

“Make for yourself a
teacher, acquire for
yourself a friend and
find in every person
their merit.”
– Pirkei Avot



Creative Writing Chapbook

Session One
2021

Notes from the Editor

This summer at 6 Points Creative Arts Academy marks the third year of our creative writing major. This session we welcomed poets and storytellers from across the country, each with their own unique viewpoint and fascinating stories to tell. Our creative writing majors spent hours upon hours learning and understanding the building blocks of writing, from how a plot is constructed to the importance of a character's emotionality. In this chapbook you will find the culmination of 12 days of learning and writing, of exploring dialogue, and character, and studying scene in the form of narrative poems and stories. Our writing this session centers around our summer theme, which comes from Pirkei Avot: "Make for yourself a teacher, acquire yourself a friend and find in every person their merit." Please enjoy these collected works, we are so proud to present the Creative Arts Academy's very own creative writers!

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CONTENTS

"Adventure Opportunity" by Salem Waschow.....	3
"Assumptions by Judith" by Sadie Sherman	10
"Thoughts of the Forgotten" by Brooklyn Grau	13
"Fair and Foul Night" by Jacob Levy.....	16
"The Mechanical Circus" by Ari Simon	22
"Teenage Girdom" by Jenna Nesky	26
"Tide" by Ayla Rossman	29
"After the Sky" by Lily Blitz	31
"Time Travelers" by Abigail Kohlbrenner.....	35
"Collection of Poems and a Short Story" by Sofia Stambler.....	40
"Trustworthy" by Benjamin Klein.....	44
"The Friends We Made Along The Way" by Brendan Engler.....	50
"Plants, Friendship and (sort of) Love" by Josie Friedman.....	53
"Loving You" by Hailey Sheena.....	57
"When the Moon Thinks Old" by Ariana Mellen.....	61
"Introspection" by Shayna Finkelstein.....	64
"[Insert Title Here]" by Benjamin Barack.....	69

The way I connect my writing piece to the theme is that it opens up possibilities. These characters are meeting for the first time, they're finding each other's strengths, their merit. Their meeting also opens up the possibility of them all becoming friends and learning from each other.

Adventure Opportunity By Salem Waschow Age: 15

Orion was stuck. He was stuck in his mind, in this bar, in the marble halls of the palace back home. He was trapped in his thoughts. The turmoil of the bar around him felt like a whirlwind of blinding lights and obnoxiously loud patrons. He stared at the glowing tabletop of the bar he was sitting at, getting lost in the foggy light.

"Sorry buddy, but you're going to need to either order something or leave, you've been here for a while and I have other people here who actually want to order drinks," the bartender's matter-of-fact tone cut through Orion's daze.

"Of course, I'm sorry," he said as he got up to leave.

As he made his way through the neon-lit room, pushing past the crowd, his eyes were drawn by a job posting. It read: "Adventure Opportunity! Pay will be received at the completion of the task."

There was nothing on it about how much the job would pay, or even what it meant by "adventure," but Orion was desperate to get out. The only two places he had ever been were this chaos ridden city and the kingdom that had never really been much of a home to him. He needed something more, and besides, he could use the money.

He turned back towards the bar to make his way through the mass of people to ask the bartender if she knew anything about the job and ran into someone head on. He stumbled back, the collision felt like running into a brick wall. The girl was on the ground, rubbing her jaw and glaring up at him. She had bright purple hair that fit right in with the blues and greens of the lights here. He could only see half of her in the wildly inconsistent lighting of this place.

"Hey! What's your deal? Don't you watch where you're going!?" She said from the floor, huffing with indignation.

"Well, maybe if you weren't standing so close to me, I wouldn't have run into you, princess," he snapped back at her. He didn't have time for this, he needed to leave, he would ask about the job tomorrow.

Then, of all things, she *growled* at him, it wasn't even a sound a

normal person would be able to make, it was a raw, animalistic growl. Orion had experienced many strange new things since coming to this insane, floating city, but that was a new one.

Just as it looked like the girl was ready to punch him in the face, the bartender walked over, helped her up, and took her aside to talk. Orion took that opportunity to quietly leave. As he walked away from the bar, shivers got sent down his spine and he was filled with a deep sadness over something that he had no grasp of. He was used to this feeling by now.

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Devia had been having a good day, she really was, up until some elf-looking jerk decided to run into her. She had been going to check her job posting to see if anyone had left any contact information on the paper, but a man (or a very tall boy) with white hair, long elven ears, and skin like caramel had been standing in front of it. Not only had he knocked her off her feet, he had called her *princess*. She had been looking for a reason to start a good fight all day, she was fired up and had been ready to fight him then and there, she could've probably even won. But Thalia had to go and pull her away from him.

"I can't have you killing people in my bar, Devia. It's bad for business," Thalia said affectionately.

"He called me princess..."

"Yes, yes, I know, how dare he, and all that," Thalia said, dismissive of Devia's mood, "what I'm more interested in, is that we have an applicant."

"And it's not even that-..." Devia cut off, she had been ready to continue her rant, but she perked up at the mention of an applicant, "I'm sorry what."

"Come on, I've already taken her upstairs, she says her name is Tzib," Thalia began to make her way towards the industrial-looking staircase.

"Tzib, huh? Sounds like a sound birds make," Devia said, trying the name out on her tongue.

"Yep, kinda does," Thalia chuckled.

Devia laughed along with her and they both hurried up the stairs to meet their new potential partner in crime.

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Devia was happy with this. Thalia could make this group work, Devia trusted her completely. Tzib would make a perfect third member of

their group. This would work, they could get L back.

"This won't work," Thalia said, breaking Devia out of her daydreaming.

"What? Why not?" Devia said from her spot, leaning on the doorframe of Thalia's office, "You're smart, I'm strong, and they're stealthy. What else could we need?"

"We need another fighter, someone who can use weapons. Not just you and your curse-magic-whatever." Thalia didn't look up from the stack of papers she was reading, presumably about corrupted monarchies, she had been really interested in those lately.

"My weapons aren't 'curse-magic-whatever,' they're me reshaping--"

"There was someone who was carrying a sword yesterday at the bar," Tzib cut in, stopping Devia before she could explain how her magic worked, "he looked interested in the job, and I can probably remember what he looks like."

"Alright, describe him, if he was genuinely interested in it, he'll probably come back to the bar tomorrow, if we know what he looks like we can watch for him," Thalia said taking out a notepad and a pen, ready to write everything that they said down.

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This sucked. Devia was stuck watching for the guy who ran her over yesterday all because Tzib thought he looked like he knew how to use a sword. She should be inside helping Thalia come up with a plan, not playing search-and-find at the doorway of the bar.

People streamed past. With the sheer amount of bodies here you could barely see that the walkways and bridges that connected everything were transparent, only able to be made out by the halo of light they gave off. Thalia's bar was near the top of the towering row of buildings, too high for sensible tourists, but they did get a crazy one up here every once and a while. The drop off of the walkways would not be pleasant, Devia glanced down to the street miles below. Only locals frequented the bar, tourists brave enough to come up here only came once, they did spend ridiculous amounts of money on drinks though. They must need the liquid courage to be able to get down.

Every so often, Devia saw someone who could be the elf boy, but it never was. He was nowhere to be found.

After multiple hours of watching the crowd like a hawk, she spotted him. He was wearing new clothes that did not fit him, the pants were too short and the hooded sweatshirt he was wearing still had the tag

attached. His straight, shoulder length, snow white hair was covered by the hood, his ears were pushed down by it as well, in an attempt to hide them. The whole getup had a comical element to it.

She dove into the crowd, zeroed-in on the elf boy.

As she neared him, she called out, "Hey! You, elf boy!"

He spun around, glancing around wildly with panic. His eyes settled on her and his gaze filled with rage.

"What do *you* want?" he said, aggression and fear threaded through his voice. He settled into a fighting stance, and Devia felt a wave of fire pulse through her, she wanted to fight, but that wasn't what she was here for, she was here for Thalia. She was here for L. She grinned, trying to keep any hint of her inner turmoil out of her voice.

"I want to talk to you about that job you're interested in," She struggled to keep her stance casual for Thalia's sake. She hit send on the 'found him' message she had typed up to send to Thalia earlier, hopefully she could get here soon and explain things to this prince-looking guy who appeared to be getting ready to run away.

"I don't think you're telling me the truth here, princess," he said, clearly lying through his teeth.

"Again with the whole 'princess' thing, what is your deal, dude?" Devia was glancing around, searching and scanning for Thalia to come save her from this interaction.

+

Of course she was the one offering the job with no details. The girl who hated him for such a small reason. And now that he could see her in in better light, he was both mesmerized and terrified by what he saw.

This girl, who had looked so normal in the darkness, was half consumed by some sort of demon. Her entire right side of her body looked as if it had been dipped in ink. Her eye was barely even an eye anymore. There was no pupil and no white, that eye was purely a sea of purple. The only part of her that had seemingly resisted the darkness was her hair, still bright, vibrant purple.

"Well hello there, are you our second applicant?" The bartender's voice came from directly behind him.

He stepped to the side and turned to be able to see both the bartender and the demon girl.

"I haven't applied for anything, all I did was look at a job advertisement," Orion said, protesting.

“Oh yeah? Then why did you come back? I’ve never seen you before so you’re not a local, and tourists only come here once in a while,” the demon girl said in a standoffish tone. Orion noticed that something else corrupted by the demon was her teeth, they were no longer human teeth, she had fangs.

“You definitely weren’t coming back for the drinks, you didn’t order anything yesterday, I had to make you leave,” said the bartender.

“And you seemed pretty reluctant to leave yesterday, too,” said a child, whom Orion hadn’t realized was a part of the conversation.

“Alright fine. I was curious about the job, alright? Now will you all please leave me alone, or at least tell me what this job is so I can decide what I want to do and leave already?” Orion said. He really needed to get out of this bar soon, the noise was beginning to hurt his head.

“Of course,” The bartender grinned, “follow me.”

Orion was lead through the thrumming crowd to a metal staircase that appeared to have seen better days.

When they all came to the top of the stairs, they were met by a wooden door, out of place in this city of metal, glass, and lights.

The room they stepped into was even more out of place. Following the wooden cue from the door, the rest of the room was a hardwood floor, an ornate rug, and many paintings on the walls. The room’s small size was cozy but able to comfortably fit a well-worn couch, bookshelves, an armchair, and a beautiful wooden desk.

Whoever made this room clearly wasn’t from this city. They might’ve even been from somewhere Orion knew of.

“I’m Thalia,” said the bartender, “this is Devia.” She gestured to the demon girl.

“An appropriate name,” he said, muttering.

“And this is Tzib,” Thalia said, ignoring his comment and nodding at the child.

“Cheep? What kind of a name is that?” Orion said, bewildered.

“Close, but not quite, it’s like ‘seeb’ but with a hard ‘s’ sound,” Thalia said patiently.

“Right, apologies, Tzib”

“I get that a lot, it’s stopped bothering me at this point.” They shrugged.

“I am Pri-“ he stopped himself, he was no longer a prince, not after what they tried to make him do. He began again, “My name is Orion, it’s a pleasure to meet you all.

A strange look of triumph rested on Thalia’s face as she nodded and began to explain the job.

“I don’t want to alarm you, but this might get a bit illegal,” Thalia said with the cautious excitement of someone who just got a new chance to save their own skin.

The plan was to combine the skills that the four of them possessed, and climb the levels of the city. This city, Orion learned, was divided into five levels, the High Council at the top, they were the rulers of the city, and at the bottom were the slums, home to factories and their workers.

The level they were currently on, the third level, was the easiest level to access, due to it being almost entirely dedicated to tourism.

The top level consisted of only three things, the Council building, the gardens, and the most high security prison Orion had even heard of. This prison was their target. They needed to break a prisoner out. Simple enough.

“Tzib here is one of the only people to ever go up a level. She was actually born on the second level, but here they are,” Thalia said, pride dripping from her voice. Whether that pride was directed at Tzib or herself, Orion couldn’t tell. He was distracted.

A haze was forming in the corner of the room, the same haze he had been seeing since around a year ago. It looked and felt the same as it always did, like the steam rising off of a hot bath, like sadness and the sense that you could help if you were only strong enough. The haze alone wouldn’t have snagged Orion’s attention; what did, however, was that Devia, from her spot leaning on the desk with her arms crossed, was looking at it too.

“Hey Thali?” Devia interrupted Thalia’s ramblings about the layout of the prison, that Orion had forgotten to listen to. “Am I going nuts, or is there fog in that corner?”

Thalia glanced to the corner and did a double take. She saw it too, Orion wondered at the novelty of it all. The thing that he took as a sign that he had finally lost it was actually there. He couldn’t help but start to laugh.

He laughed and laughed until another voice joined him in his laughter. A new voice.

He stopped laughing. The voice was coming from the misty corner. But the mist wasn’t just mist for much longer. It formed into long, sky blue hair covering half of a laughing face, hands trying to cover a

smiling mouth and failing due to their translucency. It formed into the most beautiful boy Orion had ever seen. Once the boy was done laughing and he opened his eyes, Orion saw that they were beautiful too. Despite a lack of reflection and pupil, they looked like a sunset. Deep oranges fading into golden yellows. His clothes were tattered, and he wore the traditional elven crown of flowers worn at funerals by all, even the deceased.

“Oh! Hello! How lovely it is to be seen again,” the ghost boy said in a voice as soft and light as a feather brushing skin. “I’m Hawnt!”

My story, Assumptions by Judith, focuses on the last sequence of the theme: “Find in every person their merit.” You can take this to mean that everyone has positive personality traits, and you should focus on those instead of negative ones. But my main character, Judith, chooses to judge and assume her way out of this. She makes an unconscious choice to not just find negative traits, but negative realities, and easily convinces herself that they are true. In all of the people she encounters, there isn’t one who she approves or thinks well of in the slightest. For me, this behavior is a way to justify herself and her opinions, forcing them to be valued above all others. I hope that it shows the dangers of immediately rejecting criticism, and inspires you to create a balance of valuing yourself while valuing others.

