

Creative Writing

Chapbook

Session Two

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!

Creative Writing Arts Mentor: Carly Husick

Instructors:

Olivia Solomon - Olim

Alana Goldman - Olim

Anna Vernick - Bonim

Susie Berg - Bonim and Olim

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*This is an experimental poem I wrote in response to the “Find in every person their merit” theme. The poem is from the perspective of two narrators: one who believes that their distrust in humanity is sound and well-informed, and another who condemns these beliefs. The second one owns a sandwich shop.*

**The Burning Building by Sam Zaslow-Braverman Age: 16**

If I have to be honest, I’m having some trouble

Making eye contact with strangers

If a building collapses, and I’m covered with rubble

Will they leave me there, in danger?

My trust in the common man is gone

Whether that’s good, I’m not sure

The decent are nothing more than pawns

In the game twixt bad and worse

Grabs for grabs for grabs for power

And for what? The world’s not infinite

I wish I could scream louder

I’d scream one thing, and this would be it:

**Come on down to Larry’s Sandwich Hut, where the value of your dollar makes you wanna holler! Our scrumptious salami sandwiches are seventeen percent off for a limited time, and when you buy our Yummy-In-My-Tummy Tater Tot Super-Sized Satchel, you’ll get select fountain drinks free of charge! Now *that’s* something to smile about! Larry’s Sandwich Hut: Relish the Prices!**

I’m scared of people and their minds

‘Cause we’ll save ourselves whenever we must

A tornado starts, you’re left behind

Choking on the stampede’s dust

When the building’s on fire and you have to get out

Who will you save? A stranger? A friend?

Time’s running out! Without a doubt

No matter your choice, a life will end

So, who will it be? You have to choose

Yourself or another? I’ll guess your answer

I’d do the same, cause it’s just human instinct

But you wanna know what else is human instinct?

**Loving the delicious food down at Larry’s Sandwich Hut! My views on the merit of humanity may be skewed and depraved, but our prices sure aren’t! The only things we here at Larry’s Sandwich Hut would save from a burning building are our perfect pastrami platters, served on a beguiling brioche bun and a side of Cape Cod chips! For a limited time, these delicious deli meats are Larry’s treat! Just use the promo code “CRY-FOR-HELP” at checkout on the all-new Larry’s Sandwich Hut app! Larry’s Sandwich Hut: Eat, bubelach, eat!**

Maybe I’m wrong, but I don’t think I am

**That’s right! The only thing I’m wrong about is that our food is bad! But it isn’t! It’s tasty!**

Hastily running for the exit, leaving the dying behind

**Besides, who wouldn’t want to run for the exit, cause the further you are from a burning building, the closer you are to Larry—**

--Carry that with you, ponder it despondently

**Responsibly head on over to the ‘Hut, everyone’s dying to get in!**

Begin to think about what you could do bet—

**--ter eat our food or I’m out of a job! Hahahaha!**

We need better people to make the world a better place

**Race you to Larry’s!**

Don’t tarry, just evaluate--

**--Appreciate the savings**

Craving a reason--

**--Tis the season for sandwich--**

--Anguish over the state of--

**-- our food is better than ever!**

Never doubt for a second--

**--That our facilities have passed the health inspec—**

--t your value—

**--of your dollar makes you wanna**

Holler

**Holler**

HOLLER

**HOLLER**

**Yeah, so come on down to Larry’s Sandwich Hut, for a limited time, we have a lot of whatever this is.**

**Prison Meeting**

*INT. WARDEN'S OFFICE - DAY*

*Guards MURPHY and AARON stand in front of a crowd of guards, all of whom are crammed into the small room. The two are before an enraged WARDEN.*

AARON

Well, I'll be the first to say it. None of us could've seen that coming.

MURPHY

It's all pretty confusing. We're very confused about it.

AARON

Extremely confused.

*The guards echo this sentiment.*

MURPHY

And shocked. Don't forget shocked.

AARON

Ohyah, extremely shocked. Shocked beyond belief.

*The guards nod and agree.*

MURPHY

Also we're angry. Tell 'im how angry we are, Aar.

AARON

Sir, we are peeved.

*The guards affirm this statement.*

AARON (cont'd)

We are peeved like heck. Matter of fact, we're so peeved, that--

WARDEN

SHUT YOUR TRAP!

*Murphy and Aaron shut their traps.*

WARDEN (cont'd)

How could one of my inmates have dug a tunnel all the way from the yard to the parking lot without any of you morons noticing?

*Silence.*

MURPHY

W-well, sir, y' see, Jack's having a bit of a rough time at home lately. We've been putting a lot of our collective effort into--

WARDEN

Who's Jack?

MURPHY

He's under your employ, sir. First guard you ever hired.

WARDEN

What's his problem?

MURPHY

I mean, Jack can tell you hisself. He's right behind me. You alright with that, Jackie?

JACK (O.S)

I mean, it's a personal issue, Murph. I dunno if I oughta--

MURPHY

All part of the healing process, Jackie.

*JACK, a short prisoner behind Murphy, squeezes his way to the front of the crowd.*

WARDEN

Jack, what's your problem?

JACK

Well, uhh...

AARON

The man's time is valuable, Jack. Speed it up!

WARDEN

Speed it up, Jack.

JACK

Well, the wife and I... we aren't doing so hot. She moved out just a week ago, an'-- well, you're putting

me in a real uncomfortable position here, Murph--

MURPHY

How many times I gotta tell you, Jackie? It's part of the healing process!

WARDEN

Don't waste my time here, Jack.

JACK

Well, uh, if you have to know... she took my stamp collection with her.

*Beat. The warden is completely nonplussed.*

WARDEN

Your... your what?

AARON

His stamp collection, sir. Loved it like a son, he did.

MURPHY

Loved it like a son.

WARDEN

I heard you the first time.

*Beat.*

AARON

So then... why'd you ask what?

WARDEN

Listen here, you jackaloon. I hired you, and everyone else in this room to make sure no inmates make it even two inches from the prison walls. And if you find yourself incapable of such an inconvenient task, then—

MURPHY

Sir, in all fairness, the collection's worth a fair amount.

