





“a way a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun...” - *James Joyce*



# **riverrun**



**2016-2017**  
**Vol. 44**

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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 showcases the fiction, poetry, non-fiction, and 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 the funding provided by the UCCS Student Government Association. Published each Spring, *riverrun* generally accepts submissions in the Fall of each year. For more information, please contact the UCCS English Department, or visit the website at: <http://www.uccs.edu/student-activities/riverrun.html>.

# Farewell to Our Faculty Founder

*riverrun*'s founding father, Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow, has been teaching at UCCS since 1969. Over the years, he has left an impact on students and faculty alike. His legacy is widely felt, destined to remain intact long after his upcoming retirement.

## **Q: How did *riverrun*, the student literary and arts journal, begin?**

A: Interestingly enough it was a student initiative. Students came to me and said, "We really would like to have a publication that includes writing of students here." Poetry, short fiction, nonfiction perhaps, but mostly in the early days it was poetry and short fiction. There was no art at the time. That was a later addition.

In those days, how you went about doing such a project was you had to get student fees from the

**"I often think, I can't believe I get to do this for a living."**

"joint board." The board was made up of some students and some faculty members, about a split of each.

They came to me and asked, "Would you be our advisor?" and I said "Well, why me? Am I the most creative person you have here?" Their answer was pretty much along the tone of "Everybody else is pretty busy." I just said, "Oh, thank you. I'm so flattered."

Some of the students had been with me the previous semester in a class on James Joyce. They were still so steeped in Joyce that they took the title of the journal from Joyce, of course. That's the first word of *Finnegan's Wake*.



I had no notion whatsoever at the time that we would still be doing the journal 30 or 40 years later. I had no hopes that it would go more than two or three years. The students who had the push behind it would be gone in a couple of years and I thought there wouldn't be a lot of people who would want to pick it up.

It has become everything I've wanted it to become. It has been marvelously produced. Sure, there is work that comes with it, but it is worth it.

**Q: What will you miss most about UCCS?**

A: The students and the people, and the interactions with students. I get to read all the great books of the world and I get to come into a classroom with bright minds and discuss them. I often think, 'I can't believe I get to do this for a living.'

**Q: What will you miss most about *riverrun*?**

A: Working with the most energetic, driven, and talented student writers. There was always enough material to make a readable journal.

**A Word from the UCCS English Professors**

From Dr. David Diamond: "I will not soon forget Professor Pellow's encouraging words during my campus interview, nor his horticultural prowess!"

From Dr. Stephen Carter, reflections on waking and rebirth: "What a mnice old mness it all mnakes! A middenhide hoard of objects! Olives, beets, kimmells, dollies, alfrids, beatties, cormacks and daltons. Owlets' eegs (O stoop to please!) are here, creakish from age and all now quite epsilene, and oldwolldy wobblewers, haudworth a wipe o grass." James Joyce, *Finnegan's Wake*

From Dr. Kirsten Ortega: "Ken Pellow's work as faculty founder of *riverrun* demonstrates his commitment to mentoring students and fellow faculty, and to professionalizing the creative work of UCCS students. Those commitments are clearly central to his understanding of what it means to be a literary scholar. I have been so fortunate to have worked with Ken for the first decade of my career as he has modeled a career in which literature is central to communication, insight, and growth. Moreover, I have been privileged to inherit the legacy of literary and artistic connection between faculty and students that happens on *riverrun*. I hope our work on the journal continues to make him proud."

From Dr. Katherine Mack: “Dr. Pellow’s wit and wisdom characterize every exchange we’ve had. In equal measure, he makes me laugh and think more deeply about literature and politics both at UCCS and beyond.”

From Professor Sarah Treschl: “I remember Ken kindly allowed me to visit his literature class during my first year teaching at UCCS. I was nervous and wanted to see an expert teacher in action. I was impressed with Dr. Pellow’s expertise and breadth of knowledge. I could see why his students were willing to listen rapturously at 8 o’clock in the morning. I left feeling emboldened but also humbled by the important work I had to do.”

From Professor Rebecca Posusta: “I have been so lucky to spend the last nine years as a colleague and friend just across the hall from Dr. Pellow. His door is always open and he is always ready with an entertaining anecdote or an inspiring story.”

From Dr. Rebecca Laroche: “After 20 years as his colleague (not even half of his time here!), I’ve come to view a chat in Ken’s office or lunch out with him as a return to sanity (or at least a hilarious survey of the insanity). And I’ve also found in each visit a deepening friendship, one founded on a love for literature and teaching, and an appreciation of the capaciousness of the human heart. I’m sure retirement for him will be a development of all connections, and I know ours will continue.”

From Dr. Tom Napierkowski: “Ken Pellow is, I believe, the last surviving member of the faculty committee that hired me. I have always been grateful for his support then (I’m pretty certain that he supported my candidacy!) but am even more grateful for his friendship throughout the years. Thank you, Ken.”

# Letter from the Editors

Dear Reader,

This issue of *riverrun* embodies the quote after which it was named. *Finnegan's Wake*, the neverending literary masterpiece by James Joyce, begins and ends in the same place: "A way a lone a last a loved a long the riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay..." As new students join our growing campus, a new generation walks across the stage and into a new, unfamiliar life. UCCS, like *Finnegan's Wake*, is a place of circulation; our student body will continue to create and admire art long after this editorial staff has gone and a new staff has taken over.

The photograph on the cover was submitted by Samantha Rowe and inspired us because of the theme. We were pushed towards lighting up the darkness of student work as well as shining light towards the man who started this all.

In producing this journal, we have fused our creativity with the creativity of those before us, and together we have lit the path for those to come after us. The pieces in this journal are artistically crafted and beautifully written, and were carefully selected to showcase the talent of our student body. The selection process was completely anonymous and blind reviewed. Through many long nights, this issue has been created with the desire to cross the horizon and journey to somewhere new through the power of art. We hope you are as inspired as we have been by the art and literature of UCCS.

This edition of *riverrun* is dedicated to the journal's founder, Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow - the original light source for *riverrun* editors - who will be retiring from UCCS after this year. Although he does not fully take credit for starting the journal, his willingness to help the students who thought it was important to have a literary journal created by and featuring students is why the journal is still around to this day.

This journal is our mark in history, our mark on the current world, and our way along the riverrun.

Sincerely,  
Jonathan Smith, Editor in Chief, Art Project Manager  
Emilie Hagopian, Non-Fiction Project Manager  
Jasmine Nelson, Fiction Project Manager  
Halle Thornton, Poetry Project Manager

# *riverrun* Spring 2017 Editorial Class

## Editorial Class

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# non-fiction



# Non-Fiction Editorial Introduction

Creative non-fiction. To the uninitiated, the two words may seem antithetical: it is non-fiction. It must be boring. Dull. An Ambien-laced academic paper or an REM-inducing technical document. This could not be further from the truth.

Within each person is a story to tell, and a unique way of telling it. That is the power of creative non-fiction: it is a way for a writer to risk it all and bare their souls for all to see, to tell their own tales, to say the truth as they see it. Compelling non-fiction makes us think and feel. It makes us laugh and cry. It forces us out of our comfort zones, into new perspectives. It can make us question everything we thought we knew. It can be a narrative story, an essay, or a piece of journalism. It can be a blog or a Facebook post. It can be a deeply personal piece, one that leaves the writer in a state of vulnerability. It can be a story of survival or a treatise on the ills and wrongs of the world.

We in the Non-fiction Selection Committee chose stories that exemplify the elements that make non-fiction so compelling. They tell human stories of struggle, hardship, and sacrifice, but also ones of emotion, compassion, and triumph. The excellent writers showcased here have taken risks by laying bare such personal stories; they are not always pretty, but they are stories worth telling. For some, this may be a stepping-stone to further publications. We are proud to be able to share their impressive work, and to give them recognition for their creative achievement.

Sincerely,  
*Emilie Hagopian, Project Manager*  
*Troy Roth*  
*Kyle Guthrie*  
*Gina Herriage*  
*Nicole McConnell*

# An Empty Backpack and a Bullet in the Head | Ryan Hamby

George Erickson and three friends walked along the Bugline Trail in a Milwaukee suburb one Saturday afternoon in May. Trees line the trail, and that spring day they must have been just budding. The fully paved walkway stretches for about 16 miles and crosses over or dives under both roads and railways; some bikers and walkers probably passed the four high schoolers as they cut off the trail and wandered up through the trees to the parking lot of a Pick 'N Save convenience store. George, the youngest of the group at 16, told his friends to wait near the trees at the northern edge of the lot. One, also 16, walked with him over to an early 2000s burgundy Impala that was idling about 30 yards away at the south corner of the lot.

The plan was for George to get into the car and give the two men inside an empty backpack in lieu of one containing a quarter pound of weed. He and his friends had worked out the logistics earlier that day in George's basement; his mom worked Saturdays, and his two younger sisters were over at friends' houses. The four boys were close, drawn closer artificially through their use of heroin. George had been a junkie since the age of 15, and when his mom found out she immediately sent him to a juvenile rehab and later a boys' home in northwestern Montana. But for George, rehabilitation was left in the past - he cautiously walked toward the car, heart racing, carrying an empty backpack and a .357 revolver tucked into the back of his jeans.

As the two 16-year-olds approached the car, the passenger's tinted window rolled down about halfway. "Which one of you is doing this?" said the man, brown-skinned with a light goatee and sharp blue eyes. "I am," said George, and he got into the back seat of the Impala at around 3:20 pm on May 15, 2015. One friend stood awkwardly outside the car, shifting from one foot to the other. Another smoked a cigarette nearby, on the grass to the north and east, and the third waited down the hill from the parking lot on the Bugline Trail. They thought they knew what was coming--they waited nervously, ready to split the \$1,000 George would extort from the two potheads in the burgundy Impala.

Suddenly, George jumped out of the car—he sprinted with his friend toward their third accomplice who had flung the still-lit, half-smoked cigarette and was already crashing down through the trees towards the trail; as George fumbled for the pistol in his

waistband, the passenger door of the car flew open, and the man with the goatee lept out, pointing a black semi-automatic .380 towards the two fleeing boys. George pulled the revolver from his jeans and shot twice, stumbling backward onto the grass as his friends raced down through the brush towards Bugline. The man shot four or five times, and, because his hand was steadier than that of the teenager, George fell to the ground with bullets in his chest and stomach. He had held the thousand dollars in his hoodie pocket, but it now lay around him on the grass at the edge of the parking lot of the Pick 'N Save. Police later found that the money was counterfeit. The passenger then walked from the Impala over to George, stood over his body, and shot him once in the head. He and the driver were later arrested and charged. George's body hung on for about a month until his mother decided to pull the breathing tube from the throat of her brain-dead son on June 16th.

The previous summer, I knew George. I lived with him in that boys' home in north-western Montana—I worked a few summers guiding him and the other boys who lived there on backpacking trips. After the summer, George kept up with me and called me a few times. Lately, the calls had tapered off, and I learned secondhand that he was back in Wisconsin the February before he died.

George's struggle grew from a chaotic home life. His family had been homeless when he was young. George lived with his alcoholic dad for a few years in his early teens near Helena, Montana; they lived in a van and sold pickled garlic at carnivals and farmers' markets. He watched his dad hit his mom; he witnessed him pointing a gun at his little sisters. These memories and the resentments associated with them held him back; his deep bitterness towards his father inhibited George's ability to mature and master his emotions. I was there when George's dad drove up in his pickled garlic van at the end of the summer, and I was responsible for facilitating a discussion between them. George listed off for his dad every resentment he had against him. George described scenes for his father vividly, gritting his teeth as tears ran down his cheeks. His dad responded by telling him that he was wrong, that he was lying, that he was too young to understand what was really happening.

All the local news stations in Sussex, Wisconsin, in addition to some state and national outlets, picked up the story of a 16-year-old drug dealer shot in the head by a black felon in a Pick 'N Save parking lot after receiving \$1,000 in counterfeit bills for an empty backpack supposedly filled with a quarter pound of marijuana. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel notified citizens that police had "swarmed the area looking for suspects," and authorities released statements assuring locals that this shooting was an "isolated

incident.” Commenters on news websites commended the removal of more drug users from the streets. Some assumed that the boy referred to as “G.E.” had dark skin and listed questionable violent crime statistics without citation. Other commenters, after news sites released a name hinting to northern European ancestry and a photo of a white boy with blond hair and blue eyes, used terms like “wigger” and scolded the parents that allowed a good boy to be “led astray.” Many recommended that should the 16-year-old live, he be met with zero tolerance and given federal prison time; one commenter offered the idea that all involved be given the death penalty. The man who murdered George is currently incarcerated. George’s parents requested money instead of flowers at the funeral. Friends of his occasionally post memories on his Facebook wall. His mother now supports two young girls by herself in Wisconsin. George’s father has moved back to Helena and is again living in a van selling pickled garlic.