Assumptions by Judith By Sadie Sherman Age: 11 (but almost 12)

To the eyes, this room was lacking in a lot of things. But to the mind, it was full to the brim of quiet. And not any of the interesting quiets either. It wasn’t laced with tension or mischief, anger or excitement. It was bland and boring, but it fit in perfectly with the rest of the rest of the Henderson Medical Services waiting room, conveniently located in the middle of nowhere. The walls were an extremely distasteful shade of beige, and they were completely bare. Small chairs and couches were placed on the edges of the room, sitting alone and uninteresting. Each one managed to have an awful floral pattern that was worse than the one before it.

On a particularly garish couch with a faded design of hot pink roses sat a lone girl. Her concerningly pale arms were folded tightly across her chest, sending a message that seemed remarkably close to *don’t you dare come near me or I will not hesitate to use violence*. Judith couldn’t help taking a second to stare at the silver spikes she wore on a bracelet around her wrist, or the dark ankle length boots laced with silver on her feet. Looking at her in the plain waiting room was so bizarre it almost made her laugh. She looked so out of place that Judith wondered what on earth she could be here for. The girl wasn’t with a parent, and she hardly looked older than 16. Deciding that she must have some sort of reason to be here, as opposed to literally anywhere else. Judith resolved to stay back. Besides, she looked extremely mean. Cruel, even. There was no reason for her to check in on or help anyone who could be a bully. As posters all around schools in America advertised, bullying was bad. Judith did not endorse this kind of behavior, so she shouldn’t trouble herself to check in.

She was the kind of person to bully small children on a playground for fun, and that was that.

So Judith sat back in her boring chair, listened to the country music with bad lyrics quietly being played, and lost herself in thoughts until the door creaked open and an old man walked in. He moved astronomically slowly, putting most of his weight on an aged walker, tennis balls and everything. The walker was made of rusty metal and covered in scuff marks and scratches, presumably from years of use. Judith turned to face the man, watching his progress. After what seemed like years, he sat down and rested his eyes. Judith tsk tsked under her breath. The older folks these days were so pitiful. They should be more active, trying their best to take care of their health. But instead, they clogged up waiting rooms, causing everyone else to suffer due to their inability to do anything. This man was almost certainly a lazy grouch who spent his time napping and chasing young children off his lawn, which was the biggest waste of time she had ever heard of. In her opinion, which she knew to be correct, the seniors and the youth were equally troublesome for society. By taking one look at his wrinkles and almost-transparent wisps of hair, you could tell that he was done doing useful things with his life. And his bowtie? Should be illegal. Ah, the seniors nowadays.

So Judith pulled out an *Us Weekly* magazine from several years ago, flipped to the third page for no particular reason, and learned up on the fascinating subject of celebrities who have worn mauve gowns. Another 20 or so minutes passed uneventfully, unless you count the radio station being changed from country to classic rock. Right as Judith was about to get up from her chair and say something about not being seen by the doctor, the door opened yet again and a pale woman stumbled in, a crying baby in her arms. Trailing after her was a toddler, loudly rambling about everything that had ever happened to him. The woman sank down in a seat and attempted to quiet down the baby, to stop its shrieks and tears. The toddler, noticing that he was receiving little attention in comparison to his brother, began to cry as well. Soon the room was not full of silence anymore, but screams and anger. Judith rolled her eyes. What good was a mother if she couldn't keep her children under control? She looked far too unprepared to actually expect them to have a peaceful visit to the doctor. And as for the kids themselves, they looked like brats. She would bet her cheese-less Mac & Cheese recipe that they hadn't mopped their entire house once. Why, she had half a mind to stride right

up to the children and give them a lesson on obedience. It didn't even matter that she had never stepped into their household, or that Judith didn't fully know the temperament of the kids. It was her opinion, so it was right. Besides, you couldn't help but look at them and clearly see how pitiful her parenting was. In her mind, every mother was too lenient, and all the kids were too disobedient. If only the pale woman sitting in the chair could learn from her advice.

Satisfied that they were all ignorant, Judith cleared her throat loudly and whipped out a large paperback book. It was labeled *Crossword Puzzles for Everyone*, yet it wouldn't be very interesting to most people. But Judith savored every second that she spent looking at the checkered boxes, wondering what the name of the Greek god of Cheese and Beekeeping was, or the Portuguese word for watermelon. Many more minutes passed, containing nothing but silence and waiting. Soon the sun fell behind the horizon, turning the sky a multitude of oranges and pinks as it left. Not long after this, a tall bald man carefully opened a door. He gave the room a quick smile, his stethoscope swaying. It flashed silver in the fluorescent lights. He called Judith into his office for her appointment, and after that was all done, she walked out of the door.

So Judith left behind the kind teen that spent her afternoons reading to small children rather than beating them up. Judith left behind the fit old man who tried his hardest to stay able in his old age instead of lazing around. Judith left behind the mother who doled out proper punishments and kept her home tight with rules, as well as the obedient children who always listened to her. She left behind the possibility that these people could be more than her judgements. But she didn't know that. So Judith drove, although many miles above the speed limit, home. And once she was settled, happily talking to a friend on the phone, she rattled on and on about the strange people she had encountered that day.

Her friend laughed, sounding far away and muffled on the phone. "I bet you didn't know any of them, though. You really should work on your assumption habit."

Judith frowned and replied with a stormy rumble. "Don't judge!"

The theme of camp this year is "Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and find in every person their merit." My story connects to the part of the theme that says "acquire for yourself a friend." In high school, you will go through a lot of ups and downs. Friends will come and go and that's ok. I tried my best to make my story relatable to the teenage experience.

Thoughts Of the Forgotten By Brooklyn Grau Age: 15

You may know how it feels to be stuck. Not tangled up in the monkey bars in elementary school, but more tangled up in your own thoughts. Not your arm stuck in a tight spot, but your entire being, not being able to yank yourself free from the tight spot as it slowly begins to contract. Tighter, and tighter, and...

Tighter the halls feel every year as new kids join. They are all laughing and joking while I feel emotionless. I want to cry, but I can't. I want to smile, but it feels unnatural. I'm just numb, I guess. Every day is the same. Wake up, school, sports, homework, sleep, repeat. Over, and over, and over. I feel like a side character in my own story. I feel like I'm part of *your* story.

On the first day of school I remember seeing you with your friends as you strutted the halls. Your confidence is so admirable. The way your shoulders bounced as our peers made you laugh. Your bright, brilliant eyes as they scanned the halls, looking for the friends you didn't have the chance to see over the summer. The warm smile you gave me as we exchanged glances on my way to algebra. The smile I gave you in return was the first real smile I had shown in a long time.

Fifth period is my favorite period of the day. Yeah, chemistry is fun, but chemistry with you as my lab partner makes the periodic table a lot more interesting. Every day, fifth period, one more limb untangles from the monkey bars and the contracted spot releases just a little bit.

Do you remember when I went to your house to study? I had never been so excited to solve chemical equations. The moment I took one step into your foyer, I was hit by a waft of vanilla with a hint of maple. The scent was familiar, it was you. I took a mental note of everything I could. Your placement in your family photos, you were always in the center between a girl who looked a little older than you and a boy who looked older than her, I assumed they were your siblings. The sound each stair made as I shifted my weight onto it, some steps had a soft creak like door hinges starting to age, while some were completely

silent. I was even interested in the individual decorations you put on your bedroom door. I found it funny how you had a "KEEP OUT!" sign on your door, but decorated it with colorful streamers and feathers. Like a drum roll before a grand reveal, my heart was beating so fast, I was afraid you would be able to see it through my shirt. I was feeling something, finally feeling.

As we sat down at your smooth, hardwood desk, a shiver of nerves coursed through my spine. I brought out my flashcards as you brought out yours. As I was writing down the elements of the alkaline metals, I occasionally glanced over at you to see if we were on the same element. Even the way you held your pencil intrigued me. Your hand glided across the paper as a figure skater glides across the ice... with elegance and poise. I couldn't peel my eyes away. We sat face to face as we began to quiz each other. As you were flashing your notecards, I was trying my best to hide my beet red face. Every time you set a card down, my guard went with it. As you picked a new one up to show me, covering your face, I snapped back into reality. Like a light switch. On and off, on and off, on and off.

That was the last time we hung out together. The last time you were content with our friendship. Now, you can't even bear the thought of me, while I can't stop thinking about you.

I watched as you started to drift. Away from me and closer to them. They sucked you in like a vacuum. My single handed friendship wasn't enough. You needed more, and left me with less.

As I smile at you in the hall, you don't return it with the same comforting smile I usually receive. I'm now combatted with a stern glare and a look up and down. An extremely judge-y look. A look of true disgust as if you never enjoyed your time spent with me. It feels as if you aren't just judging my looks, but the content of my personality as well. Is my affection and admiration not enough for you... or is it too much?

You broke me free of the trap I was once stuck in. The free feeling you gave me was one I had never felt before. Now that I'm just a distant memory to you, I'm slowly falling back into my previous mannerisms. Up all night, sleep all day. Paying less attention to my work, and more attention to my phone. Hot and cold. Up and down. You were the bass in my symphony, and now my rhythm is lost. I'm lost.

I still go to your games when I can, but I stopped making and effort to be there. I watch you the whole time to see if you would look up

at me in the stands. You don't. You never do. I don't cheer for you anymore. Why bother. My screams will just be drowned out by the rest of the crowd. I don't stand out to you anymore. Although, I'm not sure if I ever did.

I could say that I'm fine, and that I'm over you, but that would be a fib. Not just a fib... a lie. A totally blatant lie. I miss you. I miss you more than anything. I miss everything about you. The way your shoulders bounced when I used to make you laugh. Your bright, brilliant eyes as they would look at me in between flashcards. The warm smiles you gave me that always made me feel safe, and at home.

I wish I could tell you all this, but I can't. I can't.

I chose the part of theme about finding in every person their merit. All humans are different and yet the same. Our lives we live and even if we knew of them all we would be no wiser. So what is it that we may do? I ask for I do not know.

Fair and Foul Night By Jacob Levy Age: 12

Chapter I: Eykesburg

Allen died. They found his crumpled figure at the bottom of 77 Water Street. They called all of his friends and family, informing them of the death of Allen B. Eykesburg, the twenty-year old philosophy student, asking if anything had been going on.

I sat at the edge of my bed across from the end table, waiting for the phone on it to ring, as I knew the police officer was currently sitting at a wood desk in a station in Flatbush, at his shiny phone, waiting for me to pick up. And the phone rings, at 1:59 AM, just as the president has decided to announce a new bill. A bill of no importance, to which the reporters will flock like seagulls, and the death of Allen B. Eykesburg, one of the greatest humans to ever exist, will be like a ghost in the corner, another depressed college student.

Right now, the police officer is rubbing his temple and somewhere else his child is groggily wandering the hall of his apartment looking for a glass of water. I know this, because I can see before me, every detail of the lives of every human ever to exist. Their lives lie before me in a complicated web, like the path of a crowd. I can see when every last street sweeper has gone to bed on any night of his life, when the first hunter-gatherer fell down a rocky ravine in the Italian alps, when the man sitting across from you is going to pick his nose, and what he had for dinner the night before. Every detail of every life from every corner of the earth, like a never-ending tidal wave. You can see every nasty thing that every person has ever done, every sin and crime to be committed. And every good deed and life laid down to save another.

And I am miserable for it.

Every human seems like a twisted puppet that grotesquely moves its limbs like some beast from before the existence of time. And yet the good are cruel and the evil are kind. I can see their lives, but still before me they twist and turn and act as I have seen they shouldn't from all I know. They are grey, grey to the marrow. And these two on my shoulders;

an angel and a devil, proclaim they are all either good or the rot of the earth. That's why I befriended Allen.

He was the most perfectly human human to ever exist. His was a miserable existence. I will not say he was kind. He was not always. When I first met him, I thought I had made a mistake. But that was Allen. The human of humans. The most human of them all, whose existence seemed to be a mockery, a cruel allegory on our existence: the most perfect of humans lived in a spartan apartment and died at twenty. But that wasn't Allen. He was always somewhere between optimism and pessimism. But he treated them like they were one and the same. I will always remember what he told me the first time I told him about whatever it is that. He didn't believe me. I told him I knew his father had actually abandoned him and his mother, not dying in a car crash as he told me. He believed me. And I talked. I just talked. And I will always remember what he told me.

I pick up the red phone. "Hello?"

"Is this Nicholas M. Bergschilde?"

"What is it?"

I have been here before. Pretend you don't know what you do. It is something every human learns.

"Listen, you're not in trouble or anything, but I think your friend... Allen Eykesburg... he..."

His voice falters and dies.

"Listen, I'm sorry for your loss..."

"Don't be."

I then tell him what Allen told me. "Allen told me something when I first met him. He told me that humans live short lives in bursts of color, and that each one is the center of their small universe, and even if you can look inside, you still will never know what it's like down there. That was Allen. Now go home and tuck in your child. Love your life while you can, because it's pretty great, and love those you get to share it with."

Chapter II: Greenspoon

It rained. It rained like the song of the sky, in a never-ending melody. I sat like a shadow. A wet, wet shadow. I sat on a bench leaned up against a glass window in a café. The smell of water and coffee beans in the air.

"Hello and how can I help you?" said a waiter, who injured someone in car crash while driving drunk.

"An espresso and a croissant, please," said a businessman who is blindly working for a Ponzi scheme.

He looks at me. "Oh, and I'll pay for him." What the heck? He walks over and sits down across from me.

"Do you mind if I sit here? You know it's"- he jerks his thumb at the rest of the café. "Rather lonely out there."

