same part of the world as those men and the nation fears us right now because of what others from our country have done.

This angers me. I did not highjack an airplane. I did not murder anyone. I am a child. I love America. My Mama and Papa are not highjackers or murderers. I begin to scream and cry. Raging at the world that would so carelessly cast us in the same lot as these men without seeing the differences between us. It was this day that I grew up. Not when I shaved for the first time, found my first armpit hair or kissed sweet Marie for the first time on the cheek. Today was the day I became a man. A man who vowed never to look at one person and see all other people similar to them. I would look at each person in their own light.



GIVING UP

BROOKE TOMI WAMSLEY

If you're loud, you're out of ideas.

If you're out of ideas, you're out of motivation.

If you're out of motivation, you're out of inspiration.

If you're out of inspiration, you're out of hope.

If you're out of hope, you might as well be dead.

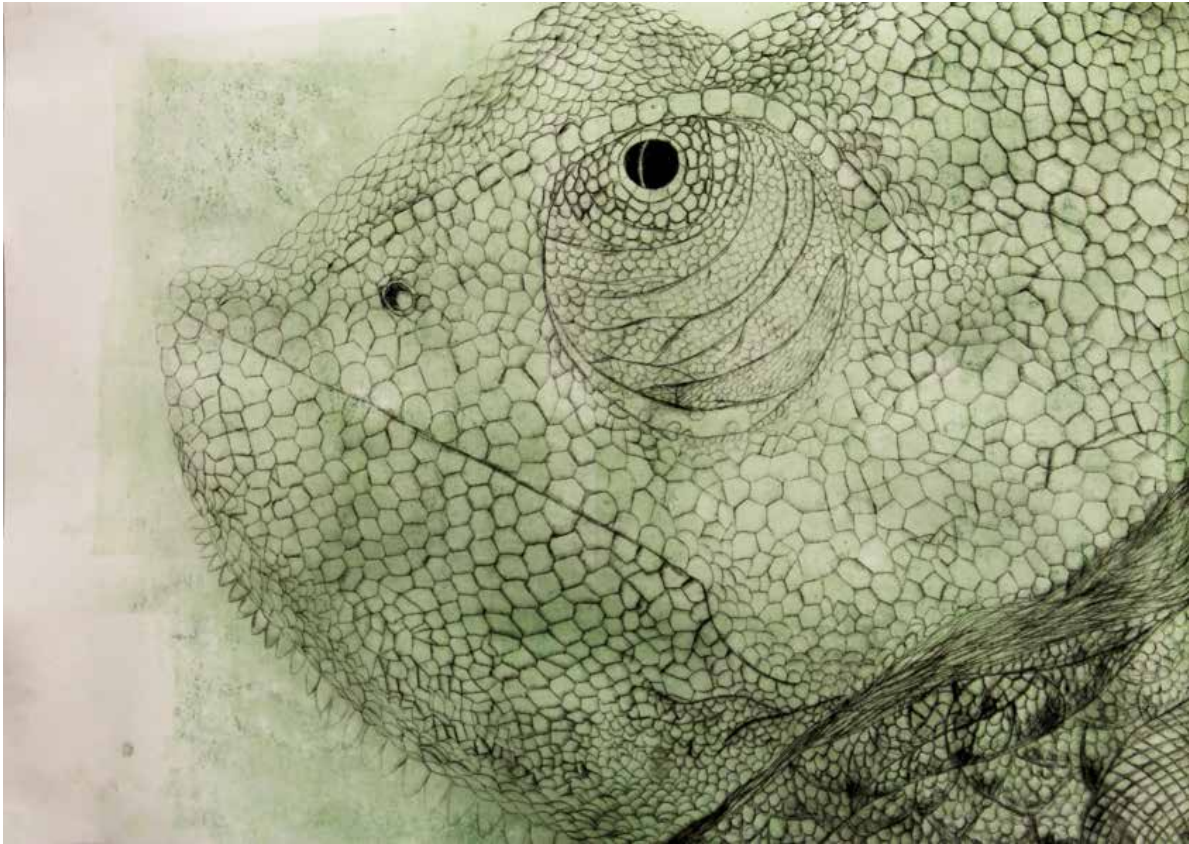
And if you're dead, someone's gonna eat the slice of cake

You left in the fridge.