# Angel's Landing | Rachel Hetrick

*Hot.  
Sweaty.  
Light headed.  
Out of breath.*

The world swam around me, tempting me to fall forwards, backwards, back down the switchbacks that we had just hiked up. Well, the others had hiked. I trudged. After a while, I stopped caring that the others were two loops ahead of me. I could only stare at the broken cement in front of me.

*Don't look up.  
Don't look down.  
Just look forward and take the next step.*

What a choice in hikes for someone who has never been athletic. Even the name was misleading: Angel's Landing. It would take angels to carry me up, that was for sure. It was labeled one of the most picturesque hikes in all of the sandy, rust-colored Zion, Utah. That drew me in with camera in hand. I had never been on a roadtrip in my life, much less a hiking roadtrip across the country. Over half of our group of eight had been here on a previous trip, most of them the year before, so they knew what the hike entailed. I, however, did not.

Only 2,000 feet up. I've been worse. My purple water bottle was no longer cold, so putting it on the back of my neck was not helpful. Thank goodness everybody else wanted to stop to take a group photo—or twelve. If I had to keep going, I'm pretty sure my heart would've stopped working. It would've been the second trip to the hospital during the Epic Roadtrip of a Lifetime.

The background was too bright. The valley below us with the river that wound around like a snake was not in the viewfinder unless we were black silhouettes. There is a really good chance that I took an extra long time to readjust the photo, slowing my breathing so that the stranger we had pulled aside to take our picture wouldn't think I was actually dying—though I was pretty convinced that I was.

"Take a couple, that way I'll have something to work with later. Thank you. Do you

want us to take your picture too?” My words must’ve slurred together with how out of breath I already was.

My camera was my pause button. When I needed a breather on the “easy” part of the trail, I would stop, adjust the aperture, mess with the shutter speed, change the ISO, alter the focus, get the right angle, refocus, fix the ISO again, refocus, catch my breath, then take the picture. I didn’t mind that they were all ahead of me. All seven of them.

Thankfully we passed the first set of switchbacks and reached the “easy” section, the part of the hike that was in the shade. It was useful at the time; however, I’m sure it was much more useful the year before when my friends were hiking in 113° weather. Psychos; if I had been there I would’ve died for sure. My friend thought it would be cool to watch the sunset at the top. I couldn’t have agreed more. Perfect time of day; the sun was going down and the air was cooler. It saved me the trouble of having a sudden heatstroke.

All shades of green, red, and orange surrounded us inside the deep canyon, swirling around in the shape of trees, bushes, and the dirt path. The slightly slanted part of the hike was in between the canyon walls, which towered on either side of us, blocking the low sun from our sight. The cliffs on either side of us were stained red, contrasting with the brilliant blue of the cloudless sky. There was a lot more foliage in the inner parts of the canyon, trees spiraling up towards the heavens and leaves pulling at my arms, warning me to turn back before the next part of the hike. I, unfortunately, don’t ‘speak’ plant.

I was fighting the cramp in my side despite the break from the first switchbacks, each breath I took piercing my chest, cramping my insides until all I wanted to do was curl up in the middle of the dirt path and wait for it all to be over. They have park rangers in Zion. They could’ve saved me. Even my camera couldn’t help me because I would’ve gotten too far behind the quickly moving herd of eager college-aged students. Then the “easy” part was over. Behind us.

Onto the bane of my existence.  
Walter’s Wiggles.

It is a deceiving name for one of the steepest, most exhausting set of switchbacks I have ever completed in my life. Short and narrow. But almost at a 45° angle—all twenty-one of them. Huge rocks lined the edges; their sole purpose: to keep idiots from

falling down the Wiggles. Maybe not just for idiots. Maybe they were there for me so that even if I passed out, I wouldn't be put out of my misery. If I ever met Walter, I'd have a few words to say to him, many of which I conceived as I trekked up his ridiculous switchbacks.

I don't know how my group was still doing it, that is, still singing at the top of their lungs. *The hills are alive with the sound of music*. I distinctly remember being jealous that one of the guys could hit higher notes than I could. At least it was a distraction from the grief I was in.

Still at the back of the group, falling further and further behind. At least the Wiggles were behind me. On to the part that chilled me to the core. No, not the outhouses filled with muck and feces, roasting in the 113° weather the year before, not that I had been there to experience the rank smell. Nope, because this was my first time up the trail. And at the rate I was going, it would be my last.

The part that scared me the most was scrambling up the side of the cliff during the last leg of the trail. If you could even call it a trail anymore. Heights, for as long as I can remember, have never been my friend. We were at the edge of about a 1,500 foot drop above the valley with the smallest little river cutting through it. Even if you managed to make a graceful dive into the river, you would still break everything in your body. That is, if you didn't hit the protruding canyon walls on the way down. Serves you right for not holding on for dear life. The only thing that hikers could hold onto was a chain, which had worn the coppery sandstone away after years of use. Safe, right?

I heard that seven people had died on that trail. The previous year, one of my friends would have joined the dead. She almost fell off. Almost brought the number to eight. I wasn't there to play the role of mother—*Get off the rocks, idiot*—I would've said it in a loving tone of course.

We had to be wise with our movements, planning out every detail so that we'd never take that plunge. My reward for holding on to the chain was not losing my life, along with the added bonus of metallic-smelling, rust colored, extremely tired hands.

I stopped frequently, taking more pictures from higher up. It was the same valley, but it looked different from up there—vaster, mightier, grander. I could barely see the tourist buses that transferred people from one trail to another. The buses were there to reduce the amount of vehicles within the natural park. Never mind the fact that the

people in khaki shorts and visors were packed on the buses as tightly as sardines in a can.

Two of the boys from my group were behind me, following me up the sandstone that was easy to slip on. One of them, the one who could sing, seemed more nervous of the height than I was. For some reason that made me feel better. I felt bad for them because they would be in all of my pictures. Theirs were the only faces that I could capture with my camera, given that I followed the rest of the group from behind. At least I wasn't in last place anymore. Not that it was a race.

The last part of the trail didn't have chains, making it a bit trickier when I had to carry a camera that was more expensive than all of the books I own combined. And I have six, full bookshelves.

I could smell the salt on my skin, taste it even when I licked my lips. I couldn't remember what we had for lunch, but I remember feeling my stomach tighten, clenching every time I neared the edge of the steep cliffs. It was good that there was not much in my stomach at that point in the hike. I also smelled my antiperspirant, but I was just glad it was working.

Turning around, I separated from the last two boys, and took a picture of the backside of the canyon. The part that no one looks at because "the view" is "on the other side." But in my opinion, the intersection where the river splits into separate canyons is much more beautiful. The tops of the canyons looked bald at the highest points with only a few straggling trees, but they quickly became greener as the foliage started sprouting on the side of the canyons. The strata in the sides of the canyon were layered with different shades of crimson; some deposits were whiter than others. There were fluffy clouds beginning to form on both sides of the canyon, and the sky was a vibrant blue that stole the scene, creating quite the contrast in the tiny screen on my camera.

The rest of my group was sitting down, taking in the view that they had earned by hiking up the trail for the last hour and a half. Was it really only an hour and a half? Or did I make that up? I couldn't remember how long it really took, but it felt like a lifetime.

I sat down at the very front of the group, furthest down the cliff side despite my fear of heights. I didn't want my view to be hindered by the ones that I loved. I just wanted

to see the view that was created for me. Pictures just don't do it justice, especially the ones that I edited. I think I messed them up, but other people tell me they are pretty. But you can't see how blue the sky really was, or the vibrant green that surrounded us on every side. The shadows are too dark and the whites are too bright. It's like it was never meant to be captured by technology, just seen with the natural cameras we were given through our eyes. Even the chipmunks don't look as lifelike as they did when they were stealing our food.

My hair was dripping with sweat, and so was my back where my backpack had pressed against my tank top. It felt amazing to sit on the cold rock and stretch out my back. The wind carried the smell of fresh pine; not the horribly fake kind they put in the tree shaped car fresheners. Do they even still make those?

It must've felt like my mind had completely emptied; completely absent of complaint or sarcastic remark. I could only focus on the picture that surrounded me. It was an image of Grace.

In one of the Psalms in the Old Testament, the writer says that "the skies proclaim the work of [God's] hands" without even using speech, words, or sounds. The Bible summed up my thoughts in a much more poetic way than I could. But I saw power: in the river that cut away to make the cliff we were standing on; in the trees that had the strength to hold on and grow on the almost vertical cliff sides; in the skies that could open and drench us at any time. Looking out over the massive valley, a valley that is so often photographed that it has become iconic, I saw the imagination of the ultimate Creator.

I thought I was never going to make it there to see that view. I thought I would never be able to say that I'd been to the top of Angel's Landing. But I did.

I was proud.  
I was inspired.  
I was in awe.  
I was happy.

# A Drug Addict and His Mother | Ryan Hamby

My grandparents stood together in the entryway of my parents' home. My mom, their daughter, called them, I presumed. Possibly the cutoff for grandparents visiting after self-induced hospital trips is five, and they were currently on number four. Actually, to be honest, I don't remember at all when my grandparents arrived, but I do remember after I was discharged and at my parents' house, that my sister had made a little "Welcome Home Ryan" sign on a piece of poster board with the wrong markers so it bled when I brushed my hand against it to steady myself as I thanked her. Everyone, a blur of immediate and extended family, was welcoming me home. I remember that, like I had just returned from active duty or something, and I hadn't just put myself in the hospital with some ridiculous drug combination.

Some attempted masks of happiness—their smiles like grimaces, eyes red and sunken from tears and sleeplessness—and some faces with a more genuine expression of "I cannot believe this piece of shit is still alive." They all stood around me like they wanted to hear me say I was happy to be home, and to thank them, but I just grabbed my computer, mumbled an excuse, and went to bed because I didn't want to look anyone in the eyes with some combination of shame, embarrassment, and apathy. At some point, my grandparents must have come into my room and led me onto the back porch, because suddenly the blurriness comes into focus and there I am, sitting in an uncomfortable green chair with my bare feet on the cold concrete, shivering as each cold breeze cuts through my thin, yellow shirt and basketball shorts, suddenly alert and full of emotion, and a few days sober, watching my grandparents collect their thoughts from across the porch, and then they look up.

When you're addicted to something, the people who love you give you the same talks about getting help and staying away from bad influences and how much they care about you and blah blah blah. You really don't give a fuck because you're either coming down and not listening or you're high as shit and not listening. Every person in your life gives you this talk every time you hit rock bottom. My grandparents had given me this talk. Eventually you stop getting these talks, and people try different methods. That day, on the back porch in late August while I sat on one side of the concrete slab and they on the other, my grandparents tried a new method. I struggled to walk to the back porch; partially because my muscles had atrophied after a week in a bed in four point restraints (I punched a male nurse after hallucinating him telling me I was dead, in hell, he was Satan, and my parents had killed me), and partially due to the extensive

seizures I experienced while overdosing. The ground was cold, and I wasn't wearing shoes. I was wearing a yellow shirt. (I only remember this because the two times I cried hardest in my life were in that shirt, and after this time, I threw it away). My grandma's voice was shaky with emotion; my grandpa's voice was firm and gravelly. I stayed seated and didn't speak; they stood and paced and sat. I didn't look up once, but I guarantee they stared at me the entire time, wishing I would look up and see in their eyes the things they didn't know how to voice. I can't remember a single word of the conversation, and I won't try to recreate it.

They were sick of my shit. *Okay, I'd heard that.* They didn't care what happened to me anymore. *Neither did I.* I needed help. *I don't need shit.* If I didn't get help, I needed to get away from their daughter. I needed either to die, or get out of the picture. They didn't care which, but they cared about their daughter, and I was killing her. *I was killing my mother.*

Just a couple of weeks ago, I was standing in the kitchen when I asked my dad about a dent in the refrigerator. It was near the bottom, just noticeable, reflecting the light differently than the rest of the metal door. I couldn't imagine how something could have dented the lower left corner so close to the wall. For a moment, he paused in memory, his back to me. In an offhand way that suggested he really didn't want to talk about it, he announced that my mom had fallen into it. He didn't look me in the eyes, and we moved past the subject.

