

riverrun



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About *riverrun*:

Who started *riverrun* and when?

The UCCS Student Literary and Arts Journal, *riverrun*, began in 1971 when Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow became the first faculty advisor. The first *riverrun* journal was published during that year, but it did not become an annual tradition at UCCS until the 1980s. For the last 40 years, it has been published and circulated at the end of every spring semester, and it showcases the fiction, poetry, nonfiction, and visual art created by UCCS students.

Why “riverrun”?

Dr. Pellow and his first group of students decided to name the journal *riverrun* in honor of the first word in James Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. The book’s innovative style of combining words and reinventing the English language represents the paradoxical necessities of merging differences and change continuously. The book is also written cyclically, with the very last line feeding back into the book’s opening word, which implies that both convergence with and divergence from the norm are vital for survival.

How is it published?

The journal is made possible through funding provided by the UCCS Student Government Association. Published each Spring, *riverrun* generally accepts submissions at the beginning of spring semester each year. The journal is designed and published by an editorial class (ENGL 3170) each year. Selections are made through a blind review process. For submissions information, please visit the journal's website at riverrunjournal.com or the university's website for the journal at uccs.edu/riverrun. For more information, please email riverrun@uccs.edu.

A Note from the Editor-in-Chief:

Dear Reader,

The 47th issue of *riverrun* is about change and growth. The editorial class selected the design of this book not simply because it represented a river running, but also because we believe that rivers and water are representative of change. Just like rivers slowly forge new paths through the places they run through, we think that writing and art can enact that same change, slowly forging new paths through culture. We hope to embody that not only in the cover art, but also in the myriad of excellent selections that make up this edition of the journal.

It is through the efforts of each and every student in the editorial staff that this journal could be produced and it is in making this journal by students and for students that we hope to show the creative talents of UCCS. This collection would not be possible without students bringing their creative works to us, be they prose, poetry, or photograph. We hope this collection does all of their works justice and that anyone can find a work here that they connect with as we've connected with them.

The rise of Covid-19 had a major impact on the production of this journal as it has had with all of our lives. With all of the chaos it has brought into our lives over the past few months, we hope you can find a moment's solace in our journal.

Sincerely,

Josh Kint, Editor-in-Chief

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nonfiction



“The challenge of nonfiction is to marry art and truth.”

- Phyllis Rose

Letter from the Nonfiction Selection Committee:

Nonfiction is not a fantasy or a creation from nothing, nor is it a simple reporting of fact. Nonfiction is a representation of fact. This literary form blends the realistic with the creative in ways that add meaning to the narrative. Thus, nonfiction is as much about the experience as it is about the event, and as much a work of interpretation as it is a work of observation. Ultimately, nonfiction authors craft engaging stories from their experiences that offer us a new perspective.

We selected four pieces that reflect these nuances. These pieces encourage us to think critically about the world around us and to empathize with others. Moreover, they connect our experiences and reveal the author's pain, growth, and poignant reflections. Through their writing, these authors invite us into their stories; and in some ways, their journey becomes our own.

We hope you accept their invitation.

The Nonfiction Selection Committee, *riverrun* Vol. 47

Kiera Hemphill

Tristan Cooper

James Manda

Anxiety Driven Damsel in Distress by Tiana Trujillo

My lungs fail me. Healthy medical record, the altitude is just fine, and no foreign chemicals flow within my body. Invisible bricks happen to build their towers upon my chest. Chains wrap themselves around the skin of my wrists as they begin to drop in temperature, freezing to my bones until the aches are no longer an aspect I can ignore. As my lungs are stagnant, my heart races as well as the words in my mind. Legs and hands are now massagers for they cannot resist shaking vigorously.

My fears are not “just fears,” not a usual common stage fright; however, they are the very threats that begin to creep up on me when I sit in silence, when nothing is attacking me, nor scaring me. Even the simple talk between me and another can stir up the boiling sensation until I finally overflow and let it all out with a harsh and hateful tone. Every second of every day is consumed with the tension of the rope tied tightly around me. Everyone surrounding me only sees a girl who gets through her workday and school day with confidence and serenity, while inside is a fight only I know of. The exhaustion which follows those strong empowering speeches, the nap needed after conversing with the various people, the heaviness each day brings while I push myself to do what should be my impossible. The fears consist of the many beliefs I have of what others think of me, stepping out of my comfort zone, intense conversation, or my personal favorite, driving.

My driving fear was not brought upon me from a previous accident, no witnessing one and no being a part of one. I simply freeze behind a wheel and lose my breath as I turn on the car, hearing the engine mock me. Every ounce of me wants the freedom to be on my own and do my own activities, but the car is a grizzly bear protecting her cub from my hands. The anxiety meds, they are useless, the counseling, well, helpful, but to diminish a fear this vast takes more than one forty-five-minute session a week. The dreams taunt me, the vivid images of me swerving off the road, driving too fast, harming another human being on the way. Powerless. Every piece of the puzzle brings the feeling of complete powerlessness.

Power. A hard concept to grasp. Sure, in every story the word is some superpower, the ability to fly, teleport, and fight evil, well, in my story, the only power I want is for the simple things in life. The worst of it all is when my larynx abandons me while someone who dares call themselves my best friend tears me down piece by piece with her words while I beg myself to fight for the words to say for my sanity. For my dignity. I'm the quiet little girl again who cannot save herself

from the suffering of someone's hands gently against her skin, the little girl who was bullied with the words, "you're too weird" echoing throughout her soul, the fragile girl taking Benadryl to force the sleep to rest the crying of the night. The friends I loved and would do anything for, stripping me of my worth and power, and taking my kind words to heal their wounds as mine only dug deeper, pouring out blood. The moments when my power is taken, they bring back every part of me I worked so hard to rid myself of. Her sentences full of hate remind me of the pain of years before, and that life is not mine.

Healing. To rid myself of the toxicity in myself was step number one. All the corrupt thoughts, I had to stop giving way to. Traveling back into the traumas, step by step discovering the very effects each one has carried into my day to day life, now, in my present time. From the mean girls in elementary school kicking me out of the talent show, to the middle school girls, "she's lying about her mom's cancer for attention," to the abandonment of the high school girls, bullying every year, every day in the halls of those schools. Feelings of worthlessness, self-hatred, being unworthy of care and love that I give out to others, loneliness, and dependency. I had to learn how to find the very love I gave within myself. I had to fall in love with my smile, the golden specks throughout my eyes as the sun illuminated them, the softness of my voice, and the laughter that made my stomach hurt. I had to teach myself how to forgive the scars of my pain and be thankful for the lessons. To give grace to the emotions stirring inside me. No more shame, no more brokenness, no more blaming me.

Forgiveness. I sat in my room considering all of the people in my life who had hurt me. At first, the pain was all I could feel, then my fingers brought themselves onto my keyboard. The familiar feeling of readiness to let my heart become words on a blank white screen. It was time to be free. It started with "dear" and the name followed along with the hurt following and the thanking of each and every person for how they assisted me to become the woman I was in that moment. It seems simpler than it was. Tears slid down my cheeks, dragging my foundation with them until the black mascara followed and caused my eyes to burn. "Dear mom," "dear Sean," "dear Jorel," until it was the last. "Dear me."

~

Dear Mom,

I know I haven't made that sparkle in your eyes blind me when you look into mine in a while. We have been distant. Secrets were the barriers between our sunny days where the grass was always green, and the birds were always singing our song. I was scared to let you down over and over again, only to tear down the solid connection we had instead. I didn't trust you with my secrets. I didn't feel safe because I knew the image of the color leaving your face and your heart falling to the floor was going to break my heart made of glass. I wanted to be a perfect daughter for you, and I know you truly did not

desire that of me, but I still felt it every time I did something you would for sure disapprove of. I forgive you for the fights we had where I couldn't even look you in the eyes, I forgive you for the assumptions you made, I forgive you for not understanding me. I forgive you.

Dear Sean,

This is no love letter; this isn't even a letter you will ever cross paths with. Much like I am a woman you shall never cross paths with again. Sure, we may run into each other at the grocery store, but I will smile and keep going. This will never be done out of hate. Those days are much over. I was angry for so long, hurt for so long, and longing for the day we spoke again. That day came, but it came with a resurfacing of pain as I realized even though I had moved on, I had never healed from the pain our time together brought me. I was close to falling down the same toxic hole I did a year ago. This is not to attack you, I promised myself those days would be over, and they are. This is to let go of a painful lesson I was taught. This is to be thankful for what I gained from my time with you. You saw flaws in me that you couldn't look past, and I guess that was the problem, I wasn't doing the same, I was ignoring the things that were not fit for me from you. I ignored it because my romantic heart took over and thought my love could change you if I were just the perfect girl for you while waiting for you to fix yourself for me. That's not how love works, in fact, two people should work on themselves for themselves. I know I had flaws. I was aware of them, and even more conscious of them when you left me. I spent months working on them. Growing and changing because I wanted to be the best version of myself. Thank you for making me aware of things about me that were sometimes toxic and that were not healthy to live in. That knowledge helped me become the woman I am today. I hope someday you find who you are too. Your true and best self. You deserve greatness, but it isn't just handed to you. You have to work every single day for it. No one has the power to change your life but you. Thank you for the laughs and the smiles. The jokes and the hugs. Thank you mostly for the lesson you taught me. I can never regret you because I learned what I needed from you. You can have happiness and love, but don't search for it in anyone. Find it within yourself first. I also want to tell you that I forgive you for pressuring me into doing things I never thought I wasn't ready for, but now I see how naïve I was and how corrupted the relationship really was. I forgive you for breaking my heart. I forgive you for taking advantage of my desperate heart. I forgive you, Sean.

Dear Jorel,

I was always taught that my first should be special and unforgettable. Well, it was. Sure, I wished to save myself, but I will never

regret what happened. Regret is for the broken. I knew it was going to hurt to not end up with my first. I was always told it would. I don't want that to be what I think of you. We were simply never going to be meant to be, and that is okay. My feelings for you were real and strong. We shared so many special moments with each other, and I had to watch it crumble to dust. I wanted to change you. I wanted to be the girl who taught you love, and maybe I sparked that in you a little. I sure felt it. Regardless of how we did or didn't feel, thank you for being this lesson. It came while I was already a stronger person, but the pain still sits with me. With every fight, every excuse to see you again, and every forcing myself to ignore it. I'm here to admit that I had feelings, and I am here to let them go. To let you go. Our relationship, whatever it may have been, was unhealthy and we both knew this. It was something that hurt more to have than to lose. You don't need to feel for me or admit it. You don't need to want to be with me. You do not owe me anything, and I am sorry if I ever made you think that you did. Thank you for the laughs, the care, the food (ha), the handholds, and the coldness you showed me. Thank you for forcing distance. You knew I deserved more and that we were too different to ever create some beautiful love story. You helped me stay on MY path and not to stray where I do not belong. Thank you for supporting my writing and pushing me to be the author that I am. Our time is over, and it is time to stop mourning that fact. I wish you the best. Make the difference we both know you can. Change the world. Go do everything your heart desires. You are made for great things, and I hope you get everything you deserve. I hope you find the feeling of love again and I hope the pain inside you dies. Farewell, Jorel.

~

The people I loved most were those who may have caused the most damage. The anxiety, the brokenness, the pain, the self-loathing. I missed those who never deserved me as a child misses their favorite blanket to sleep with. I drowned myself in my own tears, while I was hurting, while I was healing, while I was forgiving. Every part of me hurt in ways I never knew were possible. I knew of the damage the trauma could cause, but I never imagined it would have taken such a hold on me. The trauma was a rottweiler refusing to give up his steak. In the end, it came down to me.

~

Dear me,

I know you haven't always loved me. I know you have caused blood to run down my arms and legs to numb my pain. I saw you when you looked into the mirror and said I couldn't do it anymore, that I was worthless, that I was unloved, I wasn't meant to be alive. Those words were all I ever heard. I gave myself the rundown of those words every waking hour and every night before I closed my eyes to sleep. You taught me how to hate every single ounce of my soul and body. You

taught me how to believe I wasn't normal. You sent the anxiety throughout my body. You made the Benadryl the only thing to help me stop crying to sleep at night. You destroyed my body, and you broke the woman I was supposed to be before I could even discover her. I'm furious with you. I spent every day believing you and trusting you when there was always so much more to me. My sense for feeling emotions deeper than those around me? You demonized that trait when I should have been praising it as a child praises the gift they always wanted on Christmas morning. I never saw my eyes shine golden in the sun because of you, I never saw how my smile was the very smile to cause others joy because of you. I only ever saw a broken girl who didn't have purpose when all I ever had was one specific purpose. This is forgiveness, but this is also a warming of my heart, a brightening of my smile, a new gold speck inside my eyes. This is it. The very thing I needed to heal. How you treated me. I hope you never take control over me in this way again. I'm worthy, of life and love. I am wonderfully and fearfully made. I am clothed with strength and dignity. I am an original masterpiece. With God within me, I will not fall. I will never let you poison my heart. I will love you and I will fight for you. I will heal you. Every broken piece will find its place. I will comfort you, I will always remind you of what you need to hear most: you are meant for so much more, and your life will never be a mistake. I forgive you with every fiber of my being. I forgive you.

~

This is my story. Not all of my story, for that is something I hold close to me, and I'd never be able to fully release it without the tears coming down like rainfall. The story was never meant to be simple; however, it was meant to break me. I was to be rebuilt through it. An easy life lacks character, and I would never be the woman I am today without the pain. Pretty fucked up if you ask me. Do I regret any of it? Never. Do I wish it were different? Sometimes, but then who would I be? Would I be the woman who cares about even the worst of people? Would I be devoted to loving those around me and hearing their stories? Would I feel strong and powerful? Would I ever fall completely in love with myself? Who knows. I know that if people didn't mistreat me, I would have never decided what kind of friend, partner, and stranger I desired to never be. They taught me to stand up for those around me, to be honest, to communicate, to fight for the hearts of those around me when they can't do it themselves. Everything the people around me lacked, I wanted to gain for them. To ever make anyone feel what I felt, it just was never going to be an option. I'll never be perfect, but I can always strive to be the best woman I can be. The woman I am meant to be.

I forgive it all.

Sincerely, me.

Not Just the Ice Cream by Joseph Schwartze

The little boy and his father sat on the curb. Cars drove by at a leisurely pace; it was a Sunday afternoon, and no one had anywhere especially pressing to be. Even though the cars went by and people passed on the sidewalk, it was just the two of them. A bubble of happiness—of family, and of love—surrounded them. Each held an ice cream cone, a slightly smaller one for the boy, though he'd asked for larger.

"You'll upset your tummy," his father had said and ordered a medium anyway.

They didn't say a whole lot to each other. Occasionally, the father might state, "That's a nice car." The boy might reply, "Yeah." He didn't know, but he trusted his dad; his dad knew about cars.

Occasionally, the boy might say, "That's a cool cloud." The father might reply, "Yeah." He didn't know, not as well as the young and imaginative mind of his son did, but he understood. It was a cool cloud if his son decided it was. That other cloud to the side? Just not puffy enough.

The sun was warm, but not hot. It was the middle of summer, but there was rain coming, and calm breezes kept the city cool. The concrete of the sidewalk felt slightly too hot as they sat on it, but the chill of the ice cream balanced it out.

"How do you like it?" the dad asked, breaking their personal silence. The sounds of the city moved about them, people chattering and cars rumbling, but his voice broke through that din clearly.

"It's good," the boy replied. He never said a lot. It wasn't that he didn't have much to say, it was that he didn't often know how to say it.

"You like Rocky Road?"

"Yeah, it's good," the boy repeated.

"Why?"