WARDEN

Wait, how much?

JACK

Well, again, this is really more of a private--

MURPHY

For the last time, Jack, it's part of the healing process! Quit wasting the boss' time and give us a ballpark figure!

WARDEN

Give us a ballpark figure, Jack.

JACK

Uh... well, I guess I should mention before I get into it that the average stamp collection here in the United States is about three dollars and forty-seven cents.

WARDEN

And how much is yours worth?

JACK

Well... uh... gosh, I suppose you could say it's comparatively worth a lot of money.

*Beat. The warden raises an eyebrow.*

JACK (cont'd)

Nine dollars and sixty-eight cents.

WARDEN

You mean to tell me that you and your friends let a murderer out of my prison and into society over a ten-dollar stamp collection?

AARON

Well, as he said, it was nine dollars and sixty-eight cents, but I guess if you're privy to rounding

up--

WARDEN

I AM PRIVY TO THE LAW, YOU BUFFOON!

*Aaron begins to cry.*

WARDEN (cont'd)

Get your sorry self out of my office. You're done here.

*Aaron nods and crams his way through the crowd of guards to reach the door, which closes promptly.*

WARDEN (cont'd)

Anyone have anything else they feel like telling me?

*A guard raises their hand.*

WARDEN (cont'd)

Yes?

GUARD

I had a cramp at the time. In my leg.

WARDEN

He'd been tunneling for two weeks. How on earth could you have had a cramp for two straight weeks?

*The guard looks like a deer in headlights. He knows he's been caught in a lie.*

GUARD

I don't eat very much potassium. That could be it.

*The warden puts his hand to his face.*

OTHER GUARD

Bananas have a lot of potassium, if you're looking to improve your intake.

GUARD

I sure am, but they aren't cheap.

OTHER GUARD

I mean, you could take supplements.

GUARD

That's true.

OTHER GUARD

You can get those at any ol' pharmacy. Over-the-counter.

THE END.

*I’m relating this story to the line “make for yourself a teacher” because Keaton is learning so many new things about himself and his emotions during these unfamiliar experiences. I can also relate it to “acquire for yourself a friend” because he found someone new after coming to terms with the fact that he can’t be alone.*

**Alone on Emerson by Avery Lansman Age: 15**

Today marks the first weekend with my siblings away at collage. I know they wouldn’t spend time with me anyway, but it still feels weird, like baby birds leaving the nest but they left one behind. I know it’s not my time to leave the nest, but I can’t help but feeling a little abandoned, especially since Dad is out on a work trip this weekend. I am completely alone. I could call up my friends and see what they’re up to, but honestly, I don’t want to. I feel like I should be taking advantage of the time I have to myself. For most high school boys, that would mean throwing parties and having girls in their room, but all I want to do is blast my music and go skating past midnight.

If the twins were here, Charlotte would probably be baking or studying in her room and Xavier would be watching a movie on his computer or filming whatever stupid stuff I’m doing. But like I said, they’re not here. I am one person, alone in a house built for five people. I put my headphones in because even though I can listen to music out loud, it still feels unnatural. Who cares, this whole experience feels unnatural. I take them out and run upstairs to my CD player. I decide to listen to Gorillaz and turn the volume almost all the way up When I get back downstairs, I grab my skateboard and ride it in circles on the hard wood floor. It makes a rumbling noise under the wheels, totally different from the noise it makes outside. I’ve never felt like this before, it’s a new sense of freedom in my own home.

I can do whatever I want. It hasn’t really hit me until now that there’s no one here to stop me. I ride into the couch and slam my body into the cushions. Xavier texts me. It’s the videos he uploaded from a couple weeks ago, when he was still here. It’s of us on the hike Charlotte made us go on. She was sad about leaving the town she grew up in and never felt like she truly experienced it.

The video takes a minute to download. It starts with me in frame, walking ahead of Xavier. You can hear him say, “Keaton, look like you’re having fun.” I laughed back at him because I probably wasn’t having fun.

Xavier has the most amazing laugh, and it’s a rare sound, I’m happy to have it on video with me now. “I can see the Elementary School from here,” Charlotte says from a distance. The camera moved over to Charlotte who had one hand blocking the sun from her eyes and the other pointing off at the school. You can hear the buzzing noise Xavier’s camera makes when he zooms in because he can’t afford a new one. The rest of the video goes on like that, capturing candid moments between me and my siblings. Maybe I should have appreciated those times more, but it’s too late now.

My body is so absorbed into the couch that I consider staying here until morning. It’s already 7’oclock, I should start considering what to do about dinner. I don’t know how to cook, that was Charlotte’s thing, and I don’t know how to order food, that was Xavier’s thing. If you’re wondering, Dad’s thing was letting his children deal with stuff that parents should.

The most brilliant idea pops into my head that actually motivates me to get off the couch. I get on my skateboard again and ride over to the freezer. The cool air hits my face as I reach for the twins’ leftover graduation cake. It’s not like they’re here to eat it. The question now is, how do I defrost cake, and fast? The oven bakes the cake, maybe it can defrost it? Toaster, maybe? Microwave, definitely microwave. I get out a knife but decide it would be easier to heat up the whole thing and cut it after. Genius. I feel proud of myself for being independent. There’s thirty seconds left on the microwave, I’m so excited.

“Shoot, where’d my knife go?” Out of nowhere I hear a loud bang and watch the microwave light up from the inside.

“No no no no no no no no!” I open the door to the microwave, bad idea. The flames grow larger with the increase of oxygen. I nearly trip off my skateboard and scramble to find a bug cup and fill it with water. My heart is racing, I’m praying the fire alarm doesn’t go off and send an alert to Dad. I throw the water at the flames without a clear state of mind advising me where to aim or a proper method. It only defuses it a little, so I run back for more water.

Once the smoke clears, I see the black burnt inside and a very wet and unappealing cake. Exhausted, I collapse on the floor and stair up at the mess I’ve made. Not thinking straight, I call Charlotte.

She answers on the second ring, “Keaton?”

