Special Feature: Knox College

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Creative Writing program at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. The program proclaims, “We treat writing as an exercise in living.” The faculty include Robin Metz, the program’s long-time director; Monica Berlin, whose poetry book is forthcoming as the 2017 Crab Orchard Poetry Open winner; Nicholas Regiacorte, who’s won the college’s teaching award; Cyn Fitch, whose Knox career began as a non-traditional student transferring from a community college; Gina Franco, author of The Keepsake Storm; and Natania Rosenfeld, a literature scholar whose poetry collection is reviewed in this issue of TAB.

This year, TAB Editor Anna Leahy was asked to judge the A. Eugene and Ella Stewart Davenport Award in poetry and Audrey Collet-Conard Poetry Prize at Knox College, where she earned her bachelor’s degree. The Davenports have been awarded to undergraduate creative writers there since 1960, and the Collet-Conard award was established in 2016 to honor poetry “reflecting both aesthetic excellence and spiritual resonance (broadly speaking).” The packets of poems submitted to the competition—and the conversations that Leahy had with these writers—showcase the best of emerging poets and demonstrate the attention to craft and thoughtfulness in language of students working across academic disciplines.

TAB is thrilled to share the work of the following young poets:

“Look” by Diandra Soemardi, Collet-Conard Poetry Prize
“Wait, Wait” by Erika Riley, 1st Place Davenport Award in Poetry
“414-415” by Stephan Torralba, 2nd Place Davenport Award
“Moon Poem” by Sam Geiger, 3rd Place Davenport Award
“dearest” by Bridget McCarthy, Honorable Mention
“Hiking Tumamoc Hill at Night” by Joshua Tvrdy, Honorable Mention
LOOK

Whether or not you’ll grow up to be a scientist, a microscope is a always toy. A microscope is a window it lets you peek into a world you wouldn’t have known. But don’t you touch it for your fingers would blunder. As a child, I analyzed my finger under lenses. As a child Meshach captured bees and saw hair over their eyes. In biology class, I saw spears spiking from the legs of an ant. We’re supposed to be looking at arteries of a rhubarb, but instead I thanked God for He didn’t make ants any bigger, but God didn’t make xylems any bigger either. If He did, then I’d slide down the slippery web of evolution, and maybe end up alongside dinosaurs. I heard dinosaurs were killed by shooting stars. There is something imperceptible about tales and theories, how they sound a lot like windows too.

DIANDRA SOEMARDI holds her BA from Knox College and is the recipient of the school’s Audrey Collet-Conard Prize in poetry. She is a first-year graduate student in Chemistry at University of Maryland and is originally from Jakarta, Indonesia.
WAIT, WAIT

In retrospect, every night of August hurt, starting somewhere in my quicksand stomach, oh, dearie, stop struggling, it’s the only way out, stop struggling, stop telling yourself you’re not worth every piece of china on his wall.

I hated the way his kitchen smelled, because it smelled exactly like him, I forgot how to say, “Stop,” when he leaned over the table, told me all about pretty eyes, bad timing, I waited for him to sink into the linoleum.

I tried to tell him that he was celestial, but all he did was squeeze me until I became dust. I clamped my own hands over my mouth, said This is what you’re supposed to want, a hand moving up and down your arm in a way that feels anything but natural, and that goddamn beach was too secluded. I placed my hands over my stomach, pressed down hard, waited for words, waited for a where are you from my mother, waited for him to sink into the sand (sink, please).

With his permission, I scattered his belongings, his study guides, his precious words, words became blurs, syllables became spills: If he was a summer storm, then I was a car crash, destroying myself for all to see.

If it were now, I’d take every piece of china and smash it on the ground, letting the scent of could have, would have replace the scent of his skin, his hair, his dryer sheets.
I could watch him sink into his own
mistakes, into his vomit, his vodka,
his misspelled words, his judgments and lies
and it was a jokes. (very, very funny)

That August I wore my vulnerability like morning dew.

This August I will work at the Italian ice shop down
the road. My eight dollars and seventy-five cents
an hour will feel better than his hands,
up and down my arms. My mouth will swell
with sweetness, and my teeth will rot.
I will give the customers a smile that is both
unsettling and intimidating (to match my disposition)
and when he shows up at that window
with a five dollar bill and a smile too rotten to return,
I will ask, “Do I know you?”
and pop open the register.