I now know that my mom had passed out in the kitchen one morning, probably from stress and a lack of sleep, smashed her head into the base of the refrigerator door, and laid there until my grandpa came in to find her there, unconscious.

I was in four hospitals because of drugs. Each time, my mom slept, or, more accurately, sat awake, in the chair next to the bed each night I spent there. I remember the first hospital particularly well because it was the first time I wore a new yellow shirt, and it was covered in snot and tears, and because it was the first time my mom knew that I would rather be dead than alive. The white-walled room was too small with no windows, and I felt like I was too close to her. There wasn't even a door, just a curtain and then the hallway, so fluorescent light spilled into the dark room along with that constant, dull roar of a hospital that ignores the time of day and never allows any real sleep, and so the doctor could check in every 45 minutes to make sure I wasn't dead. My mom had this look in her eyes like she had no idea where or who she was, but she sat down in that uncomfortable hospital chair that sat right next to the bed like the

only certain thing in our world was that she had to spend the night there. I remember sleeping on my side facing away from her, even though it was uncomfortable and it put my face right next to the beeping, whirring, blinking machines, because I couldn't wake up and look her in the eyes and feel that combination of embarrassment, shame, and apathy.

In the fourth hospital, I barely remember anything at all. My mom later told me that I would wake up and look her right in the eyes and tell her that although she looked like my mom, I was certain she was an imposter. I was certain that was not my mom.

Any drug user knows the discomfort of someone squinting into your eyes, trying to figure out if you're high as a kite or coming off a binge, trying to see where you've been and what you've seen just by grabbing your face and staring at you. This was the only time I could look someone directly in the eyes because all I felt on drugs was apathy, no shame or embarrassment, and it was extremely easy to lie when you feel no emotion. I remember once walking in my house and directly back to my parents' room, and finding my mom looking in the mirror and washing her face--getting ready for bed; I know that because it was definitely late. I hadn't been there for a while; I know because when she lifted her head and saw my reflection in the mirror she looked slightly surprised. "Slightly" because this was probably sometime between the third and fourth hospital and at that point emotion was only felt "slightly." She looked frazzled, partly because she had just dried her face and the hair bordering it was damp and out of place, pulled from the headband that she wore to keep her hair back during her bed preparation ritual, and partly because she rarely saw her only son, and it was beginning to show. I think I asked her for money. She turned around, now looking me directly in the eyes rather than using the mirror as a middleman, and grabbed my face firmly, her fingers digging into my skin as she turned my face slightly to try and figure out my state of mind. Her face was hard, lips pursed, eyes angry. She asked me if I was "on any drugs," covering all the bases, and I said no, feigning that I was offended. Then, staring right back at her, I witnessed her break. It started with her eyes; they suddenly welled with tears as her face melted and her mouth opened in a wail, and she pulled me in and squeezed me tight, holding me there, if only for a minute. I hugged her back, repeating, "Mom, I'm not high, Mom, I'm not high."

## Youth | Addey Vaters

“Can Kirstin come out to play?” My sister and I would ask the question every day after school, our little girl voices floating through the door to whoever answered. Sometimes, we’d call. It was a time before middle schoolers had smart phones perpetually glued to their thumbs, and we had each other’s phone numbers memorized. The question was always the same: “Can you come out to play?”

I used to think that this was normal—this everyday occurrence of playing with the neighbor kids. That everyone else in the USA knew each bright-eyed and bushy-tailed young’un on their cul-de-sac. There was Tristan and Cody with their matching shaggy blonde mops and constantly upgrading skateboards. They’d show up every other week to stay with their dad—the only single guy with a nice car in the midst of family after family residing in nice brick-and-plastic-siding two-story homes. Then there was the Evans clan to which Kirstin belonged. The four loud and crazy children who lived at home plus two who had moved away—all with the same spitfire personality. Then the Millers—the ones who somehow always looked alike and had the same screechy, nasally voices—the homeschoolers who weren’t allowed to say “butt.” Next it was Niles and Connor, the troublemakers who were too short for their age to actually cause trouble, but who started an uproar when Kirstin and Connor went on a date. And finally, there was Pavel and Diana—the brother-sister duo who never got along and were originally from Russia. Going to their house was like stepping into another world where Russian phrases hung on the wall and where there was a China cabinet filled to the brim with delicate plates and saucers that weren’t meant to be touched.

I realize now that as a child growing up in the twenty-first century, my experience is of a dying breed. Today, no one knows their neighbors, and children do their homework before playing video games until bedtime. Kids don’t stay outside until the street lights blink on as the firefly-filled night fades in. They don’t ride up and down the cold street on their bicycles, friends positioned precariously on the handlebars. They don’t have mud wars in the vacant lot next door, or pick wild onions and wash away the dirt clinging to the roots under the cool stream of water from the spout attached to the side of the house. They don’t walk hand in hand up and down the street singing songs to ward off the freezing, humid weather.

They don’t play.

Now I understand that my childhood was the exception. I wish more kids would ring each other's doorbells to ask that all-important question: "Can you come out to play?"

## Looking Glass | Nicole Taylor

He's wearing a sky blue shirt, head drawn down, eyes closed, mouth turned up at the sides. A small child adorns his shoulders; she too is wearing blue. Not sky blue, but the kind of blue that is found opposite orange on a color wheel. His hands are large compared to her small size, encasing her unseen fingers in half closed fists—to steady her. She too has a half-moon of delight on her lips. Together they are frozen in that moment. The dark cabinets, waffle iron, and stripes of the American flag setting the stage behind them. A snapshot of a memory shared between three people. The child, the man, and the photographer.

The child is me, the man my father, the unseen capturer of the moment my mother. By taking that picture my mother snagged a bit of reality and flash froze it in light. It existed in that moment as it exists now. It is proof of a memory I don't have. Perhaps I was too young. Perhaps it was such a small moment out of the days upon months upon years of my childhood that it was washed away by the more powerful recollections, like when I got a guitar for Christmas. But it isn't me that inspires intrigue in this picture. It is my parents.

They got divorced when I was seven. But in this picture, cemented by the click of a button and a chemical process on film, they are still together. Still happy. And though this picture shows the reality as it was, in all the truth of the split-second it took to take, they would see it differently now. She would see the emotionally abusive man she wasted 21 years of her life with. He would see only the two presented in the scene, his beloved daughter and him, the wonderful father. Their perceptions, so alien from what was captured with the lens. It is what this perspective does to memory that fascinates me. The fermentation of events and people and ideas that occurs when just the right amount of time and emotion are mixed in.

This picture is a view into a reality that I can't fathom. A looking glass into a connection—my fingers in his hands—that as far as I can tell, has never existed to me. It is beyond my capacity of retrieving, true to me only in the way that I can observe it. The more I look at it, the more it begins to haunt me. I am so distant, so dissociated from this point of reality that it is hard for me to understand it as existing. I was joyful. My father was blissful. My mother was contented. We were a family in the true sense of the word.

I sit on his shoulders, a small-toothed baby grin staring into the camera. I am elated to be up so high, so far above the ground. He holds my hands to keep me from falling, my small legs draped around his shoulders like a prayer sash. His rough, strong fingers holding tight in a gentle embrace of trust. He is clutching, forever holding on to me, fighting to keep us together. My mother snaps a picture, sealing the elation and tenderness upon our faces in a delicate artifact of paper. It is a moment she wants to lock away into a tomb and bury.

A moment he clings to.

**poetry**



# Poetry Editorial Introduction

Poetry speaks to people across many cultures and is one of the highest art forms because it appears in almost every corner of history. It captures certain aspects of human emotion when other forms of expression fail.

When we were developing selection criteria, we realized immediately that we had to reconstruct our definitions of the word “poem” to better understand what each submission was trying to accomplish. These contemporary poems made us eliminate our preconceptions of what a poem is. The submissions we received broke many of the traditional rules of the English language that we all understood and elements such as rhyme scheme and structure became obsolete.

The definition below is both a collaboration of the criteria used to select the poems for this year’s edition of riverrun as well as our individual perspectives:

po-et-ry/ pō trē/noun. A literary genre in which special intensity is given to the expression of emotions and thoughts by the use of distinctive form and rhythm. It has the power to break and bend rules, tweak forms, and defy all logic.

What you will find in this section is that poetry does not have to conform to rhyme, meter, or any specific form; it is what it is because it refuses to follow the rules. It cannot be easily understood or defined because it simply does not conform to one definition. Poetry is freedom, timelessness, and beauty. All of the submissions were of outstanding quality, but these works stood out as the most artful and emotion-driven pieces. These poems were constructed purposefully and consciously, and every word was beautifully and thoughtfully selected.

Sincerely,  
*Halle Thornton, Project Manager*  
*Tim Clevenger*  
*Cala Hageman*  
*Maelynn Holloway*  
*Cydney Ruff*  
*Janelle Watson*

# The Watch from My Brother | Samantha Rowe

Always encompasses my left wrist.

A façade of rose gold on Christmas,  
Blinding me  
Binding me  
In iridescent timelessness.

Its surface is scratched,  
The sharp birth of the crack at 4 o'clock,  
And water has seeped in from my bath this morning—  
All I see now is a cloudy tik tok mirage.

I can still faintly read the hours  
(Well the 12 and the 3 and the 6 and the 9),  
But each is washed out and blurred  
As if the whole world submerged  
Under water last night.

I can still hear the ticking—  
(Time continues as if nothing was weathered)  
But this piece of vanilla floral drenched jewelry,  
Clutched to the petite pale wrist of mine,  
Does not tell time.

I wear it to feel it,  
To be awakened by its cold touch against  
My skin when there's nothing else—  
An accoutrement for the eye and soul.

I stare into its wasted wisdom  
Tick  
    Tick  
        Tick  
And I wait for my brother to come home

# Dreams | Charli Cowan

This gossamer fluid rushes through  
my fingertips, becomes solid,  
taps away at the keys.  
The pen clings to my hand,  
awakens upon the page  
all of the imaginings of  
my mind and yours.

The desire to awaken this,  
awaken the dreams which  
have slipped into the night,  
the memories which jerk  
away from me,  
has pushed the feelings  
up and out of my body.

Internalized within this  
sopping heart,  
where the demons watch  
and haunt  
and dream  
of the ways they will tear me apart.

But you.  
You will see all of this,  
my uncanny witness.  
You will explore the veins of this ink  
and determine your own truths;  
uncover the dreams which have been carved  
into the paper  
or the screen  
or anything  
which lies between  
my dreams  
and yours.

This identity is fleeting.  
Mutable.  
It is hidden within the walls of my skin  
between the hairs on my body  
and behind the taut line  
of my lips.  
This brilliance cascades through my skin  
like blood.

Like the blood of one  
who has felt too much—  
chooses to lock it away.

But my fingers are not sufficient  
at guarding the gates.  
These things slip through the cracks—  
beg to be illuminated,  
despite my apprehension.

So come explore with me.

Examine the lies  
in my eyes.  
Wait for the ghosts  
between my lips.  
And if you look hard enough,  
you can hear the key dangling  
within my chest  
and unlock these dreams,  
to let them dance with your own.

# Change | Addey Vaters

Spring.

The cells that once gave you life  
decided to devour you.  
Your strong voice now a tilted whisper,  
hardly able to stand up straight.

Summer.

Cold air permeated that sunny day.  
I wore a sweater to keep out the biting  
wind and settle the nerves flying around in my gut.  
A million layers couldn't keep  
away the frigid hold of your end.

Autumn.

Little specks of gold and red fall  
from the boughs of trees. Beautiful  
crunchy death litters the streets.  
Time passes in a slow, strange way—  
growing darker and darker like the days.

Winter.

White bits of icy confetti fall and coat  
the earth—a consolation  
prize for mother nature's sleepy soul.  
You were gone, there were tears,  
there was growth in spite of the frozen earth.

## Spring

Dormant blooms spring to life,  
reaching their cold, tired hands towards the sky.  
The sunflowers turn their golden faces  
towards the light—  
a reminder that you are always near.

# Concerning a Cantaloupe | Rebecca Tarnow

Say you laid a cantaloupe  
Upon a divan  
And proceeded to subject it  
To Freudian psychoanalysis  
What would you uncover?