I don’t even know what to say or why I called her in the first place, she’d just be disappointed in me and tell Dad.

“Hello, are you okay?” she sounds more worried. I hang up, hearing her voice is the breaking point for me. Charlotte likes to act like my mother, and as far as I know, nobody likes to upset their mother. I hug my knees to my chest and start crying.

Cleaning the cake out of the microwave makes me even more sad, so I pick myself up and now I’m on my way to Izzy’s Diner to grab a milkshake. I may not deserve it after what happened, but I really want it. I ride past my stolen street sign that’s been replaced by a piece of cardboard. Emerson St., never fails. A little further down, I pass a house with moving trucks and an unfamiliar family standing outside. I guess Mrs. Feller finally kicked the bucket.

Bells chime as I open the door to Izzy’s. I’m immediately welcomed by one of Xavier’s old friends, a burnout waiter who will probably never leave this town.

“Hey Keaton! Cookies and Crème, I assume?”

“To go please,” I reply.

Can’t risk bumping into any of my friends without an excuse not to hang out. There are two skate parks in my town, one is where all my friends and other older kids go, but the other one is more for children who don’t stay out past 8 pm. I like to go there when it’s empty. The waiter comes back with my milkshake.

“Thanks Luke,” I say heading out

“No prob!” he replies. The milkshake’s not the best, but what can you expect from Luke?

I’m riding down the street, headed to the empty park with my headphones and my milkshake. I’m happier than ever, completely forgetting about the worries I face back at home. You know, the loneliness and the microwave.

When I make it to the park, I’m surprised to see that it is, in fact, not empty. I recognize the girl from the moving trucks at Mrs. Feller’s old house. I guess she found my hiding spot. She must be smart because out of all the people in this town, she’s the first one to find it, and it’s only her first day. Maybe I should leave and let her be alone. This is my spot, if I go home and be alone with my thoughts again, that may just kill me. On the other hand, she might apricate a new friend, I know I would.

It’s too late to make a decision, she’s already looked at me and gave me a friendly smile. My heart is racing as she picks up her board and walks over to me. I can see her more clearly now; she has brown eyes and dark curly hair, pulled into a ponytail. Her smile is so familiar and kind, you can’t help but smile back. She now stands one foot away from me.

“Hi, I’m Sloan.”

*The main character of my story, Eric, finds friends just like him, which relates to “acquire for yourself a friend” and “find in every person their merit.”*

**The Phantom & the Slime by Ari Cohen age: 12**

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The cup of coffee sways back and forth with every step I take, like the contents are trying to topple over the sides of the container. The burning liquid adds to the sensation of the thin, scratchy paper lining on the slightly heavy, but hollow cup, brushing against my hands. I watch as my feet glide forward with every step I take. The pattern of each step sends me into a trance. Right foot forward, then the left, repeating over and over again. The recent news is worrying, and difficult to think about. But, since my mind’s full of boring thoughts, it’s like my brain is forcing me to think about it. “Actual footage of a human-like creature soaring through the skies!” At least, that’s what the news reporter had said. It’s not like anyone would believe it, right? Even if the ‘creature’ were caught on camera, people would think that it’s photoshopped or staged.

BONK-K-k- A sharp pain darts through my forehead, causing me to fall over. I snap out of my daze to find I had run into a stop sign. Swiftly rising to my feet, I clutch my head, which is pulsating in pain. I look down at the coffee forming a puddle next to me. Suddenly, a squeaky chuckle catches me off guard. It’s Brendan; I forgot he was there.

“Pay attention, Eric. You’re going to hurt yourself!” he says, in between chuckles.

I glare at him as I pick up the empty cup and store it in my bag, knowing that he was right. Brendan was trying to warn me rather than mock me.

“Fine, though I’m not used to walking--”

Panic strikes his face. “THE BUSY STREETS!!” he shouts over me, shaking his head and grinding his teeth, signaling me to play along.

We’re standing at the corner of a random sidewalk, and the people of Manhattan walk, jog, and run by-- everyone at a different pace, painting a sea of people. However, none look at us. Not even a glance in our direction.

“Yeah...” I lie. I don’t see why he stopped me. No one’s even paying the slightest bit of attention to us.

Brendan slides his hand into his pocket and pulls out his phone. “It’s 6:55 In the morning and we need to be at school by 7:00! We’re gonna be late!” he cries.

We run the rest of the way to a modern building, that’s supposedly our new school. The smooth grey concrete sculpting the cube shaped building, supports too many windows to count, it’s a wide building, and looks pretty new. Three glass doors are spread out in front of where I’m standing. I’m super excited, a new school, and creatures… uhm, I mean humans, just like me! Brendan on the other hand seems to be a little bit queasy. He’s fiddling with his short, curly, uneven, forest green hair.

I place a hand on his shoulder, “Listen, it’s going to be fine. The people here are just like us.”

He nods and brushes my hand off. Rude.

I push the clear doors open with a subtle swoosh and creak. People are swarming the halls, talking to each other. ‘Maybe they’re waiting for something?’ I wonder.

“ALRIGHT STUDENTS!” A very loud, but cheery voice suddenly announces, “PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE GYMNASIUM!”

At the exact moment the announcer’s voice disappears, I get caught up in the swarm of people pushing and shoving each other trying to make their way to the front, of course there’s no point in this, but that’s just how people are. Everyone wants to be the first one to the gymnasium.

At first the gym smells of old socks and sweaty teenagers, but I quickly adapt to the awful scent. Its ceiling is extremely high up. I couldn’t really get a good glimpse of most of the huge space because people are blocking my sight. I mean, it is true that I’m tall, 5’10, but so many others here are tall too. That’s not surprising, however.

All of us stand in a huge uhhh, well, deformed square? Yeah, that’s what I’ll call it. Everyone’s spread out standing on the wooden gym floor. I’d say that I’m standing at about the middle of the deformed square, fidgeting with my thumbs, next to Brendan.

“Alright, students!” The same peppy voice that announced before, bellows. The announcer gets even louder as they make their way to the stage in the front of the gym. A small woman looks down at us from the raised platform, holding a microphone in her left hand.