Remember the tax avoidance? Why the heck is he acting like this? He should be some suave con man. He just looks like some tired corporate robot.

"My name is Lionel Greenspoon. And yours is....?"

"Nicholas Bergschilde." Cheat! Fraud! Liar! Swindler! Swine!

"What do you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Oh! My father was a writer. Just a hobby of course."

"What did he write?" Blackmailer! Your father was a blackmailer! Bet he never told you that. Just...try not to think that he was doing it put food on the table.

"Uh...I don't know, you know, uh, I could never find any of his writing. So, what are you writing about?" the waiter brought the coffee. Try not to think about how the other driver was also drunk. And not wearing a seatbelt.

"I'm writing about a man who knows the entirety of every human life to ever live."

"Philosophy, eh? The meaning of life, the universe, everything?"

"Actually, it's about good and evil. Do you want me to tell you, I mean, all story ideas seem dumb when you say them?"

"Nah, I want to hear."

"The main character, who can see the entirety of every human's life and all their secrets." Greenspoon shifts around uneasily. A rush of schadenfreude. Then guilt. Don't think about how he only realized latter the mistake on the tax form and how he struggles everyday with the guilt of not talking. Don't think about it.

"He struggles with dealing with the grey of good and evil in humans, and how he can still not predict how other humans act, even

though he knows every detail of their life. His friend then dies, and he decides all humans are evil.” Greenspoon listens. He really listens. Not like the 78.94 meetings he completely zoned out on which would’ve revealed that he was working for a Ponzi scheme.

“You know, my brother studied philosophy.” Yes, your brother who cheated on his wife with yours.

“I never understood him. He was always rambling nonsense about humanity being worthless. You know what I told him? I told that although life has no point, it is not pointless, although it has no meaning, it is not meaningless. Humans are not grey. The grey is a given. The grey is always there. The grey is unimportant. People are not grey inside. They are purple. The purple you find at midnight. They are purple and green and yellow and orange. Good and Evil do not exist. People do good and do evil, yes. But they are not good or evil or even grey. All of them. Each and every one of them. So don’t be a stranger to them because they’re all wandering like ghosts, just like you. That’s what I told him.”

The silence is a song. He sips his coffee, trails of smoke rising like vile serpents. He stands up in a second, snapping like a rat trap. He smiles tiredly at me and lets out a barely audible sigh.

“Well. I hope you enjoy your coffee.”

And he walks out the door, as it swings behind him with the chime of the bell. I wonder if I should tell him about how he will die, how he’ll be fired just as the scheme collapses, and what his brother is doing behind his back, and how his daughter will be born red-eyed and die young. But it wouldn’t change anything. We are ghosts wandering. We can’t do anything, and yet we still fight. Yet we still stand stubbornly. We all someday vanish, but for now, we still stand for each other. We can find either gold or dirt in the rest, but you tell me which one you want to find.

Chapter III: Danse Macabre

Allen Eykesburg awoke to the grey of night, a starless night. He sat up slowly from his ground. He wiped of the back of his shirt, but there was not dirt here. Instead, the ground was made out of some sort of sand. There was a small slope leading down to some black wasteland. He slipped down, a small avalanche of sand trickling down. He put his foot down onto the black material. It was water. Allen looked up at the non-existent horizon.

There was a boat and a man inside.

Allen straightened up. The Ferryman. Of course, there would be a

ferryman. The boat came forward, its hull washing up on the sand. Allen looked up at the ferryman, his mouth opened and hung shut. It was not human. It was as if someone had a cut a shape in the world. He looked about, before putting his foot into the boat.

It was as if he had seen all that had come before him, all that he had seen, and all that came after him. He saw every bit of existence, of war and peace and life and death, of the cosmos taking shape from the void, of stars entering and leaving the heavens, of alien creatures and landscapes. Of the kingdoms of man and the wild, of beasts and birds, and sea and land, of the complete nothingness yet to come. And then there was a sandy bank and a path through the sand. Allen onward walked, the sand beneath his feet shifting like tiny continents. And then upon he beheld a tree. Its leaves were still. Everything was still. Allen looked about and sat down beneath the tree. In the distance, he squinted. There was a shape in the desert, turning and twisting, a cyclone in the sand. It did not glide, or fly, or hover. It was a storm of black sand and dust. There was no time here to measure it by, but it was there. The sand took the shape of a robe with a bony hand holding a scythe. Bits of sand and dust flew and fell from its figure.

hello said the figure.

It did not speak. You did not hear the word etched into your head.

They were just there. Somewhere.

and you are allen eykesburg, may i presume?

“Are-are you, The Grim Reaper, the Sower of Souls, the-”

death? yes. we are death if that is what you mean. but we are not what you think of, we are not the skull and scythe, we are.... we are the collective consciousness of your people, their concept of the void, the long sleep, etc. i have a challenge. for your life.

“And?”

do the danse macabre. the dance of death. win and I shall yield and ye shall live.

The desert changed. Bits of sand and earth flew from the ground like bees. Then they were standing at the edge of a cliff. Black waters flew and wailed against the chalk. And death began to move, a shadow moving in the dark. There was a silent song, and it filled the air. Allen moved and spun. Death swung his scythe, and blade that like a bird cut through the air. And the dance began. The two were a circle dancing like skeletons, rattling and quaking, bones shivering and shaking, a cyclone, the eye of a storm. The sea sang and the song rose in the silence. Every corner was darkness, the black waters on the chalk cliff, and the two dancing on the wind. Death

swung and sliced through the air, he swung and sliced. The wind split and splintered. Death grabbed the wind, and it froze like ice.

why do you fight? why do you fight so hard against the void? i know you are not scared, that you know it's like the blackness of a dreamless night. why do you fight? you know your life meant nothing to the world, you were just another dead philosophy student, you never loved another person, you have no family to grieve you, those few who acknowledged your existence, thought little of or hated you, you too hated your life, and tried thrice to end it. ye were a ghost while you lived, you cared not for your life, yet you fight so hard against a never-ending void for it. why?

"Why? Why my life meant something to some fifty million people. All those who hated me, all those who ignored me, they too will someday do the danse macabre, but now it is me. It is me who does the danse macabre. It is me, who like all humans, will eternally fight a void, for what? Nothing. We fight the void because we are human. I will do the danse macabre. For I love life cruel and kind. And so, I will do the danse macabre."

And so, the wind began again, and the sea began to turn and twist, like a giant in the earth, and the silent singer and the fiddler and flute began to play their silent song, and so again began the danse macabre.

The Mechanical Circus exemplifies the theme by applying it to the idea of community. Throughout the story, the character struggles with finding a community that accepts her. It explores how each person has something special and unique about them, and how important good relationships can be. The story is about finding a teacher, a community, and seeing something good in every person, just like the theme.

The Mechanical Circus By Ari Simon Age: 15

The girl pulled the cool metal pump up and down. Releasing the water into the splintering bucket at her feet. She pushed her young muscles to their limit, attempting to drain out the conversation of her siblings a little way away.

No matter how loud the creaking of the pump was, the hateful words about her life, her tendencies, and her clothes, still prickled the back of her neck and raised goose bumps on her arms. They always did this, poked at the one who couldn't help being different. Who couldn't help that her heart did not beat faster at the sight of a boy, who couldn't help that she liked her brothers' blue trousers more than her own red skirts, and who couldn't help that she wanted to play in the woods, not sit and sew.

The child carried the now heavy bucket, straining with both hands to lift it, onto the back porch where the laundry would be done. After setting the bucket down, the girl raced inside to grab all of her and her siblings' laundry to wash. She stopped by all five beds and came out with a small dirty mountain.

She combined all the fabrics into one pile and pulled them out one at a time to scrub and rinse. As she was on one of the last pieces of clothing, the sun much lower in the vast sky, the girl noticed that something strange was happening to her younger brother's trousers. A red sock, somehow lodging itself in the bottom of one of the legs, made the typical blue dye of the trousers morph into a beautiful color that the child had only a distant memory of seeing once before.

Sounds of laughter rang from the house, while the girl sat with a small warm light and the cold laundry to finish before she could eat. The moment she was finished hanging all of the laundry up to dry, the child stashed the stained trousers by her bed, and finally relaxed onto the wooden stool at the now empty table. Her seat complaining with the sudden weight. The house was silent, except for the soft clanging of a fork against a tired girl's plate.

Throughout the night, the girl tossed and turned, her head turning over the possibilities of what would happen because of the stained trousers, and the question of if her parents would throw a fit at her brother wearing the ruined garment, allowing her to maybe, just maybe, be able to instead.

As sunlight brightened the room where the five children slept, a shriek like those heard when ghost stories are being told, awoke the children. The child's mother, a short and sturdy woman, stood over her daughter's bed with the stained trousers in hand. The mother screamed at the girl for what seemed like hours. How because of her, no one would take her brother or the rest of their family seriously ever again. After all, the community was prohibited from using the color purple for good reason.

As her mother went on and on, the girl's entire body got tighter and tighter, flashing back to when these harsh words translated themselves into something even worse. When finally, it was over, the child was completely drained. *The Mechanical Circus* would be in town later that day, which she was now banned from going to. Everyone knew that it was the girl's favorite, but not why. Being in a place where being different was what makes you special meant the world to the child, and her siblings did not seem to get that. They fit inside the perfect square mold, but the girl was a circle, only able to fit by being squished and forced to conform.

No more than two hours later, cheery music overflowing with joy and excitement began to come in from the top of the hill at the edge of the village. Immediately, the other four children sprang up and scampered ahead of their parents towards the big tent housing the circus.

Almost instantly, the child was alone in the house. The rest of her family abandoning her without a second thought. She decided to make the most of the peace and quiet and slipped on the unrespectable trousers.

As she stepped into them, her heartbeat began to get faster, her typically sad eyes bounced into a more alert focus, and she smiled at how good a laundry mishap could make her feel. In a moment of rebellious inspiration, the girl grabbed the family scissors and held the sharp metal against her hair.

Sweat dripped down her neck as she moved the scissors along at a snail's pace, methodically chopping her long wavy locks to rest just above her shoulders. As she cut, the girl strained to hear the coarse voice of the scissors. A sound typically reserved for the ears of boys. The girl was

struck by a moment of confidence, one that she had not felt since she was a little girl. The day she got her first hair ribbon, she remembered. When every girl became a true member of the red and blue village. This confidence straightened her spine and faded some of the scars her family's words had inflicted. It swept the child up and carried her out the door before her brain had the chance to catch up.

Before she had fully grasped what happened, the child was hiding behind some bushes, staring longingly at the majestic purple and gold tent in front of her. That was it again, the color on the trousers. The loud voice of the ringleader echoed to the outside, welcoming all to the circus.

The girl could not help herself; she crept into a corner of the tent and began to enjoy the wondrous show. It went on, and her senses were overwhelmed. The vibrant and patterned fabrics of the costumes, the mechanical animals with their fused and bolted together parts doing tricks, and the scent of the peanuts filling the air, all made the child clap until her hands stung. Most of all, the girl was mesmerized by the ringleader herself. The ringleader stood atop the tallest elephant, her hands in the air. Her purple and gold tailcoat glimmered with swooping patterns of leaves dancing down from the fall trees above a dress black as night.

A voice latched onto her and pulled the girl out of her trance. It was the child's youngest sister. At only four years old, she had not yet completely solidified into the hatred for her older sister.

The child nodded at her small sibling and scurried outside, while her sister returned to the fast-approaching remainder of the family. Not yet wanting to go home, the girl wandered into the maze of tents, set up for the show in the big top to come together. She found tents filled with props and trinkets, a workshop for the animals, food for the performers, and wondrous instruments. With the girl's shortened hair and dyed purple pants, she did not stand out among the circus folk the same way she did in her own community.

The child lost track of time going from tent to tent in amazement and wonder at the variety of people who were accepted here. She was particularly drawn to a shimmering silver tent. The girl pushed the flaps of the tent open and stared completely engrossed in the colorful clothing before her.

A hand was placed on the girl's shoulder. When she looked to see who it belonged to, her face lit up. It was the ringleader with the beautiful

tailcoat. The ringleader handed the girl a piece of paper and left.

*The Mechanical Circus
For those who have never had a place
This can be your place*

Smiling brighter than she had in years, the girl slipped the paper into her pocket and exited the tent.

Teenage Girlhood relates to “make for yourself a teacher” because it depicts teenagers as a powerful force to be learned from. Broccoli relates to “acquire for yourself a friend” because the narrator is unable to find friendship in an unnamed person they look down upon for perceived hypocrisy. My Dude relates to “find in each person their merit” because it depicts a mere squirrel as having empathy.

Teenage Girlhood By Jenna Nesky Age: 15

The stack of books stretched three stories tall. From bottom to top: a body of green cloth by a famed philosopher the same shade of green for he had returned to Earth; an orange bound cover preaching Judeo-Christianity in a gospel prose as flowery, but not as youthful, as orange citrus; a grey novel with monotonous grey narration of mythological names. The books rebuilt Babel in one language, trying to touch God with manmade paragraphs. Yet they were: ornaments, unbloomable bulbs, a rot unbitten from. The forbidden taste of them tickled the literary palette like three tiered fondant cake watching the loud and quiet sexualities of industry and nature as they wed. There was no priest, promise, proof—a nocturnal nullness as lonely as a tree or an angel tumbling with no two ears to hear it—nor celebration nor optimism nor awe. A low cherub played cameraman and pollen blurred the lens of his instrument, printing polaroid’s of the indelible couple illustrated in inaccessible smudge. Further—the books’ copyrights flung rose petals on the diva carpet—then their publication datum gave up gemstone rings. But the couple, each still staring into the other, did not kiss. Meanwhile, three teenage girls with widening grins and flicking flip flops skipped around the trifecta of hardcovers, squealing.