From the very beginning:  
Lamentations  
So few can tell  
Poor cantaloupe's face  
From posterior

A severe paranoia is identified:  
Leering, salivating humans  
Who have missed their lunch

"For what cruel purpose,"  
Cantaloupe cries,  
"Was I snatched from the vine  
From my umbilical cord  
To the universe."

Cantaloupe dreams  
Of being tethered once more  
To the pulsing lifesong of Earth  
And affectionate caress of Sun

"How quickly our children grow,"  
Sun says to Earth, sad yet proud,  
"They all long to take wing."

But all return to my bosom  
In the End,”  
Earth replies, Her voice a primal, ancient lullaby,  
“This I promise all my children.”

Cantaloupe finds peace in these words  
And smiles to think  
Of the long sleep to come.

# I'll let the Trees Tell You | Samantha Rowe

We sit by the secluded river in the woods,  
Me in your lap—  
Our bodies nestled in the cornerstone of a million trees' feet.

Your arms entwine themselves around mine and mine around yours,  
Our limbs sculpt into vines of a vertical garden.  
Horizon greets the sinking Austin sunshine on  
a bed of Hunter green sheets.

I look up into the amber-tinged sky of trees, naked in the February cold,  
Without leaves,  
Without seeds.

We sway back and forth in cadence with  
The timeless clock sunken deep beneath  
The river that crawls silently through the forest.

And all I can hear is your heartbeat:  
An echo from your chest to my spine  
As I recline further into your mystery.

I ache to tell you,  
To tell you I am falling,  
Instead you catch my mouth with a kiss as soft as the sun.

My lips surrender to yours and I let the river carry my unspoken words upstream,  
Knowing that here,  
The trees whisper  
For me.

# The Summer House | Monica Postma

Nothing disturbs us here.  
Not the cold  
or the dark  
or the ghosts.

An old, white dress hangs in the next room,  
a beautiful dress I'll never don.  
Lace sleeves sagging, back bowed before the raging  
the shambling storm that came again.

Snatched the last, faded picture of a smile  
between me and you.  
Always looking for something better  
for a safer place to call home.

The rain pounds against a sagging roof  
and we huddle together in the basement,  
Waiting for it all to come caving in  
but we will be torn apart again.

Beautiful old bones, white filigree  
top to bottom, full of dust and cobwebs.

Nothing disturbs us here.  
Not even the dead.

# Inner Hippie | Lee Derieux

Why is it you tell me  
When I try to lend a hand  
My sex, my skin  
My faith is wrong  
I just can't understand

Difference in the Mind  
and difference in the Heart  
it seems to me  
we look for ways  
to keep ourselves apart

This ones skin is black  
and this ones skin is red  
Ooh, that one there  
is multi-colored...  
Let's bust its fucking head!

This one here is Christian  
That one there's a Jew  
Oh look there's a Muslim  
and a nasty Pagan too.

Can you hear the words?  
Can you see the signs?  
None of this crap matters  
This bullshit just ain't right.

Well I don't really give a damn  
What's the color of your skin  
What you've got betwixt  
your legs  
Just the mess our minds are in

We all have our differences  
So do lyrics in our songs  
Let's Celebrate  
    our Diversity  
And try to get along.

## the yellow line (dream sequence) | Samantha Rowe

i want sunsets with you,  
sunrises,  
and all the rainy afternoons.

i want to drive along winding roads in the woods with too much coffee  
and adventure running through our veins,  
to roll the windows down and take a breath of that sweet pine scent  
and know that i am wholesomely a l i v e.

i want to feel the wind tickle my arm as my fingers dance through the crisp air,  
to stand in the dead-center of the road right on that yellow line  
with my hands in the air, my head hung back  
and shout “I LOVE YOU” to the sky, to the universe, to you.

i want serenity,  
euphoria,  
contentment.  
but i also want passion,  
pain,  
and a never ending sense of urgency—  
i want to feel it all.

i want to read vintage road maps and get lost in the mountains with you,  
to never be settled in one place for too long.  
to be completely incomplete, and perfectly imperfect.

hurry and find me, my love,  
hurry and come along.

## Colors | Claire Nibbe

My best friend called me Yellow once.  
I liked that.  
Yellow was the sun, which brought life.  
But one day, I was burnt by Red.  
I had been beaten.  
I had been lost.  
I became Orange.  
She asked me when I would be Yellow again.  
I told her I was Orange.  
I liked that.

## Slaying the Prince | Kenna Jackson

Don't fashion me into a maiden  
who needs saving from a dragon.  
I am The Motherfucking Dragon,  
and I will eat you whole,  
so come closer my prince.  
Be my lover.  
Seize my lips.  
Bruise my hips.  
Scrape my scales.  
Taste my talons.  
Desire my wings.  
Be my forgiver.  
Don't you want to  
save this dirty little damsel.  
So, become my other,  
I will *engulf* you in my flames.

# why would you want to be an artist? | Ana Karina Manta

why would you want to be an artist?  
He boldly mentioned paintings were sort  
of irrelevant, since they were  
not saving anybody,  
not changing stubborn minds,  
not building houses,  
not feeding kids,  
just drawing  
the world  
fine

She  
told him  
fine colors  
were better than  
tearing down houses,  
fueling the stubborn minds.  
At least she was trying to  
make beautiful things relevant,  
She was hoping to draw the world fine.

# The Lucky Bamboo | Bettina Bich

Is fetid and putrid like the now brown, once gold fish,  
Who are congealing in the tank, in the study, where  
Whipped cream wars waged and the scars of aerosol were  
Folded into time waves and dad ironed his shirts there.  
Where the holey air mattress laid with us as we slept and  
We ran across the street to roll in the neighbor's yard  
And down the street with powdered iced tea mix in rain  
Where that trash-bag-man followed us until we turned  
And ran, dripping with danger and high on sugar cane to  
The wood porch, soggy and deserted like the bamboo plant

That is fertilizing maggots like shit feeds flies and the socks  
Between the sheets that grew feet, that grew legs, that grew  
The reflection of a phantom's face, just to float through walls  
Like the cigarette smoke failingly hidden, but it still smells  
Like nothing's changed and the old rusty Toyota van still  
Drunkenly boats loads of kids to class, while we all sing,  
"Sail away, sail away, sail away." It's all Orinoco flowing  
Across the bathroom floor where the William Hippo necklace  
Rests in pieces and mom, knees first, vomited the rocks that  
The bamboo now twigs in, roots pooling over the edge, escaping

From the reek of sweet pithy grapes and wasted salty liver  
Sweating from its leaves, golden with neglectful thinking  
By the red cellophane and tin foil windows that pretend  
The world is darker than it really is and keeps your earth-  
Stained-sock-men from reminding me that Jim Carrey  
Is trapped under your floor boards; where you really  
Hid the keys to the liquor store so no one would drown in  
The afternoon thirst as it drifted in and out, waiting to burn  
Us all alive with the dusty candles in the fire place, but we  
Always thrived in three hundred and sixty five degrees  
Because if that red brick could burn down, no has to take out  
The old bamboo plant with the used coffee filters and candy wraps.

# Knotted Hearts | Monica Postma

We tied knots in our hearts  
notches on sticks  
each time shorter,  
each time broken.

Believe it or not,  
I believed what you said  
when we lived in those craters,  
made of ourselves.

We counted days  
til we ran out of fingers;  
we'll always be lost  
til we know what we're after.

Your handprints left me  
with nothing but scars  
of tracing shapes in the clouds,  
laughing like jackals,  
and the poison I choked on.

Because.  
Because.  
Because.

The sun slows down,  
as I lie beside you.  
Is this the end?  
Not revenge, nor recompense.

But slowly melting snow  
as we learn not to be cold.

# As She Ripens | Nicole Taylor

Lemon blossoms across the horizon  
fruitful is the day freshly opened—  
peeled, pressed, and squeezed.

Let us drink this splendor of beauty  
from Her fingertips,  
savor every drip-drop—  
sweet, sour, and in between.

Raspberry ripples along the shoreline  
beautiful is the evening kissing closed—  
whispered, nestled, and rustled.

Let us bathe in this tender gesture  
from Her lips,  
cherish every neck-peck—  
gentle, passionate, and betwixt.

Plum embraces over the heavens  
toiling is the night running askew—  
swollen, throbbled, and sensitive.

Let us caress in this seduction  
from Her chest,  
reveling every rushed-blush—  
furious, aroused, and amidst.

# A Man Wakes Up On A Bus | Ryan Hamby

and then  
he woke up  
suddenly  
and he saw that he was sitting on a bus  
and it was snowing outside  
and he didn't recognize the trees or the roads or the buildings rushing by  
and he was wearing strange clothes and shoes  
and when he looked around at the people on the bus he didn't recognize any of them  
and none of them looked at him or noticed him  
and he decided, when the bus stopped  
whenever that was  
that he would get out there  
and he would change things  
and he would start a new life  
and he would never tell anyone where he came from  
and he would have a new name  
and he laid his head back against the window of the bus  
and he went back to sleep.

# The Intrinsic Goodness of Pain, Anguish, and the Loss of Pleasure | Hans Cox

When you are on fire, and not engulfed in flames,  
Movements become stereotyped, the mind cannot rest.  
Smoke pours out you try to hide, and all hate your guts.

They talk about you everywhere you go—in the library—  
They spit on the sidewalk as you pass, they wish you'd  
Die on the spot.

It must have been awful, what you did,  
And we've decided you can't make it up. It was the worst thing  
In the world, and you were supposed to figure it out

All by yourself. You didn't, and that's proof. Everyone  
Knows. You don't because you're the worst  
Thing in the world. It's so obvious, why can't you believe it?

We talk just loudly enough so you'll hear, figure it out,  
Believe, and crawl off with a large backpack,  
To eat trash the rest of your life, where there's no water.

We are aware of what we're doing, at all times—  
I want you to know this: we are doing this on purpose.  
Every hour you sleep—and we know you aren't sleeping—

We grow stronger. We even suck your life in dreams.  
There really is just something wrong with you no one can fix.  
By the power of all that's good in the world, we cast you out.

## Against the Current | Amber Richberger

I float along in a sea of falsehood,  
Sailing in a ship I built on misinterpretations and white lies.  
He never told me that my anchor would fault,  
Or that the wind and the waves would work against me.  
I realize now that I never should have put my faith  
In that long-bearded sailor.  
He was never one to think of others first,  
That self-righteous, narcissistic jerk.  
He just let me fight against the current,  
Laughing as I slowly started sinking.  
He watched from a distance  
As I drowned in what I once thought was ecstasy.  
In reality,  
It was just a torturous reminder  
That nothing ever really changes.

# 1873 | Addey Vaters

A mound on the street  
where a pot hole used to be  
And weeds sneaking in through the sidewalk;

Two bushes spilling  
Their greenness onto the curb  
And shaped perfectly round and perfectly huge;

A basketball hoop, net swaying in the wind  
Held in place by small twisted silver  
Wires latched onto the roof;

A stone barrier protecting barky mulch  
From the cool grass  
Attempting to keep flowers alive in the sun;

Three cars lined up  
A pattern of shiny paint and metal  
Diagonally accenting the concrete drive;

Four numbers by the burgundy door  
1-8-7-3  
And stuck onto the pitch colored mailbox;

A mat on the front stoop bidding  
Visitors 'hello,'  
A porch light beacon like a lighthouse in a storm;

Five people inside  
Two dogs and a cat  
A spider or two, smiling picture frames;

This is home.

# Sanguine | Bettina Bich

Is a gerbera daisy  
Soaking in water on the windowsill.  
It is the inside of your palm—  
Tree, swaying on the beach.  
Is the pendulous “open” sign  
Hanging from that psychic’s porch  
And the tap of red high heels on pavement.  
Is the anatomically correct heart,  
Some freak abandoned in the park  
Next to the dumpster that smells  
Like the sweat in your coat.  
Is the taste of your girlfriend’s  
Perfume lingering on the sheets  
We now sleep in and it’s the spot  
Between the legs—  
Of the coffee table, where you spilt.  
Is goosebumps, market slums,  
Finger tips on collar bones, and  
It’s your lips on my earlobe.  
It’s the flush in your skin,  
When you see her and the rings  
Around your tired eyes  
When you haven’t.  
It’s a snare drum, a tambourine, and  
The sound of flashing sirens,  
Someone was short lived.  
It is nostalgia and your narcissism.  
It’s your manipulative smile  
When you push my hair back.  
It’s the ring on the glass,  
Where her lips once sat  
And it’s the last words you said.  
Something about god,  
I forget.