A huge grin forms on her chubby face, “Drop the disguises!”

The room suddenly fills with swirling colors, and everyone seems to change. As I drop my disguise, I turn to Brendan, but he doesn’t look like the Brendan I was walking with before. He’s literally a puddle of goo on the ground. Slowly rising out of the center of the green liquid, his entire body and all of his clothing appear to be pale green and translucent. Curious to see what everyone is, I turn my head; one teenager catches my eye. She was looking down at a book, seemingly unaware of what was happening around her. Or that’s what I thought. She turns to me and throws the book in the air, quickly zooming after it with giant golden wings that popped out of her back. She catches the book in her (also giant) orange claws milliseconds after. Her colossal poufy hair swishes back and forth.

*To be continued – P.S. I’d like to turn this into a novel!*

*My story relates to acquire for yourself a friend because Roman and Orlando end up becoming close.*

**Roman and Orland Part 1 by Joshua Robinson Age: 15**

Roman is a boy that just moved to California, full of rage, 16 years old, lost both of his parents in a car accident and is now in foster care. People took advantage of him whenever he let them in his bubble of trust. For example, when Roman was 15 years old, he had three people he would communicate with consistently. But suddenly those three people distanced themselves from him for no apparent reason but came to him whenever they needed help with homework or were having relationship issues. Because of this Roman has made a promise to himself to not to open up to anyone because they weren’t going to do anything but tear him apart.

One day Roman was at school getting his lunch and he noticed a new student named Orlando in the lunch line but Roman didn’t seem to care. Orlando then proceeded to get some fruit from the fruit bowl but while he was headed there, he unintentionally bumped into Roman which caused Roman to get angry and growl and no matter how many times Orlando apologized Roman continued to growl, which frightened Orlando.

A few days later Orlando seen Roman in the hallways and decided to approach him.

Roman told Orlando, “Don’t you dare come any closer,” in an angry manner and continued to walk to his next class and it confused Orlando because he just couldn’t understand why Roman was being so difficult in that moment. After taking a few minutes to think about what Roman told him he sprinted to Roman and tapped him on the shoulder which put Roman in a rage because he felt as though Orlando disrespected his bubble.

Roman then turned around dropped his backpack and pounced onto Orlando and started hitting him. Security then rushed to break up the scuffle and Roman got suspended for one week and when he got home his mom Jessica told him she had something to tell him.

When Roman and Jessica got home, she told him that she was disappointed in him for resorting to violence instead of using the talk it out door or the let it go door. She then told Roman that she had received a letter stating that Orlando and Roman are biological brothers and Orlando’s mom has been looking for Roman for a long time.

Roman then responded and said “I don’t care, he still disrespected my bubble,” then went to his room and did not come back out for the rest of the night.

Following the incident that took place at school last week Orlando vowed to never speak to Roman ever again but both Orlando’s parent Karlie and Jessica wanted to change that. They just recently spoke on the phone and agreed that all of them will go out for some good ole steak on the Friday coming up.

Friday had finally come, and everyone met up for dinner. Although Orlando was excited for the steak, he was not happy to see Roman and tried to walk away but was forced to sit down because his food had been ordered. Jessica had started off the conversation by explaining how sorry Roman was for what he did.

Roman then jumped in and said, “I am not sorry for what I did, you got what you deserved.”

Orlando then got upset and shouted, “I hate you,” across the room.

Both parents then intervened and said, “You are brothers at the end of the day, we aren’t leaving until we come out with some type of agreement PERIODTT.”

Roman and Orlando started yelling once again but not at each other. They were yelling at their parents complaining about how it’s their fault because they did not tell them they were related.

Jessica said, “It’s not my fault because I didn’t know, so sit down because the steak is coming, and I paid too much money for it to go to waste.”

As everyone was eating their steak the waiter, that couldn’t help but hear all of the commotion going on, stepped in and said, “Maybe you guys should sit at a different table and have a one to one conversation.”

Both parents agreed and said, “That’ll be great, thanks for the idea.” Then told both Orlando and Roman to go to the other table and talk. Both hesitated but decided to go get it over with.

They began to talk and the next thing you know the screaming started. Karlie then ran over to the table while Jessica was still eating to try to defuse the situation, but it didn’t seem to work. After trying several things, she then yelled, “HEYYYY” and that got the attention of both Roman and Orlando.

Karlie then said “I’m sick and tired of the yelling, you are both brothers and will act like it, I am going to walk away and come back in 5 minutes and if you guys don’t come to an agreement you won’t like what I am going to do.” She then walked back to enjoy her meal and 5 minutes had passed and when she turned to look at Orlando and Roman, she was shocked at what she saw. They were actually having a conversation.

Both Jessica and Karlie approached the table they were at and said, “Hey you guys, what’s going on.”

Orlando then responded and said, “Turns out we both have a lot in common, we both love Nicki Minaj and know pretty much everything about her.”

After constant laughter Orlando and Roman said, “I’m happy we are brothers.” After they were done with their meal they left, went home and kept in contact ever since.

To Be Continued…

**Dear Nicki Minaj,**

Your rapping skills are so good

Your music is so good

You’re the reason I love long hair I hope that’s understood

Ever since a kid I loved you so I can say that I am a barb

Always dreamed of buying a hot pink Barbie car

You look good in Fendi, Gucci and definitely Prada

I shed a few tears when I heard the news about your father

No one can compete with you, not the city girls, not Cardi and not Megan

You’ve been rapping for about 12 years you are such a blessing

I love Super Bass, Pills and Potions and Starships

I remember you saying “starships were meant to fly”

Everyone has an idol, and you are mine

You haven’t won a Grammy but that’s because they are rigged

I love when you said “if you ever get famous don’t let your head get too big”

Because it can be taken today or tomorrow

I would love a pair of your heels I promise I won’t keep I’ll just borrow

I love that you give people chances despite how terrible rappers have used you in the past

You’re the type of person that’ll give all you have if someone just asked

If I were to meet you someone would have to pinch me or even hit me

You have inspired me in different ways that’s why I love Nicki

*I believe that humanity has much to learn from the natural world around us. From infinite galaxies to the tiniest microorganism, everything in our world carries value within it. In order to ‘make for myself a teacher’, I took inspiration from four natural elements of our world: sky, earth, fire, and water. Soul, my final element, represents learning from ourselves, which would make a teacher out of me. In these pieces, I hope to inspire you to take inspiration from both the world around you and inside your own mind when creating your art, no matter the medium.*

**World Sound by Nathan Gottlieb Age: 17**

**Sky Sound**

That boy over there

under rain-soaked trees;

laying on sand

with his head in the clouds,

sun-kissed skin

under moon-drunk skies.