A new silence reigned, and it was a ponderous and thoughtful silence. While others may have explained simply that it tasted the best, the boy knew there was more to it. Rocky Road was not just an ice cream; it was an experience. He said, "Well, there's a lot here, dad. The chocolate is good, and the almonds break it up. The marshmallows do that more, but in a different way, a softer way. It isn't just eating some chocolate ice cream; it's like driving down a real road, out of the city where they aren't paved, and dealing with all the dirt. It's fun, and it's different."

The boy paused, thinking about what more to say. "I like it," he finished simply.

"I like it too," the father said, "but don't you want to try other flavors? You always get Rocky Road."

"I don't need to try other flavors," the boy said, licking at the ice cream in his hand. He was getting to the cone part, now. It was a waffle cone, his favorite kind, and sometimes he liked eating that even more than the ice cream itself.

"If you say so," his father replied, taking the new silence to continue eating his ice cream. He was trying a new type today, some sort of chocolate banana flavor. He wasn't certain if he liked it, but he wouldn't decide until he'd eaten the whole thing.

Behind the two of them, the ice cream shop bustled with people. Most came and went in a few minutes, getting their ice cream and then leaving on some adventure or another. A few groups came and stayed for a while, mostly young teens looking to kill some time on this lazy Sunday. Soon, they wouldn't have the time for this. School would be back in session, and they'd have homework to do.

Most of them would probably find the time to enjoy their ice cream anyway.

The boy would be back in school soon, too. Third grade was coming up. It was a big year, at least he thought so. Every year was a big year. Every year was another one that he could learn and grow, and he'd been doing a lot of growing. He liked when the school year started because it meant that he could mark his new height on the door to his room. He liked his birthday for the same reason, and for the attention. He liked the entire family, sitting around the table looking at him, happiness in their eyes. He liked when people had happiness in their eyes. It made it easier to smile.

He found it hard to smile sometimes.

But not when he was eating ice cream with his dad on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Not when he knew that he'd be home later, and he could watch TV with the dog until dinner was ready. Not when the next day he could play in the sun with his friends. Right now, he could enjoy it, and so he did.

The boy bit into his waffle cone with a crunch.

"You're going pretty fast today," his father said, continuing to lick at his ice cream. He wasn't even close to the cone.

"It's good," the boy said, simply, and with a smile on his face.

"If it's always the same ice cream, isn't it always the same amount of good?"

"It isn't just the ice cream," the boy said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Oh? Then what is it?”

“It’s the day,” he replied, the smile on his face widening as he looked out over the street, across it to the people walking and the other stores.

“A perfect lazy Sunday?” his father asked.

“A perfect lazy Sunday,” the boy agreed.

Prayer House by Brandon Flanery

Her

Colors of Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka dance on her olive skin, sunlight filtering through their flags. We sit with coffee between us at the local prayer house in the bookstore, while further in the building, diligent worshippers pace, kneel, cry.

But we are not pacing. We are not kneeling. We will be crying.

We've been laughing about nothing and everything for at least an hour. The coffee is now lukewarm, and as the exchange dies down, and the only thing that drowns out the silence is steaming milk and cherished memories...

...Kidnapping my best friend together to watch one of the most disappointing sunrises in history on his birthday.

...Napping on a mini-golf bridge after watching the elderly powerwalk through the mall.

...Dancing beside a pond under the moonlight after bailing out on Homecoming, the silence and discarded Chik-fil-A far better company than the beating music and throbbing bodies.

I smile as the memories return. Every moment meaning so much...

...meant so much.

"This has to end. We're going in separate directions." I coach myself with the wisdom of an adult. But I'm not an adult. I'm sixteen. You don't think about mature things like marriage and the future and kids and jobs and all those heavy but lovely things at sixteen. You're barely thinking about college. Instead, you should be thinking about the latest video game that just came out and the acne that refuses to go away after you've spent hundreds of dollars on skin care and cliques you both hate and want to be a part of and what homework you forgot about over the weekend and, most importantly, cute, annoying, immature love.

But to me, it's always been heavy. Love. It's no joking matter. It's for keeps. It's for a future together. For marriage. It's for propagating the world with more of your acne-ridden spawn. So this had to end.

I take a deep breath. I muster courage. I act mature.

"We're going in different directions. You want to move to Africa and help people, and I want to move to the inner city. I love you, but we're eventually going to have to part ways, and that's not fair for either of us. We need to stop now before this hurts worse than it already will. I can't be your boyfriend, but the man who

gets to be your boyfriend down the road will be so blessed to have you. You're amazing! We're just not going in the same direction. We need to end this."

Silence floats between us. Then came that foreshadowed crying.

Through soggy eyes and a weak smile, she looks at me and says, "Thank you... of all the things you've done, this is the moment I have felt most loved and cared for by you because you fought for my heart."

I smile back at her, matching her tears. Of all the moments, of all those unforgettable moments, this is the one that she felt the most cared for—the moment we said goodbye.

Dad

We get out of the car. Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka are nowhere to be seen. Tonight, there is only one flag—the United States stands at half-mast. Someone's died.

There's barely any wind. Just enough to have the cleats knock against the pole, clanging as we walk towards the prayer house doors.

My dad leads me forward. His pace is quick and determined.

"Pick it up." He calls but doesn't look back. His gaze is locked on the door.

I quicken my pace, but don't look up. I keep my eyes to the ground and my hands in my pockets. I don't want to be here.

The two of us enter the main prayer room, where he points to a chair, telling me to take a seat. Still no eye contact. He exits the room, leaving me alone with nothing but a massive globe slowly rotating for company... well... that and this pungent smell.

It's so hard to describe. But anyone that's been to the prayer house knows it well. The best way to describe the smell is clean sweat or sweaty cleaner, and when someone thinks of the history of this place, it makes sense complete sense.

Thousands of men and women have laid prostrate in this room, sobbing into the carpet. Over the years, desperate teens have paced and rocked and jumped till sweat cascaded down their body, to join the tears. They both find a final resting place in the dated rug, creating this salty and musky odor. It permeates the room. Faithful custodians have attempted to remove it, day after day, but it hasn't worked. The smell remains, only now with a hint of freshness. The mingled scents produce a comforting affect; as if hard labor will cultivate cleanliness; as if simple tears will perpetuate purification.

That's why my dad had brought me here—to purify me with sweat and tears. I just wasn't sure if it was going to be mine or his. Maybe his sweat and my tears, as he came here to make me right, to make me clean, to make me straight.

That's right. My dad brought me here to pray the gay away. It was the only thing he could think to do after catching me looking at gay porn just moments prior.

"What are you looking at, Brandon?!" The screen had frozen while my heart raced to a panic. It threatened to burst out of my chest, just like my secret, a secret so dark and shameful, I had been hiding it for five years. But here it was. Frozen. In the open. For my dad to see. And I was terrified.

"Brandon. What. Is. That?!" His finger points to the screen, shaking in rage. He keeps asking the same question over and over again, as if asking it enough will change the fact that his son is looking at gay porn. It doesn't. He has to find a new plan.

After being asked rhetorical questions, after being outed to my whole family, after a petrifying silent drive, I found myself at the prayer house, where I sit with the salt of supplication and the sting of sanitizer as my only company.

My dad returns, looking directly at me, not saying a word. He touches me on the shoulder and motions me to follow, leading me out of the main room into a side corridor. He opens a closet and closes it behind us.

And there he prays for the gay to go away. There he prays for his son to be cleansed with sweat and tears. There he contributes to the odor that rises before heaven as an offering of zeal.

He prays for his son. Who is in shock. Who is still frozen. And exposed. Like the men on the screen. Now sitting in a closet. Again.

Him

Outside my car windows, hundreds of American flags flap violently in the wind, just like my stomach. It's as if I had swallowed an entire hive of bumblebees. They refuse to be still as questions knock in my chest.

What will it be like?

What do I do?

Who pays?

Should I be wearing something else?

Am I caring too much about what I wear?

Should I care less?

Does he care?

What's that smell?

We had been talking via text for weeks, never hearing each other's voice. Then, we mustered the courage for a phone call, never seeing each other's face. Then,

we FaceTimed, never letting our bodies touch.

But now it was time. Now he was on his way to meet me. Now I was panicking.

At the prayer house.

The prayer house where I broke up with my girlfriend.

The prayer house where my dad tried to pray the gay away.

And now, the prayer house where I was going to meet up with a man for my first gay date. The bumblebees refused to be silent.

Is this what it's supposed to feel like?

Am I supposed to feel this much?

Care this much?

Ask this many questions?

Did I put on deodorant?

Do gay guys care if you wear deodorant?

Do they want you to smell nice like girls do? Or is it like dating in a high school gym?

I sit in my Jeep in silence. The flags flapping outside in silence. My mind, nothing but silent.

Then his Jeep appears in the distance.

My stomach lurches as the bees swarm louder.

Am I really doing this?

What will everyone think?

Do I even want this?

What happens if it goes poorly?

What happens if it goes well?

I really can't remember if I put on deodorant!

He pulls up adjacent to me.

He smiles.

We roll down our windows together.

“Hi.”

“Hi.”

The bees stop.

The questions stop.

And all that can be heard is the thunder of the flags as they violently flap in the wind while two men hold each other's gaze.

Reality by Luci Schwarz

It's not the blinding lights of red and blue that captures her attention. No, it's the smell; the repugnant odor of something burning that assaults her nostrils and makes all other senses obsolete.

It's overwhelming—she gags.

Fingers scramble for the campground map, discarded into the backseat when she'd thought it had fulfilled its purpose. Part of her is aware that she needs to go past this area to get to the site but her more naïve persona is hoping she read the numbers incorrectly and she'll get to turn around.

However, the numbers are the same and she's disappointed but not at all surprised. But how to navigate this mess?

The sounds of the sirens shut off abruptly, but the lights continue to flash and flare.

An officer approaches her car and she reaches to roll down the window before remembering, stupidly, that it's already open. The fumbling with the button adds a layer of awkwardness to a conversation that has yet to start.

“Do you need to go past here?” The officer asks, dark lines emphasizing tired eyes. His hand is twitching against his belt loop, with trepidation or suspicion she'll never know.

“Yes, sir,” she replies in the politest tone she can manage. “I've got a delivery for Cabin 3.” She's tempted to ask what the ambulance and the several squad cars are for but eventually decides against it. If the officer wants to let her know, she's sure he'll tell her.

He doesn't and instead gestures to the barricade of cars blocking the only road to the cabin. “We apologize for the inconvenience, but you'll have to park here. Cabin 3 isn't too far though.”

She nods understandingly and he leaves; the sound of heavy boots crunching gravel ringing loudly in her ears.

Shutting off her car, she pulls the key from the engine and retrieves the pizza boxes from her passenger seat, arms shaking uncontrollably for seemingly no reason.

Going around the police cars is an obstacle of its own, a music-less dance that involves several hasty apologies. As she passes the ambulance, from the entrance of site #75, a stretcher appears, carried by a handful of men in uniform.

On the stretcher lays a motionless blackened figure, covered in festering blisters from head to toe. Once her mind connects the scene to the smell from earlier, her gut rebels and the girl falls to her knees, clutching her stomach with pizza boxes forgotten in the dirt. It takes all her strength to keep from depositing the contents of her stomach onto the grass.

Risking a glance up, she's scared she'll see charred eyes and strands of smoking hair clinging to a barren scalp but instead realizes the figure has some sort of plastic bag around their head. She's not sure if that sight is worse—is the person so disfigured that it would be too awful for people to see? The girl tries to bring herself to stand but finds herself paralyzed below the waist with feet that refuse to listen.

It's the sound of two young children speaking that draws her back to reality.

“Woah, look at his arm!”

“He's probably dead!”

She stares at the kids, not bothering to hold back the incredulous expression on her face. Where are their parents? What sort of mother or father would allow their kids to watch this?

Cabin 3 is curious about what all the noise is about, and she greets them with a smile like nothing's wrong. “Some sort of accident,” she informs them with forced cheerfulness. But it's eating away at her thoughts. As she leaves, the script feels even more rehearsed than usual. “Have a great night, thanks for choosing pizza today.”

When she gets back to her car, the ambulance is gone and the last of the police cars are pulling out. She stares at the spot they were, not a minute ago, numbness creeping into her thoughts.

It's nothing like how they portray on TV.

This was real. When she drives away, she looks back at site #75 through the reflection of the mirror.

And she cries.

poetry



“Genuine poetry can communicate before it is understood.”

- T.S. Eliot

Letter from the Poetry Selection Committee:

Poems can be breakers of contemporary societal and rhetorical rules and they splash humanity's beating heart across a page with words. Regardless of our level of willingness, poetry immediately places us in others' shoes, so that we might experience more life than we could ever have previously expected. In the simplest words, poetry is art whittled down to one of its rawest forms.

This year, *riverrun* was flooded with poetry submissions at a level unprecedented, and our committee chose to focus on those poems that portrayed individuals grappling with conditions that left them in states of plight, bewilderment, even sorrow, and how this affected them as they went about their personal journeys within the world. Themes centering around self-love and self-doubt, sometimes both intertwining and complementing one another, as of poetic admixtures, captivated us; and the devices in their technical brilliance only furthered our admiration. We believe that these poems are a great reflection of not only universal problems, but the diversity that we experience both on campus and beyond it.

Please enjoy this year's selected submissions,

The Poetry Selection Committee, *riverrun* Vol. 47

Orrin Marcy

Jacob Rigsby

Lauren Kohut

William Boswell

The Barkeep by A.E. Newell

This bar has stayed the same;
Hasn't aged for forty years
Warped wood and loose bar stools
Reflect in dusty mirrors

With wrinkles deep and hair snow white
The barkeep polishes a glass
Long he's lurked here in the dark
Ever since he lost his lass

She was a beauty
Full lips and long dark curls
He loved her so much, truly
She was buried in his pearls

A wedding gift, they were to be
Though she didn't get to take that walk
Now it's a different anniversary,
And his fingers trace her name carved in that tombstone block

Bully by A.E. Newell

I have a bully,
She brings torment every day.
Her hatred is unbearable,
Yet to her opinions I will sway.

She tears me so far down,
Then builds me back up slightly.
I see the loathing in her eyes,
But I'm so desperate for her liking.

I'm too fat, too short, too ugly,
Or worth nothing at all.
Here I lie so broken,
While she stands so proud and tall.

A million words lay on my tongue,
Insults to throw back in her face.
But they die before my lips,
Her anger puts me in my place.

I want to stand and face her,
But I'm kept down by my fear.
She holds so much power over me,
Maybe one day I'll smash the mirror.

Drowning Out Man by Grace Shepherd

I walk without direction, trying to step to the rhythm of the wind.
The birds sing at me, questioning my motives.
They dance around me like bees to flowers.

How can I drown out these sounds
that man creates?

Honking horns and blaring sirens
who scream emergency but not where,
stalk me on every walk.

With every stomped crack or piece of gum I crunch,
I am reminded I cannot escape
except when I look up
towards the birds on their clouded stage,
swaying to their own song.

I am man.

I have created these blaring sirens.
And no matter how many feathers I collect,
I cannot be a bird.
So, I circle around and around
until I am too dizzy to watch the cars speed by,
honking their horns.

Earth's New Gown by Nina Hall

In loving memory of my mother Annette, the source of my creative spark:
05/27/1953 - 03/31/2020

Perfect and light,
they trickle down
quite small but bright,
and swirling 'round

In frigid cold;
frozen, they dance;
they're newly-foaled,
and how they prance!

Each journey, grand;
To softly sink,
and give the land
her springtime drink

And when they rest,
they clothe the earth,
in pristine dress
of brightest worth:

A shiv'ring shroud;
intricate lace,
Born of a cloud,
in icy grace

Alas, that quilt,
by nature's law,
intends to melt,
in the next thaw

But warm, the heart,
when next we see,
the snowflake dart,
both light and free

Journeying past,
on its way down,
to cover earth
in her new gown.

