Essence has gone through some creative growing pains as the staff has developed a greater understanding of the complexities of bringing two types of art together. The result has been a magazine that clearly respects both writer and artist. The work of the past three years has been filled with growth, passion, understanding, and commitment. The character of each staff member has flourished as has the magazine. A great thanks is extended to the university community for their continued support. A personal thanks goes to Andrew Isser-moyer, Emily Hammel-Shaver, Jeffrey Voccola, and Dr. Tony Bleach.

Natasha Mottola, Co-Editor

To the curious picker-upper who thought “is this free?” upon seeing this humble little magazine strewn about on a table somewhere: the answer is a resounding yes. Although you are right to be surprised, and surely it is worth at least 10 dollars, it is yours today for free. A good thing has happened. Thank you for picking this up. It is full of artwork and writing that possesses grace and keen vision, and we are extremely honored to be able to bring such work to you, the unnamed finder.

There would be nothing here for anyone to pick up had we not received such an array of ardent work from authors of both words and images. I thank every one of you. I am also deeply grateful to everyone involved in the production of this magazine. I admire you all. And I would like to extend a special thanks to our faculty advisors, Dr. Tony Bleach and Professor Kate Clair, and also to my co-editor, Natasha Mottola.

Today, April 11, 2008, is the one year anniversary of Kurt Vonnegut’s death. This was a man who claimed he could “have a hell of a good time” doing something as simple as going to the post office. He was also a creative force built almost entirely out of empathy and desire for a better world, and believed that artists were a key part of positive social change because “they are super-sensitive. They keel over like canaries in poison coal mines long before more robust types realize that there is any danger whatsoever.” I believe this spirit is echoed in these pages (and in the pages of Shoofly, and the work of our good friends there). And I hope that the KU art community will continue delving into the coal mine, warming us of toxins in all forms, but also finding truth and beauty. I look forward to your inevitable success.

Aaron Smyk, Co-Editor.
Black flip flops
worn down after
one month traversing
the streets of
San Jose, Cedros, La Fortuna.

Rocks cut my feet
through the hole
made in the bottom
because I'm too scared
to try public transportation.

—Alexandra Cavallaro
St. Mark's Place comes alive at night with twentysomething hipsters in skinny jeans with cigarettes on stoops and cafe stools. Shoulders stiff walking in the brisk December sight we meet on 6th and 1st Avenue, curry and rice to last the night. Outside it's raining and we have one umbrella, heads together we stumble through puddles, laughing.
She Reads

He left it there, on the nightstand,
And her ethics said she shouldn't,
But as she listened to his shower water
She recalled...

How he sat up late at night and
Pored over the book; that time they
Both lay sprawled out on the bed,
Her eyes closed as he read aloud.

And she wondered if it truly was
A daily creative journal,
And if it were, well, then he was
More prolific...

She picked it up, from off nightstand,
And her fingers fanned the pages.
Her eyes saw only a spattering of ink
In a sea of white.

She replaced his journal, unread.
The relief: he also had inarticulate days!
But as she listened to his shower water
She sighed...

—Jessica M. Shimer

untitled — Brandon Abel

his Journal
Lauren did not define herself by her career, but by how many miles she had run in any given day. Today she was a twenty-five. Lauren wanted to break thirty.

She ran until the steady beat of her Reeboks hitting asphalt drowned out the sound of colleagues, deadlines, and her lover's incessant praises. She would have to get rid of Gary; he was too optimistic. Although he was good in bed—no matter, plenty were. She would inform him of their differences this evening over wine. The grinning fool would cry, no doubt. Lauren smiled and picked up her pace.

She liked to look at herself in the mirror. She posed, stared, and scrutinized her naked body. Lauren prided herself on her lack of body fat and a waistline that could showcase little girl's belts. Some men thought she was breakable because of her small frame, but Lauren was made of steel. She was not soft like weaker women.