His eyes shine like stars

in the darkest of nights;

galaxies spin

through a fog-clouded gaze,

thunder and lightning

abound in his head.

His words are like snowflakes

so fragile and cold;

but somehow his sentences

fly by on comets,

and words from his mouth

are a hurricane’s storm.

The wind blows around him

as day turns to night;

the boy sits and tells me

of planets and starlight,

while everything follows

the Earth’s lonely spin.

**Earth Sound**

There was a girl who roamed the Earth

because her heart was lonely;

she sought to find a worthy man

to wed with very quickly.

She traveled to the copper mines

to find one who was sturdy,

but all she saw were dusty men

who died when they were thirty.

The next she tried were gemstone shops

where ores would be refined,

but all she saw were tired men

who weren’t home by five.

She followed roots to sprawling farms

and found the men who ran them,

but these were muddy workers and

she didn’t really want them.

Finally, she found herself

a building made of stone,

foundation large and sturdy with

a man who worked alone.

She asked him to please marry her,

that she would love him so,

but all he did was shake his head

And tell her, “I think, no!

“My love works in the mines, you see,

and he told me of you.

You told him just the other day

you thought that he was crude!

“I’d say you don’t exactly have

a great amount of clout,

so I’ll be going now, and *you*

can see yourself right out.”

The girl ran off, her heart in two,

no men behind to follow;

the village breathed a tired sigh

and left her in her sorrow.

That was all the story’s end

of her who lived alone;

maybe she will find a man

to break her heart of stone.

Or maybe she will want and want

until her life is done!

**Fire Sound**

Fire.

burning, searing, burn burn *burn,* and

watch everything go up in Flames.

see us in the middle,

*there,*

in the Fire where everything dies,

in the smoke and ash and soot and dust

and lifetimes of oxygen

used up in one fell swoop.

Fire.

have a heartbeat, a life,

make a home.

warm warm *warm* in our hearts

and our food,

give it taste, sear the illness out,

make the water safe for us to drink.

help us live in a world made to kill us

by design.

careful, please,

with the Fire in your hands;

do not let it overstay its welcome

or you will find yourself

dead dead *dead* in the blaze

and there is no way out.

if you are not the Fire’s master,

it will be yours

and *you*

will not survive it.

**Water Sound**

Water has a simple flow,

a calm, serene refrain;

the ocean tides will come and go

while life floats by, and waves will show

a lifetime free of pain.

Some streams sing a siren’s song,

a secret now unfurled;

the currents there are tough and strong

and bring to life a story long

enough to snare the world.

Whirlpools have a weapon’s will,

the currents never slow;

the sea-foam brings intent to kill

and while it spins, the ocean’s chill

will quickly grow and grow.

Generations fade away

in giant, sprawling storms;

a lightning flash comes out to play

and ships collapse under the spray

where waves are bound to form.

Water has a twisted flow,

a secretive refrain;

the currents there will come and go

while ships collapse, and waves will show

a lifetime wrought with pain.

**Soul Sound**

Silent mouth and void-dark eyes.

He sits. He dreams. He waits.

Steps are soft and words are lies.

He stands. He looks. He waits.

Empty room and empty mind.

He walks. He sees. He waits.

Paper walls and things to find.

He stops. He blinks. He waits.

Somethingthere is watching him.

He looks. He cries. He waits.

Forced emotions to the brim.

He falls. He shakes. He waits.

Run and run and run and hide.

He screams. He waits. He waits.

All his fear is now inside.

He drowns. He waits. He waits.

Snow-white room and stone-cold heart.

He thinks. He waits. He waits.

If he feels, he’ll fall apart.

He looks. He waits. He waits.

Something’s in the darkness, still.

He waits. He waits. He waits.

Waiting for his heart to spill.

*(Wait. Wait. Wait.)*

*This story ties together with the theme in different ways. It connects on finding the merit in people by the way that Willow needs to look in the good parts in people and not the bad. Also, Willow shouldn’t judge people. Moreover, acquiring yourself a friend is a connection because she is doing all these things to get along with people more.*

**The Talk by Mara Sheldon Age: 14**

Willow wakes up to the chirping of the baby birds who are waiting for their food from their mother. Half-awake, she goes to grab her phone but ends up knocking everything off her bedside table. Now everything is on the floor that Willow must pick up. In frustration she goes to the bathroom to take a hot steamy shower to get ready for the day. Her mom said showers in the morning help people focus more. She turns the handle and feels the cold water hit her face; she flinches back and then proceeds to turn the handle until it’s the perfect temperature to where its hot enough where its steamy but doesn’t hurt. Willow washes her body and thinks about what she must do that day. She needs to take a geometry test and talk to her guidance counselor to see what higher level classes she can take. Willow thinks all her classes are way too easy and wants a challenge. After her shower she goes to put on her light washed skinny jeans and a shirt she got from the spelling bee she won two years ago.

“Come on down honey, I made you eggs,” her mom shouts from downstairs.

“Coming!” Willow hollers back. Walking down the stairs she can smell the bacon and eggs surrounding her as she makes her way to the kitchen. She grabs the hot sauce from the fridge to put on her sunny side up eggs that were cooked perfectly for her; the yolk is super runny, and the whites are fully cooked. The smell of the browned butter and salt makes her super happy and ready to devour it.