# fiction



# Fiction Editorial Introduction

Fiction challenges its readers to step outside of their normal boundaries and surrender themselves to a new world. Powerful short stories draw in the audience with captivating characters developed with intriguing prose. Short stories invite readers into these new worlds to make sense of them and draw out newly discovered personal insights.

We were most compelled by two stories that have something to say, that have distinct voices, and that gave us some insight into our own hopes, fears, beliefs, and doubts. “Flicker, But Do Not Die” explores hope in a melancholy New Orleans performer through the story of a relinquished dream and persistent heartache. “The Human Chimney” meditatively explores the current direction of our world and the mind-consuming power of addiction. These pieces reflect not just their authors, but also their readers and the world around us.

As we look forward from here, we invite readers to immerse themselves into the same worlds that captured our imaginations and to learn about themselves and the power of storytelling. We encourage readers to keep reading, artists to express themselves, and the UCCS community to stay connected through literature and art.

Sincerely,  
*Jasmine Nelson, Project Manager*  
*Carol Aho*  
*Keve Glaspie*  
*Sarah Kellar*  
*Aubrey Lawson*  
*Julien Loeper*  
*Jessica Valvo*

# The Human Chimney | Brian Marshall

James Joyce was riding the train on the way to his annual mental health examination. James isn't the author of *Ulysses*—that James Joyce died 104 years ago. This James Joyce lives in Santa Clarita, California. He works as a food scientist, and he writes poetry.

James thought of when he rode this train as a child. He and his father would sometimes ride southbound into L.A. to watch the Los Angeles Dodgers games. He remembered tugging on his father's shirt, pointing out the window, mystified by the blur of colors he saw. The sprawling southern California vegetation looked like a streak of green paint strewn across a misty blue horizon.

Now he sat, fingering the tips of his mustache, looking out the window. James didn't see any greens or blues. In fact, he didn't see any yellows, reds, oranges, or purples either.

*These days, you can only find those colors on streetlights,* he thought.

That wasn't entirely true, but it was close. Most vegetation had been completely paved over, and the few trees, bushes, and flowers that still existed naturally were in the hills blocked by towering buildings—some 200 stories high. Most of these gargantuan structures had been erected in the last 20 years or so, built in response to the aggressive population spike.

The train passed a sign with faded letters that read: "Los Angeles City Limit, pop. 46 million."

James felt his stomach turn, sickened by the perverse medley of greys and blacks he saw through the window. His hands were shaking, as they always were around 10 in the morning. It had been nearly three and a half hours since his last cigarette, and the primitive symptoms of nicotine withdrawal were gnawing at his brain. He pressed his hand against his front pocket, tracing the outline of a few bootlegged cigarettes and a lighter. This helped with the nerves.

He redirected his attention to a family sitting across the aisle from him. A sullen mother, with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, was yelling coarsely at her three children, who

were screeching loud, unintelligible noises; sometimes fragments of words, other times gurgling squeals that sounded entirely unhuman. The children were either blatantly insubordinate or unable to understand their mother, who was having difficulty constructing sentences in between fits of a whooping cough; the children continued crawling over the floor and their seats making these horrendous noises.

One of the children, who seemed to be around the age of ten, drug herself across the aisle to where James was sitting. The child was on her hands and knees, her skin a vile shade of green, looking up at James. She raised her head, exposing a pair of yellow eyes—they looked electric, radiating like neon sludge—a cleft lip, and a malformed left ear that was warped like plastic in the sun.

James stared, transfixed by the child's ghoulish presence. She opened her mouth, showing off a set of whittled teeth, and let out a guttural bark, startling James and turning his blood to lead. The child ran back to her seat, howling with laughter.

*She won't live another five years*, James thought, reflecting on the high mortality rate among the world's young. He looked at the miserable family, surely foreign. The country had been flooded with millions of identical families after the war: fatherless units with destitute mothers, and children who were horrendously deformed by the poisoned atmosphere. Around the world, trees had turned to ash, soil had become infertile, and the hundreds of millions still clinging to life fled to the only remaining inhabitable place, the perpetrator of all, the United States.

"Life in the U.S. had become almost unbearable," recounted the talking head on the screen in front of him.

All public transportation vehicles were fixed with screens that cycled through government-sanctioned media: movies, news reports, skits, songs. Today's feature was a documentary called "The Great Crisis: A Story of American Triumph."

James had seen it before, but he watched dutifully.

"Just shy of a billion people crowded into the streets of American cities, forming ghettos deprived of social order, an antagonistic milieu where disease and mutation festered like viruses."

Images flashed across the screen, a lineup of children displayed in the cold immobility

of death.

“But the American government was there—selflessly allocating resources for housing, healing, and nourishment. President Thompson had heard the cry of the people.”

The screen flashed to a waving President Richard Thompson, beaming with a smile and borrowing a stone-like jawline from his father.

“Yes, the situation was out of control,” he said, in a commanding, baritone voice, “complete anarchy. Sure, people were dying. But that wasn’t the only issue; we were also reproducing at an alarming rate. We had to get creative. After providing safe entrance into our country, we realized we just didn’t have what we needed to help everybody. We tried test-tube food, genetic engineering, but we just couldn’t keep up. America wasn’t a ship equipped with lifeboats for 850 million, and we had hit our iceberg. We were going down. However, after a few logical population control efforts—my life-saving PCE plan—things turned around almost instantly. Life felt like life again.”

“Amazing,” said the interviewer.

“Yes, these measures were criticized by some, but they were, of course, necessary for our safety and well-being. These are the actions I have built my legacy upon. These decisions, the tough ones—they are reason I am truly proud of my tenure as President. I have created a more optimistic future for our children.”

One of these population control efforts was the reason James was on the train now. This particular PCE mandated annual mental health evaluations. At these evaluations, doctors examine their patients for signs of mental irregularities.

“Your critics, though few in number, argue that some of your actions, particularly some of the PCE’s, are, should I say, ‘eugenic’ in nature.”

“Eugenic...isn’t that a funny word? Does that not simply mean ‘improving the human race?’ Sure, people like to manipulate definitions and twist my words, attempting to defame my presidency, but that’s part of the job. It’s up to me to improve the conditions of this planet for the largest amount of people. Does that take sacrifice? Of course! But show me one great leader who didn’t have to make a sacrifice.”

“Well I couldn’t think of even one, sir.”

The train slowed, and the documentary's audio was replaced by a mechanized voice informing James this was his stop. As the train halted, James' stare was fixed on the ground—more specifically at his shoes, wondering if his only pair would last him through another long winter. L.A. didn't used to have winters, but now harsh weather prevailed nine months of the year. James, lost in thought, almost missed his stop.

“Last call for 115th and Broadway—Medical Station,” the genderless voice droned. James snapped out of his trance, grabbed his coat, and headed for the door.

James trudged through the eroding sidewalks toward the Department of Mental Sanitation (DMS) located two blocks down from the station. Rapid disintegration, due simply to overuse and lack of maintenance, had destroyed the city's walking paths. The roads, built to withstand daily wear from multi-ton machines, were much more durable, and with cars being essentially non-existent, the streets were bustling with foot traffic. James chose to stay on the sidewalk.

James recounted mental examinations from years past. He remembered his first one 21 years ago, at the age of 22. President Thompson had formally announced that it was no longer terrorism, or crime, or drugs that were the enemy of the people, but rather, overpopulation.

“Crime isn't what it used to be,” President Thompson had said. “No one is putting a gun to your head and taking your things for the sake of it. The real crime is in the diminished potential of our youth, the wasted life. Young, ambitious Americans are going hungry, while the mentally unable compete for their food and resources. This is true injustice.”

James remembered the first set of mass executions a few months later. They passed quietly. “Maybe this wouldn't be right in regular times,” his mother had said, “but these aren't regular times.”

He thought of the days just before the examination in his 29th year. The PCE's had lost their initial effectiveness, and the population-to-resource relationship was more strained than ever.

“Pressing times call for urgent measures. Therefore, we have made some revisions to our country's clinical standard of Mental Sanitation,” President Thompson had declared. “Nothing, of course, that will cause the average American any concern.”

That year's revisions included the schizophrenic, the depressed, the bipolar; those with eating disorders, those with Alzheimer's and dementia.

"Only so many of us can live," his mother had said. "It's a fact! Mr. Thompson said so himself. Why shouldn't it be those of us whose brains are working properly?"

Thinking about his mother blurred his vision. Tears welled in his eyes. He pictured her, three years later, when she began to forget.

"Help me, James!" she had cried, when they showed up with the truck. That was the last time he ever saw her.

James turned the corner on 117th avenue. He glanced to his right, noticing a motley crew of three young men sitting in the alleyway. Their faces were dirty, and their clothes were torn. Two of them sat huddled around a burning newspaper, with blank faces and hollowed eyes. The third was different, pacing neurotically, clearly in pursuit of something on the ground.

"Got it!" he screeched, pinching a squealing rat by the tail, dangling it in front of his face. The man, surely no older than 18, rubbed the rat against his face, drowning the rodent in the patches of his red beard. The look on his face was almost orgasmic.

"You're gunna be in my belly, you hear that?" His eyes were ablaze. "I gotchu this time, no escaping me, I gotchu, and I'm coming for the rest-" He raised his eyes, locking them with James'. "You hear that, fella? This rat is mine, whoooo!"

James quickly looked down, striding swiftly through the revolving front door of the DMS.

James was temporarily blinded when he walked in. The fluorescently lit waiting room proved too bright for his dilating irises, which were accustomed to the gloomy fog permanently hung over the city.

James approached the secretary, who sat behind a glass encasement. James struggled to see the secretary; she was excessively short, her eyes barely able to peer over the desk. She stared up at him, her neck craning like a Lamarckian giraffe straining for the lowest tree branch.

“Name, sir?”

“James Joyce.”

“You’re late.”

“I know, my train missed—”

“Please take a seat, sir. Dr. Hanson will be with you in a few minutes.”

James took a seat next to a pretty young woman. Discomfited by her beauty, James stared at the ground, intent on avoiding connection with anybody else in the room. The mood was standard for a DMS waiting space; the scent of death lingered in the air with a veil of ambiguity. For all James knew, the pretty woman to his right would be dead tomorrow.

The room seemed to James even more disturbed than in previous years. This was undoubtedly the result of a new mandate, a revision to the standard of mental sanitation, which included, among a slew of newly recognized disorders, one particularly damning condition: addiction.

James noticed a stack of pamphlets on a coffee table sitting directly in front of him: a message from President Thompson to the people. James reached for a copy, and began to read.

“Addiction is a condition that had plagued the heart of our society for years. Despite the fact that it has been tolerated for centuries, addiction embodies the very essence of psychological disease: complete detachment from reality, a refusal of logic, and a lack of control over mental faculties. The myth of the ‘functional addict’ has persisted far too long. It is time that we, as a nation of the future, have the courage to face the problem head on.”

With every word, James’ heart sunk further into his chest and into his stomach where it sat, burning. He reached once again for his breast pocket, trying to settle his nerves.

“And so, effective at the start of this year’s evaluations, not only will addiction join the mandated list of psychological conditions, but the possession or consumption of any addictive substance, at any time, will also result in a failed examination. This list

includes: caffeine, alcohol, narcotics, nicotine..."

James loosened his grip on the pamphlet, allowing it to slip through his fingers and onto the floor. This wasn't news to him; he had already seen President Thompson announce this amendment live on television.

*They couldn't know, he thought.*

*How could they?*

He shoved his fists back into his pants pockets. They were now shaking violently.

"Joyce," the doctor called from the opposite corner of the room. James looked up. Dr. Hanson—Frankie, as James had known him in his youth—stood in the doorway peering over a pair of spectacles that sat lazily across the bridge of his freckled nose. James stood, Frankie turned, and the two of them walked through the sterile hallway.

"Jimmy," Dr. Hanson said. "My friend! It's been too long. How've you been?"

"I've been all right."

"Good, good! I'm glad to hear it, I really am. God, you look great. What're they feeding you over at the factory?"

"Chemicals."

Dr. Hanson nearly exploded with laughter. Dr. Hanson had been an acquaintance of James' in high school. Both had been all-star athletes—touchdowns in the fall and home runs in the spring. Dr. Hanson had conducted the previous 13 examinations for James. Their meetings, which would typically digress into more of a catch-up than anything clinical, had become an annual fixture for James, like New Year's, or birthdays.