Her life was regimented, organized, and categorized. Perfection was just another mile, fifty more sit-ups, thirty more minutes of aerobics; just a little more than Lauren currently was. But that pounding in her chest felt wonderful. Throbbing pulse at her temple reminded her she was alive. She would run until it no longer felt like she was inhaling fire.
Old Country Buffett

Consumer of
Medicine
Insurance
Identification
Rotten teeth
Never good enough
Always traveling
Never fitting
Donor
Needed
Lonesome
Bought or sold
Tickets to nowhere that will
Get lost
Get passed on to a stranger
Never be used
Always
Going
Buying
Clipping and plucking
Never good enough
Calling when no one's home
Asking for the light to stay on
Losing the keys
Using coupons
Keeping receipts
Discount card swipes
Eleanor, I know you wanted more than a
Drone consumer
Going nowhere
Calling no one
—Erica Hesselson

And she adorned him with
sea treasures and
relics from (their)
past lives.
They exchanged
honey from their mouths
and smelled like nectar and joy.

(I remember those cheeky smiles and small touches.)
They made picture
Frames from
four leaf clovers
and recorded their (new) memories on paper and wrote
in pen.
When she asked if this was forever, he said,
“Yes, dear. It’s permanent ink”.

—for S & D
Your strength is your greatest imperfection
Your skin can uphold the bitterest winds
And yet I break at the slightest zephyr
My knees have never been so weak

I drown so gracefully in your green irises
I don’t want to swim, kick, breathe
I love to drown in you
So let me sink and hit the bottom

I don’t want to swim, kick, breathe
You’ve already saved me
So let me sink and hit the bottom
I’ll save you, I promise.

You’ve already saved me
And yet I break at the slightest zephyr
I’ll save you, I promise.
Your strength is your greatest imperfection.
I sat there for a while on the swing. Some people have thoughts. Some people dilute their pain. They contemplate. They ruminate. They dwell. I was in the place. It was dark and dank down there—a place intoxicated with vehement emotions. I just sat there silently, welcoming the quiet malign thickening of my loneliness. I tried to appease myself with other distractions.

I remembered when I couldn’t even touch the ground with the tips of my toes. Now, my feet were firmly planted on the macadam. I looked at my shoes. It was about time I tossed my Converse All-Stars into the trash. The laces were knotted and the rubber sole of my right shoe was worn, dirtied. I didn’t know many things, but I did know that if the sole of a shoe was worn, there was no use in wearing it anymore. Laces could always be replaced. The sole of a shoe could not be patched or mended.

You can never fix the sole.

I stood up from the swing; I had to think. I turned, but I had nowhere to go. And so, I decided to walk along the sinuous cobbled path, progressing and all the while, retreating.

“I think you kids today are like the walking dead. You don’t live the life I lived. Did I ever tell you the story about Kenny McGregor in the record store? It was, oh, in ‘67…” As I continued up the path in the waxy morning rain, I remembered how my father would nurse his cigar between his thumb and forefinger, rocking it slightly. The discernable scent of it lingered in the air like charred paper. I watched as the ashes insinuated into the folds of his shirt. I longed for that scent and those sentiments. In isolated fury, I was taken prisoner, once again, by the memories. Memories seemed to mock his absence. I loved my father more than I had ever before. But he was now gone from my world. And it became one riddled with pain.

A sudden breeze scalloped the surface of lake near a park bench. I shivered and decided to deviate from the path and walk back to the house. When I approached the front yard, I peered into the living room window. He didn’t even look my way. He continued to read the paper and sip the overflowing foam from a coffee mug. I could hear the political prattle on CNN, which permeated throughout the entire first floor. He adjusted his tie and placed a calloused finger on his pulsating temple. His head was probably throbbing. After working night shift, it usually did. I always left the house during those agonizing hours. That was the inexplicit routine. His fatigue and stress became a vortex of irritability, whipping about the house with all the power of a Floridian hurricane. Looking back, I would endure those hours without hesitation.

He suddenly stood up from the couch and, on his way to the kitchen, stopped in front of the mahogany shelves filled with the photographs of us. He touched every frame, smiling faintly. I noticed how his bottom lip trembled. And then I saw them. I saw the tears. Even from the window, cloaked by morning fog like grey curtains, I saw his swollen eyes. I observed him as he reached into his breast pocket to pull out the slip of newspaper. It happened again. For the seventh time this week, he reread my obituary and he wept.