After eating her breakfast, she’s ready for a great day of learning. She takes her binder and books and shoves them in her bag. She struggles a little because there are so many books. After a good five minutes of stuffing things in her backpack she slips on her checkered vans. Willow’s out the door on her way to the bus stop. She walks a couple of blocks listening to the animals and cars pass by. While walking on the sidewalk she hears boy pass by on their bikes. They yell “nerd.” She sticks her tongue out back at them. The bus comes and she hops on. She sits in the front seat at the window and puts her backpack right next to her so no one can sit next to her. She proceeds to put on her headphones and listen to “Sit Still Look Pretty”. This song makes her feel like a #GIRLBOSS. Later a popular boy gets on the bus and asks Willow if he can sit next to her.

She says, “Do you have a 4.0 GPA?”.

“No?” he responds.

Willow says, “Then no,” in a rude manner.

The bus comes to a stop and makes it to Cranbrook Highschool. Willow gets off the bus quickly. She doesn’t want to be late to class. She needs to have perfect attendance.

Willow walks down the hall watching fellow classmates laugh and talk to their friends. No one meets up to Willow’s standards, so she doesn’t have friends. Willow makes it to her first class of the day. She sits in the front middle seat in the room. She is ready to take her test.

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As Willow leaves her final class, she stops by her guidance counselor. She makes it to the office. She is there to ask about higher level classes. Before Willow can ask Mrs. Allen for higher classes, she gets interrupted.

“Hi, Willow I was meaning to talk to you,” Mrs. Allen says with a smile on her face.

“Really” Willow says confused. Willow rarely does anything wrong or needs help with anything, so it is weird that the guidance counselor needs to talk to her.

“Yeah, I am a little worried about you,” Mrs. Allen says.

“Why would you be worried I am fine, great, an overachiever, how could anything be bad!?” Willow says.

“Your smarts are not what I’m worried about, it’s getting along with people that I’m worried about,” Mrs. Allen says slowly to calm Willow down.

“What do you mean. No one likes me,” Willow says.

“Are you sure about that?” Mrs. Allen says with one eyebrow up.

“There is no one as smart as me in this school so there is no one I can totally get along with, if I try to talk to people, they are just rude to me or not to my standards,” Willow says with her back up straight ready for any comeback.

“Are you sure? It seems to me that you push away everyone that isn’t as smart as you because you think you are better than them and ignore everyone else because you might be afraid to let your guard down,” Mrs. Allen proceeds to say, “I don’t have time to talk more but just think about that.”

Willow walks out of the room stomping so that Mrs. Allen can hear that she is furious. On the bus ride home, she can’t help but think about what Mrs. Allen had said to her. Yeah, it was rude, but was she right? Was she really that person? When she gets home, she does her homework. She asks her mom how she can be nicer and make friends……….

*This story connects to the theme in three different ways. The main character, who is nameless, learns from a few different people, makes a few new friends, and tries to find the positive in every person, she spends just enough time with each person to understand them and their personality.*

**Forceful Socializing by Hazel Schneider age: 9**

I wake up one morning, feeling sick to my stomach that it’s the first day of school. Summer is over and it’s time to stuff our heads with boring math problems. I brush my teeth, shower, and eat some breakfast. Now I’m feeling more awake. I get in the car and my mom drives me off to my new school.

My mom asked me if I’m excited, I quickly lied and said yes. I was terrified. It’s not fun being the new kid at school. I slowly put my hoodie up and walked through the messy hall. Kids stuffing kids into lockers, papers flooding lockers, and trashcans everywhere. I then stuffed my locker with boring files and quickly ran through the hall to my classes. First days in class are scary. I’ve never met most people in that room, and I’m spending a whole school year with them. Panting, I sit next to a girl named Alyssa, she has brown eyes, and brown hair, she is really welcoming and introduces herself.

She loves modern dancing and is great at baking. I slip my hoodie off and listen to the teacher talk about boring science facts, but I still listen. Alyssa seems to always say hi to people even if she doesn’t know them. I spend the first month with Alyssa. She is really really friendly. She introduces me to a ton of people and we worked together on a few science projects and we have a lot of fun.

But then we change seats. I sit next to another boy and he is super focused and doesn’t talk much. We both love reading and similar subjects. He loves passing on knowledge to other people, in a month I’ve learned so much! He tutored me after school He taught me reading and writing strategies, math strategies, and science facts. I would think I could graduate college now! I’m so happy with how much I’ve learned.

Before I could learn more, we change seats again. I’m put next to another girl, a shy one. She is also very quiet. Over a few weeks and months we don’t change seats, so we stay together and get to know each other. She becomes rather friendly than shy. She becomes my friend for almost the whole school year. Thinking I will know her forever, summer starts again.

Instead of being happy that summer is here, I’m sad that I’m leaving my school friends. But I’m still excited to have fun in the heat and spend more time with family. My family surprises me by moving to my favorite state, Nevada. Moving is going to be so fun! We’re going to have a fresh new start.

After a while we move to the corn fields and I decide to introduce myself to the new neighbor. He loves art such as drawing, painting, and writing. I made a lot of friends who have different personalities and preferences. They all had one thing in common. They all loved the arts, especially writing. I didn’t like writing that much, but I learned so much from them! Writing strategies, how to get unstuck, and using more sophisticated words. Instead of writing being boring. Writing is much more interesting.

Summer is over and I’m SO excited for school. I do my normal routine but with more enthusiasm. I get to school, and organize all the interesting papers in my locker. I head to class, say hi to my teachers, and go to reading and writing class. I am doing really well on the first day at my new school. I make quite a few new friends and am having fun reading and writing. The school year passes by quickly and summer is here. Summer is also gone in the blink of an eye and then college comes. I become an author and write many stories and I am doing a great job as a writer.

*I think my story correlates with the second part of the theme: acquire yourself a friend because when this all happened the characters in the story had to look out for each other and for themselves and most of the characters didn’t know each other. It also applies to real life because I met new friends through this role play game!*

**The War Between Houses by Galit Madairy Age: 13**

Disclaimer: This was also a group project roleplayed in a discord server, this just happens to be from my character’s point of view. The overarching plot was made by all the people in the server (at the time it was about 3000 people), and this was just my group’s little bit of lore.