"Alright, Jimmy, you know the drill. Stand here, straight up, alright...6'4... okay and now over to the scale, shoes off Jimmy, okay...187...good. Jesus, Jimmy, down 11 pounds from last year, and you look it too. How do you do it, friend?"

James remained silent, concealing his anxiety with a soft grin.

The two rounded the corner and into his office. It was eccentrically decorated. The walls were painted sunset orange, and potted plastic ferns hung from the ceiling. The room's lighting was tinted pink from a silky cloth that hung over the window. A pair of framed photographs sat prominently on Dr. Hanson's desk: one, a vintage-style photograph of him garbed in samurai clothing, standing in what James had always imagined to be some sort of Chinese rice farm, and the other, a picture of him graduating from the PCE Medical Program, firmly shaking the hand of a smiling President Thompson.

James took a seat directly across from the doctor, his friend.

"How's the family been, Jimmy?" Dr. Hanson asked, throwing his feet up to the side onto his desk.

"Good. Just got back from El Paso."

"No shit, huh? What was the occasion?"

"Birthday present from Janet."

"Remind me, when was your birthday again?"

"Few years ago."

Dr. Hanson doubled over in laughter, the auburn whiskers above his lip seeming to dance.

"Of course it was. God, Jimmy you're as dry as ever." Dr. Hanson turned to his desk, his chuckles beginning to fade as he fumbled with a stack of papers. "I'm assuming you heard about the Sanitation revisions, right?"

"Sure."

"Good. I am, of course, legally required to brief you on the updates. Here, I need you to sign these, indicating compliance." Dr. Hanson handed James the stack. "Bit tedious if you ask me," he continued, leaning back in his chair. "I can't imagine a single person out there that doesn't know. We can't escape it: the riots, the protests. It's got everyone all whacked out."

James nodded, lazily browsing through the documents in his hand.

“That’s the problem with these people, Jimmy; they’re a certain breed, entirely impossible to satisfy. Are they not the same folks who were rioting, years back, demanding action when there wasn’t enough to eat? Thompson’s done everything right; he’s solved problems. He’s a problem solver, and quite frankly, I am entirely satisfied with what he’s done for our country. I’m telling you Jim, with these people, I mean, if it wasn’t this, it’d be something else.”

The door flew open, followed by the entrance of a young man. He was pushing a dense machine decorated with gauges and wires and buzzing lights. A metallic helmet sat on top. The young man looked surprised, almost frustrated, by the doctor’s apparent lapse of professionalism.

“Jimmy, this is our new intern, Charlie. Charlie, Jimmy is an old friend of mine; we go way back.”

“Sir,” Charlie said, addressing James.

“Charlie, you won’t be needed for this appointment. Jimmy and I have been doing this for years; his mind’s sharp. Clean as a whistle. Ain’t that right, Jim?”

James sat silent.

“What, you’re not going crazy on me Jimbo, are ya?”

“Course not.” James forced a smile.

“That’s right. Charlie, go see if they need you in 309. I know they were scrambling for bodies earlier this morning.”

James watched Charlie leave the room. His fists were balls in his pockets; his mind was frantically craving the sweet release of nicotine. Four hours was an eternity. *He imagined the cigarette resting lightly between his pointer and index fingers and his left thumb fiddling with the lighter—the one that never ignited on the first few clicks. He thought of lifting that cigarette to his face and allowing it to hang delicately between his lips. His heart skipped a beat. The orange paper was caressing his upper lip, the*

*curvature of the cigarette filling the void of his puckered mouth.*

“So anyways, Jimmy, what’s new?”

Dr. Hanson stared at James with a pair of wide brown eyes. His voice was calm and engaging, but James’ mind was elsewhere.

“Oh, nothing much.”

“Come on, what kind of answer is that? Damn it, Jimmy, what do I need to ask to get a few words out of you? Where did you get that shirt? What did you have for breakfast? Is Janet nagging you into the grave?”

*James had managed to light his imaginary cigarette. He breathed slowly and deeply, his mind absolutely consumed. He followed the air through the initial ring of exposed tobacco, down the leafy tube as it collected ammonia and arsenic and nicotine, through the filter, where the smoke funneled into his mouth. He imagined the heat on his tongue, an exposed wound gulping a few of the stray chemicals directly into his blood stream, while he greedily inhaled the rest of the poisoned air down his charcoaled esophagus, into his lungs.*

“Jimmy, you with me?” The doctor’s smile slipped from his face, and he snapped his fingers in James’ face.

“What, oh yeah, I’m here. Sorry about that. Haven’t been sleeping much.”

“Well how about your writing? Anything? You know I’ve always thought of you as the, uh, what’s his name...what’s his name, Jimmy? That one poet I like?”

“Pound?”

“Yes! Pound. Ezra Pound. I’ve always fancied you to be a bit like him.”

“As a matter a fact, I brought something with me.”

James’ hand dove into his back pocket and re-emerged with a piece of crumpled paper, which he handed over to Dr. Hanson.

James' mind continued to drift: *the murky air dispersed evenly about his lungs, filling every corner with its smoldering goodness. He exhaled the stale cloud of smoke and carbon dioxide, but the damage had been done; his alveoli readily absorbed the ammonia and arsenic and nicotine, and spewed it all into his bloodstream.*

Dr. Hanson read the poem aloud:

"In flight, dare I liken to love, what is one wing without its twin? Just as in learning the mind of winter's youth, one must look to the spring, sir

—Jimmy Joyce"

"Bravo, Jim. That's what I love you for. It's always got to be pulling teeth with you, but you come through—come in here, once a year and culture me up. What was that, some sort of haiku or something?"

"No, not a haiku."

*The chemicals were now swarming rampantly in his blood. This was his favorite part. He imagined them racing one another through his body's highways and finding a carotid artery, a toll road of sorts, before crashing into his brain in an explosion of ecstasy.*

"It's, umm, a pair of American—American sentences. 17 syllables each. Yeah, and um—well written, or, more so inspired, I guess, by—a Shakespearean-type language. But they're incomplete. I—still need to work them into meter, maybe iambic, or something."

James' eyes were unfocused, and his mind, deep into his smoky fantasy, was almost entirely disengaged from the conversation.

"Jimmy, if you didn't want to talk to me, why'd you even show up to this thing?" Dr. Hanson flashed a toothy grin. "Kidding, of course! But seriously, you want my opinion?"

James gave a slight nod.

"Well, I would say, professionally speaking of course, that you my friend, are sleep deprived. Janet must be running you ragged!"

Dr. Hanson stood up, placing his hand on James' shoulder. "Here, buddy, I still need

you to sign a few things. I'm gunna go grab them from the front, and I can send you on your way."

James hardly noticed Dr. Hanson leave the room. He tried mightily to shake the dream, redirecting his focus to the window, through which he observed a bleak image of a nameless factory. It was one among a million others, featuring a prominent row of enormous grey chimneys, and whose color would have been indistinguishable from the very smoke it emitted if not for its opaqueness. James was overcome with despair, and he retreated back into his mind a final time.

*With a sudden limpness, James' neck rolled back, and he wearily followed the smoke billowing above his head. He took a puff, and another. The smoldering ash fell to the ground, landing on the document of compliance. The papers began to burn, slowly first, then accelerated, gaining momentum. James didn't mind. The flame spread rapidly, in the likeness of a stack of dominos, devouring every combustible object in the room. Smoke was abundant, funneling through his blood, swarming in his brain, and rising to the room's lone smoke detector. The alarm rang. It was blaring and rhythmic, music to his ears. The sprinklers fired, a downpour, and the shadow of a rainbow arose from the mist. There they were, the colors: the reds and the blues and the yellows; greens, oranges, purples. He was the human chimney. James sat upright, his eyes closed tighter than ever, and laughed. Honestly and heartily.*

## Flicker, But Do Not Die | Cydney Ruff

It is early in the morning, but she is already awake. She has no reason to stay abed past the seventh chime of the clock, and besides, she loves to stand at the front door and watch the sun rise over the Garden District. Wrapped in her dressing gown, with bare feet and red-painted toenails, she grabs her cup of tea and hurries over to the door with a slight spring of anticipation in her step. The old, ornate front door stands like a great, dark sentinel bent on keeping her inside, away from her beloved sun. She doesn't care; her front door is of little concern to her. All she cares about is the sun that will greet her in just a few short moments and make her day completely worth getting out of bed for.

Today, however, she is disappointed because the Mississippi has decided to muddy the sky along with its depths. The majority of the District is hidden behind a thick layer of humid fog, and the air is icy with the promise of the coming winter. She slumps against her doorframe, cup suddenly heavy in her hand, and sighs. There will be no lobster-colored streaks crossing the sky this morning. There will be no sun to reach over the rooftops ahead of her and warm her from the crown of her bright red hair all the way down to the tips of her red toes. There will be no spark to ignite the flame today.

Her long red fingernails graze the side of her teacup, and the china sings a little from their attentions. Her sky-blue eyes darken, and her lids droop slightly as she gazes out at the oppressive fog. She draws the cold, water-logged air into her lungs and huffs it back out so that she can see the cloud directly in front of her hurrying away with the force of the breath. Perhaps if she goes around the District blowing the cloud away, she'll be able to make it disperse in time to see the sunrise.

But it would be a useless errand, she knows, that would only result in the neighbors thinking she is even crazier than they already suspected. And they wouldn't be wrong about that. They are always up early because they have places to be and things to do. Even now, as the gray day begins to lighten in the early morning, the men are hurrying through the brisk air with their briefcases and fancy suits, going to work in Midtown and Uptown and the Arts District and the French Quarter. Their wives walk alongside their husbands to the streetcar stop in their beautiful mink coats with their faces made up despite the dismal weather, and when they see her standing in her doorway in nothing but her dressing gown, they scoot their children along and refuse to return

her wave. They have lives to lead, families to support, and a difference to make in the world. They are ugly lightbulbs that cast wide, ugly glows and they have no time for the strange woman, so like a gentle wax candle in comparison, who stands under-dressed at her doorway in the middle of November.

Now, she has no real purpose in life. She used to be a famous dancer, but giving up a life of fame and money for a lonely life as a singer from the Garden District made her an outcast. Who would be crazy enough to leave behind a life of constant adoration and world renown? And she supposes she is crazy, if not for collapsing on the stage and wailing uncontrollably during “The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy” last winter, then for leaving behind a passion that made her happy, even though it wasn’t her fault.

It wasn’t her fault that her belly had begun to swell or that she began having fits of anger and sorrow on stage in the middle of her performances. It wasn’t her fault the theater manager had taken her aside and told her, I’m sorry, my little flame, but we can’t keep you on, not in your . . . condition; people are beginning to talk. I’m so, so sorry. She knew he meant it, but that didn’t mean she had to like it. And he had leaned close, away from the others, and whispered, “*All flames flicker from time to time. It’s okay to flicker, ma chere, but do not die.*”

She could—she should, sleep in until noon every day because she has nothing to do in the mornings. She has the whole afternoon to get ready to sing at the nightclub in the French Quarter. In the afternoon, she must curl her red locks, paint her wide, blue eyes and high cheekbones with colors that make her look more alive than she feels, and dangle sparkling diamond earrings from her delicate ears. She must make herself pretty so that she can flirt with the young streetcar driver at four o’clock and then again at one in the morning when she goes home, even though he technically shouldn’t be working at that hour. In the afternoon, she can do her grocery shopping at the French Market, or she can read the newspaper that is dropped at her house at five o’clock every morning, or she can spend an extra amount of time picking out her dress for the evening. She has no reason to be awake before noon.

But if she weren’t awake before noon, she would miss the sunrise, a reason to keep flickering—or, in today’s case, the fog, a reason to think about why she stopped burning brightly in the first place.

She’d rather not think about that. She backs away from the open doorway slowly,

afraid that by shutting the door she might miss the sun bursting through the awful clouds and lighting up the sky with its rays. She knows that will not happen, not today, and so she forces herself to close the door, to close herself off from the rest of the world. As she walks back to her kitchen, she sips at her tea, but it's usually pleasant peppermint bite has become bland and lifeless. She sets the teacup down on the table in the kitchen and looks around, wondering what she might do with her day. She has no appetite for breakfast yet, but no desire to go back to bed and try to sleep the gloomy day away, despite possible dreams of the sun. With a sigh, she sits at the table and picks up the newspaper.