—Lauren Shields
still life

—Megan Doran

Chaotic
She is walking to class naked
It is clear, yet messy
Beautiful, yet absurd
It is everything she has ever done
Her savings are apples fallen from a tree
Scattered, tempting
Her connection to the world lies unmoving
She may never speak again.
Make your appointments
Swipe your cards
Identify yourself
But don’t get lost in the small red world
In which you are confined
She has broken free from the minute prison
Crimson as her perfect fingernails
Probably groomed with the instruments
Separated so far from each other across the table
Make your notes with the miniature Pilot
That your blood helps you to be positive
And that the harsh little rose can bloom
It lets everything out
Tool, scent, life
No more secrets
Mr. Lincoln is dismayed with the silent mess
It never ends, it is never cleaned
She posted it as a full circle
And bought a book as a member on the way
New York is crying to leave
Send a letter with some liberty love
Ten dollars can go a long way for her
After all, who needs a cell phone anyway?
What’s left of my family sits together at a round table and we all look at each other uneasily because we know what we’ve been called here for. My mother sits to the left of me; my brother Charlie and his wife Denise are on my right side. My sister Samantha sits across from me on the far end of the table, chewing her fingers and fidgeting with her son’s clothes. And then, with no warning, she begins the conversation we’ve all feared for years. “I don’t have any money left in savings since I haven’t been able to work,” my mother says. “All I have left to leave you is my personal belongings, jewelry and stuff. It’s all very specific.”

We sit in silence staring at her, wondering why she would begin a conversation like this by talking about money, like we care about money. “All the furniture that I bought it belongs to Bob and I, so he’ll be keeping everything in the house,” she continues. “And I’m not sure that he’ll be ready to look at an empty closet right away so when he’s ready to give up my clothes he will and you guys can come over and take what you like.” No one cries yet, but all of our faces are red from holding back the tears that are sure to come. “Do you understand the situation?” my mother asks. “This surgery is serious, but even if I come out of it okay, I’m still only buying myself about five years.”

Then the tears begin, in the usual order. First Samantha, because she’s too emotional for her own good. Then my mom because seeing Sam crying is triggering her off as well. I am still silent, staring at the ceiling fan whirl around in circles. “So the odds are really against us at this point,” Denise says, between sobs. I’m still silent, wondering how things got to this point. My mother, so strong, ready for anything, was being taken down by a disease. My Wonder Woman, my hero, she could withstand anything, but this surgery would be the death of her. How did this happen? I turn to my right and see my brother beginning to cry, something I haven’t seen in years. “It’s okay to cry, come here and hug me!” my mother demands. Charlie shuffled over, sits barely facing her, his face buried in his sweatshirt. And then everyone is crying, everyone but me. They all alternate embraces around the table comforting each other and I’m still staring at the ceiling. My mother looks at me and reaches out her hand, holding mine while she’s hugging my brother. They all take turns giving me sideways glances, waiting for my outbreak of emotion that will never come. Then my mother turns her head to me, tightens her grip on my hand, and says, “You have to get out of Egypt.” I nod and sit still, uneasy and unsure of how I’m supposed to handle this. I don’t want to cry so I don’t; I want to be stronger than everyone else. I excuse myself from the table to check on my laundry downstairs. I tiptoe down the steps so I can hear all the whispers as I leave the room. “She’s shutting everyone out,” they say. “She’s going to explode when none of us are there to help her.” I remember being treated like this every time someone close to me dies.

I become the ticking time bomb. I can’t help it, I’m numb to the idea that the hero is dying. And I’ll continue to be numb to it until it’s too late, until she’s gone. Then, well, then god help anyone who has to deal with me on a daily basis.

Because then,

I’m going to lose my mind without her.
Wrapped in purple tissue paper, entwined in each other's limbs, the two stuffed lambs nestled in the box on my lap stared up at me with big black eyes and stitched red smiles. I grabbed them quickly with my tiny hands and thrust them to my chest. I knew from that moment they would be my new best friends.

And so I took it upon myself to name them. The plumper one with perky ears I named Lucy and the thinner one with a longer tail I named Lola. Together we traveled everywhere. Lucy liked to swim. Sometimes when Mommy wasn't looking I brought her to the bath with me. She would splash and play in the water and make me laugh when she'd get bubbles on her nose. Lola didn't like to swim very much. She'd sit on the edge of the bath watching Lucy play, barely touching the water with her hoof. But Lola loved to play in the grass. She'd frolic and eat every blade in sight.