Teenage girl politics, culture, and philosophy painted them in boy band tees that billowed a size too big, bland monochrome backpacks whose weight rode up and down, and store bought friendship bracelets boasting machine craftsmanship. Power decided everything around the girls. Even lazy lyric-ed pop music sounded like hexes or magic, which is another word for power; the trendy brand of backpacks commanded conformance with the fierce and hairy fist of power; friendship, too, grew off a lattice of politics, popularity, and power. Most of all the books exuded power because stern adults held them in esteem.

Power extended to the dual tensions of creation’s two chambered chest, for example the: happy, sad; good, bad; kind, cruel; up, down; light, dark that pulsed in all like God or a devil and outlined the girls’ lifetimes.

Politics-culture-philosophy—nay, the green-orange-grey of the industries’ abusive lust for those twofold themes of nature—colored in. I will not introduce the reader to each girl one by one because the threes of this replay of GIF blend into singularity, where the individual is superfluous. What’s important is: the girls memorized the same happinesses, sads, goods, bads, et cetera. Even more—their adversities neither weighed the same nor had similar causes, but all tasted the same flavor: the fondant, that of musty tomes written by old men with steady angst of teens. After all, should a girl fall from the sped circling skip of adolescent living—who of her peers would still love her? Where was the soft spot to land in open arms? With it was the boy bands and the backpacks and the bracelets: that mathematical bastardization of three becoming one; of the bitemarks in the two slash duality between three and one; then of shades of difference and indifference beyond.

The girls and their adversities skipped, squealed, flapped, frolicked, and different identities became identical, and dualities rejoined at the umbilical, and suffering dissented from the equation only in that moment. The ugly water of misery weaned not by pigments of paint and serial colors but by teenage confusion and cruelty—blue as a blubbering whale or a morpho butterfly—the up-now-down girls would dole like slop to less pretentious persons with tongues of lame comfort. Whether it was an old man who authored it or an adolescent who told it to a confidant, suffering is not strange; neither is misery. But, they are as likely and holy and hated as a teenage girl, her politics-culture-philosophy, and all she stands for.

There is nothing more powerful than teenage girlhood.

Broccoli

They say, you can be whatever you want to be
One day, I watched TV and saw a blonde with colored streaks
Next day, I bleached my hair and dyed it blue
Maybe you actually turn into what you consume

I wanted to be big bumpy broccoli
My mind was taunted by the leftover stuff no one ought to eat
I thought that way maybe people would leave me alone
No more peeving me and thieving my time I count on my phone

Some people want to be the love-song birds when you ask them who
But don’t even watch the winged things out the window
They sit facing the wall of the room
Well, if you turn into what you consume

They’ll be the peeling skin of drywall instead
That’s what it’s like talking to people like them:
As boring as picking at scabbed skin
So I turn up the tele—some rich TV host on screen
By that logic if I watch it, someday I’ll finally see some green
Because growing up is becoming all that you’ve seen

Or at least, so it seems

I remember someone once said to me, You are what you eat
But the reality is, I am just the processes natural to all humanity
And no matter how much I can digest
I’ll never be broccoli

My Dude

The car spins up the mountain
Marring further the line between
The mind and the horizon steep
At a tee-pee angle, each degree stacked to be counted

The free-hand tangle of buds beneath boulders
Meets the industrial trolley mantled on concrete like wood in water
A tearing, a bloodless rip-p-p
Wringing by no earing, nor uncut skin

The tires don’t sense the death below them
The driver’s too busy looking up to know it
The mountain, too, looks to the heaven’s blue
But an anxious squirrel whispers in passing, That’s just life my dude

Theme: Acquire for yourself a friend and find in every person there merit. Acquire for yourself a friend: Tide makes Riptide her friend. Find in every person there merit: Tide trusts Riptide when others thought Riptide was too young.

Tide by Ayla Rossman Age: 9

Tide was a dolphin, but she was different she could live out of water. In fact she loved the sky. Every morning she would use her flippers like wings and soar. Tide was there welcoming the sun every morning, she was there every sundown to say good bye.

Then one day, "TIDE GET DOWN HERE!!" It was mom, but why was Tide's main question.

"TIDE I KNOW YOU'RE UP THERE!" Well she couldn't stay up so she dove down and down next to the island in the middle of the bay until she found the hole in the rock of the island. That was where her pod called home, through a short tunnel and home to her beautiful home. Pearls and sea glass adorned the walls, dark green seaweed hung from the ceiling and coral reefs were scattered around the floor, and the room as a whole was about the size of five large ships across and four ships tall.

In the middle of the cavern there was a statue of Tide's mother their fearsome leader, Coral, Tide came from a long line of mages as the dolphins called them. They were immortal, to get control of the pod the female before them has to step down.

Tide waited and waited and then:

"Tide is that you?" A whisper was heard through the dark water. It was Riptide, Tide would've been surprised that Riptide had snuck out of the play house, the play house was where the youngest of the pod stayed. But Riptide was a master at escaping.

"Why did you call me here?" Riptide swam forward (he was a **gray blue** that could blend in to most things in the cavern.) Tide was glad that Riptide could make it. Tide was sure he would come in handy as well as his gift of sneaking off. Riptide had promised Tide not to run off. And Tide knew he wouldn't break his promise.

"Do you know the plan?" Tide said, unsure if Riptide had listened when she went over the plan a few minutes ago.

"How am I supposed to get in to the island's main runoff?"

"I told you the main river goes from one end of the island to the other you can access the river from the east or the west we will be going from the west there are less humans there."

"HUMANS!" Riptide exclaimed making Tide jump. "Riptide shush we don't want to wake any one!"

"No that's not what I meant. I meant the reason you can't go outside!"

"Sooo what you're saying is my mom is worried about me being seen by humans?"

Tide didn't get why she was frustrated that Riptide had figured it out. "What about the missing pod members?"

"Probably got stuck in the humans' fishing nets I read a story about that happening once."

"Riptide how are you so smart?" Tide said affectionately.

"I know I'm amazing," Riptide said with pride.

"Let's go, it's almost midnight only the patrol will be out but I know a guard who is always asleep so come on."

"I can get us to the island in two minutes if we go now," Tide added when she saw Riptide's uncertain expression. Tide swam off with Riptide on her tail.

"Now it's time for me to fly." Tide leaped out of the water spreading her flippers as far as she would go gliding over the water.

The end

In my story, a girl finds herself in an unfamiliar place, scared and alone. She encounters a monster, but learns that they aren't what she thought they were. The monster promises to be the girl's teacher, she finds a friend in them, and they both learn to see the merit in one another.

After the Sky By Lily Blitz Age: 14

The ground prickled beneath her wings. It was sharp, but not painfully so. Her back itched, and she longed to scratch it, but her arms were numb from sleep and refused to move. Above her, she could hear the singsong chirping of birds and the soft swishing of plants in the wind. It was... quiet. Peaceful. Her breath slowed to match the world around her, a slow but steady march.

She opened her eyes, and the world shattered.

Everything was wrong. Everything was terrifying. Her muscles tensed and her breath came in small, quick gasps, before leaving her entirely. She squeezed her eyes shut, feeling the prickle of tears on her face. She couldn't move. She needed air. She should stay still and quiet and hope she would wake up back in a familiar place, with the comforting weight of blankets over her chest, the ambience of nighttime playing its rhythm outside the windowpane. She would feel safe, instead of itchy and numb and frightened. But she knew she wasn't dreaming.

A wave of panic washed over her like a tidal wave, pulling at her, urgent and white-hot. She stumbled to her feet, lungs working too quickly to truly let her breathe. Everything was green. The ground was green, thin blades covering every inch, worming their way through her feathers. The plants were green, with great clumps of it atop huge brown stalks that towered above her. The sky was still blue, but it was too far away, and so were the clouds, too high up to touch. The calling of the birds was too quiet, too soothing, trying its best to lull her into a false sense of comfort.

She knew this place. Everyone did. It was the place of warnings and stories and nightmares, a way of scaring children into behaving. It had never been more than a fantasy, and she had never expected that to change. How had she gotten here?

A bush rustled nearby. She jumped, then clapped her hands over her mouth. What if something heard her? What if that something was right behind one of the plants surrounding her, and it had heard her

panic? Her mind whirled like a tornado. What kind of monster could be watching her right now? Was it curious? Was it hungry? Did it have sharp teeth and claws or was it armed with weapons that were far worse? She waited, but nothing moved. Maybe it had been her nerves trying to scare her. She told herself it was. But what if it hadn't been? *You have to be brave.* She turned to watch the plants, wondering where she could escape to if she was attacked. What should she even be looking for? Where could she go where monsters wouldn't follow?

She felt something creeping up behind her.

A painful lump rose in her throat, and her heart thudded like a hammer against her chest. She felt the feathers under her eyes getting wet. *Big kids don't cry*, she told herself. *I can be brave. I can face this.* She turned, and both she and the monster screamed.

They backed away from one another, scared to move, but scared to stay still. The monster's eyes were wide, and its fists clenched as if it was trying its best, but failing, to convince itself to fight. It was skinny, fabric hanging loosely around its shoulders; a strong wind could likely send it flying into the brush. But the thing that caught her attention, sent a shiver down her back, was how... *slimy* it was. Other than a patch of dark, pine-needle feathers on its head, there was nothing to hide its inner layers from the world. It didn't look particularly dangerous— if anything, it was as frightened as she was— but it was horrifying, and that was all the incentive she needed for white-hot panic to resurface, blinding her as she started to run.

It called after her, voice desperate. “W-wait!”

She didn't want to stop. She *couldn't* stop. She would have lent every last drop of energy into putting distance between her and the monster. But the branch, lying in wait on the ground, didn't give her much choice. It snagged at the feathers around her ankles, and she tumbled to the ground, grit shoving its way towards her skin.

“A-are you— are you okay?” The monster's voice wavered, a drop of rain into the smooth, still surface of a pond. She trembled silently in response. It took a tentative step towards her, snapping a twig under its leather-clad feet. “I— I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me,” it said.

“Of course you'll hurt me.” She heard the words come out in her voice, barely a whisper. “That's what monsters do.”

It stared at her, at a loss for words. “You... you think I'm the

monster?” It said. She nodded, then squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for a blow to land. But it only made a quiet “Oh,” sound and stood there, seeming to think. A few minutes passed before it spoke again.

“My name’s Ori.”

She cracked open one eye to gaze up at them. Confusion pushed back fear, fog instead of fire. “What?”

They shifted from foot to foot, suddenly uncomfortable. “I’m not a monster. At least, I don’t think I am. I’m a human.” They stopped to peer curiously back at her. “Do you have a name?”

“Aliya.”

“That’s pretty.”

“Thanks,” she said. It didn’t feel like the right word, but she wasn’t sure what else to say.

“Do you... live here?” Ori asked.

She almost laughed. Her, live here, in this strange, scary place? “No. I live up there.” She pointed towards the sky. “I don’t know how I got down here. I must have fallen somehow.” She snapped her mouth shut. Why was she telling this... *human*, if that’s what they were called, so much?

“What’s it like up there?” They sounded genuinely curious.

“It’s nice. It’s a lot more open than wherever we are. There isn’t nearly as much green. Things are mostly white and blue.”

“Are you going to go back?”

Cold seeped into her where warmth had started to grow. “I don’t know how,” she said.

“Can you fly?”

She shook her wings a bit. “Not really. I’m not big enough for that yet.” She laid her head back on the prickly green ground, staring up at the distant sky. A tear slipped into her feathers as a thought struck her. “I’m stuck here. Maybe for a while.”

“Oh.”

Silence.

“Do you want to come with me?”

She sat up, shocked. “What?”

Ori peered down at her, eyes almost hopeful. “I can help you. You could stay with me for a little bit, and I can try to help you get back to

your home. I can show you around, and you can tell me more about where you live.” Their face was bright with excitement.

She shook her head. “No. Maybe you’re a nice monster— human— thing, but even if I can trust you, there’ll be mean ones. My parents told me all about how evil you can be to people like us.”

“Humans can be mean,” Ori admitted. “But they can also be kind. I know most people around here, so I can help keep you safe. I don’t want to leave you out here alone,” they said, voice tinged with worry.

They were right. She didn’t have anywhere to go. If she stayed put, she’d probably starve. If she left on her own, she’d get lost, or hurt. And who knew how long it would take before someone would come to her to take her home? She still wasn’t sure what to think about this human, but they were her best chance.

She lifted her head with a sigh. “Alright,” she said, and Ori’s face broke into a grin. They extended a hand, smooth and bare; she reached out her own, feathered hand, and took it.

This is about the theme because Violeta teaches herself that she is not the person that her parents want her to be; she can be her own person! She also acquires for herself friends from the soldiers. She found merit in everyone, even the soldiers on the English side.

Time Travelers by Abigail Kohlbrenner Age: 9

Violeta. Beautiful name right? Not to me. Does not fit my personality at all. My parents named me that because when I was a baby, I was pretty. Blond hair, blue eyes, looks cute in bows. Now I have short, purple hair and look good in hoodies. My parents never really understood me. They want me to be the perfect little princess and wear makeup and dresses and get married to some handsome man. Sometimes I feel like the only person that understands me is Alex. He's my best friend.

I've learned a lot in my fourteen years. I've learned that you don't always have to be the person that people want you to be. I've learned that no matter if people judge you or not you still should be the person you truly are.

"You're going to be late!" Dad screamed.

"Now, remember don't get your dress dirty," cried my mom as I rushed out the door to catch the bus, I hate dresses. I secretly put extra clothes in my bag to change into. I see Alex rush out of his door too. He catches up with me.

"Dude, your parents made you wear another dress?"

"Yeah," I say.

He screams. "The bus is moving!" We run like cheetahs!

"Violeta!"

"Here," I say hesitantly. Another thing I hate is school.