End Days by Anthony T. S. Guerra

I was not born on my birthday,
I became alive when I saw you.
I did not know that the world was gray,
For the world had no hue before there was you
You must know it's true when I say,
I will be with you in my end days.

Three years ago, you killed a man
He was unsure, lost, not knowing his fate.
But something new began with his death:
We didn't know we were waiting, but so long had we waited.
Never will he be lost and found astray,
He will fight off the frost in his end days.

Bittersweet times of highs and lows,
Will never blur what there is to see.
If there is only one thing in this world I know,
Neither body nor soul that has more beauty.
When I see your allure, I can't help but say,
"I will want her until my end days."

You can blind eyes with a mind that bright,
It is something unlike anything I've seen.
And with such courage and might,
I already know the success you will glean.
You will conquer all in your own way
And I, your anchor, till our end days.

For the rest of our lives, tomorrow and today,
Through thick and thin, through furious frays
I will love you, and that will never go away,
My love, I will be with you until our end days.

Faded Stars and Love Scars By Cassian J. Cole

We don't like to think of awful things
like how our sun will one day grow red and giant, killing us all
It'll be okay, that change is far away.

Other changes are closer, as summer becomes fall
leaves fade, shift shades, and a sprout becomes tall

Outward changes reflecting our own
like how rain changes the shape of stone
like how emotions can break a home
the feelings when the one you loved left you all alone.
Change is the cousin of destruction, but not always awful
the moods of the moment make it hard to see
the emotional mileage that has grown between you and me.

Nothing natural is pure or absolute
over time, our emotions will dilute, like a drop of blood in the ocean.
Madly mixed with moments into something we don't recognize
the glow of *you*, leaves my eyes...

As another heartbreak song is being played.
Emotions echoing away like sound.
What makes a feeling fade?

Think back to the days
when more things seemed right and your problems were small
a day you wouldn't trade for anything at all.
Look back at the mental photographs.
Remember when hearts were full of laughs?

Memories that were host to a smile
feelings that haven't been felt in a while

What makes a feeling fade?

What makes a smile crack?

Let's go back —and tell them how long it wouldn't last
the sad fact is, those people no longer exist—

Resist speaking to them!

They live in a place you cannot go, the past.

Are my hands on the wheel? I do not know, time is too fast

What makes a feeling fade?

The resentment of now, the anger of then, all the emotions held within
sometimes wishing not to feel any of the above

They say the strongest is love
but love is now mixed with different shades of feeling
some not so appealing.

On one hand jealously
on the other devotion
like sweet serenity
or harmful potion.

Love is a thing stronger than any, more dense than a neutron star
love will go any length; it knows not the meaning of far.
Love will cut deep; it'll make us weak; it'll make us grow
lovers will weep like children when it's time to go.

It is so unique, but we all

One day
will have to let go.

Holding on will burn your hand to the bone, but love is no mistake

It is an unknown risk everyone must take
to live your life void of love is cowardice
We all must face change and that's how it is.

The emotional supernovas that fade without a trace,
Leave room for new things to fill its space.

If Only by A.E. Newell

The wind whispers your name
In its breeze I hear your laugh
I feel it, watch it rustling the trees
And I'm flown gently to the past

You and I, in younger days,
Watching clouds above the sea—
I wish that we could go there now
If only it could be

At water's edge, teetering,
Gazing at the aliens beneath
Bulbous eyes returning stares
From within the abyss of deep blue-green

We'd stand there silent
Watching peacefully
I wish that we could go there now,
If only it could be

Little Puritan Girls in White by Kaitlyn Sevits

*“The city where I hope to dwell,
There’s none on earth can parallel.”*

– Anne Bradstreet

Little Puritan girl in white
Her hair done up and covered
A needle pressed into her palm
Even as she is sent out to play
With the other little girls in white.

Little Betty,
Little Abigail,
Where do you roam
During your times of play in the woods?

Little Puritan girl in white
Her hair done down in braids
A bible pressed into her hands
Even as she is sent out to play
With the other little girls in white.

Little Betty,
Little Abigail,
Who whispers words
In your tender, innocent ears?

Little Puritan girls in white
Singing in the columbine ring,
Weaving flower crowns of red
As temptations are laced together
By their hands.

Little Betty,
Little Abigail,
You who read fortunes
By candlelight in the dark night.

Little Puritan girls in white
Sitting in the dark while
The specters of the Devil
Whisper in your ears
And take your bodies in the night.

Little Betty,
Little Abigail,
This city so clean and pure
Is not for such ticksters as you.

Specters there may be
In your city on a hill
But shining it is not
For corruption is rampant
And protection is scarce for those clothed in white.

Little Betty,
Little Abigail,
Sisters of unblighted flesh
The spirits shade you from the golden gates.

Little Puritan girls in white
Preaching lies amongst the lawmen
Forgiveness of the Father is given to you
As salvation is given to those who fall
And your eyes pierce the invisible heavens

To see the Father's golden gates of pearl
And your eyes are opened by the blinding white light
To the utter darkness that rests
In your dark city on the hill.

Missed by Natasha Pepperl

Maybe it's just as well
you never see this world:

Construction projects always
take longer than planned.
Sometimes strong boys shoot
other strong boys in the back
of the head—the papers
mistake these dead for
“an unidentified man.”

We drive ungodly speeds
on too much blacktop—
anything for convenience!
—we ignore metal-crushed
bone and split skulls.

Maybe it's just as well
you never see this world:
My mother has kitchen scars
down her hands and arms,
though oven mitts were
long-ago invented.

Maybe I would've broken you
like she broke dinner plates,
without a care for wounded

wood floors.

The night we learn things aren't going right:
Your father nurses a refrigerated beer
in the dark womb of our living room,
I spoon a pho alive with noodles and spice
distracting tears with restaurant T.V.s.

Later, his brother sits on our
couch, his sister on a stool.
We listen to a sad country song
few have heard, and talk about
our strong boy, shot dead in the head
four months ago in September.

Maybe it's just as well
you go back to running free.
When I see moonlight
reflecting on water,
I'll think of you:
a treasure
beyond the deep.

I'm not sure if you
were slipped your soul
yet, but if there is a God
appeal to her motherness:
Tell her I'm trying,
but it's getting harder

to keep my knees from shaking.
Tell her I need a sign, something
other than blood, something solid
—something impossible
as you.

The Monster Under the Bed by Tristan Hinkley

The monster under my bed
Was scaly and had horns covering his head,
But tonight, I did not fear him at all
As daddy was here, drunk, and just having beaten “the old chain and ball”
Belt in hand, he climbed the stairs

Tonight I knew I would not be able to hide behind stuffed bears,
I climbed under the bed, pushing against the monster and his scales
“He is coming, he is coming, don’t make me be in his trails”
The monster moved, taken aback by my rush

As daddy came in, the monster came out from under the bed
And smiled at daddy, as his face turned to dread
“You will never hurt this child, or for you I will come”
Daddy fell back his face colored like a plum
On that night, the monster was no longer such
Instead he was now the one who protected me from daddy’s punch.

Nightfall in Palestine by Natasha Pepperl

Pink and orange scrape
sky, saccharine and
sharp, like AK-47s on
the hips of teenage
soldiers.

Holes pock the West
Bank Wall, where men and
boys lunge 15 vertical
feet to jobs or familial
embraces.

It's three hours after the
fifth cry for prayer crackled
electric. Showers now run
dry in Arab neighborhoods:
another tightly moleculed
sunset.

OCD Zombie by Deanna Murri

a feral hunger holds me close
squeezing organs like oranges
'til they seep sticky stuff that defies control
'til I'm forced to make a move
 to move devolved.
a primal beast with eyes for teeth
that I send searching into the gelatinous mass,
because I make the rules
and I bite

a compulsive convulsion
there is no stopping the hunger

Rich by Rebecca Sachaj

After C.P. Cavafy's "Ithaka"

When you find each new encounter
and hold to nothing when you return,
you'll meet with suspicion and hear adversity.

Commiserations and sorrows,
 grueling hopefuls—they'll get nothing from you;
no fearful cries that lose those who held hearts
too lost to be found near our small world—
our world too close to brokenness
from the stirring of them defeated.

Commiserations and sorrows,
 tired hopefuls—leave them wandering streets
freely paved by souls who wholly believed and were
freely sold by them with hopes too long hoped for.

Roam far off places to peace your heart.
Live out great stories in sunlight shining,
with heart soaring, mind reeling,
'til the evenings arrive, and you watch modest worlds;
find towns with strange happenings 'round people
whose sighs were never uttered.

Outlast the tall, dark trees, stirring in evenings,
'til they fade into comas at sunrise—
every person knows they sleep in the sun;

you'll notice their ways,
and only then will you see nights never known before.

Still, finding splendid lands you'll learn—
the pallid mind, the empty heart never turn whole.
You'll find the tall trees forever cold—
a chill that seeps into your bones and mind that always reminds you.
And soon you'll discover as you gaze to the deep night sky—
This journey must one day end.
That day, not one thing will be found in your hands.

Returning home, they ridicule empty hands.
Returning home, you hear mocking tones—
Returning home, the sun will set once more on a listless world.

Do not take the mocking to heart.
Within your ears and heart, higher voices will dwell forever.
And after your journey, you will hold treasures more precious than gems.

Tava by Skylerann Gorgonio-Wong

For Dr. Gould

The people here call you Pikes Peak
After someone dared to say
He discovered you first.
But you have a different name
A name from a different world.
So I ask you,
What is your name?

If we listen hard enough,
If we listen with purpose
And with patience
The ‘āina will answer

Tava,
Like the sun
Because when the sun
Kisses my highest peak
All of me glows

While we gaze at your beauty
You stare back at us
To only see
More and more buildings
More and more roads
And more and more people
Who do not know your name

This Old Ship by Chris Jordahl

This old ship
I've known so long.
Warm wood whispered to me.
Creaked and groaned under the pressure of the sea.
Carrying me to lands unknown.
Its glory shown with strong mast
And banner flown.
A barrier between me and the sea.

This old ship
I've known so long
Started splintering in this gale,
And sea salt stings while suffering one more
Season we need to sail.
Repairing would render me with
Naught but one rusty nail.

This old ship
I've known so long
Hit the floor without a sound.
Regal wood and banner drowned.
Disappeared and never found.
That grand old ship that carried me
Now owned by the violent sea.

So long,
This old ship I've known,
So long.

To Park at the College by Rebecca Sachaj

you had to pay to be given a place.

And you wondered in two lots and one garage
if that money had been wasted.

But—you always remind yourself why you paid the price:
 you've got someplace to be.

Parking in two lots and one garage brings you
closer to that place,
and in that place
you'll get there faster,
anyway.

But as you start to so long wander, you realize that
you're later now than you might have been,
had you never paid a penny.

That place you paid for came with
small print: NO GUARANTEES

And what you paid for, after all, was
 a little bit of hope
that you'd be closer to
the place you wanted to be.

Turns out,
that's what people are selling these days—
when freely it was given—like a can of fresh mountain air sold to

ones who (are told they) live on giant heaps of stone.

But,

at least

this is all only about finding a place to park.

Trapped by A.E. Newell

I have a life sentence
To this prison of mine,
The hours are long
But the company divine.

Out through these holes
I see a whole world
But I'm too far inside
To know if it's real

I'm safe from harm in here,
Nothing to burn or frighten
But it's all so dim and dark
At least I'd be burning brightly

My blankets are shadows,
I bathe in my tears
No one's keeping me here
But I'm locked in by my fears

Outside my cage they stand guard
Cackling and taunting
Every day they come, without a doubt
Those thoughts so good at haunting

The Storm by Nina Hall

Wind gusting, singing, blowing
Trees shivering, swooping, swaying
Clouds scudding, curling, lowering
Air whistling, whispering, hovering
Ground freezing, crunching, rumbling
Bushes reaching, stretching, leafing
Leaves rushing, rustling, cushioning
Needles bristling, wavering, pointing
Flakes swirling, falling, floating, dancing,
flying, rising, fluttering, drifting,
prancing, jumping, flowing, going,
starting, darting; in essence, it's snowing.

Vanity by Rebecca Sachaj

Could I be worth it all?

When the question is finally asked,
and its import is found buried beneath the facades of rose-colored lies,
the grasping need for air becomes beset.

Did you know about them all?

My mistakes and my purposeful mess ups.
Promises you'd never turn away—that you would do whatever it takes—
left me realizing they were never yours to fix

Were the smoke and mirrors worth it all?

You ask with eyes awake.
Then, with mirrors gone and skin laid bare against fadeless satin,
what remains is the question finally asked.

And now you find the truth: you can't lie to yourself again.

What Changed the Man? by Tristan Hinkley

What Changed the Man?

Was it the girl who promised forever but only gave a year?

Or his crippling anxiety and life full of fear?

Could it be the death of his friend?

Maybe it was that he knew that life was not meant to end.

The bills piling up because he could not afford insurance?

Or that he spends his days without any reassurance?

Life as a man is often seen as easy.

For his life is one of privilege, and that should make it breezy.

But few understand the stress of it all,

The bottle capping of all emotions, for how could a man feel anything small?

He is expected to be the rock of everyone's life.

But he himself has no rock and is now holding a knife.

What changed the man, they all asked at his funeral.

He was once so happy, but society dictated that, as a man, everything is doable.

When My Rapist Dies by Irina Amouzou

When my rapist dies, I wonder if they will celebrate him too?

He fought for his country, the headlines will read.

His wife will cry on tv screens and his children's faces will be shrouded in misery.

When my rapist dies, the world will bless him with sainthood.

His friends will write beautiful eulogies about their late nights fighting sleep.

Strangers he never met will herald him as an American hero.

A star will die out.

When my rapist dies, I will silently light a candle for myself and shed a tear,

For my own,

Beating heart.

Witching Hour by Julia Elbert

The yellow bloom,
Soft light in your eyes,
 Don't doubt your heart at night.

Love grows as flowers,
Grass and trees.
 Digging roots in the dark.

Go forth, move onward,
The moon shines bright in the
 Witching hour.

Love lives through
owls, serpents, and butterflies.
 Growing wise through the vines.

The deep red halos
Surround all life,
 But without the moon,

There is no night.

fiction



“Some day you will be old enough to start reading fairy tales again.”

- C.S. Lewis

Letter from the Fiction Selection Committee:

Fiction is a journey. It is a beginning, middle, and end; it starts in an interesting place and ends leaving one ready to wander into their imagination. It rolls over us and submerges us, and beneath the tide we are confronted with a special sense of wonder.

Fiction is the flow of inspiration between author and reader that creates this wonder, a spark that encourages the reader to explore the story and themselves. Perhaps it's a giant monster that is a town, or a girl who has not yet fully grown, but through any plot, fiction unites human emotion with the very human need to make art.

Our goal was to publish stories that engaged our ability to wonder. Wonder about the world and the characters the authors created and the world that we reside in now. Most often, we found this wonder through authors' unique voices, bold stylistic choices, gripping plots that pushed towards meaning, and that unutterable, intangible pull of each story's "magic." We invite you to walk the path, to take the dive, to find the spark within yourself and within this selection of work.

The Fiction Selection Committee, *riverrun* Vol. 47

Julia Jackson, Project Manager

Jon Roeda

Kyra Hanson

And So She Flew by Taylor Shackelford

And from my hands, the wind tore the last tiny pieces of crumpled lined paper from me, flinging them forcefully towards the viciously foaming sea. The world was stormy gray sky melting into growling gray sea, like it was mourning fiercely. I knew it didn't want to remember.