Sometimes I'd climb the hill behind Mr. Lee's house when Mommy wasn't looking. I held Lucy's hoof in one hand and Lola's in the other, scurrying up the mountain. My legs would ache the higher I walked but I knew soon it would be worth it. I plopped down onto the grass catching my breath and holding Lucy and Lola firmly. "Are you ready?" I'd ask, my voice high pitched and shaking. They'd nod excitedly, Lola trying to scramble out of my arms in anticipation. I'd squeeze my eyes shut as tight as I could, then lie on my belly and roll. Giggling and hiccupping with laughter, Lucy and Lola squealing in delight, I'd roll faster and faster over clovers and dandelions, crunching leaves all the way down Mr. Lee's big hill, the world spinning in a swirl of colors and sounds.

The night before my first day of school Lucy and Lola could hardly sleep. They were scared they'd get lost in the big school where Daddy worked and that no one would like them and they'd never make friends and at play time no one would want to play with them. I told them to go to sleep so Mommy wouldn't hear.
Lucy and Lola didn’t like when Mommy and Daddy fought. Sometimes when Daddy yelled they’d hide under my bed. When they wouldn’t come out I’d crawl under with them so they wouldn’t be alone. They’d whimper as I held them in my arms.

“Why do Mommy and Daddy like to yell?” they’d cry.

“I don’t know,” I’d answer, patting their heads.

“Is it our fault Mommy and Daddy like to fight?”

“No,” I’d say as I shut my eyes and hope the sounds of anger would go away.

Lucy and Lola were there with me when Daddy went away. They watched through the window when the men in blue driving black and white cars pulled up to our house. They were big and loud and had scary voices. I hid under the dining room table with Lucy and Lola and watched as Daddy walked upstairs and Mommy talked to the scary men. When Mommy wasn’t looking I snuck upstairs and saw Daddy there, sitting on the floor.

He looked small for a daddy with his wet cheeks and little mouth. When I walked into the room he looked up at me and smiled with trembling eyes. I sat in his lap and held his hand. He rocked back and forth as I leaned against his chest. I told him Lola wanted to be his friend but the only way he could take her was if he’d promise not to forget me. He held me tighter and kissed my hair and smelled like Ivory soap. I still miss Lola from time to time.

—Lena Ziegler
Janice Dumar wanders through the breezeway of the Shady Palms Motel at night crooning her old tunes. Her gray and thinning hair, held together by a faux diamond barrette, hangs on her narrow shoulders. A sequined ruby gown that once hugged her frame now drapes her brittle bones.

The Night Club

At one time she headlined hot spots in Chicago, considered to be the Jayne Kennedy of her day. Standing on a stage with her name flashing in lights, it was just her and the mic. Catcalls echoing from the audience never phased her mood and she always ended with a graceful bow.

Now a staggering Dumar churns out slurred words, “Thought I had a lover.” Listening for any man who recognizes her tune, she offers a private performance for money.

Poor Ms. Dumar, blinded by her vanity and addiction. Always searching for the high of the limelight in a bottle.

—Brittany Mike
be peace
Men rape me under scarlet skies
Tear and bruise my flesh
Drain the blood from my children’s veins
But refuse to give me death

Thus my scabbed and wrinkled hands
Tie silver charms to blackened twine
As I plead to the Lord in whispered tongue
“Jesus, save my life”

I craft my life into dangling gems
I sell for my despair
To use my gain as my own escape
From the bloodstains in the air

Men slaughter my brood under blistering skies
Plundering my village in mutiny
They rape our daughters and break our sons
Pillaging their souls in victory

Thus every string of bloodied twine
Sold on market stone
Turns the memory of my children’s death
Into my children’s bone

The scorching metal will sear
Into your polished skin
Branding my words in flesh and blood
Be peace among my kin

Wear my chain around your neck
Weighing heavy as a gun
Let my world collide with yours
Until our peace is one

—Lena Ziegler
I listen to her play the piano over the phone, breathing moonlight sonata like fog.
As if dandelion seeds, thirteen years blow by over twig-grown bones. I’m a bird, breathing moonlight sonata like fog.
It rains & I wear nothing over twig-grown bones. I’m the bird alone there in the magnolia.
It rains & I wear nothing, hatched from our tree house, alone here in the magnolia, my voice fallen like feathers. Hatched from our tree house, as if dandelion seeds, thirteen years blow by.
My voice fallen like feathers as she plays the piano over the phone.
Into caged words
I've always

shared
potent specks
of every occasion.
Fixing my empty
stem
as if bodies
were

lowered.