ERIKA RILEY is a junior at Knox College from Stony Brook, New York, majoring in creative
writing and minoring in journalism. She works as the editor-in-chief of the campus paper,
The Knox Student, and plans to work in either journalism, new media, or publishing.
at last, from the cave mouth: a boy! feel his pale skin absorb the air ‘round him—creature of fog. step beyond the mouth, boy, into sunrays that adumbrate your figure. ask me about warmth. feel yourself as a series of curved lines. i will take you home and cradle you in morning, make you breakfast, write you lullabies that you, for now, will not understand, but whose sounds you will intuit.

in turn, you will find home in coffee, your skin will adjust to fabric, and you will learn to read your face as a map, and the cave wall will become a memory no longer yours, replaced by what is real.

and as the sun descends and the earth, again, comforts you in native darkness, i will teach you the word night, so when you sleep, blanketed in what is now named, your wakeful mind will cling to night to maintain this illusion.


STEFAN TORRALBA is a recent graduate of Knox College, where he earned a BA in English and where his work placed second in the school’s Davenport Poetry Contest. He is now pursuing a PhD in English at University of California, Riverside.
MOON POEM

with nancy eimers

now it's a way of remembering, dark by dark, letting go.
to find myself again on the lakeshore in the shower of the eclipsing moon

is to mistake a close friend’s pale cheeks for my god

there’s been a lot of that. watching the moon
to call it a mayfly is to identify something

small & familiar in the tactile world,

is to gather thousands of mayflies in a metal bucket
& then pour them into the wind.

to watch that moon is to dissolve mortar,

housecat, daydreams, part-time job, is to stream live
a series of birds sitting absolutely still on a telephone wire,

until it quiets, blushes, or gives up hoping

for anything more.
in early evening, the moon is what’s made of it,

painting red the night

as we separately send our prayers away.
each minute, we post thirty six thousand photos to our feed.

a moth drying on a windowsill

has the volume of memory, or is it the windowsill
moving like memory in the fading day
that holds our ugly words inside?

in a failed city i found a surveillance camera
and the surveyors all long gone.

what more could vanish but the moon

as we pass slowly through the light's wake?
the hours--implying that yes, it would be something like this:

no moon, no moon, no moon.

SAM GEIGER is a graduate of Knox College and currently lives in the Oregon woods.
DEAREST,

i’m back to climbing stairs again
reaching the lonely rests, but not

my legs have burned the last three
floors, i think they know i

haven’t been reminded in a while
that i’m scared of heights

come home soon, these stairs—
i need to sleep

Note: In the past of the English language, “rest” has been used to mean “the landing between flights of stairs” as well as “freedom from anxieties or pressure.”

BRIDGET MCCARTHY resides in Galesburg, Illinois, where she is pursuing a Creative Writing major and Business & Management minor at Knox College. Her poems and fiction have appeared in several issues of Knox’s Cellar Door.
HIKING TUMAMOC HILL AT NIGHT

For Sandy

We do this for danger—a diamondback
coiled on the path, jumping

cholla underfoot, a copper wasp
stuttering through the air, sting

so bad it feels like giving birth—
the kind of pain that draws a crowd, blood,

blinds us to the quiet ways
your body is dying. We do this

to see our homes grow smaller
as we travel higher, lights splayed

below, glittering, like a clumsy cloud
stumbled and spilled its collection

of beach glass—golds, blues, silvers—
all over the desert. Our words, inside

this thinning air, nearly touch
what they try to touch—you

tell me about prayer, how a dying
honeybee sprays the air

with its name, calling for the hive
to carry it home. You tell me

the legend: a man runs down
this hill, late at night, completely
backwards. Reckless or brave, he
doesn't look where he's going, he doesn't
even glance, and somehow, despite
the turns and stones, he never stumbles.

If I peel the skin of his hand, I'll see
this wilderness, won't I, alongside
the usual bones? His body keeps
all of it—the switchbacks and snake-holes,

the drooping ocotillo, the red
fruit of a prickly pear, the intimate

rises and swellings of this place, our
place, and look, there we are, scaling the slope

of his knuckle. You can barely move
forward now, the steepest part, your body

surrounded by saguaros, an audience
of shadows. Maybe tonight we'll finally

see him, the backwards man, descending
above us like a god, turned away

from our progress. He'll move
to the edge of the trail just in time,

like he's able to see with more
than his eyes, passing like breath,

a rewound memory, so close
he'll brush your cotton shirt sleeve
with his elbow, pressing sweat
into the fabric like rain.

JOSHUA TVRDY hails from Tucson, Arizona, and is a recent graduate from Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. He is now working with the Religious Studies department there to resurrect Fusion, an online journal that features theological and spiritual writings. He plans to pursue an MFA.
Alison Williams is a writer currently in the Dual MA/MFA program at Chapman University. She is the founding editor-in-chief of Chapman’s international, interdisciplinary graduate journal, *Anastamos*. Her work has been in *World Literature Today*, *Levure Litteraire*, and *Not Impossible*, and she is a reader and book reviewer for *TAB*. 
A pervasive sense of privation and loss, but also the richness of memory and nature, inhabits *Wild Domestic*, the debut collection by poet Natania Rosenfeld filled with reflections on art, nature, and story. Dropping in here and there with observations, connections, adaptations, Rosenfeld circles around her life, the life of her family history, and the life of social history, like the birds she references throughout the book. A querying scrutiny underlines the poems, an investigation into the self and into nature, but with a cultivated articulation that delicately holds the contradictions of the title in balance. For all the esoteric potential and execution in the poems, there is a prevalent violence, an underlying threat, that is inescapable.