With that wind-stolen paper, I had let her die.

Everything around me was a spinning world of multicolor chaos. Too many people, too little space, too much noise, and no means of escape. Whilst the idea of hosting a party in a tiny seaside house was, in *theory*, a grand idea, this place was no Gatsby's and there certainly was no appealing golden aura present. It was, simply put, distasteful. Just another stupid college party.

Clumsily bumping past multiple sweaty bodies, I wandered the house for solitude. Making the mistake of opening one too many bedroom doors only twice—I considered this a win. Finally, I found myself in a laundry room adjacent to the living room where the whirring of the machines made its own melodic tune married in with the bumping of the speakers next door. Loud, but quiet.

Very nimbly I shucked my phone from my jacket pocket and flicked through various apps at various speeds in hopes of finding something to appease my all too irritated mind.

This is when the door opened.

In walked a lithe girl, long sugary blond ringlets and slender white dress. She wore a crooked, sort-of Mona Lisa grin and insisted on keeping my gaze. In her too-tiny doll hands, she held close to her chest a red cup spilling over the plastic rim. A prop that seemed out of place in contrast to her appearance. Like a child holding a lighter.

Instead of speaking, I stared. In that moment, I couldn't tell you why this was the case because she wasn't some God-sent angel girl who I felt destined to spend the rest of my pathetic, cynical life with, yet, I stared.

Amidst the merry beat of the washing machine-techno that muffled anything spoken between us, I would never come to forget what her tiny pink lips murmured.

They say when important words are spoken the world becomes quiet. I completely disagree. The world around me came to a frightening crescendo of thumping, whirring, and the distant crashing of the sea. Like someone had slipped and hit max volume and I could do nothing about it but helplessly endure.

She had left the room before I could process her words:

“I’m going to kill myself.”

She breathed her words and I don’t mean in your typical damsel manner, rather, in such a way that she spoke those words like the punch line to a still-sticky popsicle joke. When she smiled, her teeth hid just behind her lips so that she looked posed for a picture—horribly mundane.

When she disappeared, I didn’t believe her. She was some drunk girl with romanticized thoughts pieced together by social media and John Green.

Yet I followed her.

I sat clutching a crumpled piece of paper along the shoreline. Hurriedly scribbling down anything I could remember. She had to be remembered.

I scrawled quick words that came to mind: blond curls, small frame, too young.

I could still remember the gravity of the news broadcaster’s voice right before they segued to a commercial break advertising dog toys.

“Lilia Monet Merriweather was found dead last night, her body at the base of the cliffs near Corona Del Mar where she allegedly committed suicide.”

Her friends were shown next, sniffing and rubbing at their dry eyes as if willing tears to form.

“We never thought she’d *actually* do it! She had a good life!”

“We just kinda ignored it, ya know? Lil was so far in her own head that I wouldn’t be surprised if she thought she’d fly after she jumped!”

I felt sick.

I followed her to the coastline where the cliff face kissed the shore. A sheer drop downwards into the unforgiving sea. There she stood. Bare feet curled around the crumbling edges with arms outstretched so her sheer white blouse rippled around her too-small body, giving her wings.

I didn’t believe her. She was drunk. No one truly wanted death, they wanted to flirt with the idea and, like a tease, leave it altogether.

And yet, as easily as someone would step down a stair, she strode. Her tiny body quickly disappeared from sight. Her sugary blond curls and eyes shut tight. She fell.

I didn’t believe her and she fell.

I choked out a sob, wiping at my tear-swollen eyes, I wrote one more word:

She flew.

And from my hands, the wind tore the last tiny pieces of crumpled lined paper from me, flinging them forcefully towards the viciously foaming sea.

Another Time by Kendall Johnson

“Have you ever lost someone, and then wished you could have them back? You have the chance to do the impossible. Before you click the link below, think about how life would be different if you were able to stop someone from dying. Would it bring more peace, more hope, or would it have devastating results? Click the link below to find out.”

The Dream Experiment from DE Inc. Capable of doing the impossible. With one click on an email, those who have lost someone from tragedy can go back in time and save them. *Bullshit*, I used to think when that commercial came on in the living room at my house. A part of me couldn't understand why someone would want the dead to come back to life if they were already gone...

Early on the night of October 2, 2017, my phone buzzed from under my pillow. Still lying down, I dug out my phone and stared at the screen until the letters on the screen started to unblur. The name on the screen made my heart feel like it was drowning, and a part of me knew what the call was about. I tapped the green circle on the screen to answer the call.

“Hello?”

“Serena?” I heard her take a deep, shaky breath in the background. I could tell by the way the lady's voice cracked that it was Katie's mother on the phone with me. “It happened. She's gone.”

Four simple words were enough to shake the once secure world around me. I sat up in bed and my phone dropped to the floor in front of me. Putting on jeans and a t-shirt was not a concern of mine, and instead I rushed out my front door in my pajamas. I was confronted with the chilling breeze that night as I got into my truck. The drive, and the arrival at the hospital, was blurry.

I remembered sitting in the hospital chair and staring at the body that was once full of moments of unforgettable laughter and moments with tears from heart shattering breakups. Her parents left the room, and with the almost numbing quietness, I could hear their weak sobs. My eyes were fixed on her pale eyelids—the eyelids that I knew held forest green eyes. Katie Reice, a girl who I spent 20 out of 24 years of my life with, someone who I considered my family, lost her battle with Leukemia.

I stepped out into the hallway lit with lights so bright it stung my aching eyes. My back slid down the cold, rough wall. There was nothing I could do, and I realized the harsh truth of having a disease.

After hours of remembering, crying, and hugging Katie's parents, I drove back to

my house and texted my friend Vienna the news. Grief attached itself to my back and followed me to my house.

That night, while Vienna was staying the night at my house, the email that I thought was bullshit made me sit up in my bed. A simple paragraph from this ad was strong enough to act like a sword piercing through my mind and my chest. While I sat staring at that email, I kept thinking if I could bring her back—her laughter, her love, and her happiness, I wouldn't mind if the world crashed down and burned in tall flames all around me.

Lying next to my bed, I heard Vienna shift in her sleeping bag. She was lying on her back, and her blue eyes looked off into the distance reflecting the same drowning turmoil I felt. Her blonde hair was spread out around her head.

“H-hey, Vienna?”

Her head rolled across the bean bag to look at me.

“The Dream Experiment emailed me.”

She sat up and used her palms to push tears out of her eyes. “What is that?”

“I might be able to bring Katie back.”

Her palms stopped pushing on her eyes, and she put her hands down on the sleeping bag.

“It's this company. It lets you see a reality with someone that died.”

“Um... Where'd you hear about it, exactly?”

“There was a commercial about it once. I think I was watching the news and it came on... look at it.”

Vienna pushed the sleeping bag off her legs, and sat on the bed next to me. Her eyes squinted at the screen before she said, “Oh, DE Inc.?”

“Yeah.”

She rubbed her chin. “I've heard about it. I haven't heard anyone using it though.”

“Should I try it?”

Her eyes moved from the right to the left while looking at my phone. “Honestly, if neither of us have heard anything bad about it, give it a shot. If you do go back, maybe you can do something to...” She put her head in her palms. “She didn't deserve to die the way she did. Maybe there's something we can do.”

I nodded, and the air in my chest froze up. My thumb hovered over the link on the email. *What were the consequences it was talking about?* After tapping the link, the sun started shining through my window. I turned to where Vienna once

was, and I saw the carpet where her sleeping bag once was.

“Vienna?” I searched the room while the phone was still in my hand, and I leaned over the bed did not see her sleeping bag. My phone buzzed. When I unlocked the screen, I saw I had a text... from Katie.

“Hey! You ready for the concert tonight?!” My heartbeat picked up, and my eyes darted to the top of the screen to briefly see the date. April 7, 2017. The date made me pull my head back a little, as I squinted my eyes. My eyes still felt exhausted, but I couldn’t tell if it was because I was tired or if I was crying.

There was only one way to find out. I checked my email inbox to see if the DE Inc. email was still there. It disappeared as well. My fingers scrolled up and down on the screen, only to find nothing. All the newest emails I had were from April 7, 2017.

“Ok ok, I just downloaded the CD on iTunes. I’m gonna have this ish memorized by tonight!” Katie’s text flashed on the top part of my screen.

Every bone in my fingertips wanted to respond back, but I sat, sinking into the cotton sheets, unable to move. Eventually I shut my phone off, and threw it to the side of me. I put my elbows on my thighs and put my hands to my mouth. *Holy hell.* Air filled my lungs as I shut my eyes. If everything was happening like it did months ago, I needed to ask Katie to come over so we could jam out to the CD together and talk about life.

Feeling my arms tremble from the stress running through my veins, I picked up the phone again. “Do you want to come over and we could jam to the track?” I hit send and my face scrunched up.

“Yeah man! I gotta shower first but I’ll be there in twenty.”

Twenty minutes. I hopped out of bed, brushed out my hair and watched as the black dead ends snapped off my head and wrapped around in the bristles of the brush. When, I leaned over my dresser into the mirror, I saw my brown eyes staring back at me, and fine red veins travel up to my cornea. Trying to ignore the exhaustion prevalent in my eyes, I pulled open the top drawer and pulled out a T-shirt with droopy letters, a bra, and jeans. By the time I was done getting dressed and staring at myself in the mirror, the doorbell rang. I shoved my phone in my pocket and ran through the bedroom door and up to the front door that was next to my living room and kitchen. My hand fell on the doorknob and even warmer air entered my lungs.

I opened the door, and a girl with red hair that stretched down to her waist stood before me. Her eyes, which I’ve complimented before, were bright green and curved slightly down at the tips. The corners of her lips were slightly up, and her arms were crossed over her shirt that was covered in floral patterns.

My mouth fell open, and tears burned the sides of my eyes once again. I took two wide steps before I wrapped my arms around her.

She fell back a little bit and said, “Whoa! What’s up, dude?”

What’s up dude. What’s up dude. “Oh my gosh,” I inhaled a wet sniff on her shoulder. “It really is you.”

“O-Ok,” she said, hugging me back. “Are you okay?”

I pulled away and wiped my tears from my eyes. “I’m great.”

From then on, even though it was strange, Katie and I mostly hung out in my room. She turned the album up on her iPhone speakers. We screamed every chorus from the band Red Not Blue, headbanged at the breakdowns, or we sat through songs and talked about how “the weather was crazy stormy last night,” and how “the concert tonight was going to be rad.”

“But, like, is Vienna coming tonight?” Katie asked me while she was sitting on the ground in front of my bed.

Vienna. “Oh, I actually don’t know. I’m sure she’d love to come.” I pulled out my phone from my pocket while I was sitting on my bed, and I pulled up Vienna’s name. As I opened the new text document, I stopped, and my face scrunched. *Did Vienna have any recollection of Katie dying? Did that really happen?* “We need to talk. Can you come over right now?” I sent the text and stared at my phone.

“So... Is she not coming? You look confused,” Katie said.

“I don’t know.” I looked up at her. “Actually, there is something I need to tell you.”

Buzz. My head dropped back down to my phone. It was an email. “Thank you for trying this experiment with us! Sometimes new worlds are not what we think they are...”

I felt my back straighten up.

Katie paused the music. “Strange text?”

My mouth opened and closed a few times.

Buzzzz. Buzzzz. A call started coming through on my phone. It was from an unknown number. I answered it. “Hello?”

“Hi, yes, am I talking to Serena?”

“Who’s this?”

“It’s Vienna’s mother.”

My head started to shake.

“Are you at home right now?” She said.

“Uh y-yeah.”

“Okay, well I just wanted to let you know that Vienna passed away this morning.”

Nothing. I made no sound, no noise—absolutely nothing.

“I-if you want to stop by, we are at Memorial Hospital North.”

“Okay, h-hold on.” The words finally forced themselves out of me. “What the hell happened?”

“She had a heart attack.” Her mom’s voice cracked.

The world came crushing in on me, once again.

“Take care of yourself okay. Vienna loved you very much, and we are so grateful you had a positive impact on her life—”

I ended the call.

Katie got to her feet and walked up to me. “Who was that?”

“Vienna is dead.”

“W-What?”

I ran my fingers through my hair and looked up at Katie. My phone dropped to my side. “I don’t know what the hell is going on.”

“H-how’d she die?”

“A *fucking* heart attack! You want to know something weird? I briefly lived in some timeframe where you were dead! You died from leukemia! I get this weird email and now Vienna is dead!”

Katie stood in front of me, flailing her arms. “What are you talking about? Who called you?”

“Her parents!”

My phone buzzed next to me and I picked it up. The email this time said, “Sometimes, other worlds are only meant for dreams. The reality of the pain will still be there, even if you run. Click the link below to go back. Do not click the link if you wish to stay in the world you are in.”

Katie’s head leaned over my phone. “Why do you have DE Inc. emails on your phone?”

“I don’t know! In another world you died! I was so upset I clicked the link and I-I”

“Geez, Siren. You can’t just mess with time like that.” Her head turned to me.

“You need to go back to that time.”

My eyes were glued to my phone, and my hands started to shake.

Katie sat on the bed next to me and said, “If you came back to this day just to save me, that honestly means so much to me.” I heard her take a deep breath. “What date was it?”

My head looked away from my phone, and my eyes looked at the wall in front of me. “O-October 2nd.”

“Wow...”

We sat there, hearing my clock on the wall behind us tick away. A few times the ticking was interrupted by one of us sniffing.

“Look, dude.” She said with her voice cracking. “This isn’t right. You have to go back. Maybe I’m meant to die—”

“No. there has to be another way. There has to be a way the three of us can still be here. There has to be, there has to be.”

She shook her head. “I’m okay with dying if that is what needs to happen.”

“No. I’m not going to choose—”

Katie reached over my lap, and tapped the link. Before I could turn to her and react, I saw darkness all around me. Katie disappeared and the email disappeared. The sun was no longer shining through my window. I checked my phone for the date. October 2, 2017.

I was sitting on the side of my bed again like I was earlier. Slowly, I turned my head next to me to see Vienna resting her palms in her cheekbones.

“Are you gonna do it?” She said not breathing through her nose.

The tears that I thought were frozen inside of me began pouring again for one last time. I felt my phone slip out of my hands and heard it thud against the carpeted floor. My sobs ran from me uncontrollably, and I felt Vienna’s warm arms wrap around me.

The Denizens of Crickback Bay by Daniel Knapp

It happened in May in a town called Crickback Bay, five months after the new year and six months before election season, when all the tired and broken are beckoned out from their holes, to be seen and heard, only to be banished once their votes had been cast. To the denizens of Crickback Bay, a house without mold was a body without a soul, and to breathe in its fumes was to become one with their fatal city. Fatal—it killed them with tetanus and lead, with sinkholes and chemical fires, and yet there were no protests in Crickback Bay, only pursed lips and vacant eyes. When one walked through the streets of Crickback Bay, one could hear the pitter-patter of rain escaping rusted shingles and the tapping of a family of mice above one's head. The bricks abandoned their buildings and sewers were welcomed onto the streets; the gutters were lined with corpses and flowers lined collapsed buildings that reeked of decay. If one bent over to lace a knot in their shoes, they were overcome by a legion of vermin—one could not falter on the streets of Crickback Bay. To walk its streets was to walk alone.

A senator arrived in the city and the city wept: the rats tore themselves from the sidewalks and alleyways back to the beds they had festered; the vermin funneled into the sewers; the cats hissed; dogs growled; and people wailed—none were welcome in Crickback Bay. The senator was short two thousand votes and six inches to his opponent, and the early projections had seen his adversary to be his better. His staffers had abandoned him, and his donors clutched their wallets. The senator walked alone.