FAMILY REUNION

KAYLEEN MERICLE

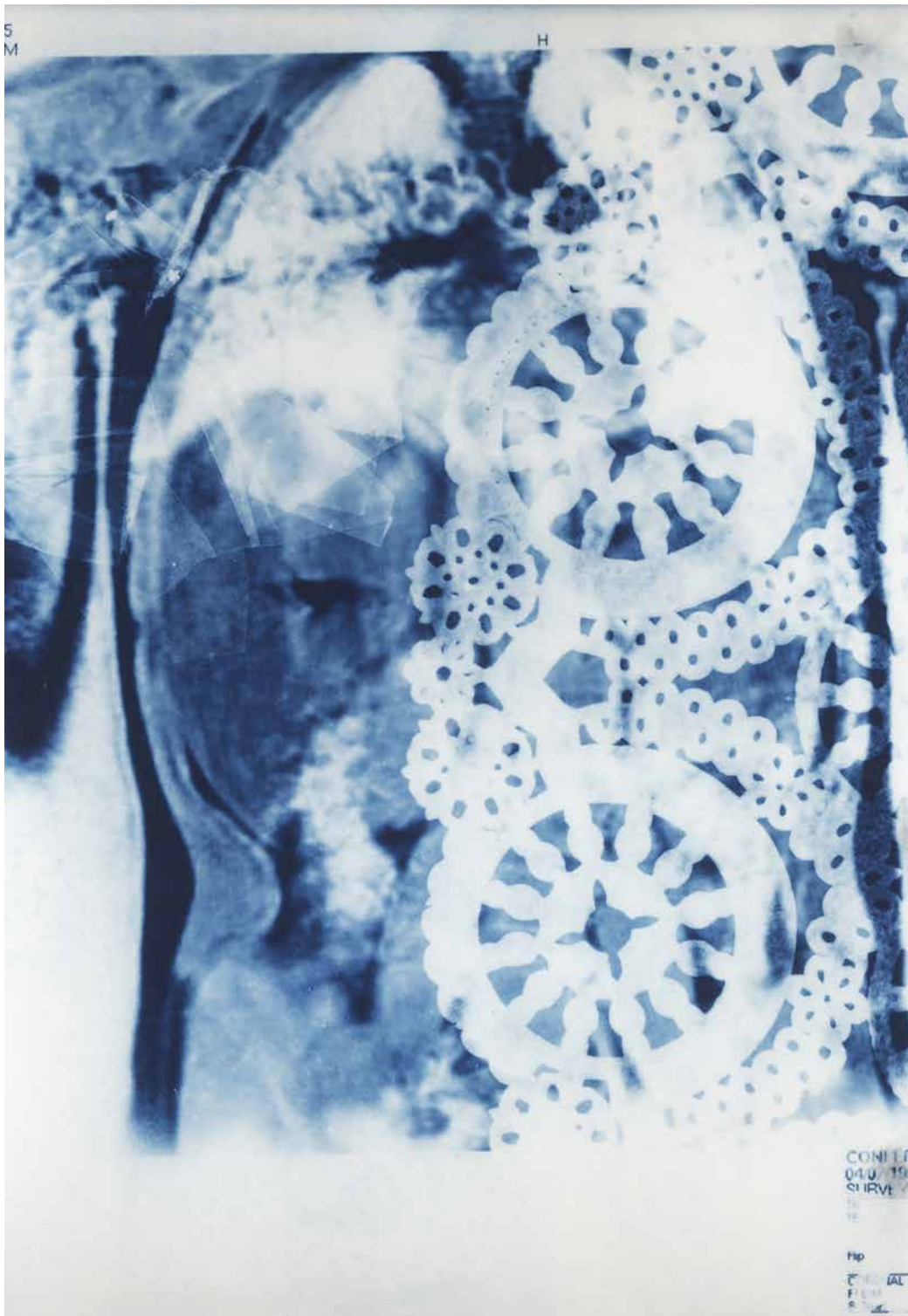
I said I would come while scrolling Facebook,
Cursing the damned newsfeed the whole ride here.
Broken gravel, sharp under striped flip flops,
Leads way to horseshoe pits, smoking huddles.
Go and get me a plate – toss it over
Here. Yeah I said hello already.
Flip flops in hand, feet play with dry, green grass
Swing creaking as soles slide against light sand.
Find shade beneath a looming tree, don't
Bother me, crap! A glare on my dull screen.
Wooden gazebo draws them in, clustered
While I sit on a rusted steel seesaw
That's green instead of red – lime green stings eyes
Against dark emerald trees, loss of clarity.
Baby cousin hands pulling me forward
Sand and dirt, brown-black sludge, bugs and hugs.
Rather this than listen to buzzards screech
While leering at texts over my shoulder.
I don't even know that one's name.
Split up rations in a saran wrapped cage.