"ATTENTION SCHOOL!" the speaker's so loud the sound bounced off the walls of the classroom. "WE WILL NOW HAVE AN ASSEMBLY IN THE GYM."

"Come on class, to the gym," Mr. Michal urged.

"A special guest has arrived at our school," said Principal Qwerty importantly. "Robert Ceolriner!"

Only the teachers clapped. Suddenly the doors opened. A man with hair

that was almost bald and an unlikeable orange sweater walked in.

"He has made a special challenge for us. You will make a science project and present it at the science fair. Whoever wins the science fair will get a large bucket of candy."

The whole school burst into whispers.

"Let's partner up," said Alex, who was sitting next to me.

"Sure."

"What should we make?"

Alex and I said it at the same time, "Volcano!"

"We will start working on our project after lunch," Mr. Michal said.

At lunch, me and Alex sat together. We had both got the only thing that we like: a sandwich, turkey and cheese to be exact.

"Do you know how to make a volcano?" asked Alex.

"It's really really simple," I said. "All you have to do is make a model out of clay and then add vinegar, baking soda, and red food coloring and it explodes."

"It is time to start making our projects," shouted Mr. Michal over the talking of all the students, including me and Alex. "Start now!"

Me and Alex start making the clay model.

"Okay, I'm looking up pictures of volcano models online."

"This one looks good, I think we should copy off of it."

"Yeah," I said.

Once we finished making the clay model we started testing it out.

"Okay, now add the food coloring, it says here that you should add one liter of vinegar and three hundred milliliters of baking soda," Alex added the baking soda and vinegar in.

"Oh no! It was supposed to be one ounce not one liter! You're gonna make it overpowered when it explodes!"

Before Alex and I could say anything else, giant foam spouted out of the volcano and covered us in it too.

"I don't think we're in the classroom anymore..." Alex said confused.

"What do you me-" I looked around. It wasn't the classroom! We were standing in what looked like a battlefield. There were a couple of men on one side of the field and some more men on the other.

“Where are we?” Alex said.

I suddenly remembered. I saw a picture of this battle field in my history class! This was the battlefield in the revolutionary war.

“Alex we have to get out of here!” I grabbed Alex’s hand and ran as fast as I could.

We finally reached a nearby forest.

“What did you do that for?”

“Don’t you realize? That was the Revolutionary War Battlefield.” I think for a moment. If we’re in the Revolutionary War that means we travelled time. And if this is the Revolutionary War, will we survive?”

“We have to be really really careful about what we do, we’re in the Revolutionary War, we travelled time.”

“We don’t want to change the course of history or die!”

We both pause for a moment taking everything in. Is this really real? Am I dreaming? I pinch myself. I do everything I possibly can to wake myself up, except I can’t. Finally I smack myself in the face!

“Okay, we are not dreaming!” I said.

“We need to find a way to get back,” said Alex.

“Or we’ll be trapped here forever,” I finished.

Suddenly a man in uniform appeared. He looked like he was from the American side, I gave a sigh of relief.

“Oy! Why aren’t you in your place? And what are you doing here?” he pointed at me. “You’re supposed to be helping out the injured soldiers. And you,” he pointed at Alex. “Get back out there and fight!”

He dragged Alex back out to the battlefield. The last thing I remembered before Alex disappearing out of my sight was a horrid expression on his face.

“Well, what are you still doing here, go!” he motioned me over to the left. Over there stood what seemed to look like a tunnel leading underground. I walked there absolutely terrified about Alex. I mean, I know he takes martial arts but they have guns. I go down the tunnel and in there are about ten hospital beds, four with injured soldiers.

Another girls who only looked about a few years older than me was caring for one of the soldiers. “Who are you?” she asked, annoyed.

“I’m... Brielle Yorker. I’m new here.”

“Start helping Davey with his broken arm,” the girl said.

“Um...”

“Oh right. You’re new,” the girl said, still annoyed. “I’ll help you.”

She walked over to me.

“Here, put this cloth over his arm.” Suddenly, there was a loud “ding!”

“That’s the bell. We have a break now.” She walked out of the room. Once she was gone I got an idea. I would cut my hair and disguise myself as a boy so I could go out on the battlefield. I see a pair of scissors and take them before the girl can catch me.

I walked up the stairs, out of the tunnel, and into the forest. I went to a nearby pond. I take the scissors and start to cut off all of my hair. I remembered something my hair was purple! People in this time didn’t have purple hair. I quickly pulled my hoodie over my head. Perfect. I left the forest and went onto the battlefield.

I search for Alex but I can’t find him. I’m so nervous. Before I could burst into tears, I feel my body hit the ground. Standing above me was an English soldier. He held out his hand.

“Are you from the American side?”

“No.”

“Are you?”

“No!”

He sighed, “I know you are.”

“Don’t hurt me!” I shouted.

“Listen. I don’t want to fight you. None of us do,” he said sadly.

“You don’t?”

He nodded.

“My parents made me,” he said.

Suddenly, I saw Alex.

“Goodbye!” The soldier saluted.

“Alex! Where were you?”

“No time to explain. We need to fight!”

So we did. I punched and kicked and dodged. Suddenly, there was a loud BOOOOOM!

And a volcano sprouted from the ground. I shouted, "Get in the volcano!"

Alex took my hand. We both jumped in.

Suddenly, we were back in the classroom. Alex said, "That. Was. Awesome"

THE END

The narrators in the poems speak to the person they have lost a connection with, as well as recognize the positive implications that have occurred because of the situation. This relates to the parts of the summer theme, "acquire for yourself a friend, and find in every person their merit." In Turtle Traffic, the turtles who were originally frustrated with the wait come to learn from Terry Turtle's slow way. This relates to the first part of the theme, "Make for yourself a teacher."

Collection of Poems and a Short Story By Sofia Stambler Age: 15

The Secret Years

I don't know if you remember...

Containers of broken Crayolas we rummaged through,
getting the colored wax under our fingernails.

Long hours waiting,
in strange places,
that felt like seconds.
Because for us: the clock sped up.

The days we lived
in your grass,
on my swing in the woods,
on your rough carpet.

I want to know if you ever think about...

Those few short years we spent together.
Just a blip in the span of time,
When we were flying -
And I thought we would forever.

Or what about...

When you chose to leave,
our world of written words and marker smudged hands, bright graphic t-shirts,

backpacks bursting with pencil and paper, and bulky winter coats.

You left:
for gooey lip gloss and bright white sneakers,
trips to city streets, crowded with buildings,
like the people you know now.

Like an autumn leaf,
I fell towards the earth.

And I want to know if you remember,
Or rather, if you care.

Sea Dive

There was no single day that it happened.
No blink of an eye,
Or snap of the fingers.

No, it was slower, much slower.
Like a deep sea dive,
The surface becoming farther, and farther, and farther...

I don't know why you left.
If it was me, or you, or them.
But that didn't matter then,
I had to find a new place in the sea.

And now I know that's alright
One can't tread on the surface forever.
We're here for exploring,
And maybe you thought that too.

You swam away,
Giving me room,
And I guess for that,
I should be saying:

Thank you.

Letter to the Past

Dear me
Back then
The one who thought she knew it all
Yes, you
You will be just fine.

Dear me
Way back
The one who felt replaced
No one can take your place
You will be just fine

Dear me
Back when
You thought you'd morph to someone new if you had the clothes to
match
You'll improve every year with everything you'll know
And you will be just fine.

Dear me
Yes, you, and everyone else
You will be just great
Because you're you
When no one else is.

Turtle Traffic

Tucker Turtle works every day of the week. His job, you may wonder? His job is to sit on a log. Tucker's wife, Tina, does the same. So do their friends Tara, Tilly, and Tessa. In fact, all turtles work at the log. For some it's the log in the lake, others it may be the rotting log, but a log no different. Though they may spend their careers spectating from logs (some call it spec-turtle-ing) turtles live elsewhere and therefore, they must commute.

Let me explain the turtle commute. There are no turtle trains, or trucks, or tricycles, and therefore turtles must walk to and from work.

Due to the twice daily influx in total traveling turtles, a phenomenon is caused called, “Turtle Traffic.” Turtle Traffic is like no other traffic that impatient humans honk their horns at. It’s no slow crawl from the suburbs to the city. No, this is Turtle Traffic – the most terribly tricky traffic of our time. This is, of course, due to the natural speed of turtles.

One morning, when the sun was bright and the sky was blue, Tucker Turtle was in the usual Tuesday Turtle Traffic, inching his way down Twirly Terrace with the rest of the crowd. The turtles were averaging 10 steps per minute (at least, until one would stop to rest or look around). Just when Tucker thought he couldn’t possibly be later for the log, the turtle crowd let out a collective groan as Terry Turtle began his long venture across the street. After a long, slow, trek, Terry had made it halfway across the street. With a sea of turtles waiting behind him, Terry pulled his Turtle Phone from his shell and switched it on. The turtles waited behind him, the suspense hung in the air. Suddenly, Tessa turtle called, “Terry’s watching a Turtle race!”

The sea of turtles cried out with rage.

“Turn it off!”

“Get a move on!”

“We’ve got logs to sit on!”

The turtles pushed and shoved, their shells bumping into each other. Each was annoyed they’d be late for their log. Tucker looked back at Terry. He still stood there in the middle of the road, watching the Turtle Race on his Turtle Phone. Come to think of it, Tucker admired Terry’s leisure. He wasn’t rushing or stressing, but taking his time. Terry mentioned this to Tina and Tilly, who were next to him, and they calmed a bit. They thought it was a good point, so they mentioned it to the turtles around them, and others realized this, too. The crowd settled and they cheered with Terry when the turtle he was rooting for won. That is how the turtles learned that it’s important to slow down and not live life in a rush, even for turtles who spec-turtle on logs.

The end.

Trustworthy is related to this summer’s theme because the main character, Max, needs to find a Trustworthy friend. This subject is related to Acquire For Yourself a Friend.

Trustworthy By Benjamin Klein Age: 11

I entered the house at a slow pace. The first step into it felt like stepping somewhere with a blindfold. The floorboards creaked under my weight. Each step I took the more I accepted what was happening. We had just driven 24 hours to get to New York and now we were there. A new life from across America. All my friends, teachers, everything was gone. This was my new life now.

‘Ding dong!’ The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it”

“Max!! Your friend is here. Come down here!” *I guess she got it.*

“I’m coming, I’m coming!”

I raced down the stairs excited for the arrival. I rushed past the half furnished living room and I checked the time before I got to the entrance hallway.

“1:23” I muttered under my breath. 3 minutes late. Do all my friends have to be unpunctual!

I sprinted past the kitchen and as I was passing by I heard my mom say, “I’m going to the store honey, have fun!”

I heard the kitchen door close with a slam. I raced down the entrance hallway that had two family portraits in it. When I passed the portraits, I stopped and looked at them for a second. Me, Mom and... Dad. Dad left me, and mom, at a young age. Well he didn’t leave us; he went on an expedition to uncover some sort of lost mirror. I think it supposedly was worth a lot in Iran or something. After that he never returned. Anyway that took a dark turn.

The bell rang again. Finally, I got to the door.

“Hey Max!” Jared said.

He was wearing a white undershirt with a black jean jacket over it. I could sort of see some sort of orange stain. *Maybe orange juice?* He was also wearing light blue jeans and pitch-black high tops. He was sort of the fashion king of the school.

“Hey bro, what’s up?”

“Nothing much.”

He walked in without asking and made himself right at home by kicking off his shoes and lying down on the couch, the springs screeching under his mass.

“This is a cool house!”

“Not really, once you have explored every crevice, it sort of gets boring.”

When I walked over to him, the floorboards still creaked under my weight. We had tried to get them fixed a few weeks earlier, but it had only worked for a couple of days, then it went back to creak, creak, creaking.

“So, what do you want to do?”

“I dunno, do you have any board games.”

I sighed, “All our luggage, that wasn’t clothes because we brought those in the car, was misplaced and now it’s in Minnesota.”

“*That* sucks. I’m sorry man.”

He just shrugged it off and laid down.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not really.”

A few minutes of silence had passed when he said, “I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Ok, up the stairs and on your left.”

“Thank you.”

It had been about ten minutes since he left. *What is taking him so long!!* Suddenly, he came down the stairs with a plastic sword. I recognized that it was the one from my room.

“Hey! Where did you get that?!”

“From your room, duh!”

“Who gave you permission to enter my room?!”

“Sorry man,” he said, defensively. “This is so cool!” He said wielding the sword.

He started going down the stairs making swooshing noises with his mouth. Spit flew everywhere, left and right.

“Can you *not* do that?”

He ignored my comment and continued to swing the sword around. I tried to move him away from the couch, but he was persistent. Then he started moving closer to the kitchen fighting imaginary characters, only limited by his own mind. He knocked down lamps,

books, everything!

“Dude, stop!”

Then he knocked down a shelf left by the previous owner of the house. What was behind it had surprised us. There was a small tunnel covered in cobwebs. It looked like it hadn’t been touched in years. Suddenly, he had stopped in his tracks looking blankly at the wall.

“Did you know this was here?”

“No, I’m just as dumbfounded as you are!”

“Do you wanna crawl inside? You’re skinny enough. But not me.” He just chuckled.

I stared at the hole in the wall and then said, “Jared, please leave...”

“Why should I? You are the one who is too chicken to go inside that hole. I dare you.”

Now you know that someone is serious when they dare you to do something. Doesn’t matter what it is, doesn’t matter where you are, when they dare you, you can’t back down. It is just the rules of being a kid!

“Ok, ok.”

And with that I grabbed a flashlight from our rickety garage and crawled into the hole...

.....

I know, I know, it was a stupid idea to go crawling into a creepy uncharted hole, but I had to do it. As I said prior, when someone dares you to do something, you can’t back down.

.....