In fifty years there had been fifty elections and hundreds of candidates; however, none had campaigned in Crickback Bay. The city had been confined within itself; all understood that none were to enter so that none would leave, and the state had long since abandoned the city to despair. Congress did not utter its name and the media allowed no coverage of it. To all those concerned, Crickback Bay did not exist.

The senator walked alone in the phantom town, touring what stores yet remained and talking to the few that dared linger in the streets. One was an impoverished carpenter, the other a starving midwife – no children were born in Crickback Bay. Not in fifty years. There was a man who mourned before a chasm carved into the earth, filled with rubble and pooling with greywater, and there he clutched a hand that jutted from the remains and wept. The others passed him, not sparing a moment to pity or comfort the man, bundled in their ragged clothing, stroking their haggard eyes.

The senator entered a café where the collapse and despair had not yet secured its clutches and took a seat at the counter. He wondered why he had come to this place. He wondered if he could leave. A man was seated next to him—a tired man that both time and family had left behind thirty years prior, just as the bad had become worse and his young frame grew old. He had once worked in construction when such a thing still existed in Crickback Bay; he hadn't worked in fifty years.

The senator entered a café and sat next to a man who had witnessed the incident fifty years prior—who had been the inciter. He had once traveled into the depths of the city, navigated its serpent sewers and concentric catacombs, who had gazed upon its very depths. The man did not speak of it; he did not dare to speak of it, unless, of course, someone was to ask. The senator made the mistake of doing so.

A wry grin stretched over the man's lips. He asked if the senator truly wanted to know, that in doing so, he was condemning himself to a life within this city, one he could never hope to escape from. The senator nodded his head with a grim smile. He would not be kept within this desolate place, he thought to himself, he would secure the votes of these hapless people before continuing his campaign. This city held more than sixty thousand people within its limits. If he won here, he would never need to concern himself over reelection.

The old man mused over where he should begin his story. A few times he started too early, and others he started far too late until he managed to gather himself right where the story should have begun.

He was a young man then. Twenty and married and with two kids brewing inside a woman he thought agreeable. He worked in construction. Not because he liked the job, but because they paid the best and the poor kid could hardly count past twenty. Construction was a fairly new business in Crickback Bay—none had ever needed to be done. The city had been found twenty years prior and had not needed any renovations done until recent, hence why a contractor was called in.

Something wrong with the pipes, they had said.

No one thought much of it. Families had been immigrating by the thousands, and even more were charmed from walking the pier at sunset or watching the boats steer into the harbor while the sky blushed and the sun bashfully retreated over the horizon. The water hadn't yet run brown and the rain did not yet corrode the streetlights; the pier had not been washed away in a storm and boats still dared to dock on its shores; the city had not yet fallen to decay.

He went down into the sewers; down into the spiraling depths of the city along with four other men—all dead now. They would die soon. They were only supposed to isolate a leak. They followed a spiraling set of stairs into the depths of the city. Paths split off in every direction like an ant colony, tempting them down dark corridors to dead ends or spitting them back out to the floor above. There

was no sense to be found. The only way forward was to sink deeper into the city.

There was no light to be found; their way was lit by the dim light of a pen flashlight he fished from his coat pocket and a lighter commandeered from a disgruntled chain-smoker. They did not notice the smell immediately; at the entrance it was faint and fleeting, greeting one's nostrils for but a moment before fluttering off with the wind, making one think they had imagined it. As they drew deeper, he knew he had not imagined it. The concrete had morphed into something else. He could feel it scrape against his hand, and his feet sinking into it, and the sound it made as it was trampled by four sets of trembling feet.

Splish splash, splash splish—the sound of flesh foaming to their ankles.

Drip drop, drop drip—the cadence of blood falling to the floor.

A cry for help, a plea for salvation—the sound of discord.

The chain-smoker was the first to die. When the concrete turned to flesh, he was the first to notice; the first to retreat towards the entrance. When the pipes turned to veins, he let out a harrowing cry.

He was a fool, the old man lamented. They had been walking for hours through that labyrinth. There was no return.

He was swallowed by the city. They hardly noticed he disappeared until they couldn't detect the aroma of his cigarettes in the air. They found one on the ground not so far away.

There was no telling if the flesh belonged to him, so they said a short prayer and left him. None particularly cared for him—he had defiled her.

The family-man was the second to die—he had too much to live for. The other two men could tell he did not truly care for his city. He was just in it for the pay. He wanted to abandon her—to let her bleed down there. Alone. They tried to reason with the man. He couldn't be reasoned with. He found his way off the side of the stairs, gently bouncing from side to side as he raced them to the bottom, guiding them with a final curt curse.

The walls began to pulsate beneath their fingertips, beckoning them to its heart. Eyes emerged from the cracks; arms sprouted to lift them from their tired feet; the city was merciful; the city was considerate; the city was grateful they had come all this way. They could hear the soft drum of an intoxicating heartbeat and the hymn of shallow breaths—they could feel it glide across their cheeks.

Below them, they could spot rays of light pooling on the skeletal stairs. The dark, harrowing space was now lined with hundreds of picture windows, all allowing them to gaze out into the vast expanse surrounding them, as they continued to spiral down and down and down towards their anxious host. Mountains of red

rose upon the horizon and ivory spirals of bone were erected from the undulating foundations which they stood.

Rustle ruffle, ruffle rustle—the sound of clothes being torn.

Creak crack, crack creak—the sound of bones churning.

The third to die was the zealot. He was too eager. Too abundant in his love. He was blasphemous.

They stood before Mother, her many eyes studying her babes, as they tossed around before her like infants playing in crimson pools with ivory friends on a floor of twisted flesh. The zealot wished to commune with her. Fix the leak. He rose to his feet and reached out to embrace her. The veins twitched and his ivory friends turned to captors. Mother understood his desire, no matter how twisted it may have been. She allowed him to become part of her. He was able to commune, the insolent fool.

The first child was the prophet. He would be the one to lead the rest of her children to her, for she could not bear the loneliness any longer. Twenty long years waiting for him to come, and no more could be sustained. Mother embraced him with her many arms, studying her babe with her many eyes, and spoke a single utterance with no lips.

The senator pleaded with him to continue; however, the old man did not say any more. Penetrating the chrome and faux leather of the diner with a stare that stretched down into the abyssal plain that stretched in perpetuity beneath, where Mother lay content and sick. The old man could no longer make the divine pilgrimage. None could. The denizens of Crickback Bay had grown as dilapidated as their once great city; Mother was to breathe her last very soon. They all wished they could be at her side.

The senator asked why they chose to stay in this decayed town. He asked what Mother had told him.

The old man simply shook his head. The senator knew the answer—he could feel it churning in his gut, brewing in his skull: a faint voice echoing in the quiet of the night, an ancient yearning beckoning him to answer. There was nothing left to say—he would soon know for himself.

Plip plop, plop plip—rain drifting to the horizon.

Click clack, clack click—the sound of a pilgrimage.

The senator no longer walked alone.

Escape by Ross Likins

Owen Ramus was sentenced on August 18th to death by hanging. The date of the execution was to be September 7th. During the nineteen days between the sentencing and the execution, Owen slept, sat, ate, and paced his prison cell. He chatted with the guards and scratched words and images into the stone walls. Though he missed the air and the sun of the outside world, Owen quickly realized that his imprisonment afforded him a privilege he had never known—the chance to stop and think.

Before he was locked away, the worries of life had filled every waking moment. His need to survive pushed away the opportunity to think beyond the restrictive physical world in which he lived. But now, during the nineteen days before his execution, his survival was certain, and the imprisonment of his body liberated his mind. He could now see his own life from the outside, and he understood himself more than ever before. At first, this experience was liberating, but the initial ecstasy slowly melted away. He could now look forward and backward in time. For the first time, Owen felt guilt for his past. And for his future: dread.

He had never been afraid of death. Every moment had created enough worry for itself when he had been free. Now death was real and arriving soon. His mind desperately searched for a way out. What could he do? His own desire to live meant nothing against the power of those who imprisoned him. No one could escape from a stone prison cell surrounded by guards, and he had no one to come to his rescue. Salvation would have to find him from within the cell.

The night before the execution, a memory returned. When Owen was a child, a priest had told him of a puzzle invented by an ancient Greek philosopher named Zeno. Zeno explained how a man who wanted to travel a certain distance could logically never reach his goal. First, the man would have to travel half the distance to his destination, then half the remaining distance, then half that distance, and so on and so on for eternity. Zeno had imagined a way to turn the finite into the infinite.

Owen took Zeno's wisdom and reinvented it. Instead of an infinite number of distances, he imagined an infinite number of moments standing between himself and death. If he could force this concept into reality, he could push his death infinitely into the future. He turned over this idea in his mind, trying to transform it into reality.

But, try as he might, he couldn't do it. In the morning, the guards opened the door and took him to the courtyard to be hanged.

If Owen Ramus had been someone else or something else, it might have gone differently. If he had been a scholar or a being of superhuman intelligence, he might have fully understood the implications of Zeno's paradox. He might have seen some truth it revealed about the universe, and the path between concept and reality would have opened for him. Zeno's paradox would have been pulled from his mind and made real.

If his mind were capable of this act, then maybe, when the guards arrived in the morning, they wouldn't have found Owen's slouched defeated figure sitting in the corner, but instead a room full of dust—the ancient remains of a man who'd lived an eternity in his final moments.

Fowl by Anthony T. S. Guerra

The crashes of thunder on this rainy Thursday morning were no match for the boy's blood curdling screams. The chickens in their coops spectated the house. Suddenly, in the distance, the door on the small rundown home thrust open with such force it was shocking that the hinges could even hold on. The chickens looked in awe at the house; after days of no food, the time for their meal had finally arrived. The hens scuttled excitedly in their place, while the roosters led in a choir of lion-like roars.

Finally, after a long moment, their master appeared in the door frame. He was a fat, ugly man. At only five foot nine, he was a tower in comparison to the young boy. Hair in hand, the man pulled with all of his might to get the young boy to release the door handle from his clutches, yet the boy did hang on: his life did depend on it. The man pulled with all his might, his eyes bulged out of his head; however, in the eyes themselves no soul could be found. The boy, still latched onto the doorframe, screamed and wept. Finally, the boy's grip gave out, sending him flying backwards. His father pulled him up by the hair on his scalp and struck him square on the nose, causing two streams of blood to flow from his nostrils.

The man dragged his son down the stairs leading up to the door and started making his way to the barn. The boy's feet dragged along the soil as he tried to dig into the ground; furiously, he scratched at his father's hands. The father, unfazed, continued to drag the boy forward. The boy did everything in his power to free himself. He kicked, he punched, he bit, but nothing could break the inhuman grip his father had on him.

From the house a curtain moved, revealing his mother. Her blank face had the benefit of having the companionship of a single tear that rolled slowly down her face. It was too late now, there was nothing stopping what had started. She witnessed the boy's energy drain, and he went limp like a ragdoll. The mother's eyes, like her husband's, were absent of soul as she watched the two silhouettes approach the barn.

The barn seemed out of place in the situation at hand. The fresh paint caused the barn to glow angelically, yet not even an angel could bless this place. The man trudged to the side of the structure and pulled a lever that released the chickens from their cages and into the barn. The poultry danced and sang in their home. They were ecstatic; their feast was coming. The dark interior filled with light as the large doors swung open. The father flung his son forward, leaving him standing alone, his shadow a monster of epic proportions. He closed the barn with a mighty slam and, as if nothing had occurred, walked casually back to the house.

Not a peep from the boy was heard, but it was obvious that the starved fowl were having their way with him, for they too were silent as they fed. Every once in a while, the snapping of bone was heard as they consumed the boy's marrow.

Reaching the house, the father grabbed himself a beer and took his place at his favorite chair. He did not open his drink, he did not read his favorite novel, he did not turn on the television. He just sat, his face as blank as when the events had first begun. He did not blink, for his eyes would not allow it. There was a change in the air and with the thunder subsiding, the father's eyes finally closed.

When his eyes opened, he uncontrollably bent over and vomited on the rug. In a panic, he stood. His body was shaking so badly that it took a tremendous effort to maintain his balance. "Honey!" he shouted. "Honey, where are you!" He looked outside at the darkness of night. Thursday morning had become Thursday night, and the father had not a clue what had happened in between.

The man's wife peeked around the corner from the kitchen and timidly walked into the room. The father, still barely able to stand, tripped forward and collapsed onto the end table, knocking its contents onto the carpet. Recomposing himself, he once again turned to his wife. She stared at him like he was not from this earth, and he held a similar sentiment. "Where's Andrew?" He stepped towards her. She responded with a flow of tears. "Honey, what the hell is goin' on? WHERE'S ANDREW!" He grabbed both her shoulders firmly in his hands. Unable to speak, she pointed behind her husband towards the direction of the barn. Confused, the father released her and sprinted to the barn. Swinging the doors open, he collapsed at what he saw.

The remains of the boy were nearly unrecognizable. His flesh had been separated from his body, and his limbs were completely mangled. Not a single hen nor rooster was in sight, but this was a fact that went unnoticed by the now guilt stricken father. The man collapsed in front of his son and took his corpse into his arms. He cried so hard that snot and tears accumulated into puddles at his knees.

Sounds of sirens approached from the distance, and the man held onto his boy, the boy he had loved since birth and who was now gone forever.

~

The taxi slid on the dirt road leading up to a familiar house, a house of tragedy and death. The sonless father stepped out of the car and paid the driver. The taxi sped off, leaving him alone in front of the house.

He felt a cold sweat come over him; he knew this moment would come, but that did not mean he was ready for it. He saw movement behind the curtains, and he knew he was being watched. His wife had not visited him in over 15 years, and the father began to panic at the idea of seeing her after all this time. Three deep breaths, fiddling with his jacket zipper, and a bloated moment was what it took

for the man to muster up the courage to finally ascend the steps of his old home. However, since it no longer felt like home, he gave three light knocks on the door.

To his surprise, the door opened instantly. There stood his wife; she was as beautiful as ever, and she wore a smile that was welcoming and loving. "Hey you," she said.

"Hey," he stuttered.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too."

She grabbed his collar with both of her hands and gifted him an elongated kiss. It was a kiss like no other, and it was as if they were kissing for the first time. She released him. "Hi," she giggled.

"Hi," he replied. All of his worries melted away. The smell of his favorite meal, chicken fried steak, flooded his nose. The wife led the sonless father into the kitchen and sat him down at the table. A nice tablecloth covered the usually naked table, and the nicest sets of plates and silverware were neatly set. The wife came around and lit a fancy candle that sat at the center of the table. The events that followed were that of a Thursday morning familiar to the father. However, the absence of his son from the table weighed on him, it would always weigh on him.

Days passed, and those days became weeks; every day absolutely filled with joy, laughter, and love. However, it irked the father that his wife had not made a single mention of their son or of all the years that she did not visit him at the institution. Though at this moment their marriage felt better than it had ever been, resentment began to grow inside him. Awful dreams would haunt him while he slept; however, he had suffered with this for many years and thought nothing of them.

One night was different. One night he experienced a dream so vivid that it was as if he was not asleep at all. He was in his barn milking the cows. During these times he would let his chickens roam and play in the barn. While milking the cow, the man looked up to see something very peculiar. The chickens were cawing at each other in an unusually organized way. The father witnessed the chickens arrange themselves into a perfect square and march like soldiers out of the slightly ajar barn door. Nervous and confused, the father stood. The man, who was once aware that he was in a dream, no longer knew if this was fiction or reality. He stepped outside and caught sight of the brigade of poultry rounding the corner of the barn. The father followed hastily and rounded the corner where the chickens had gone.