CHAOS EPISODES

IMARII ANDERSON

Like a pot set over a fire
my stomach boils,
and the bile rises and sits at the bottom
of my esophagus.
Constricting my breath,
As it tries to escape
My body.
Chaos whirls and moves
throughout my brain,
unable to stop it all;
Helpless to my own nerves,
all I can do is wait.



A GRUESOME SIGHT

MEL TWAIN

There she lies
Right in front of me on a snow colored cot
Helpless like a newborn child
The once lively woman who frolicked amongst the flowers
Was now a decrepit skeleton waiting patiently for the Lord
to call her to her enteral resting place
Lifeless
Much like students in an 8am classroom
Lifeless
Like a garden of wilted roses
My once beautiful cherry blossom
Reduced to a vulnerable vegetable state
Death was in the air
Filling her lungs with each and every breath
Suffocating my beloved grandmother
She was caught in death's chokehold
Desperately trying to escape death's eternal grasp
A stream of waters began to fill my eyes
Overflowing down my cheeks
Onto my freshly pressed linen button up
Her heart rate began to flat line
She was in the ring with death
Getting pummeled mercilessly
I wanted her to tag me in
So we could face this foe together
But I could do nothing
Just stand there idly
And watch her endure her struggle
Holding the rusted medallion
Which she had entrusted to me when I was just a boy
A little piece of grandmother
That I cherish forever

THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT

HANNAH COLLINGS

From my stance behind the host's podium, I could hear the parts of the game from the TV, but I better heard the mildly intoxicated football fanatics responding to it. At a booth to my right, a man looked deeply into the eyes of his lady friend, probably to avoid seeing the rest of her in that mini-dress she shouldn't have put on. Geoff, the new waiter, takes an order for a large pepperoni with ham on one half from a family with more kids than should be legal for those with access to birth control.

Geoff smiles as he leaves their table. He seems like a nice guy, Geoff. Scrawny and probably five and half feet, but always friendly, always a cheerful word. I've seen some pictures of him from before he started working here, though. A few months back he wore his hair in a mullet. I just don't know that in good conscience I could ever get too comfortable around a guy who has that sort of thing in his past.

I shift from foot to foot, my legs stiff and pleading with me to let them play hockey. I've been on shift for about two hours and thirty-seven minutes too long. This restaurant is small and I can hear and see so much life, but partake in none of it. My lips gulp back a yawn as a couple walks in.

The guy's probably around my age, and wears the non-committal, droopy-mouthed, half-closed eyes I see in the mirror. His features suggest that, like me, he is a student. The girl wears a shirt bearing the name of the local high school and proclaiming "CHEER!"

She does not appear very cheerful tonight. She shivers, and, as she rubs at the goosebumps on her arms, inadvertently reveals bruising underneath her sleeves. It seems appropriate that she is standing in a restaurant she needs some kind of nutrition intervention. Her knobby joints and stunted, scrawny appendages make me doubtful as to whether she knows what food is.

I bless them with a wide smile, showing off the teeth my mom was always so proud of. Ah, the toil of hosting. I'd never looked this happy naturally. Not even the hottest girl could garner this kind of stupid grin. "Good evening. How are you?" I begin, and dispense of them and my duties. Again, I am standing alone, anxious to finish my final two hours and nineteen minutes.

Being short staffed, Geoff quickly finds his place waiting on the couple I just sat. The guy was leaning close to the table, speaking quickly, his voice low. The girl was staring at the table, her limp, scraggly, cardboard colored hair almost covering her face. The guy sits straight as soon as Geoff walks over. He gets a coke, the girl an unsweetened ice tea.

The girl has a soft voice that I hear in response to a question her boyfriend asks after Geoff strides off to the kitchen again. The boyfriend replies in a laugh from the back of his throat, and the girl pulls her thin, painted lips at their corners. Just a little.