Ink & tears are
in this make
or break summer.

I usually steal pills.
It soothes me when I'm gone because you
never
call me honey.

fusion —Julia Seland
Sunrise breaks the
Cool desert morning silence
Just-boiling water
Bleeds a weak cup of Folgers.

A month and a half gone by
In these arid, red rock surroundings
I’ve become the canyon dust
That settles deep in my sun-baked skin.

Each morning that I emerge from my
Dusty sleeping bag is a gift
In the continuous calendarless day to day
Broken up only by irregular baths
In the chocolatey brown Colorado River

Deep silence pervades the early air,
Silence so thick my eardrums hum

And when the early flow does break the horizon
I hear
Golden shafts stretching across
Rock and canyon
Throwing veils of shadow
Over buttes and fins,
Like sunlight through big bay windows.

Slowly the horizons morphs,
Into fading shades of
Burnt orange and red,
Yellow, green.
And lilac.

Pale blue steadily defines herself
In the space above,
Setting the stage for
Another cloudless day.

And to witness it,
To be present
In this daily
Incredulity
Is enough
Only enough.

untitled —Jenna Perfette

—Manasseh Franklin
These sheets have been lifeless
Grave and cold
Begging for bodies
To be spilled upon them
Like warm wine

These sheets have been worn
Torn and tattered
Begging to be sewn
With threads of love
Pulled through a needle of desire

These sheets have been wrinkled
Crinkled and heaped
Begging to be flattened
By an iron of lust
Heated by the heart

These sheets are now alive
Pulsing and vibrant
Begging for a breather
A refreshing second wind
To relax the lions contained within
—Ryan Torres
here, there is sun

Shoveling out Pennsylvania,
I follow the sun
to a southern state
where we name our
hurricanes
like children
(our Emily, our Victor)
who smash windows and cars
flood the basement
a whole floor welling up with the rush of
busted pipe tears and two feet of rain
we hang their satellite pinwheels
on the refrigerator
seeing ourselves in their quiet, dark eyes
keeping our beautiful disasters close
before they whisk away with

the basketball
the cat
the sound from the wind chimes
leaving us with empty air
waiting for another
lightning-ripped sky
my sunshine state
shattering like tea cups against walls
with afternoon thunderstorms
(we don’t just cry here)
hail falls hard as accusation
the Keys never felt frost until I brought Pennsylvania
remembering ’82, all the oranges die
on icy vines
while I learn to fight

lying low under toe
long, fat torpedo
shark attacks
in ocean the color of my eyes
at least here there is sun
(skin like stucco)
blue skies lying as
clouds break open over
orange trees, fruit rats, and the smallest
gekkos I’ve ever seen
darting
under
Spanish moss draped trees
The Life

Angela T. C. Carillo

Nothing like a bowl of it.

ugh.

End. Chunky or smooth.

An explosion of warmth and love will there be
make it in time! She'll see our mouth gets an
and their precious green surprise throughout
friends that are coming their home with steam
Blanketing its cutty' lone. Or odd shaped
Is how much you'll get.
And as far as the table can go—
Ruby ribbon and paper
present your grandmother, got you last year the
It's rich and dark like ribbon at Christmas (the
Stepping in the house,
jessica: the distance

My niece, I held you at birth; I hold you most high.
At fifteen, you feel alone—let my life at twenty-one be your guide.

The gray clouds, pot smoke
from a blue-black bong,
your fleeting boyfriend, seventeen,
waiting for a blowjob.

The pressure, his hand
cupped around your chest,
no clothes. Where
does time go?

Pink Floyd, Playboy Channel,
my childhood friend and twenty strangers
sniff, snort the white lines. They
change in the dust.

She unsnaps the black lace bra,
pulls me to bed. I breathe,
thrust,
another mistake to make.

The best girl friend, the worst girl advice:
You can’t get pregnant the first time.
You pause,
then pushed him away.

He said it’s addicting, but
So damn good.
Once a night, the Devil visited,
licking marrow from my bones.

The fury, the blind screams at the dark,
throwing fists into the smoke—
ashe left where you thought they all stood.
I was there, with you.

A needle, thin as her hair,
a rush, a childhood friend thrusts into her.
A door slam, a walk home in the dark.
You were there, with me.