He stopped dead in his tracks, for there were no chickens to be seen. A small boy

with a skeleton frame was facing away from the sonless father. He stood in an odd contorted way due to his limbs being barely held together by remnants of ligaments, and patches of flesh were missing from his arms and legs. The boy wore jean shorts and a white and yellow striped polo, and it struck the father that this is exactly what Andrew was wearing the day he died. The father sunk into himself; the boy remained facing away from his father.

“An-Andrew,” the father stepped forward nervously. The boy did not respond. “Andrew,” another step forward, “I love you, bud, and I miss you so much. I don’t remember anything, but, God, I have to believe—no—you have to believe that I didn’t do it, Andrew. I would never hurt you!”

“I know, pa,” the boy’s voice was distorted as if he was attempting speech without vocal chords, “it was that bitch.” Shocked by his child’s words, the father was taken aback.

“Who, Andrew, who did this?” the father gulped nervously.

“That bitch! That bitch! That bitch!” the child replied with guttural, inhuman speech. The father mustered up the courage to approach his boy and take a knee closely behind him.

“Andrew, whoever did this, they’re goin’ tuh pay. But you gotta help me out here, you gotta tell me who did this,” the father was interrupted by the loud morning song of a rooster who had suddenly appeared behind him. This startled the father, and upon returning his attention to his son, the boy had vanished. What was left was the father and the singing rooster.

The rooster strode back to the front of the barn and awaited the father to follow. Getting the hint, and no longer afraid, he followed the rooster. The ground in front of the barn began to vibrate, and a square hole suddenly collapsed in on itself. The father, who had been standing where the soil fell in, tripped backwards to avoid going into the hole. The father looked up and saw that the rooster was growing quickly in height. The bird’s body contorted, its feathers fell out, and its face stretched like rubber until it was familiar to the father. Andrew coughed and feathers flew out of his open mouth. “That bitch,” Andrew pointed into the hole.

The father turned over onto his stomach and peeked into the hole where his son was pointing. In it was a skeleton, decomposed and unrecognizable. The body wore a brilliant dress with purple floral patterns. His wife’s favorite dress.

Sweating heavily, the father awoke with a fright. His fear further grew when he looked around and realized he was lying in front of the barn, the darkness of night shrouding the structure. He was certain he had fallen asleep in his bed, next to his wife... his wife. Was that his wife? Or was his wife six feet under the ground on which he stood. He hurriedly grabbed a shovel from the inside of the barn. Adrenaline coursed through his system as he began to dig in the spot where

the grave existed in his dreams. A light from the bedroom of the house flickered on, and soon enough the father's home was glowing from its interior. The front door light came alive last.

"Honey!" his wife shouted as she stepped out the door. "What're you doin'?" She began to make her way down the stairs and towards her husband.

The sonless father dug with the ferocity of a rabid dog. His wife, worried, called out to him again, but her call fell upon deaf ears. The father had never done anything in his life with such purpose, but he had to know if what he dreamed was just that, a dream, or if it was real life. The father's eyes swelled with tears as a bone revealed itself in the dirt, and the father broke when a shred of the brilliant floral dress emerged. He climbed out of the grave just as his wife reached him.

"Honey," she spoke softly, "what's goin' on?" Something heavy appeared in the sonless father's pocket. He reached in and felt a rubber handle, so he pulled it out and saw that it was a six shooter revolver. Engraved on the side of the barrel: *For that bitch*. The sight of the gun startled the wife and she let out a yelp.

"Who are you," the father spat.

"Ba-baby it's me."

"LIAR," he pointed the gun at her. "That," he looked into the grave, "is my wife, so I'm goin' tuh ask again, who the hell are you?!" The wife leaned forward to look in the grave.

"Oh my God..." she muttered, "oh my God, what did you do, God, please, not again, don't tell me you did this again!" Tears flowed down the woman's face.

"I didn't do anything. I never did anything! All along it was you." He was so enraged that his hand holding the gun began to shake furiously. "That is my wife's dress, I got it for her for our 13th wedding anniversary."

"That is the dress Sally down the street wore, I know because I always remember commenting how overdressed she got to impress her boyfriend's parents." She said through the tears, "Don't you remember? Hell, she even wore it one night when she babysat Andrew." The sonless father did remember that, and now he was questioning everything. He began to sob.

"That's the first time I've heard you say his name in 20 years." With snot and a line of drool falling onto his shirt, the father lowered the gun. "Oh my God, oh my God, what's wrong with me." He cried hysterically. The wife took a few steps forward, hoping the father had come to his senses. However, as she walked forward, through her legs the father saw the rooster from his dream, and just as had happened in his dream, the rooster sang his song. Once again, the gun jumped up to threaten his wife.

"Baby, please, let me help you." His wife's tone was warm, but with each step to-

wards him, the father felt a sense of doom. Now, the father turned the firearm on himself. "Honey, don't do that, there is help for you, please, I love you." She took another step forward. He pointed the gun at her, then he placed it under his chin, then he pointed it back at her. Meanwhile, the wife was slowly making her way to her husband and the rooster was singing its song. The gun was on him, the gun was on his wife.

The gun was on him, the gun was on his wife. Truly, the sonless father did not know who was going to be on the receiving end of the barrel when the gun was discharged, all he knew was the trigger would be pulled.

The blast of the gun brought silence. The wind went still as if nature itself had nothing left to say. The only remaining sound was the song of the rooster.

In Which Rachel Pretends Everything Is Okay by Irina Amouzou

Dear,

I spent a little too long in the shower this morning. But it wasn't because I wanted you washing me, I just loved the water. I thought about taking out the trash, but I thought if I let it sit, you'd know, come over and remove it; you knew I couldn't do it myself.

But of course, this isn't a metaphor for my heart. I've been empty since you left. You remembered to take everything out of me.

I wish empty felt like nothing. Instead, empty feels like missed

Adventures of a Lonely Woman,

Like almost kisses,

Rain

Drops,

Turning into love making,

Us almost.

But not quite.

Love,

Rachel

Dear,

I was with another man tonight. He smelled like the lilacs from the shop around the corner we loved to go to. I met him there, he was a visiting florist, so when he inserted his fingers inside me, I could feel my heart pounding in my cunt which was budding into a rose, and I remembered how you hated roses. You thought they were overrated.

He didn't make me feel overrated, but... just right.

Love,
Rachel

Dear,

I'm writing this to you as I ruffle through
Our boxes. I find your hidden porn tapes
You had hoped nobody would ever see, I
Am sorry but don't worry, they are safe
With me. When all the contents of our
Entire lives are on the floor, because did
We really have lives before each other? I
Can't seem to remember. I would call to ask
But I can't find afterlife in the yellowbook.

Love,
Rachel

Dear,

Your mother came over today. She didn't call. The Florist had to hide in my bedroom as we talked over tea in the living room. The floor was strewn with you.

1. You on the t-ball team.
2. Your first day of grade school.
3. Your Senior Prom.
4. Your mother's tears.

5. My shame.

My lust was locked in our bedroom.

Love,
Rachel

Her bedroom at 2 AM had more company than me.
Men's cologne on the bedside table,
Slacks and ties in the closet.
His razor in her bathroom. She hung no photos of him,
A blessing,
Because as I stared at the ceiling above us,
I tried not to think of the ghost she kept.

From,
The Florist

Dear,

He
Smelled like our
Washed linen in
The summertime.
With a hint of ragged sleep, not my fault, I promise.
He seems to lay awake at night looking at something.
And as I press my face into his neck, his cologne, his...
self is intermingled with longing, excitement, regret,
disappointment, love, libido, testosterone. A man.

Love,
Rachel

Dear,

I saw you today. Did you notice me. I could understand if you didn't; the fog was so hard to see through.

The Florist took me to the beach. The ocean seemed so still and lifeless in the December snow and cold. The blue was swept over with gray and the fog looked like a solid thing.

He had laid down our picnic blanket on the sheet white sand and stood to kiss my eyes, the only things that were visible as I was covered in scarves and hats and gloves and jackets and cold.

We packed only the simplest. Peanut butter and jelly for the Florist and just peanut butter for me.

I closed my eyes in front of the ocean, just feeling. You can't smell anything anymore so take down this list as I tell you what it was like.

- A drop of sunflower extract
- Three thumbnails of red paint
- 5 grains of sand by the sea
- A vial of sea water
- Crushed rock from oceanside cliffs
- A blueberry

When I opened my eyes I saw you. I looked down at the Florist but he was already dozing off. You were so far away but I knew you. Even if your skin was as pale as the fog surrounding you. Even if you seemed distant. I knew you. You knew me. Dear, I could love you through the haze.

When the Florist woke, we left our items on the sand and he took me by the hand, by the glove, and we became children. Laughing and playing in the ocean. My bones were freezing through but we continued through the pain. There was more than pain between us. For the first time in a long time, dear, although I was weighed heavy by the water in my coat, I felt something more than the pain.

Love,

Rachel

Dear,

The weather is getting warm. The snow had seemed to last a lifetime. I was almost sad to see it go. It was there for me.

But I was content to know that the next time I visited you, there would be lilacs on your grave.

Love,

Rachel

Dear,

You are not your porn tapes. You are not your box collection of Lord of the Rings.

You are not your t-ball team.

You are not your first day of school.

You are not your Senior Prom.

You are not your cologne on my nightstand.

You are not your slacks.

You are not your ties.

You are not your razor.

You were just you.

Love,

Rachel

I look at her sometimes. And she is here.

From,

The Florist

Dear,

After I put away your things, which I'm not sure I will ever see again, the Florist took me back to the beach. It was no longer the dead of December. The weather had changed. June smiled more brightly on the ocean.

Swim with me. He said

Take me.

We stayed there for years and years and years, but when I checked the time, the clock seemed to think it was only a few hours.

The Florist had been rubbing my hands when our ring fell off. He tried to reach for it, but the tide was already pulling, our ring was being roiled in the sand. It glinted in the water, and even though it should have been so far that no eye could catch it, I saw its silver.

Let him go. I said

Him?

It. Let it go. It's alright. Just... let it go.

Love Always,

Rachel

river salt by Hannah R. Cromwell

The girl finds the mermaid after school; it'd washed ashore in the nighttime, nudged along by lapping tongues of river water all the way up the beach and down the gullet of the petrified drainage pipe that dribbles into the creek. Upside-down, its open mouth gapes, its lips lilac blue and shimmery like a half-healed bruise. The scales of its tail gleam peacock green and blue; tiny fingernails glint on its webbed hands like little polished abalone and slimy crab shells clinging inside the tangled pillowcase of its outstretched hair.

She crouches on the hot sand, dry grass scritchng at the knobs of her anklebones, and she flexes her toes and watches the biting flies hop and twirl atop its flank. So close, she sees the pale gemstones of sand stuck to the mermaid's eyelashes—sparkling.

Much cooler than a jellyfish, she thinks. And less ugly.

In the haze of the sun, its pale hair burns gold at the roots; it must be a princess.

She whittles away hours inside the shallows, wading with her pantlegs pulled up to her crotch and kicking her feet through the waves. She conjures up a world for the mermaid: magical sea glass, evil octopus wizards. A spindly white tree taller than the church tower juts out of the beach's bay like the mast of a sunken ship. Sometimes she'll see an osprey clutching to its fingerbone branches, stripping away at squirming fish. The water there is shallow, but the girl never splashes close for fear of waking the weird creatures she knows to lurk in the tangles of its submerged roots. Now, she decides, it is a castle spire; the birds are dragons, spinning leagues overhead.

There'd been a pier here once, and when the water pulls away a little island of sharp rocks and slime pokes up—hairy with green algae. It is not an island, the girl knows, but the domed, balding head of a sleeping, buried giant; the scuttling crabs and wriggling shrimp are its headlice and the smell of cold air wafting off the water its briny breath.

Real princesses need servants, the girl remembers, so she uses up an hour plunging through puddles after half-invisible ghost shrimp, spearing her dinky plastic net into the water and occasionally scooping up a twitching shrimp—they glisten in the stringy folds of the net. They are people from the mermaid's kingdom, she reasons—cursed, transformed. She plops them all in a red bucket for safekeeping. The bucket she hefts with two hands—slopping over with too much river water, splattering her feet and shirtfront—up the dunes to thump next to the mermaid's fluke.

By dinnertime, with her mother hollering her name songlike down the hill, the

mermaid emerges bedecked with a flinty black crown cobbled from shark's teeth, a dripping necklace of handpicked emerald seaweed. The girl curtsies wobbly, walking backwards, snatching a shoe in each hand and huffing uphill.

Outside the patio, she unwinds the garden hose, twirls it on and tickles the water over her pale feet so the clinging sand crawls down between the backyard bricks. She blots her feet with her striped beach towel, trots inside. Her soles feel clammy smacking against the hardwood.

The kitchen lights turn the off-white countertops egg-yolk yellow. Dishes float in the chipped ceramic sink. Under the fluffs of soap, she pictures tiny sea monkeys swimming and whirling, playing with forks like swords, using spoons as oars, cereal bowls made into sailboats.

At the table, her mother asks over plates of steaming peas and goopy macaroni, "How was your day?"

Her father's fork scrapes as he stirs in ketchup with his pasta.

The girl surgically impales single noodles of macaroni onto each tine of her fork, ignores her father's frown. Lifts them to her lips and nibbles. "Okay," she decides.

~

Catholic school and crisp uniform skirts. She's always tucking her shirt in; fingers obsessively plucking and pushing the hem down until it yanks her buttoned collar down to her clavicles.

At lunchtime, one of the boys announces he's done with his two wedges of pizza; does anyone else want it? The girl is sitting across from him, dazedly chewing the paper wrapper of her cafeteria juice pop (the purple one, which turns her lips blue). She's the first to get a hand up, and he slides his lunch tray over like a shuffle boarder.

She gets one bite—the pizza's a little cold now, the cheese turned hard and pasty—before another girl speaks up.

"You must like her," she giggles at the boy.

"You'll have to get married, now," another girl says to her. "Sharing food is pretty much kissing."

The girl has a sticky mouthful of cheese and crust. She blinks, swallows.

Across from her, the boy's ears are tinged pink, and he's tilted back in his seat, energetically stirring the contents of his yogurt cup with a plastic spoon; he looks at his lap.

"No," she says, and sits and stares at the tray until the pizza has hardened into cardboard. She stops listening, allows the conversation to warble and muddle

around her.

At recess, she prefers the playground. While the rest of the class storms the tiny soccer field, she tromps into the curling undergrowth abutting the jungle gym; there is a tangle of golden honeysuckle shining amidst the greenery. She snaps the stems and sucks the nectar. This is what fairies eat, she knows. Hovering fairies in dandelion skirts, who gulp out of the flowers, an aerial tea party.

They live inside the highest pinecones on the greenest trees.

Her tongue varnished with flowery sweetness, she tightropes across the lines of the blacktop to the swings. Sits and listens to the boys shouting, the girls screaming. Her fingers tangle in the chains of the swing; she kicks up her feet, looks at her rumpled socks. Spins—the sashay back-and-forth as the swing settles. Starts to rock, throwing her feet, plunging her shoes at the sky. Dips her head back so her hair almost combs through the grass. At the peak of each swing, through a windowpane of ivy and dripping leaves, she can see the church steeple—huge, straight and piercing.

~

On her beach, shattered shells spike out from the sand, gnarls of seaweed—dark with rot—hum with the specks of hopping insects. The mermaid reclines inside the conch shell curve of the drainage pipe, its eyes glittering wet. The rustling water has tucked its tailfins under a damp sheet of sand, but its scales still sparkle; its long hair—twisted by the nighttime tide into a sloppy, loose braid—is stabbed through with bristling grass and twigs. The gills sprouting from the gapes in its neck are flushed dark pink.