The two shortly receive plates from Geoff's busy hands, the guy losing no time in requiting his appetite. The girlfriend, too, consumes voraciously. I forget this duo for a bit as further patrons arrive and solicit my attention.

"You did *not* tell him that!" the boyfriend exclaims, pushing himself three-quarters of the way out of his seat. The girl takes air in quickly and widens her eyes.

"I—"

“You really *did*, didn’t you?”

She shakes her head back and forth, long threads of hair catching hold of her lips. She doesn’t do a thing about them.

“Excuse me, may I help you with anything?” Geoff steps over to them slowly, pausing discourse with a different customer.

The boyfriend doesn’t look at him. His eyes are attached to the girl who slouches in an attempt to be swallowed up by her chair. She sheds not one tear as I thought she soon would, as I expect all girls do when they are in discomfort.

In one long stride, the guy is at her side, holding her arm tightly. The way his grip drains the blood from her pale bicep contrasts with her purple bruises. The scene plays like a slow motion movie sequence as boyfriend pulls back his right hand, elbow level with the top of his head. Every soul collectively gasps.

The blow doesn’t come, though. At least not to the girl. It’s slowed as it encounters Geoff’s right shoulder. His meatless body slams up against the guy and he says steadily, “Sir, you need to leave.”

“Get off me, you—”

The girl sits and quakes, uninteresting by comparison.

“You were going to hurt her. I cannot allow that.”

The guy forcibly removes Geoff from his path and begins again toward the girlfriend. Geoff, knocked off his feet, swings his balance so that all of his energy is put into his fist. That fist connects with the boyfriend’s nose, releasing blood, such that has not been seen since our old chef lost half his finger to the meat grinder.

Our manager, who I thought was off duty tonight, is now standing between the two combatants.

“*What* is going on?”

“Your waiter attacked me!” Boyfriend pleads the likely story.

The girlfriend rises immediately, rushing to his side. “He did! He hit him. So hard.”

The manager looks around. Since his arrival, our patrons have all disappeared. There is no one to confirm nor deny this tale. “Blake?”

Oh, yeah. There is one person. “I...Uhm, well...”

Girlfriend screws up her face into a clump and issues a waterfall. “I don’t ever want to come back. I’m so scared.” She finds refuge in the arms which five minutes ago sought her harm. The two rush out, holding one another.

“Geoff,” the manager says, his tone is low and while he has no proof and nothing from the past would lead him to a negative conclusion about Geoff’s character, we all know the first rule of every business.



E.

MIDNIGHT MISADVENTURES

KAITLYNN SASS

The music drifted in and out of the room,
like wind.
Moonlight gleamed silver in her eyes
and she spoke the language of wishes,
reassured by the anonymity of her own name.
He gathered his thoughts into some semblance of a shape,
picturing animals in the star chart of freckles
dotting her back.
To speak in that moment would have been
to admit fear.
Instead, he focused on the gathering
dusk and her fire-colored hair
and crept into the land of
dreams.

ZIA

RACHAEL YAHN

I am the coldness whipping across your face. I am the sense of despair waking up at five PM on a January evening. I am the wet snow melting in your ill-fitted shoes.

I am frozen here.

“I just want a goddamn hot turkey sandwich.”

I look over at my friend in her fluffy fur lined hoodie and slouchy hipster hat. I sit in the passenger seat with my feet on the dashboard. There’s a Fall Out Boy album in the CD player repeating itself for the third time.

Flakes of snow the size of flowers pelt down on her little Subaru’s windshield and I wonder exactly why we’re driving to the Brookville Denny’s during a snowstorm.

No, I know what we’re doing.

She just really wants that damn turkey sandwich.

A half-lit deer steps out onto the mush-covered road and she beats down on the horn, daring the doe to come any further. It skulks off. She is a master of the road, a goddess at the wheel.

I take another sip of my beer. I’m not twenty-one yet. She’d poured the old Yuengling into a Taco Bell cup.

“Fucking deer.”

“Maybe that deer was crossing the road to catch up with its babies and take care of them in the cold winter night.”

“Deer don’t deserve family time.”

I want to ask, *Did a deer kill your family?* but I remember that this is in fact, Western Pennsylvania and that is actually a possibility. I take another swig of my drink. I have class at nine thirty tomorrow. So does she.