Sacred distance, you
cannot divide
that which was carved out of air
and burned to blood long ago.
—Ben Heins
There are many people here
Only black lines on white
But I can imagine that it would be around dusk
We are the carnival
Where I got lost
And ran only looking down the mats and cables
Temporary electric snakes
All the people there gave me a fever
That I got rid of when I found my face
And I thought I was angry
That maybe I would never watch my TV again
But be lost in the dust
That was every color and sounded like an alarm
And tasted like sugar
There are many people here
And I enjoy when my stomach lets me know
I'm moving too fast
And I enjoy looking at the other people moving fast
Their stomachs know too
Their stomachs speak through their smiles
And the dust that sticks to their teeth
We are at the carnival and I'm bigger
And sadder
But I smile more
Because I'm tall enough to ride
And buy my own tickets
Although my face isn't here anymore
There are many people here
Only silhouettes
But still covered with dust
The alarms are silenced on paper
There are nooses fastened around their necks
They are tied to nothing
And the people are frozen in their footsteps
Some look tall enough to ride
Others look like they have a fever
All of them want tickets

—Alexander Echeverria
Olive-colored sheen of unease,  
A quiet malign thickening  
He chooses to abandon  
The cobbled sidewalks  
Retreating into the corner café  
Congested with the loud  
Incessant prattle  
Of strangers  
—Lauren Shields

—Regina Iannello

A penetrative silence  
Envelops the thronged streets  
A plethora of emerald gems  
Cascade from the inky  
Blackness shrouding  
The coconut moon  
The past’s past  
Once casting a glittering light of truth  
Now nothing more than an opaque,  
delicious
pieces of part

I am that fourth grade art project.
That abstract, immature, talentless thing
Held together with Elmer's glue
Faded by the sun and falling apart.
That glue came unstuck
And left nothing but pieces of construction paper
With yellow snot dried on the back,
Hard, crusty, and ugly.
Not to mention alone.
Me—not the paper thing.
My corners are dog-eared and folded in
There are small tears in my sides
They cut into the lumpy hill,
Removing any possibility for perfection
And I don't tell a story anymore
I don't portray that sunshine landscape,
Or the beach where we went on vacation,
Or the mountains we climbed together,
Now I am just a green piece of scrap,
And you are the sun that was torn away.
These cotton ball clouds are raining on me,
And the sky is crying,
But at the same time rain makes things grow
And like the flower, you were growing on me,
You were so beautiful, and you smelled good,
But you got picked off,
And the cheese stands alone,
And yes—I do want some wine with that cheese.
And some glue to make me whole again.
Or just another piece of frayed construction paper,
That will make a beautiful portrait,
And harmonize with the imperfections of mine.
You are the wrong shade of yellow anyway.

—Angela Cavaluzzo
an empty poem

Sit at a crossroads
I wait
Watch cars roll by
Think
Of fate

after

Thousands of faces
Going places
On past they glide
Like beads of water on a string

A VERY TULL DAY

Predictable actions
Predictable scenes

—Table
She said she’d go back and tell herself,
“It isn’t your job to be pretty.”
She said she’d start back in her childhood,
And she’d tell herself every morning.
It was that important.

We all nodded silently,
Knowing the truth of her statement.
Realizing our answers
Would have had small influence,
In comparison.

Later, when I mentioned it to my lover,
He looked up from his book
To better consider the notion.
“But she doesn’t know,” he said,
“That she is a beautiful woman?

“And where is the happiness or purpose
Of pretty?
Enthusiastic, fulfilled, intelligent –
Youthful. These are better words.”
Yes, and the reason.

—Jessica M. Shimer
I can still picture him
As clear as day
Stepping off the bus
On a humid day in July
Man, he looked tough
Tougher than Hell itself
And he knew what he wanted

A pack of smokes
A stiff drink
And a woman

Three things
He could easily acquire
Because life
Had turned him into stone

He lived to roam
And when he wasn’t in prison
Fighting for respect
Among the rest of the inmates
He was wandering the earth

One bus
One brawl
One bedroom

At a time

And I thought to myself
There’s a man who knows the true essence of life

---

Ryan Torres

I began looking for a new role model
To be the coolest motherfucker alive
Just what it took
So when I finally reached
And hit him in the ass
He lived his life in the fullest
He didn’t live the way they did

Because he wasn’t like them
Nobody cared
Nobody showed pity
And a bullet in his brain
An empty wallet
Drugs in his system
On a January morning
At 4 a.m.
Cold as clay
So when they found him

My hero

Of those who disagreed
And how to shovel his shit in the face

2008 | essence
the burial tree
—Ben Heins

a difference of opinion —Ben Fried

Where the brave, lifeless soldiers lie
in pieces, with crosses made of newspaper
or parts of their plastic green M-16s.