I heard a thump behind me, and the tunnel became pitch black. I tried to turn on the flashlight but as it turned out, it was dead!

At first, I thought I could trust Jared. Then he invaded my privacy by going into my room and finding the sword, and then he had the audacity to shut the door, shelf, whatever, behind me. Now I’m trapped in here. Great! I could hear him chuckling behind me. *Sigh, why did I trust him!? Stupid, stupid!*

“Jared!!! Let me out!”

“No, I’ll let you out when you say, ‘I will let you do whatever you want in my house’”

“No!”

“Then I’m not letting you out!”

“You’re crazy!”

“No, I’m smart!”

I could not see him, but I knew he was tapping his temples. *If we found this entrance behind a bookshelf, there must be another one around the house! Right?*

And so, I ventured forth into the tunnel, into the dark.

.....

About 4 minutes later, the tunnel started to dip downwards, and the darkness started to clear. The farther I went down, the tunnel became more and more illuminated. I kept going down towards the light, in hopes that it was an exit. Then the drop got steeper, and I started tumbling. Faster and faster! The world became a blur. It looked like nothing was moving and the only thing in motion was me. I passed out.

When I woke up, I was in a room. The room was oddly... eerie, only lit by a single flame on a torch mounted upon the wall. I was in a bed and covered in dust. It looked like a dungeon with no way out... Or in. *How did I get here? Where is here?* My mind was racing with ideas. *Did I fall here, was I teleported, what is happening!!* Nothing made sense so I tried to reassess the situation. *Jared came over to my house, he found a plastic sword in my room, he knocked over a bookshelf, we found a tunnel, he dared me to go inside and then he trapped me in here.* I could not remember what happened after that, but I knew something had happened. As my eyes adjusted to the light, I realized this was not a dungeon but a room. Oddly, in the center of the room laid a chest of drawers. It had a crack running down the side like a lightning bolt. I got up and walked over to it. *What is this?* I thought. I went through the three drawers, checking each one carefully. In the top drawer, there was a small makeup mirror and some makeup. I looked into the mirror expecting to see my face with its crooked nose and straight teeth. But when I looked at it nothing appeared. It was as if the mirror had decided to take a nap. However, the mirror started fogging up like I was breathing on it. I cleared the mist away and I saw... I saw my father looking at me with angry eyes as if saying you made a mistake! I could see his long scraggy beard, shiny bald head. Suddenly, I felt my soul being torn out of my body into pieces. Everything felt cold and then... nothing. Absolutely nothing...

.....

I couldn’t describe it if I tried. Just void. And then a voice saying

“Come.”

So, I followed the voice and then the I felt nothing. I blacked out and woke up in a large room with windows everywhere. Oddly, the room was not lit even with the windows.

The voice spoke again, “Hello.”

I could see a silhouette of a person in the corner. The figure stepped out of the darkness. I could see them clearly now.

“Jared!”

“Who is this ‘Jared’ you speak of?”

“Don’t play dumb with me buddy.”

“I am Jerome.”

“Ok then Jerome,” I said with a sarcastic voice. “What is this place?”

“This place, is, well it’s a place.”

“Do you know what this place is?!”

“None of us really know what this place is,” they said

“Us? There’s more of you.”

“Well, yes!”

“Do you know everyone here?”

“No, because there is a couple thousand of us! Although I probably should as I am their leader.”

“You, a leader! Ha!”

“But I am.”

“Ok fine then ‘Leader’, can I just ask you if you know this person?”

“Fine, who is it?”

“Josh Rorrim.”

“Well, he was one of the originals.”

“Originals of what?”

“One of the people in the group of original individuals to come to, well, wherever this is.”

“Do you know if he’s alive?”

“Yes, I do. Well, at least that was what he was a couple of years ago.”

“What do you mean ‘a couple of years ago?’”
“He left the town to find a way out of this place and we haven’t seen him since.”
Jerome let his head fall.

“If you’re looking for him, I think we might be able to help!”

To Be Continued...

This is my story. It connects to the theme of “Make for yourself a teacher, acquire for yourself a friend, and find in every person their merit.” Let me explain the best without spoiling the story. This is about a mentor teaching a student and showing him how everything works. He has a personal issue and has trouble making friends, but he ends up with a friend. He finds the merit in the person by finding out he is a really good photographer and can help the zoo with putting itself out there. This story is about gorillas because I really like gorillas.

The Friends We Made Along The Way By Brendan Engler Age: 15

1st day

Back at the zoo. This zoo of almost all gorilla’s is having a special day! We get new people to work here! Before we were struggling to keep staff happiness levels up due to the large amount of people who visit the zoo and the low number of staff that we have. I am a director of the zoo along with 2 others, but I am not in charge of interviews, but I oversee training and making sure everyone is equipped to work at this gorilla zoo. Our gorillas have specific needs like attention, medicine, and diets. They also have vastly different personalities. I am specifically working with a young 18-year-old who I have no idea how he passed interviews because he has no idea what any of these things are. He has dark brown hair and green eyes and is about 5’7. He is very skinny too and weak. I don’t know how he is going to make it but we shall see tomorrow when I get to train him. I shall wish my self-luck because I need it.

2nd day

So I found out his name is Sterner. He is a cool kid to talk to about stuff. He seems to know a lot about cooking like I do. He doesn’t know much about how gorillas roll but he does love them a lot. Maybe we can throw him in the very fishy smelling kitchen so that he can cook for the gorillas but again he does not know anything about them. I showed him around the facility today. It is exceptionally large because we are the largest gorilla zoo in the country and maybe even the world. That’s why our 10 staff need help. We have 1 cook, 3 directors, 4 active zoo staff and 2 shop workers. So not a lot. We have gorillas in packs, and we tend to add one silverback and one alpha female into the mix of each pack so that they

have a leader. I told him that they don't eat meat and are vegetarian. He seems extremely interested in the gorillas. It was getting late, so I showed him to the staff lunch area and we had some coffee and talked about life.

3rd day

Had that dream again. The one about the sudden crash of everything sprinting away in the waterfall. The one where I stupidly let... never mind. I couldn't sleep much so I slept in, but I got to work just in time. I saw Sterner meditating for some reason. Today we went into our first tribe's territory. I told him to when you introduce yourself that you get on your knees and look down to show the silverback that the alpha's the boss of him. We went to feed them bamboo shoots. I saw that some of our youngest gorillas checked him out and almost played with him. I kind of laughed but I haven't laughed like a real person in a while. We fed them the bamboo shoots and went on our way. I showed him into the kitchen and showed him how to prepare the food. It isn't that hard to prepare it so he picked it up pretty quickly. He seemed interested in learning about the gorillas and how they behave. I told him they tend to walk with their knuckles and if another alpha tries to take command of a pack the leader will run a lot and charge to make himself scary. They also bang their chest a lot when they feel threatened, or they are trying to show they are alpha. I noticed that he is cool to talk to and I think he could be my friend, but you know, since the "crash" happened, I tend to not make friends.

4th day

I was moody at the beginning of the day. I was also very tired. I saw Sterner meditating again. I asked him why and he says it helps him be happier. It turns out he is taking early college classes for being a therapist and is studying sociology. It is almost Friday, that's when we give the gorillas a larger fancier meal. I showed him the early preparations for making that meal. It consists of types of vegetables. I showed him into the only mountain gorilla pack in America. We only have 7 in that pack. It consists of 1 alpha, 1 younger male, one older male and the rest young females. The mountain gorillas are going extinct, so we treat them the best.

5th day

I wake up crawling desperately out of bed to hit and make that alarm shut up. I sigh. I walk to my restroom. I look in the mirror. Just the remains of a face that was once a happy one. I take my bike to work. Sterner is waiting in the front of the zoo. I greet him, he greets me. This is the last day of the training. We walk around and go gate to gate. We feed the gorillas. He has a camera with him. I ask him why he has a camera and he said that not only is a freelance photographer for fun, but he believes that since we haven't gotten many customers anymore due to lack of employs, he needs to take pictures of the gorillas and mountain gorillas before they go extinct. I watch as he takes pictures of gorillas. I finally feel almost happy that he is taking pictures. None of the staff have cameras and no photographers have come in the recent years. He says that he can be the zoo's photographer if I wanted which I gladly accepted. We finish off the day and we have ice cream that was in the staff refrigerator. I think I finally have another friend again. I taught him the ins and outs of this place and he said he can teach me the ins and outs of photography. We both walk away back to our vehicles. I ride off the parking lot, where it is an empty void of just a few cars parked there because of the nearby coffee shop. I glide home on my bike slowly thinking about what happened today. Hopefully, this new friend doesn't drift away like the friends we made along the way.

I think that my story ties into this summer's theme pretty well, mostly because Ivy and Cora, my main characters, acquire for themselves a friend. It also sometimes bumps into the other themes as well, like finding in every person their merit, and making for yourself a teacher. Besides that, it also exhibits the core value of collaboration, in a bunch of different moments.

Plants, Friendship and (sort of) Love By Josie Friedman Age: 12

I wake up at 5:23 am and decide to make myself coffee. I honestly can't sleep so let's just start the day, I guess. As I pour my coffee, something hits my shoulder.

WHAT THE HECK DID I JUST BUMP INTO.

A week ago.

I was at Bed Bath and Beyond, in the pillowcase section when I saw it: a small, compact houseplant in a sea of bedding, sheets and pillows. (For the record, Bed Bath and Beyond is possibly the most boring store ever. Name one thing you go to Bed Bath and Beyond for that you CAN'T get on Amazon or at Target. Yeah, right? I'm surprised it's still in business. Also, for the record, I was only there because it was nearest to my house. Anyways.)

It had tropical, shiny leaves with vines wrapping all around. The pot was woven with brown twine, encapsulating it perfectly. It was really really pretty. I was totally getting this plant. Huh, the tag was blank- kind of weird. Still getting it!

When I reached the register, the employee looked confused, and told me; "we definitely don't sell that here, but if you want, you can just take it for free...?"

What the heck? I thought about it, nervously grabbed the plant, and left. When I reached my car, I stuck it carefully in the trunk, making sure it won't get squished. I drove home, a little distracted. I unlocked the door to my small apartment and turned on the lights. I decided to put the plant in the corner, where the sunlight hit it just right. I watered the plant a little and headed to bed.

I watered it each day, and took super good care of it, uh, besides that one day I accidentally poured my tea into the plant – not sure why I did that. I was tired, ok? Shush. But there's no way the tea did anything.

.....

Yeah, no, it definitely did. Or it might've. Not sure.

"Oh, um, hi! I'm Ivy, your new friend!" An arm reaches out to shake my hand, with a variety of chunky rings and beaded bracelets. I shake it, kind of in shock. What. Is. Going. On.

I look down at her. She's wearing a long, chunky cardigan and tiered skirt, hoop earrings and bandana, with earthier tones and some leaves strewn about. Her feet are covered in dirt and vines, and her pot is toppled sideways next to her. She looks really nice, actually. Also, she does not have a head – where her neck ends the plant starts. Thought I should mention that. Although I'm not that normal myself. I literally have a TV for a head. Have I mentioned that? Um. I've just never seen a plant person. Seriously, never. You know what? Whatever. Back to the story. I start to speak.

"Hi. Cora. Where did you come from?" I ask.

"Oh! I forgot you didn't know. Basically, I'm part of a new breed of plants, kind of an experiment, where we are made to be friends to people who need them! Or more, if you want to. We activate after a week and show up when you're ready. Although I'm not sure you are – maybe it was the tea...? Who knows!" she says.

"Wow. Uhm, yeah. Cool. Can I have a second?" I say.

"Of course!" she says. I walk away, kind of scared. After a few minutes, I take a deep breath and come back. Ok.

"Wow. That's – that's- I don't know how to feel. Am I really that lonely? I have- friends. Right? Also, I'm not sure I'm ready either, ha-ha! Um. Here, sit." I pat the seat next to me. She smiles and sits. This is so weird. "Can you please tell me more about this?" I ask.

"They're um, mostly for lonely people. So, you can have a friend. They show up when you need them. But I guess you already know that." She says. "who like, determines it? Is there a database or something?" I say. "Ah, so actually we don't know where they get the information from. The company is kind of secretive about it, but I promise they're nice. Well, for I all know. There's been some rumors recently. Sorry. I'm nervous," she replies.

"Hah, no its totally fine. Don't worry."

"Here, um. You can read the tag now if you want." She walks over to the corner and gently pulls it off the pot. She walks back over. I look at it. I can see it now!! That's so weird, wow. It shows the price (15-30 dollars) and underneath there is a small button. Ivy presses it and a bound book pops up from the tag, out of nowhere.

“Woah,” I say. I glance at the cover of the book – it says HANDBOOK in cursive letters. She rapidly flips through it, until she lands on a page: FAQs & more. She smiles.

She looks at me.

“This tells a bunch of basic facts and questions you might have. You can pull this up at any time, I’ll make sure it’s always on the table here.” She sets it down on the tabletop. “It also has other guidelines, like how you can pick what I wear, but the plant head stays,” she says. She flips the book closed.

“Obviously.”

“Obviously,” I say. We share a smile.

.....

The next morning.

“Gooood morning!!” Ivy shouts. “Mnngh. It’s like, 6 am.” I groan. “Its seven o’ three, actually, and you’re getting up. Because I’m lonely. And bored. Waaaake upp!!” she says.

I stand up.

“Hi,” I say, rubbing sleep from my eyes.

“Hi,” she says with a smile.

“Want me to make tea? For old times sake??” I ask.

“Old times sake? Are you kidding me?? Dude, we met LAST NIGHT,” she says. “Hah, old times. Ahh, sheesh,” she says under her breath.

“Well, whatever! I’m making tea anyways,” I say.