Wait.

Fuck.

“Don’t we have a paper due tomorrow?”

“I know.”



ROT

SUFFERING

BROOKE MAYS

Pain rushes through my limp
Body like rain flows
Through the gutters on the roof.

I wake to sharp, stabbing
In my back, as if knives
Are slicing it open.

The pain travels up and
Down my spine like a
Yo-yo on a string.

If only pain were contagious,
Everyone would understand me
And not be quick to judge.

I have plans for the future.
To travel the world and make
A difference in people's lives.

The pain takes over my
Body, causing seizure
Like reactions to fill me.

I wish time was not short
Like the life of a yellow
Ticonderoga pencil.



THE MAGICIAN

THERESE HOLZAPFEL

The magician is fine and graying, like a photograph starting to fade on a dusty mantel. His house is old-fashioned, all dark wood on the walls with the vaulted white ceilings overhead, staring resolutely at the dulled varnish on the bare floorboards. There were once nice rugs, but they had grown rebellious and started to trip him up, so they were banished to the attic. I took the pictures down last month. Their inhabitants had become strangers, and no one wants strangers on their walls. The house's only decoration now is the heaped plethora of mystic paraphernalia crowding in the corners of every room, silently jostling for his limited attention. With filmy eyes and withered hands he meanders among this maze of junk, his head swiveling slowly from left to right. He is casting about for something important, which will reintroduce itself to him as soon as the soupy green-blue of his eyes falls on it. He hunts patiently. The object he seeks will glow with some inherent importance that he will detect, as long as he can find the right chamber in this labyrinth of a house.

Sometimes something from another treasure hunt beckons him, and with renewed excitement he will hasten to retrieve it before the memory flits away again. A moldering silk top hat, trick handcuffs, a cabinet with a false back, a mirror, a bag filled with fake wands, posters with images painted in wasted colors mutely blaring the performance of a lifetime. Come one, come all! He finds these things every day and will be inspired to put them to use again. He is compassionate to the items that won him bread in the days of dying vaudeville. He lets all of them come out to play and relive their glory days, if only for an hour.

And he always needs an assistant from the audience. As there is always only me, I have to fill this role, but as half the time he thinks I'm a different person it works.

"I need a volunteer from the audience...Now with the help of my beautiful assistant..."

When I transmute into his helper our audience becomes the furniture and the rest of the stagememorabilia. They have seen the show before, so there is no applause. He never minds. It's the performance that counts, he says, not the applause that comes after.

So every day we do our performance—both of us—and every day we disregard the applause. Every day there is a different name his assistant must answer to, although every day she is beautiful. Every day he plays a new trick, and casts a new spell, until that one day when I know he is going to disappear.



Identification Representation

THE BEST I EVER HAD

HANNAH COLLINGS

I open the back door of the dark green Chevy Cavalier, because I'm too tired to deal with the perpetual mess in the passenger seat. His school bag and old papers are jumbled and thrown in haphazardly, creating an atmosphere analogous to my current mental state. I put my foot through the door and step inside. I shudder resolutely.

Gnawed lips, red and torn. Lips that are not worthy of kissing. Cuticles ravaged, pulled back. Crimson stains above my fingernails. I pull my knees to my chest and tap my feet on the seat; press my tongue against the permanent retainer behind my front teeth. This physical pain does little toward its intended goal of distraction. *Less real, less real. Less real—come on reverse. I hate that I'm sitting in my hearse. All that was good—now a curse.*

As quickly as a swinging screen door, he opens and closes his, sitting behind the steering wheel. He turns on our song: "Bargain." He's not exactly aware of the wedding I planned for us, in which there is a distinct possibility that I will be walking down the aisle to this particular sample of The Who's genius.

Daniel, you're a sweetie; really, pal, you are. I know you think this helps. It really doesn't, though, man. It just does not change anything, make it better.

I groan loudly and stretch my legs out, lying sideways across the back seat.

"So done!" I whine as he starts the engine.

He grins, tight-lipped, into the rear view mirror and shakes his head. He doesn't have a thing to say, because he knows we're a wreck and it's our fault and only Dr. Greico can fix it, but can't even really make it better, and that this is preventable, but we're idiots, and now we're committing an act that under different circumstances would get us put away.