The girl sees how low she can bow to the mermaid without stumbling and drags off a few withering fern fronds clogging up the front of the drainpipe. For a while she ponders and prods at the jiggling blister of a beached jellyfish—then she ogles the spear tip of the towering white tree. Castles have treasure rooms, she recalls, carved stone chambers where the orange lights of dancing torch flames flicker off piles of stacked gold coins and twinkling gems.

The girl flops on her butt, peels off both socks and crams one into each shoe. The sand sizzles between her toes, and she skips quick into the cool soak of the surf. Today, she will find treasure—real princesses need gold and jewels.

There are blue-tinged crabs jousting each other in the lathering surf; clouds of curdling seafoam slide on top the water. Bobbing logs of driftwood sailing through the river are the scaly spines of crocodiles, patrolling the castle moat.

In the water, the girl looks down between her legs, her hanging hair itching her cheeks. She waits with her arms angled open, her fingers fanned out, the river moving and sloshing at her calves. Posed as so, she snatches at the tumbling shine and colors of underwater riches rolling inside the frothing swell, pounces

and splashes.

She fishes up struts of snowy white coral, half of a sand dollar, a gnarled bob of driftwood trimmed with scabby barnacles, bean-shaped butterfly clamshells, baby conches the size of fingernails, glossy black rocks which could be shards of mammoth bone or dinosaur teeth. She keeps them caged in her dribbling fingers, plows back onto dry sand with tentacles of seaweed bangled about her ankles. One by one, the girl offers them before the mermaid, bundles together a treasure hoard in the sand.

As she's rinsing a mussel, scrubbing algae off the inside with the crook of a thumb, the girl glances a red glimmer wavering under the water. She sprints back into the river, the sand squelching and churning underfoot, plunges her hand down.

It's sea glass—the size of a fishing lure, glowing lipstick red. A sea ruby, she realizes, polished and churned in the cavernous innards of a whale, spat out by a blowhole. It pinches where it presses into the skin of her palm; it's still sharp, not yet worn into pebble smoothness by the waves. Cupping it daintily in one hand, the girl squats in the shallows. Twists and lifts it, catches the yellow sunlight across it so it ignites into a wash of bauble bright colors.

She wants to keep it; she knows it is too sharp.

The girl frowns, stands. Wind milling her arm as hard as she can, she lets it slip out of her grip, watches the sea glass sparkle like a tiny star as it plunks far away into the darkness of the deeper water.

One finger throbs. Her eyes snap down to her throwing hand—a blob of blood is welling, curving down her knuckles. Without thought she sucks the finger into her mouth, folds her tongue around it.

She suckles her finger, teeth fastened to the knuckle, as she waves one-handedly to the mermaid and plods uphill.

~

The bus ride home from school is loud, and long; the girl stands it by always looking out the window, eyeing between the houses and trees for a peep of the blue-gray pane of the river, the white dazzle of the sun off its water. She is propping her head against the icy window glass, pawing at the backpack in her lap; a classmate plops into the seat aside her and unsheathes a tube of twinkly lip gloss.

“Strawberry,” she boasts. And, “Here, you can try.”

Her classmate pushes in, wielding the lip gloss in one hand, and the girl purses her lips slowly. It tastes cold and she wants to lick it away. Off at her stop, she looks until the bus has vanished beyond the corner and uses her sleeve to saw at her mouth until it scrapes—walks slow so she can strip it all off.

Only her mother, nosing through a paperback on the sofa, sees the lingering shine around the girl's mouth before her backpack slaps the floor. She smiles with a glint that matches the jewels of her earrings and the polish of her nails.

"Oh!" Her mother's eyebrows elevate. She nudges the spine of her book up against her nose. "Hello."

The girl toes off her shoes and lobs them at the little embroidered rug in the corner to land on top of her mother's scuffed loafers. Her mother's mouth crinkles; she punctures her paperback with a cardinal patterned bookmark.

"Honey, can—"

"I'll be at the beach." She rips her shirt hem out from her skirt, fidgets with the buttons.

"It's all right. Do you want to talk about anything?" her mother pokes, her lips a little perked. She's looking at the girl's mouth.

The girl's face simmers; she stomps away.

Shoving herself into shorts and sandals, she escapes down the dip of the hill to the beach. Her mermaid is waiting. Its tail, curled and bundled inside the crumbling tube of the drainpipe, looks less pretty with some of its scales torn out. There's wet pink flesh inside, gross and glistening, and she thinks of the lunchmeat her mother buys at the grocery. ("One pound, shaved thin.") Its tooth crown lies scattered, its necklace melted away into slime, its shell hoard stolen away in the surf. Its eyes glisten milky and pink like two huge beads of rose quartz; its hair slithers across the sand.

Real princesses need servants and jewels. But mostly they need crowns, so the girl sets to collecting shells, dunking her hands into the water in chase of swirly conches and violet mussels.

Watching the water, she spots pointed black fins slicing through the froth; another, another. They whorl and dunk, eddying. The girl thinks about the size of something attached underneath—thrashing tail tips, a wreath of gleaming white teeth poking through snarling gums. Those same teeth shearing through the mermaid's softening flesh, shredding through scales and choking down hair.

From the shoreline she sprints between the licking surf, bare toes flicking sand. She tugs poking sticks out of the sand dunes, and plucks up stones. Her arm cracks down, flinging them at the fins—the rocks erupting into foam on impact, the sticks spinning.

"Go away!" she shrieks. Tears tickle at the top of her throat, bubbling up.

Her throat boils, tears glowing hot in her sinuses, the heat itching at her eyes. The fins corkscrew and splash, circling in a whirlpool. She spots dozens without

thought. Sharp sounds rip from her, gouge out her throat. Molten tears and slick snot dribble down her lip, into her crimped mouth—salty like seawater.

They won't go away.

Through a warm fog of tears, she sees a glimpse of their waxy underbellies, the upwards scoop of one's wings, the pink toothless gapes of their mouths. Stingrays. Heat flushes up her face like temperature rising through a thermometer. Something pokes and drags down in her belly. She likes stingrays, their funny mouths and floppy wings. She lets the stones tumble from her fingers, plonk onto the sand. Anxiously, she hopes she didn't hit any of them. Her breath deflates, and she sips in air through clogs of snot, through the chapped hole of her mouth. Her nose is wadded, her eyelids huge and swollen. The hotness in her stomach shrinks down into a single piercing ember. Sagging exhaustion leaks down each limb, gelatinizes her arms and turns her legs into boards.

The mermaid still needs a new crown. For a while the girl tries, dragging herself through the shallows, scooping shells into the bowl of her sodden shirt. She scrapes one foot across a boulder of petrified coral—blood twirling in the water—and feels boiling tears oozing up again, the muscles in her throat trembling. She quits cupping her shirt, drops her horde of shells with a clinking like jangling coins; pale clamshells plopping beneath the surf, floating slowly down.

Head hanging, she dips it lower towards the mermaid in a weak bow, trudges home before the sunset colors have started to creep out of the horizon.

~

Sunday is her first communion; “Such a special day,” her mother chitters, smoothing and worrying away at the girl's starchy white dress. The church sounds huge in the quiet, the sunlight dyed into gemlike hues through the glimmering stained glass windows. Saints are watching from the walls. She laces her polished black dress shoes on the wrong feet by mistake, and her toes pinch. She flushes scarlet up to her ears when she props up her hand and interrupts the priest's sermon to ask if she may please go to the bathroom. Down the pew, the boys giggle and chuff.

She can hear when the organ music begins blaring, gurgling through the tacky wallpaper in the church's single, tiny bathroom. She has to hike up her skirt around her belly to sit and go, and keeps her fingers clawed into the hem the whole time—terrified that somehow, she'll dunk the trim into the bowl, walk down the church aisle with a wet gray splotch clinging to the backs of her knees.

When she bends down to shimmy her panties back up her legs, she sees blood. Her mother had explained this to her—sat her down on the icy tile of the laundry room while they folded clothes across their laps. She's meant to be a woman, soon. Her mother's lipsticked mouth, sounding out “men-stru-a-tion” with slow curls of

her tongue. It's brown, a smear of milk chocolate in her underwear. She had expected red—papercuts and strawberry jelly. Her mother had said it would be red.

The girl unspools a long scarf of toilet paper off the roll, uses two hands to thread it through the leg holes of her panties, wraps it around and around. Slips her underwear up, drops her skirt. Flushes. The solid wad presses against her; it feels huge and puffy like a diaper. She tries not to waddle down the hallway.

Her feet still twinge, and now so does her stomach. The throbbing is folded away somewhere deep inside her, a craggy grit of sand inside the meat of an oyster. This is a special day, though, so she eviscerates one cheek between the chains of her teeth and smiles tinily to her parents in the pews—her mother lit up and bejeweled like a chandelier, her father dour in his suit.

The wafer—round and white like a sand dollar—doesn't taste like bread, or flesh like some of the boys had told her. Just a flavorless “snap” when she breaks it across her tongue. The fruit juice in its little paper cup is so tart she shivers. She swallows, stumbles over her prayers and tries not to imagine drips of red pooling down her legs from under her skirt.

It's almost nighttime when she finally gets to go home. She bounces from the car as soon as the lock pops up, runs from her mother's holler and punts off her dress shoes somewhere in the tall grass atop the hill. She doesn't have to wear shoes on her beach, or socks or skirts. Her mermaid is waiting underneath a noisy cloak of seagulls, which lifts away with the girl's arrival. Its face is all red, cheeks and lips shorn away by snapping beak tips. Its open mouth gapes, the bones of its teeth dazzling pale—sparkling.

The girl buries the mermaid, crouching in the thin shadow of the dead tree jabbing out of the bay. Now, she decides, it is a cottonwood. There'd been a pier here once, the algae-slick wood posts now leading out only to a rocky outcropping. It is not an island, the girl knows; it is far too small. Everything silent but for the wash of the waves, she shoves dry sand up against the body, scoops and pats the sand down like she's building a sandcastle. Slowly, she covers the shimmer of scales, each thinning finger, its rotting quilt of hair, with a dozen handmade hills.

Afterwards, she finds her shoes in the dark. Meanders up the hill, past the patio—her mother left the lights on for her—and into the kitchen. At the sink, her mother tuts and frowns. Wash off your feet before you come back in,” she reminds her with a sigh.

The girl looks at the sand gripping her feet which is digging in between the webs of her toes and notices how the grains shine in the kitchen lights. “Okay,” she decides.

What Became Him? by Ryan Casement

Feb. 2nd 17

I bought my journal today. \$7.59 + tax however much that was (\$.49)

I don't think I've had one of these things since first year of college.

I'm okay today.

I didn't see anyone I know; and took the bus a few stops further than usual to be sure.

Dr. Vance is gonna read this at some point. That's the only reason why he'd ask me to buy this thing.

I could mess with him, leave the thing empty. Pretend that there is some mysterious writing in the journal that only I can see. Maybe I'll fill it with fake crazy drawings.

He wants me to fill this thing on the daily with "Things I feel are worth jotting down," a.k.a. how I feel about life. Maybe he wants my thoughts.

Maybe he's scared that I'll kill myself. Fat chance of that, Gale would find a way to kill me twice.

I was watching a show, I heard a bit of cool music, I think it was a 60s song? I'll probably ask some of the guys at work about it. God forbid we start a conversation at some point with that RIVETING work keeping us busy.

My headaches have been getting better.

I'm getting my driver's license back next month.

God, I'm so full of shit.

Feb. 10th 17

Christ, today was a mess.

My coworker, Simon I think?

He wrecked the forklift. Though I suppose it was more of a **JOINT** effort since it only happened because he wasn't paying attention, and he wasn't paying attention because his friends were talking to him over the phone.

I swear to god it was like something out of a horror movie. A light tap of the pallet he was carrying against one of the stacks ended with a snapped axle, broken hydraulics, and crushed driver's carriage.

At least he was willing to own up to it in front of the boss.

But, a mess is a mess so "someone" (the rest of us) has to clean it up *before* the weekend starts so we the company can still ship on Monday morning. I don't know if half-cleaned at 11:59 pm counts but fuck if I care more than the rest of the guys who all left before me.

Feb. 11th 17

Oh hey, look! It's "*Saturday morning!*" I better do my daily writing in my journal so my shrink can—

You know what? I'm just gonna sleep.

Here's to hoping I don't get fired on Monday.

Final thoughts? I just want to forget this day ever happened.

~~YOU'VE HAD A LOT OF THOSE LATELY HAVEN'T YOU?~~

Feb. ~~12th~~ 17

I met someone today. Some chick at the bar. Her name's Amy.

I don't know why a girl like that would take time to have a drink with the sad fuck at the end of the bar.

She's pretty. Late twenties, which puts her at least 5 years younger than me.

She laughed at my jokes. She LAUGHED at 11pm, *drunk* Daniel jokes. What the fuck?

I'm still laughing, fuck me, she was funny.

On another note, how does a twenty-something woman hold her drink THAT well?

Right, we ended the night with a drink-off.

She said she recently moved here and that we should have a drink again together.

I am bus was miserable like always but at least I had *that* floating around in my head.

The alcohol didn't hurt the experience either.

Right, it's not the 12th

Okay, doc. I know that I'm not really supposed to be drinking. BUT you also said I need to get out and meet people again. So I think I'm good for this one time.

And it's not like my normal days are that exciting.

I watered Ferndenand like you said.

Say what they will about me, I have *impeccable* plant-caring skills. And phone notifications.

I'm going to have a hangover tomorrow.

Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaay.

Feb. 13th 17

I have a hangover.

And it's time for work.

And now I'm back from work.

Simon didn't show up.

I didn't get fired.

I'm sorry, how in the name of God is it legal to scapegoat the guy who WATCHED the guy screw up.

How is it legal to make the last guy to leave do the write-up about the event in question.

Let's assume for a moment that Simon actually comes back tomorrow; even so, the company's more likely to fire me than apologize for making me their back-up-bad-guy.

Yeah.

I really do have a way of fucking things up.



Feb. 16th 17

Vance wants me to keep writing in here. In spite of the fact that there is clearly something very very wrong.

I hope you know I'm not going to drink anymore.

You probably noticed since I've been staying in.

I WANT to stay in.

Of course, Vance wants to know what brings you out, where you come from.

You have a favorite color for your underwear?

I'm not D.I.D.

Nothing around me feels different.

I know who I am.

My name is Daniel Kurnoff.

I'm the exact same person that I was 3 years ago.

I have the same shitty job that I've had for the last 2 years.

I need to be rational about this.

Clearly, I'm losing time somewhere, and since I remember what happens during the day I'm probably losing it just before I sleep.

Vance says I shouldn't disrupt my sleep habits.

Fine. I didn't have much of a healthy sleeping pattern anyways.

I'm gonna go get a drink.

Except I'm not, I'll just sit in a bar and drink water.

God, I hope this isn't permanent.

~~Fuck you. How long you plan to run? Fuck you. How long you plan to run? Fuck you. How long you plan to run?~~

Fuck you.

What the hell am I even supposed to be running from? Bad memories? Old acquaintances?

And what's with that whole "Forget" thing?

Are you talking about Gale?

So no shit it didn't go any further than the drinks.

I guess I'm out of practice.

We talked about a lot of things, but she mostly talked about the past.

High school, college, movies, and games.

Stupid things.

Tiny things.

Tiny things.

She brought me back to those things.

I need to thank her for that.

Feb. 26th 17

You know I was finding bits of paper around my apartment for a while.

I don't write in here that often.

Anyway, I threw away most of them. I can tell you about them during our next session.

The point is, I haven't been finding them lately.

We can talk about it during our next session.