The book is composed of three sections: Mother Hunger, Prey, and Wild Domestic. The poems in the first section are the most evidently autobiographical and are steeped in Rosenfeld's Jewish heritage, with a family that fled from war-torn Europe. There is a longing present, for food but also for home and place. These poems, although imbued with tenderness and familial memory, set the stage for the following two sections, in which violence, oppression, and the threat of fleeing and pursuit throb.

In this first section, a child seeks to interpret and make sense of the world through the adults around her, but they, too, are lost and attempting to find place. There are beautiful and personal contradictions, as in the namesake poem of the chapter, "Mother Hunger." A moment of possible intimacy and connection begins the poem, with “When you came down, summer / afternoons, from the attic, / with baskets for the two of us[,]” But the poem closes with the solitude of the speaker revealed, as “Next day, / when you gorged on fruit, / I lost you again.” In “Levelings,” the push-and-pull continues with

> Oh aunt, I thought,  
> female of angles  
> and flutey forbiddings.  
> Go away.  
> Be my friend.

The second section, Prey, is wrapped in myth, art, and story. Birds circumnavigate the chapter, sometimes stationary and trapped, sometimes gliding out of reach. This is another antipodal balancing reflecting prey, as a bird can escape, soaring above ground, but must return within reach to survive. The human body also transforms, morphs, becomes animal-like. Humans in particular conjoin with birds. In “Stranger,” the poet inhabits a caught hawk, trapped in the violence of human indifference. “Just a bird, they said, / a hawk from/somewhere else. / We didn't put her there.” The poem “Earthward” continues the theme with subtle references to bird-like movements of the parent:

> Hair white, indigo-eyed,  
> Mother calls me to the last  
> flaring of her summer garden.
On our evening walk, Father’s head turns slowly when I point to the still egret by the pond.

As much as these poems soar through the natural world, they are grounded in the viscera of the human experience. There is a violence, in nature and to the body—particularly to the body. Like the painter Chaim Soutine, whose work she references in two poems, Rosenfeld investigates the fleshy layers that make up the world and finds in them both terror and beauty. “Four Rabbits by Soutine” ruminates on the painting by the same name, and, with war as the shadowy framework underpinning the book, one can’t help but draw a comparison between the action on the animal and the potential action on a human in the poem’s final section:

Flayed Rabbit: anatomized, used up, on the stained sheet. The torso stretched like pulled meat, a skull, vacant bloody mouth at the point of the genitals. Thrown down, or laid gently, the thin arms still rise in a screech beside the head.

Look for truth:
you’ll find gristle.

In conjunction with the more somber pieces, there are also strong moments of resistance, as in the paragraph poem “Admonitions”:

They say the god entered her in the form of a bird. I say change the old stories to new ones. Say that he was the sky and she was the bird and he cradled and carried her...Only don’t say that he entered her in the form of a bird. If I could dictate the laws, I would make it against the law to say that.

Even when engaging with the potentially supernatural, Rosenfeld locates within the physical. In “For Omm Sety,” which is based on a British woman named Dorothy Eady who believed she had been reincarnated as an Egyptian priestess and who in fact became a renowned Egyptologist, Rosenfeld inhabits the body of Eady in her modern incarnation and Eady as the pharaoh’s mistress. The separation of time slips and is sustained in the body of the lover.

The final section, which shares the book’s title, Wild Domestic, finds the human and the animal inhabiting the space on the pages in a capacious menagerie. Language that ascends towards the untamed and fierce is conquered and restrained, making the poems themselves the creatural amalgamations of the title.

In “Fish Songs,” fish embody familiar characteristics, as “The old ones tell stories / of the great carp in the family tub,” and
“observe the pensive trout / gazing at a pine above the dark / stream. [...]” “My Abductor” merges woman and horse into a centaurian form on a glorious ride into the sky, above the soft beasts below.

Moon-faced heifers, hay snufflers,
look up, gape! We’re on fire,

woman and horse [...] 
[...]

[...]
we tattoo our blood song
on the currents that bear us
far, so far from here.

Rosenfeld completes the book on a note of resistance, of escape, and of connection, with the final poem “Family Weather,” which sits in acceptance of the unsteady but constant passage of time, which begins:

Sometimes father approves.
Sometimes mother cries.

Either way, the clouds
float toward the horizon.

The poem and the book end as follows:

[...] you hear
singing and see snowbanks
and are never alone.