"I call that a bargain/the best I ever had/the best I ever had." Sings Roger Daltrey from the Cavalier's speakers as Daniel turns the key. So, I've always appreciated irony, but right now, I want to grab Roger's curly locks and throw him to the ground. Tears squeeze under my now-closed lids, escaping the mess which is my head, and I kick the floor with my heel.

"Let's drive, bro." I command the patriarch of our mess.

"Aye, aye," he salutes and pulls out of the school parking lot.

We agreed to just go after school. I usually went home with him after, so that takes care of parental questioning, but it didn't so much take care of my mind plaguing me all day and trying not to openly weep through AP physics. I really hate this day a lot.

"I'd pay any price just to win you." We always say that line is just about the romanticest thing ever.

Is \$450 dollars a good price for him, you think? Keeping Daniel happy, and you safe, and high school on course, and a future...That's worth four fifty. Totally.

Gee. I hate that this is the way I'm spending my Friday.

Daniel's singing along. He always does.

*To keep my life as I know it,
I'll pay four hundred fifty dollars
I'll kill this baby, and ne-ever look back,
I call that a bargain...*

Improvises my mind as my boyfriend continues with the proper lyrics. And suddenly I'm choking on nothing, like emotional distress has become a physical thing that has crept down my throat. I've been thinking about this every day since that week that I threw up every morning and that little stick I urinated on said I was positive. And I can't do this.

“Stop. Stop. Stop driving. I’m done and I can’t and I…” I just cry. A lot. Daniel looks back at me.

“It’s okay, man. You can do this.”

I’m suddenly seeing “Bargain” in reverse. Suddenly, I won’t *“give up anything and be glad”* for this boy, my—next-to-none—favorite human being in the whole world. I look down at the front of my shirt. That flat stomach I’ve always been proud of. I gag on a sardonic laugh. I make a promise to the embryonic coalition of mine and Daniel’s chromosomes. *I’m gonna “surrender my good life for bad”. Worth it worth it. It’s worth it to birth it.*

My nose wrinkles at the ludicrous strings of words that my brain seems desirous to publish. “You’re such a weirdo,” I mutter appreciatively to my mind before turning back to the stunned male in the front seat. “I love you,” is my verbal reaction to the sight of his face.

“Hey, I love you too, but what are we doing?”

“Running *away* from Dr. Greico. I hate her so much.”

“You’ve never met her.”

“But she wants to kill my kid, man.”

“Hey love, we have to do this. I know it’s hard.”

“Man, it’s against evolution! I can’t do this infanticide thing!” I slam my hands on my thighs.

“Look. We talked about this!” He’s never raised his voice to me and I totally hate it a lot. But I’m not blaming him. I accepted this bargain. It’s my wager. “What else can we do?” My heart breaks when his voice does.

“I don’t know! I don’t know *anything* except—I *can’t!*”

“Rosie, there’s nothing else to do. I know it’s hard…”

You’re some little thing’s dad and we can’t walk away from that. “I wanna go home.” He turns red and chews his inner cheeks like he always does when I cry. He’s never touched me when I’ve cried. He doesn’t know how. Little kids like us shouldn’t be able to create little kids.

“Okay,” he stammers, his eyes wide. The Who is beginning their next tune as the car again starts. We ride on the same road, tracing the path back to the school. Daniel takes a left, and we pull into the lot of a Dairy Queen instead of the high school’s.

The little boy that I love buys me ice cream with trembling fingers and takes me home without a word. I wave to him as I walk up my porch steps, clutching my dipped cone as if a life line. I turn the ice cream upside down into a cup, set it on a freezer shelf, and throw myself on my bed to shake and weep.

I’d call that a bargain,

The best I ever had.

LAKE JIMMERSON, ANGOLA, INDIANA

ALYSSA MARVA

She squishes the mustard shag carpet between her toes,
Its fuzz sprouting up like baby dandelion weeds around
The mismatched furniture with frayed threads on the armrests.

The screen sticks halfway as it slides across the plastic track
Opening to a dark, chestnut deck that overlooks
A lawn, patchy as the black hair on her grandfather's head,
That leads down to the steel blue lake.

The loose board at the edge of the rotting, wooden deck pops
Up as she ballerina walks to lean on the railing.
Her fingers follow the deep crevices of the aged timber,
Pushing a rusty nail back into place.