How to pronounce character names:

**Gemi** – Jem-ee – Pronouns: She/Any

**Ea** – Ee-uh – Pronouns: They/Them

**Ella** – Self-explanatory – Pronouns: She/Her

**Tea** – Also self-explanatory – Pronouns: They/Them

Gemi walks into the so called D&D club. She and the others in the rebellion know that this is in fact not a D&D club. This is the rebellion headquarters for the war to come. About three or four days before, Glee stole an idea for stickers from Spirited. Spirited did not take kindly to this, as they declared war soon after. This may sound ridiculous but at this academy in particular, anything could happen. They have about two hours till the fighting starts, and she wants to meet her team before hand to plan. She’s been assigned to the RnS team for Glee. Glee was her and the other people on their team’s house at school. When she walks in she sees a little bee hybrid girl, sitting on the floor, stuffing her face with sugar.

“Hello!” the bee girl says as she picks herself up off the floor.

“Hello there,” Gemi says calmly. Gemi’s been here before; not necessarily war, but killing isn’t new to her. She knows that many will die, lose a canon life. In fact everyone knows this, and everyone knows it could be them. The kindergarteners almost always stay in daycare so there’s almost no chance one will get hurt.

Gemi turns her attention to the bee girl again, “Are you RnS team for Glee?” Gemi asks. “That’s right! My name’s Ella, who are you?”

“My name’s Gemi.” They sit in awkward silence for a bit before Ella starts talking again.

“So do you have a plan?” Ella asks, “I think the others will be here soon but I’m not entirely sure who all of them are.”

Just as Ella says that, a person walks in, “Hello!!” They say with a smile on their face.

“My name’s Ea, who are you?”

Ella looks up and says, “Hello my name’s Ella! How are you?”

“I’m good,” Ea says. While this is all happening Gemi is pondering what plan to use and where to discuss it without anyone overhearing.

They decide to go into a nearby broom closet that they know no one ever uses. Ea suggested it because they found it a couple months ago and had been using it as a space to relax. As they walk in they notice a small table with a tea kettle, a box of cookies, and some cushions on the floor.

Gemi looks around and says, “This is perfect.”

Ea says, “I know right? None of the prefects ever come in here so it’s the perfect place to just hang out. We don’t have to worry about anything for now and best of all spirited doesn’t know about it.”

Ella sits down on a cushion. “So we need to start planning. How are we going to pull this off and not get caught or taken hostage?”

Gemi suggests that they secure the common rooms with lava so none of the people in them can escape. Ella then suggests the possibility of students who can walk through lava rescuing the others. Once they figure that out they try to find a way around it but are ultimately unsuccessful so they just decide to do whatever seems the most logical at the time.

While they’re sitting there a voice comes over the comms saying, “Does anyone know where our RnS Glee team is? I am part of the team and I don’t see them anywhere.”

Ea goes, “That must be Tea. I’ll go grab them.”

Two minutes later Ea walks in with another human, presumably Tea.

“Hello!” Ella says beaming.

Gemi looks over, “You must be Tea then?”

“Mhm…” While they look a bit timid, everyone has already guessed they can hold their own. Tea isn’t a force to reckoned with.

“I’m not sure if you’re aware but we only have about 10 minutes before the war starts, we should get into position.”

Everyone nods in agreement. They stand up and walk to the Glee commons, still aware they may not return to said broom closet ever again.

*Hello!! Thank you for reading my story! Unfortunately I didn’t have enough time to finish so I’m just gonna give ya’ll a summary of what happens next. They got into position, and then went to raid all the tents containing supplies, they also took any health pots(potions) they found along the way. Once they finished that they went back to the club room to rest for a bit, and then they went out to fight. There are two towers AKA capture points for each house fighting in the war, and the team and several others in the rebellion took out tower two before being overpowered. The kidnapping of prefects Kingsley and Valyn. Both were killed and lost a canon life. Someone killed Kirin who was the one orchestrating the rebellion and the killing of the two prefects, and then the prefects had the final battle, Spirited won. Thank you for reading my story!! :D*

*What lays before you is the beginning of an idea. A first chapter, perhaps, in a larger tale. Because of that, development is minor and mysteries remain mysteries. However, I do feel this story fits this summer’s theme. Brooke will gain herself a teacher, acquire for herself friends new and old, and find the merit in those around. If not here, then perhaps someday the story of Manatee Manor will be told.*

**Manatee Manor by Marisa Cohen Age: 16**

Brooke was never one to sit still. In class, her legs would vibrate, and her mind would drift to anywhere else. While singing to herself did help, she could only get away with that in chorus. And even then, it was hard to find joy in that when the majority of kids sounded so *bad.*

So, peace came with movement. Brooke loved to explore, climbing over this gate or entering that mysterious room. It was satisfying to find someplace new. It helped that she was flung from one foster family to the next. School and remembering names and all that boring stuff didn’t matter if Brooke would never stick to one place for long. Yet…

A permanent home. The idea seemed impossible, but it was happening. And soon. Which guardians would want to keep her anyway? Perhaps it was Mrs. Hughes. Brooke hated that woman with all her heart, but such feelings were not reciprocated by Mrs. Hughes. Maybe the old Bellers? Brooke liked them well enough, but they were frail and not in any place to take care of her. Mr. Stark? Madame Boisselle? Ms. Seagull? No, no, no.

It was someone else entirely. Brooke stared on at this stranger, her hands sore from carrying her luggage. He was a fairly young man, but his body aged like milk. His black hair transitioned to a fine silver the closer it came to the roots. His forehead held one clean line near the bottom, as if the top of his head could be removed as a helmet. He was skinny, but not that tall – Brooke did not have to raise her head much to reach his. When the man held out a hand to shake, Brooke could glimpse the bones and veins that held him together under pale skin. Despite everything, he was sturdy. Every piece stacked on each other cleanly, like a tower of dice. Every bit of him pointed towards his eyes. The eyes. *Those* eyes. They had the same darn eyes. Those jade fields of seaweed underneath the bright ocean. Those always shifting eyes, sometimes called blue, or green, or occasionally even gold depending on the lighting. It was as if his eyes were mirrors, Brooke staring back at herself with cold, cruel, judgement. Brooke had to look away. The eyes mocked her. She hated them. She hated him.