\*

The clock chiming twelve makes her jolt and sit up straight, and she blinks rapidly to rid her eyes of sleep. Her movements shake the table and upset her teacup, spilling cold tea all over the newspaper she had been using as a pillow. After rubbing her eyes, she disregards the spilt tea and dumps the ruined newspaper in the refuse bin.

A low rumbling sound erupts from her belly as she stretches her arms above her head. A peek in the icebox reveals the need for a trip to the market, so she shuffles into her bedroom, her bare feet scuffing and squeaking across the house's old, warped wooden floors. She barely pays the cold air any mind as she flings open the window facing the overgrown back garden and sets about making herself look somewhat presentable for the market. A knee-length white dress covered in red roses will do for the trip, and she slides stockinged feet into flat red ballet slippers. They are relics from her old life, her time as beautiful Odette in *Swan Lake*, hopeful Marie in *The Nutcracker*, ever-loving Giselle in *Giselle*. The slippers are so worn by the memory of her form that she should have tossed them ages ago. But she can always patch up whatever damage comes to them, and anything she can patch up would be a waste to throw away. At least, that's what she tells herself.

She walks slowly to the streetcar stop, her steps naturally more graceful in the dainty toe shoes. She allows her thin black jacket to hang open, unlike the other ladies she passes, who grasp the tops of their beautiful mink coats and scarves to keep out the chill. She picks up her pace just a little when she sees that the streetcar is already at the stop and passengers coming from their lunch breaks are filing on, preparing to go back to work. As she steps on, she is somewhat disappointed that the driver isn't the fun, flirtatious youth who doesn't start his shift for a few more hours. She has arrived late enough that her usual seat is already taken, so she takes the only open seat—in the middle of the very back—and stares straight ahead almost the entire ride to the

French Market.

At some point during the journey, she becomes aware of a little girl who has twisted around in her seat to stare at her from across the streetcar. No, not at her—at her shoes. The little girl, whose curiosity reminds her of Marie, turns to her mother and says “Hah shoes ah preeetty,” in her thick Creole accent. Her mother forces the little girl’s arm down, whispering something about how it’s impolite to point. Marie continues to stare at the toe shoes, no doubt wondering why a lady would be wearing toe shoes outside of a theater. She’s right—there’s no reason for dancing shoes to be anywhere but on a stage. The little Marie’s eyes shift up to stare at her face, and her heart twinges in sadness at Marie’s eyes, that beautiful shade of sky-blue. The same shade as her own eyes. The same shade as . . .

She blinks and swallows hard, pushing the thoughts back down into the deep, dark pit she thought she’d sewn up tightly. She cannot follow that train of thought. She will not cry here, not in front of all these other people who will think she’s crazy, not in front of little Marie who will have her own mother to turn towards when she realizes the strange lady in the ballet slippers doesn’t like to be stared at.

Thankfully, the car rumbles to a stop, and she is set free. Out on the banquette, she takes a deep breath in, for once embracing the lack of sun as the cold clears her head. Glancing back to smile at the driver, she catches sight of the young Marie in the window, still staring at her shoes. Marie’s big blue eyes are sad, as though she understands and wishes she could help, wishes she could reach out and whisper “*It’s okay to flicker, but do not die.*”

But there is no helping the lady in the pretty rose dress and the red ballet slippers. She convinces herself that the little girl is simply sad because her mother won’t let her take ballet lessons and become a true Marie. If she were the girl’s mother, she wouldn’t let her take ballet lessons, either. She remembers how obsessed she became as a child, how all she wanted was to be a ballerina, and how nothing else mattered to her young mind. She hadn’t known what she’d had, and then it was all snatched away from her. She can remember every detail of that old, seemingly happy life. It’s a portrait forever burned into her memory.

The French Market is not the usual gumbo ya-ya that it is in warmer weather, but it’s not too much quieter, she supposes, since the tourists will come, rain or shine. She begins her shopping, first picking up fruit from the young Mrs. Deveraux. Mrs.

Deveraux tries to get her to stop and chat, commenting, “What a charmer you are today,” although her accent makes it sound like “chaw-muh.” Mrs. Deveraux lifts her eyebrows, expecting a reply, but she only gets a nod and a faint smile before her customer moves along, making way for the next person—one who will hopefully be more talkative.

Her next stop is her favorite fisherman, Mr. Glass, who always flashes her a mostly toothless smile and asks “Where y’at today, Miss Lady?” And today her response is no different: a smile and a graceful Giselle curtsey as he hands over her usual order of shrimp and crawfish, plus a few extra pieces—lagniappe—because he thinks she’s far too skinny for her own good.

After Mr. Glass, she peruses the other stalls for spices, meats, scarves, vegetables, beautiful costume jewelry, and bolts of fabric she could turn into lavish gowns to wear to the club. She bends over a table covered in beautifully decorated, rose-scented candles and nearly trips over a small, fair-haired child in the process. The child stops running, eyes round as saucers at the sight of her ballet slippers. “Dance?” the boy asks, gesturing to the shoes, and she smiles. “Dance!” he crows, clapping his little hands. “Dance, dance!” He reminds her of Odette’s lover, Siegfried.

With a wary look around for some parental figure who might be looking for the little Siegfried, she tries to nudge him along in the direction he was originally running, but he only jumps up and down, claps more, shouts “Dance, dance!” Carefully setting down her grocery bag, she lifts up onto her toes and pirouettes. The young Siegfried laughs, only in the way babies who are thoroughly entertained can. “Dance, dance!” She pirouettes again, ending in an arabesque, and Siegfried laughs so gleefully that a small, half-crazed laugh escapes her own lips, and tears spring to her eyes. “Dance!”

Then suddenly a mother is there, pulling Siegfried back into her arms and smiling up at the strange dancer who made her son laugh loudly enough to be found. “Sorry, dawlin’, but thank ya,” she says, scooping up her son and hurrying away before the dancer has to speak. She slowly lowers herself back to the ground and looks around. The blurry market bustles on around her, as though it can’t hear her heart breaking open for all the world to see.

The little Marie’s eyes, the little Siegfried’s smile...they are everything she tries to shut out in the world coming back to haunt her. That night after the show, the show that left the city talking for ages afterwards, praising her Giselle and his Albrecht to high

heaven. She was over the moon from applause and roses and whistles and love notes from secret admirers and far too much champagne. He was in her dressing room, ready to drive her home, but instead he left her there after locking the door, slamming her head against the wall so that she saw stars, and leaving on her flawless skin painful purple marks that haunted her nightmares for many months afterwards.

She grabs her shopping bag and hurries away from the stalls, knowing she'll have to return eventually to finish her shopping but unable to stay now. She can feel the clouds pressing in on her, blocking out any sunlight that might have tried to filter in, and she needs to escape the gloom before she chokes. She needs to be alone, to take off the ballet shoes and throw them away and swear she'll never look at another pair ever again – just like she's sworn every time she has worn these shoes since that night in November when her life had begun to spiral downwards.

\*

When she was the beautiful Swan Queen Odette, she won over not only Siegfried's heart, but the hearts of every man in the audience. As Marie, she enchanted crowds with the cheer of Christmas and her love for the Nutcracker. But it was her breath-taking, heart-wrenching performance as Giselle that made her famous.

They always did the show in the autumn, because that's when the ballet was originally written for. They would allow wealthy patrons and benefactors to see the show for free and to bring their beignets and steaming cups of tea and coffee into their boxes, even though the theater's owner would have had the manager's head on a spike if he ever found out. And if the show got a standing ovation – which it did, every night – the manager would raise her pay because he knew that despite Albrecht's dramatics and Bathilde's expertise and Hilarion's facial expressions, the Dancing Flame who played Giselle was the true star of the show.

Giselle was tricked into falling in love with Duke Albrecht, who was already engaged to Bathilde. Her close friend and secret admirer, Hilarion – the man Giselle should have loved all along – tried to warn her that Albrecht was not to be trusted, but she was deceived nevertheless and died of heartbreak. She then came back as a spirit and forgave Albrecht his deceit. It was that warm-hearted generosity and compassion that made audiences love her. The movements of her arms were perfectly fluid; her red-slipper-clad feet were so graceful, eloquent, and delicate that women would wipe tears from their eyes and men would stare hypnotized, their breaths bated. She poured her heart and soul into her character and made Giselle come alive even when the maiden

wandered the world as a fragile, broken spirit. People came from across the country to see the Dancing Flame perform Giselle.

Now they have a different Giselle at the theater. They don't remember the Dancing Flame anymore.

But she remembers. She remembers everything.

\*

The clock is chiming four as she hops aboard the streetcar in the Garden District. She takes a deep breath, steadying herself and beginning to prepare for a long night of singing after the taxing afternoon she's had. She places her fare in the hand of the driver – the flirtatious youth who reminds her of Hilarion – with a wan smile. He accepts the money with a little too much gratitude, not noticing how pale she is or how long her sad eyes linger on his smile, envying his happiness. She sighs; the trip back home earlier was supposed to calm her, but didn't. The people who are coming to the club tonight probably won't have as much fun as they've been expecting and hoping for all day.

Her ballet slippers make no noise as she moves to sit in her usual spot, which is thankfully empty: three rows from the door, on the right side, in the seat next to the window, directly within sight of Hilarion's mirror. She doesn't know if she's ever seen the other side of the street at this time of day. She sits here because she knows what she always sees. As the streetcar rumbles on, she stares outside so she can watch Mr. James Rothschild coming home from work and walking up to his front door – an hour earlier than anyone else because Mr. James Rothschild has recently lost his job. He tells his wife that he is simply so well-loved at the office that they let him come home early. He'll leave his house again around eight – “business meeting” or “card game” he'll tell his wife, who needn't wait up for him – and he'll come to watch her sing at the club.

She considers all the ways she can entice Mr. James Rothschild during her songs so that he'll drink enough to come see her in her dressing room after the club closes. And when he does come, as he has on so many nights for the last few months, she'll answer the door in her dressing gown, he'll rake his eyes over her as he drawls out “Hey bay-bee,” and she'll coyly invite him inside – “for a drink” of course. She ponders all the ways she can refuse him before she finally succumbs to him on her faded, rose-patterned chaise-lounge. And she knows that in those moments, when she should be showing him a good time, the only thing she'll be able to focus on is what would

happen showing him a good time, the only thing she'll be able to focus on is what would happen if Mrs. James Rothschild were to ever find out what exactly her husband gets up to late at night.

She sighs as she looks out the window, watches the Crescent City go by, and wonders her final thought: how she might get herself out of this situation. As usual, she's arrived at no conclusion. The streetcar shudders to a stop and she rises to disembark. But as she's stepping down the stairs, all grace and charm on the outside for anyone who might be watching, she hears Hilarion call to her.

"Hey," he says, making her stop and look back at him, surprised by the gentle tenderness in his voice. "It's gonna be okay."

\*

She sits in the bathtub after her awful trip to the French Market and lets the cold air from the open window wash over her hot, wet skin. A few dozen candles that she collected during her time as the Dancing Flame sit on the floor around the bathtub, all lit to make up for the lack of sunlight outside. Her knees are drawn up to her chest and she can feel the water growing colder by the minute, sending goosebumps erupting over her skin despite the few candles she has also set afloat in the water, but she can't move yet. If she moves, she'll fall apart into hundreds of tiny pieces and probably get washed down the drain, and no one will ever find out what happened to her. She can already imagine the headlines: "New Orleans' Dancing Flame Snuffed Out in the Bath." She almost considers laughing.

The ballet shoes are resting atop the heap of her dress lying on the floor a short distance from the tub and candles. They look so small and insignificant, so dull and faded, yet they light up the gray room with their red color more than the candles ever could. That is what they are meant to do and it cheers her only a little to know that, after all this time, they are still serving their purpose. Flicker, but do not die. They used to be the talk of the theater and she used to be so well-known for them because she refused to wear the normal, cream-colored ballet slippers – even as Giselle and Odette, who traditionally wear all white. They used to be the hallmark of her career, what made her stand out. They had earned her the trademark nickname "Dancing Flame" not just for their color but because when she danced in them, her feet flickered and moved with the grace and elegance of a flame come to light the darkness.

Not anymore. Now all they can do is serve as a reminder of her old life. They no longer

leap across the stage like they were made to; instead, they rest on the floor and stare sadly at her with their worn-down fabric toes and slumped soles and ribbons that reach out to her across the white floor like streams of blood-colored tears. They have been with her since the very beginning. They know what she has been through and they have suffered right along with her. They weep for her, their broken dancer who has let them fade away into a graceful pile of fraying red silk.