Geese squawk and waddle their way through the yard,
Entering the water down the sloping, sandy muck
Through the lily padded waves, out to deeper territory.





THE FIRST FLAKES

SHANNON GEER

It is November
and the noble flakes float down.
Blades bow to greet them.

WHEN SNOW MELTS IN JANUARY

SHANNON GEER

There is something about the thaw—

The gray overcast days with their smell of warm water
and rebirth

The forty degree winds carrying the warmth of God
that chases away the stale hollow air

that had been scorching my face red

The mounds of gravel abandoned by their ice-lovers.

That soupy mess of dirt and snow-tears that
run down the University's asphalt cheeks

The wilted brown-green head of hair that
barrels

out from under its captor, begging to be seen
and loved

and remembered —

That reminds me of you and your fears

and the winds that stream from my mouth

that I hope are as warm as God's voice

so they can help your own Spring to spring

and we can enjoy the Thaw together.

MAPLE ROUGE

SHANNON GEER

and now the frosted tongue—
the breeze—slithers up my leg.
My reds licked from my branches—
now confetti for the plain and the plains.
A beautiful gift of humility
leaves me naked and scared
in the hollow October air.

THINKING OF YOU IN EARLY MAY

SHANNON GEER

You've told me, and certainly shown me
that everything has its place;
"we've all got jobs to do."
The roaring sun belongs in the sky
Silhouetted by sapphires—
A shepherd to life and growth.
A painter—she dips her brush
into her green paint and uses
the white winter as her canvas—
Graces you
And I
And everyone
with a warmth that she drapes
over our weary shoulders, promising
that the cold is temporary.
And I wonder sometimes,
how you can be so much like the sun:
so full of life and promise,
so full of guidance and love.
I fear that your place is also the sky
and that one day, you will simply drift
to the Heavens without so much as a
Goodbye.
And we both understand that is your
place
and you will leave.
But we also know that
until that time, your place
is next to me.

THE PEARLY GATES— MICHELLE'S CAFÉ

SHANNON GEER

And here I am
staring
at the warped wood of coffee shop tables.
I laugh about how
you hate getting a haircut
and how you frown when you have
to get it cut anyway.
My green tea cradles my daydream.
It's warm, and you're warm.
And so is the smile you flash me
when you return from the restroom
after your futile attempt to adjust your part.
The steam tickles my nose and you
pout about your hair, even though
later,
I will be running my fingers through it
and kissing every part of your perfection.
But for now, everything is calm
and everything is good,
because Beta Radio is lulling to us in the background
and beans are being ground.
and the couple in the corner is laughing.
and your eyes are full of life.
and we are breathing,
we are alive,
and that is just perfect.

KODAK HEARTS

SHANNON GEER

I've learned lately how hard it is to love someone.
Before, I'd take polaroids of my heart—my soul—
faded and grainy,
and hand them to a hopeful lover,
telling them “this is me, this is
who I am.”

I'd watch the corners bend and tear,
see his oily prints stain my dreams and veins,
without so much as batting an eye, because photos
have no pain.

But now, I've met you, and it's strange
how badly I want you to slip your hand
between my ribs, and clutch the beating life
that really is me.

Feel it flutter in your hands like a caged sparrow
and hold it, learn every movement,
and wind my soul around your fingers
and wrists, twisting it like cobwebs,
and call it yours.

And you have.

I've learned that
It's exhausting to give away your life—
To trust—

And to hope that it's safe.

You've placed yourself with me.

Here you rest in my arms—everything that is you.

I hold you to my chest and thank God every day

That you breathe and are alive

and laugh and sing and exist in such brilliance,

and pray that this is you—your heart

and not a Kodak Moment pulsing in my palms.

FINALS WEEK

SHANNON GEER

I can't help but thinking as I pass the library—
And the failed test dropped by the junkie
And the plastic crosses set up by the Pro-Life students
And the Pro-Choice students vandalizing them in the name of "Free Speech,"
And the graffiti tattooed on the trash bin
And the tears shed by the single mom trying to study
And the crushed Starbucks cups drunk by strung out students
And professors who forget what it means to learn—
that we should all just go drink wine
and agree that the world sucks
even though we pretend that it doesn't.

TOBECO 2016