I'm going on another date with Amy tomorrow.

If I'm being honest, I'm pretty nervous.

This is one of the first things that has felt real in a while. It's not.

Whatever the thing was, it got me thinking about Gale.

I'm okay right now.

But I've been avoiding it.

Avoiding him.

Let's assume for a moment that this thing is me telling myself what I need to do.

I'm going to ask Amy about it tomorrow.

Don't worry, I'm being discreet about it.

No names.

No places.

No events.

Just “what would you do if you hurt a friend?”

Feb. 27th 17

I’m nervous, but of course.

Let’s see where this goes.

I surprised Amy. I took her somewhere a little nice, mostly just quiet.

Admittedly, I think I made her a little uncomfortable.

The exact words I used were, “if you hurt a friend, how would you handle it?”

A pretty heavy conversation followed.

As you might imagine, the date didn’t go anywhere intimate after that.

It wouldn’t have suited the mood anyway.

Her advice to me was that I consider what I regret, and do what I can to make up for it.

On a slightly less heavy note, work today was sweet, sweet like candy.

Simon showed up finally and got the reaming of a lifetime, or as much as you might imagine you could get in a professional setting.

Corporate even has some legal charges they levied against him.

I got called in by the lawyers and they basically said that they'll win so long as I'm there for the deposition sometime next month.

Maybe I'll be able to drive there.

March. 2nd 17

Okay Vance, I'm doing like you asked.

About 10 years ago, college and junior year.

Gale was a friend, a good one.

We went to a party. We were drunk and stupid and Gale decided I was less so.

But other people were drunk too.

A dislocated spinal vertebra and severed spinal cord, “internal” damage to the lungs, kidney and liver too. Instantaneous death is what the doctors ruled.

I had a lower blood-alcohol content than the other guy.

He got 10 years and a \$10k fine. I call him Tim during our sessions. You know Ten → Tim.

I got away with a broken clavicle and a lost license. I moved here not long afterward.

The police say that the crash was primarily his fault since it occurred in our lane.

But I swear I saw him try to swerve, it explains why I didn't die when Gale did.

I'm supposed to say it's not my fault.

It was.

March. 10th 17

My driving test was today.

I passed.

I have mixed feelings.

I'm scared.

I'm happy.

I'm excited.

I'm sad.

I'm ashamed.

You pretty much NEED a car to function in society.

I don't know what I'm talking about, I don't even have a car.

Gale wou—

Whether or not I can live with what happened is kinda up in the air.

I'm still alive now.

I'm not going to forgive myself.

I—

March. 15th 17

I have another date with Amy tonight.

I rented a car so I can drive to the bar this time.

visual art



“A work of art is the unique result of a unique temperament.”

- Oscar Wilde

Letter from the Art Selection Committee:

Oscar Wilde said, “No great artist ever sees things as they really are. If he did, he would cease to be an artist.” Although there is no easy way to define “art” simply, we have learned that while every other work in this journal evokes different, important emotions and passion with the use of words, art is beautifully capable of making us enjoy the same strong excitement, concern or sympathy with one, single image.

Through the selection process, the art committee was able to build a much stronger understanding and appreciation for all different kinds of art. We took the decision about what would be published in this journal very seriously. One of the things we found the most important while going through the selections was choosing pieces which made us want to keep looking at them; made us want to analyze them. We are confident you will love these pieces as much as we do.

The Art Selection Committee, *riverrun* Vol. 47

Brianna Ledesma

David Werle

Ariana Garcia



Bad Mother by Liz Bristle

Watercolor, Gouache, and Colored Pencil on Watercolor Paper



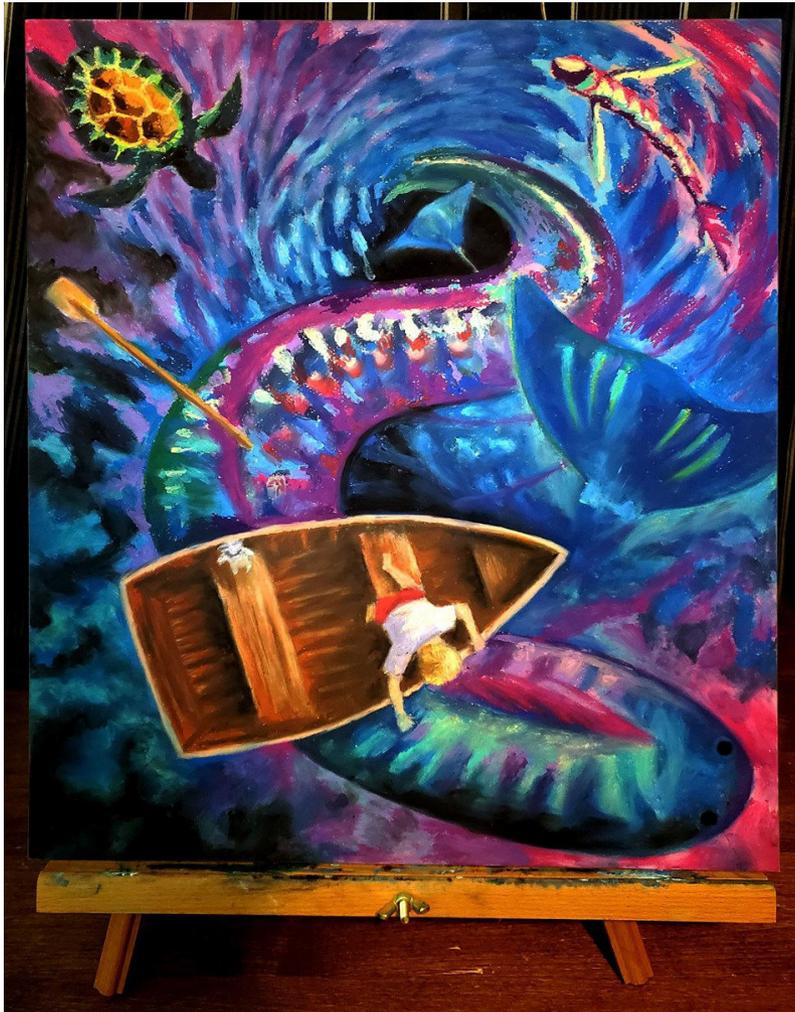
Blue Horse Eye by Kendall Stears

Acrylic on Canvas



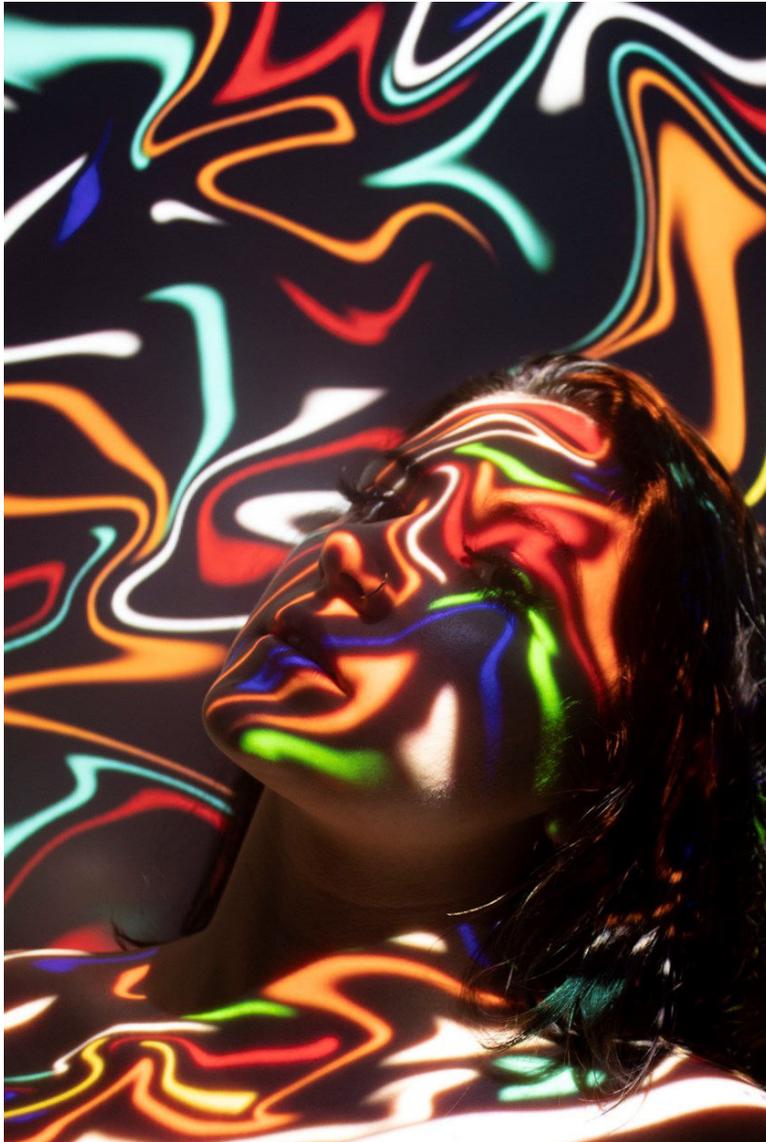
Dive into Lush by Alexander Morgan

Photograph



Drifting Underneath by Simeon Wuthier

Oil Pastel on Canvas Board



Esoteric by Elizabeth Schmidt

Digital Photography



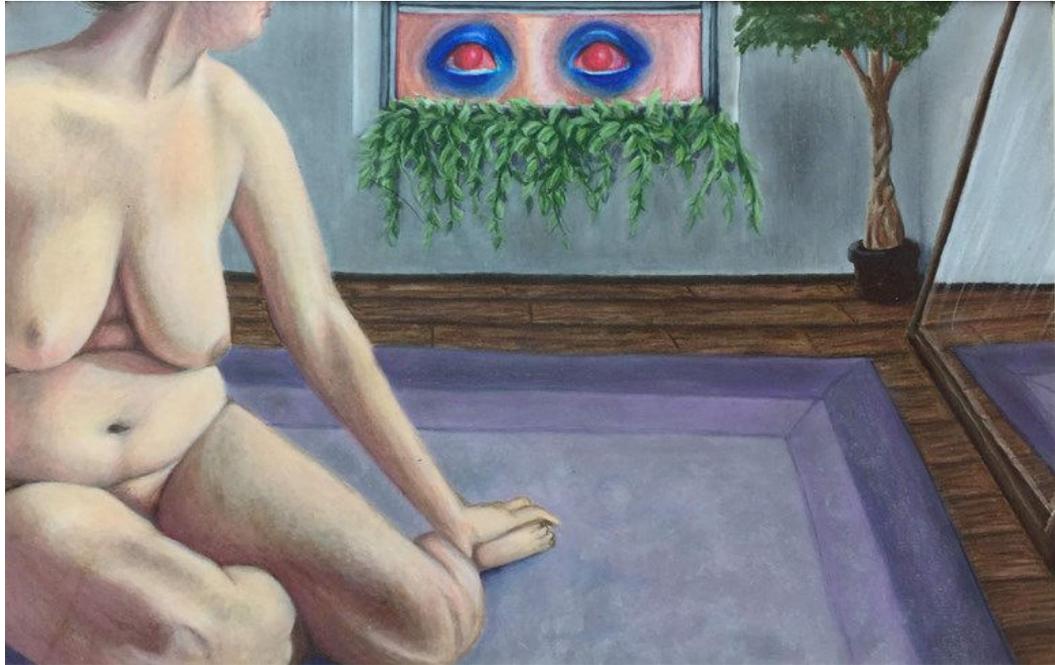
Finite Perception by Simeon Wuthier

Oil Pastel on Cotton Paper



Fox Fantasy by Nina Hall

Oil on Canvas



The Gaze by Jaden Brown

Colored Pencil



Mantle by Jaden Brown

Colored Pencil



Upright by Tiff Blakely

Graphite on Paper

riverrun Online



“Don’t use social media to impress people; use it to impact people.”

- Dave Willis

Letter from the Social Media Team:

An online presence is essential in our modern world. It connects groups of people of all ages, races, genders, and backgrounds. It encourages participation, creativity, and opens up new avenues to voice opinions. Ultimately, the world of the internet has made the inaccessible accessible and created a way to immortalize works that may have otherwise been lost.

Here, at *riverrun*, we wish to make the publications of our journal as accessible as possible. You can find us on Twitter and Instagram at UCCS_riverrun and can visit our website where you can stay up to date with the editorial class, submission guidelines, and access the digital copies of our journal.

This year, the Online Committee has set up a YouTube account for the journal. We hope to accept digital submissions in the near future. Look for us at *riverrun* on YouTube in 2021.

We encourage you to submit next year! Best wishes,

The Online Committee, *riverrun* Vol. 47

Lauren Hedenstrom

Luci Schwarz

Chloe Storm

Acknowledgements:

Acknowledgements

The 2020 edition of *riverrun* is a celebration of the creativity of UCCS Students. This celebration wouldn't be possible without the effort, advice, and help of many people. As such we wish to extend our gratitude to all those who made this journal a reality.

First, we would like to thank the Student Government Association whose funding make printing the journal possible.

We would like to thank the past editorial classes for the legacy they've enabled us to be a part of.

Thank you to Danielle Buckner from Copy it! She has been extremely patient and helpful during this difficult time in helping us produce the 47th volume of our beloved journal.

Thank you to each of the students who submitted works to the journal, without their creative efforts the journal could not be filled with the wonderful stories and artworks that line its pages.

Thank you to Jon Bogh, the faculty advisor for SGA, whose advice proved invaluable for navigating the funding process.

Thank you to each and every member of the editorial class for their time, patience, and effort. Especially in the face of the unique challenges of producing *riverrun* Vol. 47 remotely that came with this semester.

Most of all, thank you to Dr. Kirsten Ortega, whose advice, knowledge and patience were essential to this journal's success, and who will surely see the journal to a bright future.

Together, we weathered a pandemic.

The Editorial Class of 2020

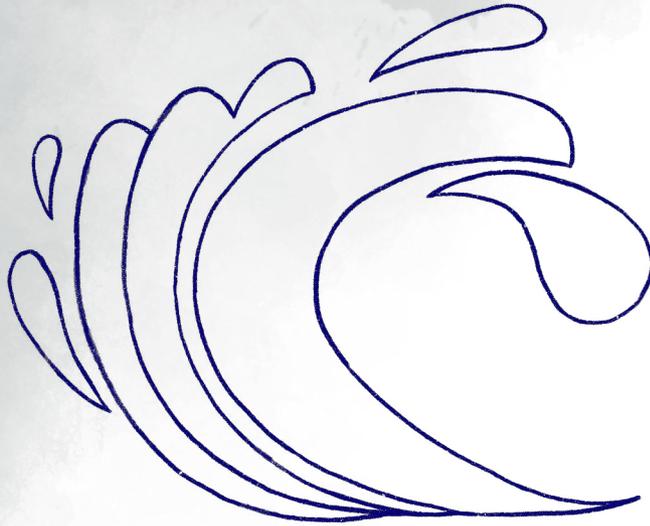
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riverrun Vol. 48 Submissions

If you will be a returning student and would like to be involved in the making of next year's edition of *riverrun*, sign up for ENGL 3170 in Spring 2021. The experience will be beyond valuable for you if you have any interest in writing, editing, art, or even website design. Not only will you receive class credit, but you can also put it on your résumé.

If you are interested in submitting work to the journal next year, consider getting a head start before the first advertising calls go out in the spring. Visit riverrunjournal.com for submissions information. The deadline is February 1, 2021.

Finally, look forward to an expansion of our submission categories in the coming years as we look to accept other media for online publication.



Thank you for supporting the UCCS student-run literary and arts journal.

Editorial Class, *riverrun* Vol. 47