*It's okay to cry*, they seem to whisper, reaching out to her with their delicate ribbons. *It's okay. We understand. We forgive you. It's okay.* She squeezes herself tighter, refusing to fall apart even as she feels the seams holding her mind and heart together stretching and snapping.

Five and a half months after Albrecht had his way with her, the two smallest human beings in the world were born – and never took their first breaths. When she woke up, she was told that there had been complications: not only had they been unable to save them, but she was unable to have any more – the birth had irreparably ruptured something inside her – but did she want to see them? She said yes, of course she wanted to see them, and she saw them and held them, those tiny red flames who had never gotten the chance to burn at all, and she vowed to hate herself forever for weeping, not because she mourned them, but because, in those moments, she envied them.

Her face is suddenly hot as she allows the tears to roll from her eyes, down the bridge of her nose, past her trembling lips and chin, and splash into the bathwater. Her increasing shivering creates ripples that set the candles in the water teetering, their flames flickering in a wild battle to stay alive. Maybe, if she cries enough, she'll be able to warm the water back up. Maybe she can create enough waves to topple the candles and snuff the flames out so that they match her spirit – or would the flames set the water on fire and consume her? She almost laughs at such a silly thought, and that makes more tears fall.

And the ballet slippers just stare sadly, reach out, and whisper *It's okay, it's okay, it's okay.*

\*

Later, when it was dark and her voice was hoarse from singing, those same words reached out to her through the quiet night. “Ah promise, it's gonna be okay.”

She flinches at his words. The jolt gives her a heightened awareness of why she has allowed him to abandon his car and walk with her, why she might allow him to come

inside and have a cup of tea with her once they reach the tall, silent tomb she calls home. Those words haunted her all night at the club, so much so that she could hardly focus on her singing. They did, however, give her courage enough to look Mr. James Rothschild in the eye and tell him NO without any coy or sexy cunning masking how much she meant it.

Mr. James Rothschild *laughed*, just sat there laughing and told her all right, stop joking and c'mere. And when she refused to do that, he frowned and wondered what the hell is wrong with ya? Ya pregnant or somethin'? She told him no, she is unable to have children, and he looked so relieved and angry and confused at the same time and asked so why don't ya c'mon over, dawlin', show me a good time? And in that moment, she realized she hated him – this man who was nothing more than another Albrecht, this man who had never been refused until he had lost his job and wasn't about to be refused again anytime soon – so she told him to get the hell out of her sight and go warm Mrs. James Rothschild's bed for once. He stood, finally realizing that she meant what she said, and started toward her, saying all kinds of things like I can't go back there, I hate my wife, she doesn't do anything for me anymore, not like you do, you're the only one I want, so stop messin' around and COME. HERE. *DAWLIN'*, and so she ran. She ran like hell, nearly blind with fear and the memory of Albrecht and all the awful purple marks, and she, in her graceful, flickering flame ballet slippers, managed to outrun his drunken black dress shoes, but just barely. Thankfully, the streetcar was waiting at the corner, waiting for her, and she hopped on, screamed at her Hilarion to go, and was whisked off into the night while Mr. James Rothschild stood in the street with his tie loosened, his top button undone, his fingers running through his hair, and his mouth flying with hundreds of curses that she would never forget but sincerely wished she could.

She jumps again when Hilarion takes her hand suddenly, but she makes no move to pull away. The warmth of his skin in the chill of the humid night air is comforting and reminds her of the sun that she has been bitterly missing all day. She wants to lean in to him and see if that warmth extends beyond his hand, but she forces herself to refrain, not wanting him to know exactly how chill and shaken and hollow she has been. With luck, he'll never know. He can keep on driving her to and from the club every night, never saying another word to her, if it means he'll never know exactly how low her flame has burnt.

When they reach her corner, he gapes at the elaborately decorated, three-story shotgun house that she bought with all the money she made from *Giselle*. At the front

door, he notices that there are three slots on the mailbox, but only one is labeled. “No other tenants?” he asks, and she shakes her head, unable to meet his eyes.

But he gently forces her to look up at him, tilting her chin up with his warm fingertips and gazing at her with his warm eyes. Blue, she notes. His eyes are bright blue, the color of the New Orleans sky on a clear day. Blue like hers. Something jumps inside her bosom.

“You’re gonna be alright,” he tells her firmly yet kindly, smoothing his thumb along her jaw. The motion nearly breaks her, nearly brings the tears flowing, but she keeps her calm because her pride, her damn Southern pride, is the only thing she has left in the world.

Then suddenly he’s gone, leaving behind only the memory of his warmth as he steps away and down off the stoop. As his feet touch the banquette, though, he looks back at her. “Hey, what’s your name?”

She blinks. He’s never wanted to know that. He’s been content to admire her from a distance, and she to let him. This is new, more intimate. Not even Mr. James Rothschild wanted to know her name.

“Claire,” she replies, her voice cracking a little. She clears her throat and tries again. “Mah name is Claire Ellison.”

His smile is as bright as a hundred thousand flames reflected by a hundred thousand mirrors. “Nice to meet ya, Claire.” *Claire. Not Dancing Flame, or Ms. Claire Ellison, or Ms. Ellison, or even Ma’am. Claire, as though they are already friends.* Another jump rattles her chest. Because maybe they are. Hilarion and Giselle, the way it always should have been. He tips his hat. “Peter Knight, at your service.”

*Flicker, but do not die.* She thinks it is her heart that keeps jumping in her chest. It makes her realize that she is tired of flickering. She glances up at the stars, at the promise of lobster streaks that will be there in just a few short hours. Maybe she won’t need the sun anymore, not if she can see his smile every day, not if it can spark her back to life the way it already has.

“Hey,” she says suddenly, stopping him in his tracks. “Ya want some peppa-mint tea before ya go?”

He smiles again, and she feels like she might melt under the heat it casts over her.  
“Love some.”

**art**



# Art Editorial Introduction

We began as novices in the practice of understanding art. After countless hours of reflection and research, we found the true meaning of the genre. Through creating our own artistic pieces and visiting various exhibits, we learned to appreciate art not only for its form, but its creative effort.

By definition, art is ambiguous; it encompasses any visual form of expression that takes creativity, imagination, and skill. Art can include painting, photography, sketches, sculpture, and digital design. It speaks where verbal communication cannot. Art draws the viewer into a new place, a new dimension, a different era. It evokes emotion in the artist as well as in the audience. Art captures once-in-a-lifetime events. It can distort reality.

We found that the best pieces of art are those that not only draw your attention, but keep it. There is a certain immortality that comes with creating a valued piece of art; the piece does not change after the artist creates it. It undergoes no edits, drafts, or peer reviews. Thus, its original message must be strong enough to have meaning for as long as it exists. The selections we have included in this section are not only striking, they are enduring. Even if taken out of the social context of time, art speaks volumes. It speaks for itself.

As Napoleon Bonaparte once said, “A good sketch is better than a long speech.” The following selections have been chosen because they convey more than words ever could.

Sincerely,  
*Jonathan Smith, Project Manager*  
*Amber Richberger*  
*Nick Leonard*  
*Summer Romney*  
*Monica Postma*  
*Keiffer Butler*



**Handful of Stars** | Samantha Rowe  
Digital Photography



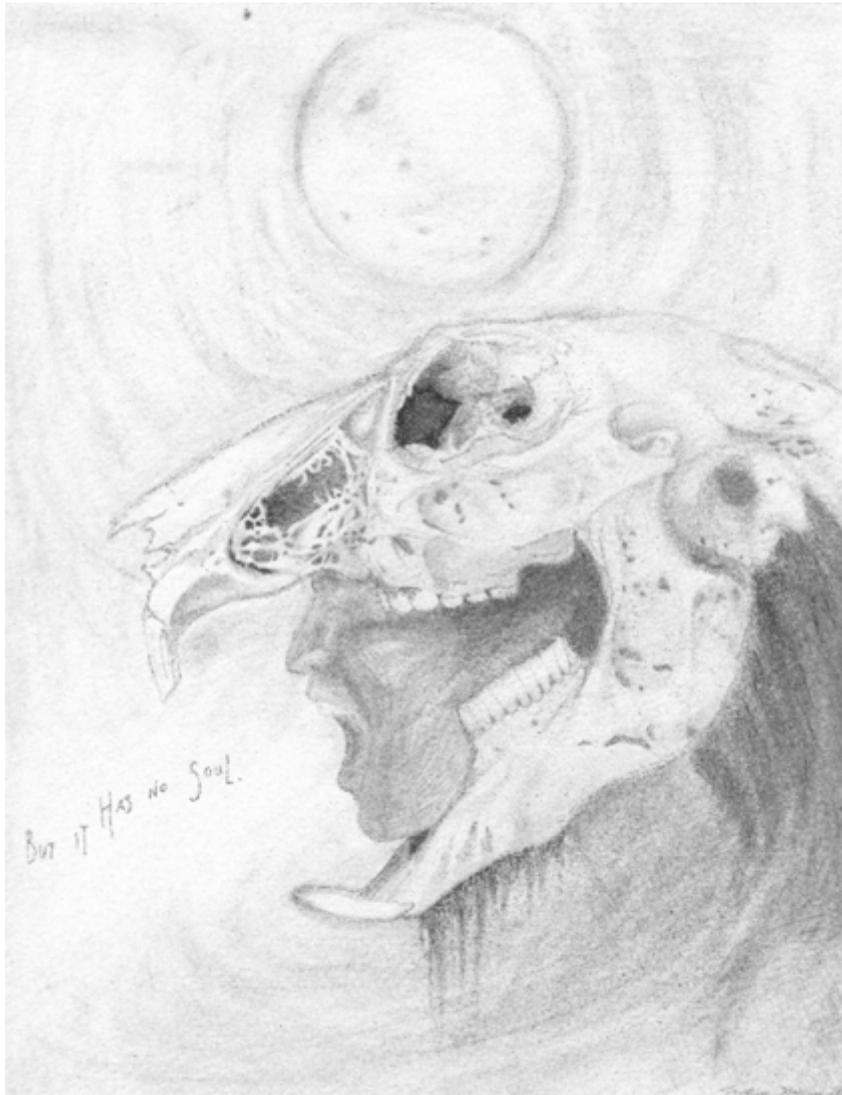
**Woman vs Self** | Grace L. Rouse  
Charcoal



**Scratch the Surface** | Justin McConnell  
Pencil & Ink on Wood



**Mother Earth** | Grace L. Rouse  
Gouache Watercolor



**But it Has No Soul | Justin McConnell**  
Pencil on Watercolor Paper



**Natural** | Grace L. Rouse  
Pen & Ink



**View of Angel's Landing** | Rachel Hetrick  
Photograph



## **Rise and Shine | Tessa-Mae Little**

Location: Red Rock Canyon Open Space  
Digital Camera



**Blue Boards** | Hans Cox  
Acrylic on Canvas



**Political Landscape | Hans Cox**  
Acrylic on Canvas

# Acknowledgements

The 2016-2017 *riverrun* class extends our gratitude to a number of people who helped make this journal successful.

First, without the journal's founding faculty advisor, Dr. C. Kenneth Pellow, *riverrun* would not exist. He took on the task of advising the first ever *riverrun* publication in 1971 and made many artists' dreams a reality.

The patience of our printer Danielle Buckner has aided tremendously in the production of *riverrun*. She accommodated several revisions and worked with our class to produce the best possible version of our combined vision.

Without funding from the Student Government Association, the journal would not be possible. We extend our gratitude and thanks to the members of SGA for believing in this campus-wide, invaluable opportunity to publish a professional journal by students, for students.

Next, we would like to thank the English Department for believing in the project and offering the course to students for a second year. We thank the department and the LAS Dean's Office for supporting the banquet, which recognizes the contributors during the ceremonial distribution of the journals.

This issue of the *riverrun* Student Literary and Arts Journal could not exist without the outstanding group of UCCS students who submitted their pieces. Thanks to the interest of UCCS students, submissions are growing every year, and whether published or not, your talent does not go unnoticed. The pieces underwent significant editing, criticism, and changes, and without the patience and motivation of students, the journal would not have been published.

Finally, Kirsten Ortega and Jennifer Panko dedicated countless hours to guide us in achieving our final product, a journal worthy of publication.