Where we buried each army man
as if they were our own blood, mourning
at dusk near the thick roots, placing the tiny bodies six
inches deep in soil — a few fellow soldiers set around the
perimeter, wanting to know what the dead feel.

Where lightning struck after you moved away to
another battlefield, fighting alone:
the bolt that tore the tree, the Earth;
that mixed souls with dirt and melted the corpses
under dead branches, or made them rise and march
elsewhere to find peace.

—Daniel Lyons

Mourning
Over a lost
Friend
Is like
Taking
A punch to
The gut
There is
The shortness
Of breath
Gasping for air
Disorienting hurt
And
It knocks you
Down
Making you
More vulnerable
Than ever.
When you
Think you can pick
Yourself back
Up,
You stand.
And as you do
Another hit
Lands
Digging itself
In
Making your
Body home
To a pain worse
Than
Twenty thousand
Dentist appointments
A pain worse
Than
Swimming
With jellyfish
In summer's tide
In Cythera I turned around
To face my only fear
In blinding pastel serpentine
I found a fiery mirror
I felt so 1920’s
Dressed up in my favorite skin
I filled my cup with twilight
To notify my next of kin
And I was wrapped
in golden sunrise
When I jumped off forest swing

But I didn’t see the sunset coming
When I sprouted bloody wings
And I was fever on the dance floor
I was burning up the night
I heard no cries from silent footsteps
So silent in plain sight
And I heard no cries from smiling face
As I chopped it off your head
Even though you’ll do the same to me
I’d rather die in bed.
I'm sitting in my mom's car. The first day of spring was a few days ago. I'm turning 13 next week, and I'm sitting in my mom's car listening to Dick Clark's Top 40 radio countdown. The parking lot is filled with empty cars. Patches of white snow could still be seen here and there—on the field across the highway and in the shadow of the barbed wire fence 25 feet away. There's an empty basketball court behind this fence and I wonder if my brother ever goes out to play. My mom is in there right now visiting. My brother's best friend is in there, too.

It's Sunday morning and I'm not allowed inside because I'm a minor and I'm not the child of the inmate so I'm not allowed to see my brother until he gets out. Ninety days are almost over and I spent every week sitting here, listening to Dick Clark and Sugar Ray and Eagle-Eye Cherry. I'm here but I'm angry. I'm angry I'm not allowed inside. I'm angry at the officer who told me I wasn't allowed inside. I'm angry at my brother for being inside. But most of all, I'm angry that I'm not allowed to tell anyone. My teachers labeled me a quiet kid, nothing more, nothing less. But they wouldn't know I sit in a car every week, alone and playing Game Boy, listening to Dick Clark.

They wouldn't know I just didn't feel like talking, because the only thing I had to say no one wanted to hear.

—Heather Guenther
Because it is a dark morning but not stormy, because mist slips into flower pots outside, because I heard myself begging don’t! to a hush in my kitchen and no child, because I am in confusion about children, because the tea here is dark, its leaves blossoming like a lotus, but it is only eight a.m., no one sips it, no pull of clasping palms, no after-dinner lips, because its steepened leaves lay open and still sit submerged, I am in confusion, my mind catalogues moments, I find not one memory complete, and however long I keep my eyes wide it will not become clear.

It’s true my daughter left this morning and I have not yet begun to breathe. Overnight, as it does, childhood left through her window the one we so often left open to pull jasmine air into open lungs, a quiet flap of the deck of cards... But lotus-blossoming tea? yes, lotus-blossoming tea. It’s true that at eighteen in the heady, dark San Francisco shops she drank such a tea, and I breathed it, fell in love with its sunken garden as if my daughter, in her butterfly body, already decided to leave had dipped herself into it as if she opened into herself, as if she bloomed.

—Emily Hammel-Shaver