We crash into the kitchen, nearly injuring ourselves on the slippery floor. Well, myself. Dirt kind of creates friction, and you know, feet dirt. That sounds weird. Whatever! Ivy has dirt on her feet. Sorry about how I phrased that. Point is we’re fast.

We sip our tea in silence.

.....

Later...

“Hey, want to make apple pie or something? I’m strangely craving it,” I say. Her feelings look hurt. Ivy stares at me intensely. Well, as much as someone with a plant for a head. Point is, I feel her wrath. “Oh, um, sorry, are you like an apple- are you- Did I, like offend- I-”

Ivy stays quiet.

She bursts out laughing. “Wait, I’m confused on SO many levels.

Did you seriously think I was an apple tree, and I would get my feelings hurt if you used my fruit? Bro- that’s so saaaaad oh my gosh.”

“Hey!! I don’t know what the like, etiquette is for plants! I thought maybe like, it was disrespectful...?” I protest.

“Seriously though. Get your head out of the gutter, Cora,” she elbows my shoulder. I blush.

We eat our pie slowly, weirdly quietly, too. We are NEVER quiet. She cracks up.

“What??” I say.

“The way you eat pie!! You’re like...” she chews her pie exaggeratedly, like a weird bear or something. There’s no way I eat like that.

“Heyy! I do NOT eat like that!” I say.

“Suuuure,” she says with a sly smile.

“Now I’m self-conscious! Where can I find a mirror?!”

“I’m joking, sheesh!”

“Oh. Let me just be mad at you for a second.”

“Mhm. That’s fine.”

I glare at her for three minutes.

Five minutes later, I jump onto the couch. “Want to watch TV?”

“Obviously,” she says.

“Obviously,” I say.

Obviously.

TO BE CONTINUED!

If I had continued this story, they probably would’ve fallen in love. ‘Cause, you know. But definitely be friends first, obviously. If you can’t tell, I haven’t thought that much about it. If you want, you can totally ignore this and make up your own story. Another option is to find me, Josie Friedman, and ask to see my drawings of the two girls, which I will almost positively have on hand. If you want to see them. Just in case. Have a great day! :)

In my story, Loving You, Elissa and Jim talk through their misunderstanding at prom night. Elissa struggles to find merit within Jim and is hesitant to believe him in his explanation. The lesson in this story is, don't be so quick to judge people and always give them a chance to explain themselves for their mistakes. Everyone is human and we all mess up every now and then.

Loving You By Hailey Sheena Age: 14

Elissa:

I sat next to him, silent, not saying a word. I tried to move on and leave the past in the past. No more restless nights haunted by my history, haunted by Jim.

Jim:

The train moved slower than ever. Each agonizing mile in silence. I didn't mean to hurt her, I swear. If only she would listen. Sitting next to her was absolutely miserable, it was a tease. I wanted to talk to her, to be with her. No, I *needed* to be with her. A rising sickness grew within my stomach. I realized that I was nervous, frightened even. So worried that I may scare her away and lose what we had forever. I brushed off my nerves, then decided it's not over yet.

Elissa:

Each passing tree started to blur together, creating a moving world too fast for me to comprehend. I started to think about the past. All the love songs and dates left meaningless by his decision. People need space, I get that, but not that time. Not when I needed him most.

Jim:

I attempted to speak, "Hey Elissa. How have you been?" I shifted in my seat, trying to ease the tension that made me feel hot and uncomfortable. I saw her hesitate, planning each word carefully, painting a picture of words.

"Do you want to hear the truth, Jim, or should I just smile, lie, and say 'good,'" she said, content with her word choice, almost smug.

"I'm sorry," I said, tears starting to form in my eyes. I looked away, feeling even hotter this time, burning with embarrassment and anxiousness. I wanted to scream and get out all the anger and nerves I've been collecting from the past year. Her missing presence had a big impact

on me. Her warm comforting hugs disappeared, leaving me alone and empty both on the inside and out.

I finally looked back at her with sincerity and pleaded, "Hear me out. Please?"

She responded so softly, so gently, I almost missed it, "Okay."

Elissa:

I wanted to hear him out. I want to hear his calming words that never failed to sooth me. I decided to give him a chance, because having him gone had left me a mess. Without him, I'm a storm raining hard on those below, but with him, he's the shelter that stops the madness above.

I said, "Okay," willing to listen. Listen to his reason for why he left.

"I never meant to hurt you. I wanted to show you that I've changed. Please give me a chance?" He spoke with meaning. I could tell he meant every single word and this was not a joke to him.

I once again looked out the window, but this time the trees didn't blur. I felt control and comfort. I looked back at him and said, "Okay."

I put my hand on his, feeling each line in his palm, memorizing the feel of his warm touch, "I'm listening." He interlocked his hand with mine.

Jim:

For the next fifteen minutes, I sat there explaining my absence. I almost felt like I was reliving it. It was the Fall of 2019. I was happy and so was Elissa, or so I thought. It was prom week and I asked Elissa to go with me. There was a group of cheerleaders known as "The It Girls" because of their popularity among other students. They started to abuse their power and used it in hurtful ways.

On prom night, the "It Girls" plotted against Elissa. During prom, they locked Elissa in the bathroom and told me that she was outside. I spent the next twenty minutes looking for her when the "It Girls" told me they saw her leave. I was unaware of the "It Girls" stealing my phone and using it to hurt Elissa's feelings over text messages.

After prom night, she broke up with me saying that she would never forgive me. I felt more alone than ever, like the light in my life had burnt out, leaving me isolated in the darkness. The radiance in my eyes, the glimmer of hope had left. I left her alone too and didn't even know it.

Elissa:

I still hear the voices, see the texts, feel my tears. I will always remember prom 2019. It all started with a simple question.

“Will you go to prom with me?” Jim asked, bringing out a decorated poster that said “PROM?” In big letters.

I said, “Yes!” I was so excited to go to prom with him.

On prom night, I presumed everything would be fine. I wore a long maroon dress that felt like soft silk. I had my light brown hair in loose curls with a couple strands tied back. I had always dreamed of wearing a dress of such beauty.

Jim drove to my house to pick me up, wearing a black suit with maroon and white flowers in his jacket pocket to match my dress. Everything was perfect. “Are you ready?” Jim asked, excited to start the adventure of the night.

“Ready as I’ll ever be,” I said, giggling in anticipation, ready for the night to begin.

As we pulled up to the school to start prom, I will never forget the intense, yet soothing, smell of the flowers decorating the walls. I took a second to admire the beauty of the event, staring at the decor in awe. All of a sudden, the “It Girls” bumped into me startling me out of my trance. I felt nervous around them, they are wild animals, they could pounce at any moment. I had to be extra cautious around them.

When Jim and I finally got settled and started to dance to the slow music, resembling the feeling of the night, I started to relax. I found myself getting lost in the gentle melody that seemed to carry me away. I stared into Jim’s bright green eyes, feeling comfort and control. A feeling I rarely felt, but loved.

When the slow song came to an end, Jim and I decided to visit our friends, Anna and Tyler, but we could not find them anywhere. “I’ll go look in the bathroom, you go look in the hall, okay?” I said, assertive, because I wanted more than anything to talk to my best friend and share this moment with her.

“Okay, meet me back here in ten minutes,” Jim said while walking in the direction of the hall.

I moved swiftly to the bathroom and said, “Anna? Anna? Are you in here?” No response. I tried again, “Anna?”

Click. I turned around confused by the sudden sound. I decided that she wasn’t in here and went to text Jim, “She is not in here. Did you

find her?” I reached for the handle to exit the bathroom, but it wouldn’t budge. It was locked.

I texted Jim again, “Hey, the bathroom is locked. Can you come let me out?”

The response came almost immediately, “I left, you’re too boring.”

I responded confused, “What do you mean?”

“I left with Becca,” he responded again. I should have known then, why Becca? Why Becca who was a part of the “It Girls?”

I dropped to the floor, bursting into tears, disregarding the fact that my makeup was running all down my face. I felt alone, empty, desperate. I didn’t understand. I would never understand. I spend the next couple weeks overthinking the situation, avoiding Jim and his “explanation.” I ended things with Jim because of his sudden outburst of toxicity. I spent the next year alone, longing to find someone to fill the gaping hole Jim left.

I blinked again, remembering where I was. Who I was with.

Jim:

She took a minute to think, overwhelmed by the past coming back to her. I could see the stress on her tensed forehead. The way she played with her scrunchie when she is caught up in deep thought. She took a deep breath, exhaling all of the tension she recently held within her body.

“It’s okay,” she paused, “It’s not your fault,” she said soft, still processing the truth that has finally been spoken. Then, the unexpected happened. She jumped on me, hugging me. I held her tight, feeling almost scared to let go. Scared she would disappear again, throwing me into an abyss of emptiness.

Elissa:

I felt whole again. I laid there, melting in his warm embrace. For that minute everything was fine. Everything was okay. Everything was whole. The world looked different again. I no longer had my dull and gloomy output on life. As I exited the train, hand in hand with Jim, I felt more confident. I no longer disappear into the crowd, I stand out and became my own person again. I’ve repaired that hole I’ve been longing to fill.

When the Moon Thinks Old By Ariana Mellen Age: nine (turning ten soon)

"Julie wake up!" I turn over hoping Elizabeth won't notice. Luckily Lizzy sits on my bed thinking I'm fast sleep!

"Please please wake up Julie!" With no sound at all I turn over and solemnly open my eyes.

"Julie Julie you're awake!"

"Mmmm...yeah awake t-totally awake," I say in a sleepy manner.

"Weeell... you better get up were going to go to our new house tonight!"

"Oh. Right, why tonight I don't even want to go," I think to myself and I look at the boxes all over my room and to avoid the thought of moving, I quickly slip up and sit next to Liz. I ask her a question, well, the type of odd question that one feels as if they're feeling sad or nervous welp, anyways.

I asked her, "Do you even want to move? You always act like everything is fine even when it's not. I just don't get it even when something horrid happens you stick with it and keep going. I-I'm just worried I guess... you help everyone b-but who's helping you?"

I see Lizzy quietly choking up tears of happiness I look over at my window in the middle of my room and in an encouraging voice I say, "How about we go for a walk we can cool off and it looks like it stopped raining. Well, I mean, yesterday I didn't even go out so I might just have been listening to rain sounds on my phone."

Ellie giggles then smiles and in a kind tone she says, "I would love that."

Once we are outside I say in a hard tone, "We forgot breakfast didn't we. Dang it."

"Ohhhhhh. That's what mom reminded me about making. Sorry I couldn't make breakfast even, I wasn't even up," Lizzy said.

"Well Liz that's because Mom's up at 6:00!"

"No she's not. Mom's up at 7:00," Lizzy answers with a little giggle.

"Welp, I really do wake up late."

"Exactly 10:37!" Ellie corrects me. We are so busy talking that we don't notice we are on Taylor Street not looking at any of the "you are here!" signs once we finally stop we are standing next to a beautifully

decorated bakery and with sharp red words saying: Betty's Bakery. I pull on Liz's jacket. We pass this a lot in the school year but never went there.

With a very large smile like someone is going to hug you Liz happily said, "T-this is B-Betty's Bakery. Mom loved this place she always took me here on Fridays. The food was hard but once you got to the middle it was breathtaking, all the flavor and work they put into it, my god it was good!" I look over in the inside, surprisingly it is empty except for one single brown-haired boy. He looks odd like the kind of kid you would see in an old timey movie, but the person at the counter looks like he can't see him.

Suspiciously I say to my sister (Ellie), "how about we step inside if you love it THAT much."

"Okay, okay I miss you being nice that was the best!" Lizzy responds.

"Hurry! Hurry!" I say hoping the boy won't leave! Once we get inside the boy is still there like he has all the time in the world. While Liz remembers and looks at all the pastry, I casually walk over to where the boy is standing.

I pretend to look at all the pastries from bottom to top I want to be distracted but I look over at the brown-haired boy in total curiosity.

I casually say, "Hi."

I don't want him to think I am weird. I just am so stuck on his old timey style and the white handkerchief sticking out of his brown overalls. Surprisingly the boy doesn't answer and keeps looking at one pastry.

For a second time, but a bit louder, I say, "Hi!"

He still looks at the one pastry like I am invisible!

Meanwhile, while Ellie is ordering the boy at the counter looks at me with curiosity while I try to get the boy's attention.

Lizzy pulls me over and says, "Stop trying to get the boys attention please it's embarrassing and he's not even looking at you!"

When Liz yells that the boy at the counter looks at us like we are crazy people.

Lizzy sighs then yells at me and says, "We're getting our pastries and leaving!"

Lizzy looks very mad she does not like being looked at like she is a psycho, I mean, to be honest, I mean, no one does. I sigh, then just as I sit down on the waiting bench I blink and the boy is gone from looking at the pastry and is outside of the shop peacefully eating it. And I didn't hear a loud "ding!" from the cash register and I didn't see him move from the

spot he was in. I want to yell “shop lifter!” but once I look back through the window he vanishes.

Once we get home mom yells at us without even asking us what we did out of the house but still mom yells at us and says, “Change of plans pack your bags were going to the hotel in an hour!”

I look over at the clock, “I-in one hour!?”

Furiously I stomp across the hallway to my room. Even though Lizzy says not to eat my pastry because we were going to surprise mom, I still eat it. I take the light-brown jelly doughnut and with tears forming in my eyes I bite into it. It is hard at first but then I get into the middle. I smile. Ellie was right all the flavors and the tastes are breathtaking.

“Julie! Come down here and get the books you left on the kitchen table!”

I stop quickly. I shove my pastry in my pocket and run down the hallway to the kitchen table.

“Oh honey here you are! Please get your books!”

I go pick up *Little Women* and *Anne of Green Gables* then finally *A Wrinkle in Time*. Once I get those in my bag I run into my room to put the boxes in a pile and pack my backpack for the car. Lizzy steps in my room and for once I don’t mind.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“I-I guess I’m okay,” I say trying hard not to cry.

“You’re not okay,” she answers. “I-I am just I-I just want to stay here. I don’t want new friends or a n-new house,” I say now crying.

“Well if you think about it, you’ll technically still be with me and mom and... sure you’ll be a bit sad but you’ll have me to be there and your room could be just like this.”

What would have happened next is it cuts to them in the lobby of the hotel. Julie, catches a glimpse of the brown-haired boy but decides to leave it for tomorrow because it’s 1:00 am. So in the morning they grab breakfast and then head to their new house but once they got to their new house they saw the boy was their next door neighbor. Then they ask their neighbor if she knows the boy but then she says, “girls, that boy died in 1915 in this house.”

This piece’s strongest connections are to the first and last parts of this theme. For the first, Celeste’s point of view shows her view of her experience as a teacher. The brief discussion of her career as a professional educator brings out this side of her. Although more subtle, this is also present when she discusses her relationship with Stella. Above all, she sees herself as a role model for Stella, and this is similar to one of the main roles that teachers possess. In addition, Reuben’s point of view shows him trying to justify both of the choices he could make. He unintentionally finds the merit in Celeste as a person rather than information on a page. Both of these connections exist as elements that were influenced by the theme for the session.

Introspection By Shayna Finkelstein Age: 16

CELESTE

“Order! Order in the court!” The judge bangs a gavel on his desk, silencing the room.

I sit at the witness stand. The plush chair that would usually be a luxury seems mocking, as I know this will be the last time in a while that I will be this comfortable. The individual threads seem to poke into me like spikes. I know that the trial is just a formality – at this point, I am already doomed. The proceedings begin, but I can’t focus. What’s the point? In a few days’ time I will be facing time in jail or –

“Execution immediately following this trial.” I shudder. I struggle to keep my breathing steady. I find myself fidgeting with the tassels on my shorts. I’m not in danger of a prison sentence here. I’m in danger, period. I was only informed that there would be a trial at all 3 days ago, but now this is all so much *more*. More suspense. More intensity. More risks.

I scan the room, attempting to memorize the face of each person in attendance. My stomach drops and my heart skips a beat when I see a small group of my 5th grade students. I swallow hard, the disbelief like a rock pinning my legs to the seat. I’ve been teaching for less than a year, and yet these kids chose to come see this today. Have I made that much of an impact? I have seen firsthand the complexity of decisions that these kids can make, and I have no doubt they made this one, yet I’m afraid to see their small faces bear the brunt of today’s verdict. I’ve grown to appreciate each of them, and right now there is little I wouldn’t do in order to protect them from this.

I scan the dark wooden walls of the courtroom. Though the

individual seats are comfortable, the room as a whole looks sterile, professional over everything else. The furniture is sparse. Aside from the seats and assorted desks, little is present in the room. The whole environment gives an almost barren look, like the people in attendance today are the only ones that have been here in years.

As my eyes continue to wander, my mind drifts to the gravity of the situation. I have spent almost 40 years of my life in the astronomy field, studying gravity, planets, and the area surrounding the world in which we live, and yet I can barely comprehend the weight that these few hours will have on my family. I see them, sitting over to the far right.

Stella sits with her head in her hands, her dark curls spilling over like pasta from an overfilled bowl. Her body is racked by hard sobs, her shuddering so constant it almost seems like she's not moving at all. Stella's a smart kid - I'm sure she is aware of how this trial will end. I want to tell her that everything will be okay, that all of this will be resolved soon, but I know the resolution isn't one she will like. Stella's always been an emotional kid, wearing her heart on her sleeve. Everyone seems to think that's inherently detrimental, but it may be what helps her through what is sure to be a dark time. Fragile she may be, she has never been afraid to ask for help when she needs it. As much as she struggles sometimes, I have never seen her lacking the strength to overcome any obstacle. I can only hope it will be the same now.

Sitting right next to Stella, my husband is doing his best to put up a strong front. *Matthew*. His chapped lips, his dark stubble and long lashes. Sitting there is the face I've memorized over long years of being together. He's always been kind of rough-and-tumble, not afraid to get his hands dirty. He's strong in almost every sense of the word, and that is part of what drew me to him over 20 years ago. I study his face: by some miracle, he seems composed, almost calm. His features barely move, almost as if they were carved from stone.

Upon further inspection, the façade doesn't break, or even crack. He isn't feigning his composure. He isn't broken inside, he isn't hurt. There is no pain in his eyes, no regret. Until now, I never had hard feelings about his turning me in. As hard as it was for both of us, it was his job. As a police officer, he needed to be neutral. His refusal to turn me in would have only led to more dire consequences – for both of us.

I remember being pulled away from my home, afraid to protest for fear of endangering Matthew or Stella. I closed my eyes for most of the walk, trying to blot out the knowledge of what was happening. I didn't

know what the trial was for, or even when it would take place. I was locked in a cold, dark cell for almost three days, after which I was brought here. I spent those long days trying to think of any crime I may have committed and forgotten about- anything to prepare for this trial. I wanted to give myself any chance to come out of this unscathed, even a miniscule one.

I remember the temptation to give in, to simply let myself be punished. But I refused to give in. I pushed through, determined. It wasn't easy. Really, I almost gave up more times than I could count, but I knew that I only had one chance, that there would be no going back once a verdict was delivered, so I pushed myself to keep going.

There was no time for resentment, and there wouldn't have been anger present anyway. That whole time, I knew that Matthew was only doing his job. I didn't like it, of course, but I accepted it. Either way, I knew there was nothing I could do to change it. I didn't spend time fixating on what Matthew had done for that exact reason.

Now, though, I realize it was all just a play. I was just a pawn in his elaborate game of chess, something he was ready to sacrifice when it was convenient for him. All this time, I have thought that he was intending to be strong for me and for Stella, so that the two of us may have slightly less to deal with, but that wasn't it at all. He never showed any emotion because he didn't have any to show. Upon realizing all this, anger bubbles in my stomach, a sort of primal rage threatening to overtake me. Over the years, I've learned to reign in strong feelings, but now may be my last chance to let them through at all.

We make eye contact. I glare at him, hoping to show through my gaze the pure rage that I feel towards him right now. But then Stella looks up, and I can't help but soften. As upset as I am with the man who claimed to love me, who promised to care for me as long as possible, Stella has done nothing to deserve that same anger. The tears in her dark brown eyes, about ready to be shed, make me want nothing more than to run over and wrap her in a hug. If this trial was for something family related, rushing up to her may even have helped my case. But here and now, due to the situation, I am unable to. My physical restraints keep me from offering anything but a sympathetic smile.

REUBEN

This trial is routine, easy. Nobody needs to know that it is a favor for a friend. Nobody suspects that I helped the defendant's husband stitch together the 'evidence.' As the lawyer for the prosecution, I see no reason that anyone should find out.

But then, I glance at the witness stand, ready to begin my questioning. I see the defendant's sad smile, and I think back to the information I read about her before accepting the case. I immediately regret it. Now, the information is no longer facts on a page. It is no longer statistics in a uniform chart. It is emotions and experiences, interactions and improvements. Most of all, it is *people*. Not ink on a page. Not a part of a statistic. A person. A real, living person.

Her dark skin is tearstained and slightly wrinkled. The color in her clothes is fading, and they are torn in a variety of places. Looking down, I see the soles of her shoes are worn. They can't be comfortable. And yet, my instinct isn't to put her out of her misery. By impulse, I want to help her- to offer her a handkerchief to wipe her face and some money to improve her life. It's a shame, then, that I was hired to do the exact opposite.

I could keep going, continue giving the case my all. Our evidence is strong, our case even stronger. We could win. I know we could. But then, we would be condemning an innocent woman to death. A teacher. A mother. A wife. She would be gone, and yet most of the world's population would not bat an eye. Most of them would not know, and the vast majority of those who did would not care.

I turn to look behind me, at the man who orchestrated this trial. He has been pulling the strings and passing it off as the workings of the legal systems. I have been helping him. We have been working on this intricate plot for almost a year now.

REUBEN

CELESTE

Matthew winks at me, sure that I will continue to give this my all.

I take a deep breath, preparing for the questions.

Until now, I would have thought I knew better than to disobey him.

I know better than to expect this will be easy.

Suddenly, I've begun to question everything.

Looking at the lawyer, I suddenly begin to question everything.

Here goes nothing.

Here goes everything.

Planned Ending

Reuben questions Celeste, seeming to feed her questions that lead to her strengths, but he then presents the evidence and his arguments. When doing so, he attempts to convince the judges that Celeste is indeed guilty. It's then a toss-up over what the judges will decide. Ultimately, in a 4-3 vote, Celeste is ruled guilty and executed less than an hour later.

[Insert Title Here] By Benjamin Barack Age: 16

Hello.

Oh? Were you not expecting to be directly addressed by a narrator today?

Well, too bad. I'm narrating this now, ya pampered brats. Back in my day, we wanted surprises in our entertainment. But now... Now we got superhero movies that are all the [CENSORED BY EDITORIAL]ing same. Simplistic morality-plays that somehow make supposed-adults cry. Bah!

Y'know, I'm supposed to be narrating some generic high fantasy novel, but forget that plotline! This is MY book now, and you're not going to take it away from me, you snollygosters!

Go ahead. By all means, leave now to do something else. I didn't want you here in the first place!

Anyway, I suppose I still haven't decided on a name for myself. How about... Isaiah? Yeah, Isaiah. I like the sound of that. Very regal.

I should probably also give myself a personality, and looks too while we're at it. Let's say, "Grumpy, Jewish, tall but not too tall, in his early 30s... A real George Constanza type, but with hair. Oh, and he wears lots of brown." That oughta do it.

I guess I'll have to think of some other characters now. After all, we can't have a story that consists solely of me!

Okay then. Parents are dull, so I won't give myself any a those... Love-triangles are the worst, so no romantic partners either...

How about a sister? Yeah, that's it! Someone who knows me like the back of my hand.

That could be fun. I've never had a sister before. Then again, I've never really had anyone before!

Alright, lemme make the accommodations and... There!

"Good morning, Iza," my sister says, materializing into thin air. She's in her late 20s, about a head shorter than me, with dirty-blond hair that's been partially dyed to look like green sea foam. Her smile's a bit crooked, and her eyes are a deep hazelnut brown. She wears a baseball costume that's one size too big, complete with a deep-purple cap that has seen some wear and tear.

I feel... disoriented. Suddenly having memories of things you never lived through will do that to you. But I right myself without too much difficulty, and I don't think she notices. "It's actually afternoon," I say.

"Hmm. Whatever. Are ya gonna help me with my bags or not?"

"What bags?"

"You know. My luggage? Why else would we be at baggage-claim?"

And all around me, what was hazy and indistinct comes into sharp focus. Yes... We're in an airport's baggage-claim. I'm here to pick up my sister, who'll be rooming with me throughout the summer.

Dazed, I help her move her bags to the side of the road. She hails a cab, I throw the bags into the back, and we both sit down on the leather cushions.

The driver turns to me. "Where to, mac?"

"625 Craven Street," I say. "I'll pay you extra if ya don't make any chit-chat."

"Deal."

On second thought, some talking might do us some good. The silence is... uncomfortable, like a sauna that goes on for too long, to the point where, by the end, you're just a melted *glop* of a human. Then again, maybe that's just the heat talking.

I turn to face my sister head-on. "Uh, how was your flight?"

She averts her gaze, staring out the window. "Fine. Nobody asked for an autograph, which was nice. And the in-flight movie was good too."

"Oh, really? What was it?"

"This weird quasi-prequel to *The Merchant of Venice*, about, like, the origins of the merchant? But he dies at the end, so he COULDN'T have been the merchant of the play..."

"But, then why bother making an origin movie at all?"

"Yeah, exactly! And he was a pirate, and there were aliens... I dunno, Iza, it was freaking weird."

I nod, projecting calm, but inside my head's racing. In all the excitement of creating a person, I forgot to answer a simple question. What's my sister's name? I've made this far without having to say it, but it's gonna come up eventually! Gotta think up somethin' now...

Elise? Chloe? Burn-a-death Peters? Nah, none o' those quite fit.

I got it! Lorna!

"So, Lorna," I say, all cool and collected-like, "I hav--"

"Why are you acting so weird?"

"What? I'm completely normal! You're the one who's being strange."

“What’s so weird about me?”

“Well, for one, you’re still wearing your costume even tho-“

“Uniform.”

“Whatever! You’re still wearing it, even though you have the day off and you supposedly don’t like fans mobbing ya. In fact, do you know what I think?” I can feel the sweat come off my brow.

“No, I don’t.”

“I think that you like all the attention. I think that you’ve always hated this city and the fact that you have to return here is killing you on the inside.”

I’m making all of that up, of course. Then again, I’m making this entire thing up, so it might be “true”. Whatever that means.

But now that I think about it... If I can shape this reality according to my whims, perhaps I can alter Lorna? Make her more cheerful, more amicable? On the one hand, that’s definitely not a good thing to do. But on the other hand... could I **make** it good?

Best not to think about it.

“You’re wrong,” Lorna says. “I’ve never felt ashamed of this place. I simply... outgrew it. Like a uniform that doesn’t fit anymore.”

“Sure, sure,” I say. “Hey, since you keep bringing it up, what’s the difference between a costume and a uniform anyway?”

“A costume is what you pretend to be. A uniform is what you are. So it’s a crying shame that there isn’t a uniform for burnout older brothers.”

“OKAY, THAT’S IT. STOP EVERYTHING!” Everything skitters to a halt. I breathe for a second, then turn to look at you. Yes, **you**. You’ve been peering over my shoulder this whole time, haven’t you? Well, no longer. I might let you see some more at a later date, but for now, this is as far as you go.

Enjoy the other stories in the chapbook, ya muk-muks.