Brooke’s previous guardian released an awkward cough. Mr. Jackson, was it? Brooke had only been with him and his husband for a few days, not enough to really know them. It was strange that no social workers were here to help the transition. *Perhaps they finally got tired of me*, Brooke couldn’t help but think. She had been in foster care for as long as she could remember, and the longest she had ever stayed with any guardians was two years.

“This is Edward Fisher,” Mr. Jackson said, “your new guardian.” His voice rung with a hint of disappointment. *Poor Jacksons,* Brooke thought, *they seemed really nice.*

Brooke forced her hand to reach Mr. Fisher’s. While Mr. Fisher shook gently, Brooke’s arm was stiff.

“I’m Brooke,” she mumbled, avoiding eye contact. Her feet tried to nudge away from him.

Mr. Fisher said nothing, he merely picked up Brooke’s luggage and started packing it into the trunk. Brooke didn’t have too much luggage, but Mr. Fisher still placed them in carefully, even taking one bag out to make sure they were all stacked neatly, despite the amount of space at his disposal.

“Mr. Fisher lives to the town west of here, only fifteen minutes away,” Mr. Jackson said, “Maybe I’ll see you around?”

“Maybe,” was all Brooke could muster with her fake smile. The last word to the world she was so used to, that she had lived in as long as she could remember. An uncertain nothing. She entered the car and waved goodbye. She watched her last foster home until vanished from her view.

Brooke sighed and cramped herself into the passenger seat. Mr. Fisher was driving in the seat next to her, his eyes focused on the road. An air freshener hung from the rearview mirror, shaped like a palm tree. The freshener did little to mask the car’s smell – not a bad smell per say, simply an unfamiliar one. The radio was on a channel that played old folk rock, older than Brooke and Mr. Fisher combined no doubt. Mr. Jackson said the town should only be fifteen minutes away, so about five songs. Brooke closed her eyes, rubbed away at the fidget on her finger, and hummed along to the music. She could keep herself calm for five songs.

When the *sixth* song ended, Brooke reopened her eyes. They were still moving, with no sign of stopping. Brooke repositioned herself in the firm leather seat. The light on the rearview mirror glowed red with the letters *NE*. The town she was told she’d live in was *west*.

“Um… excuse me?” Brooke said faintly. “You’re taking me home, right?”

“Yes.” Mr. Fisher didn’t flinch, his eyes were fixed on the road.

Brooke continued, “But shouldn’t we be going west? This isn’t the right direction.”

Mr. Fisher did not stop. “That was merely a place. Where I’m taking you is home.”

Brooke couldn’t breathe. “You’re kidnapping me.”

Mr. Fisher glared at her through the mirror, his eyes as cold as before. “I’m not,” he stated, “I’m taking you home. The only reason I had to lie was because they wouldn’t let me adopt you if I lived too far away.”

Brooke’s mind was racing, her breath unstable. She felt for the car door and yanked at the knob. It was locked. *Of course it is*, Brooke thought. Helpless, Brooke looked out the window, keeping her eyes on what was outside and not the faint reflection of Mr. Fisher. Even if it wasn’t locked, where could she go? There were no buildings in sight, just trees. No one could get her to safety. Brooke had no means of escape.

Brooke gritted her teeth. “Edward Fisher isn’t even your name, is it.”

The stranger nodded and said, “You may call me Mr. Meridine.”

A silence followed. The car buzzed and the music played. *What sort of last name even is Meridine?* Brooke couldn’t help but think, *some foreign language?* It was just so *weird*. How would it even be spelled? As it sounds? Or so strange that it felt unreal? One of Brooke’s online friends lived in one of those sorts of places. He would speak of each place’s odd vowels and silent letters, as if his entire world was written like Wednesday. Brooke wanted to chat with him (Jackal was what they called him in the group chat) but there was no service. Well, even if there was - which there probably wasn’t due to how to radio kept breaking up – Brooke’s phone was with her luggage. After all, she *thought* it was going to be a *five-song drive*, and now they were nearing song eleven.

Brooke felt for her fidget only to remember it had fallen between the seat and the central console. What a pain. Having nothing to fidget with, her fingers drifted towards each other, ready to attack. Three still had band-aids on them and one still ached from a past battle, but her fingers had to move. One found a sharp corner and called the thumb to action. Thus the picking began.

With the radio cutting out again, Brooke’s guardian could hear the clicking and scraping of her nails’ war. His faced twisted into a sigh and he said, “We will be breaking that habit once you are at home. Until then, I’d rather you sit on your own hands than pick yourself to bleeding.”

“Why?” Brooke retorted, “You never seen someone with ugly nails?”

“It’s not that,” Mr. Meridine replied as cold as ever, “It’s just that blood is not something to be given out so freely. Besides,” his voice lowered and his cheeks reddened ever so slightly, “This is my sister’s car. She’d kill me if I left it dirty.”

Despite the break in the icy man’s character, Brooke was still furious. “God, is everything about you a lie?!” Brooke wanted to scream.

“It’s not…” Mr. Meridine tried to say, but his voice drifted towards silence, too quiet for Brooke to understand. Brooke groaned.

“Look,” she said, “anything else is out of reach, and I’m the type of person who has to be doing *something*. This is the kid you signed up for. Either you stop this car and let me get my fidget and phone, or this car gets stained.”

To her surprise, the car did slow to a stop. Mr. Meridine took his hands off the wheel and leaned back. Brooke didn’t look at him but had a feeling his eyes had drifted towards blue. The sunlight was hitting the right way for that. She heard the doors unlock.

“I’m sorry,” Mr. Meridine nearly whispered, “I should have been honest up front. There’s so much that I can’t say… not yet… but I should have told you where we were going. I’ve been waiting for this for so long, it never occurred to me that you wouldn’t re…” his voice drifted off again. While his coldness was still melted, he regained some authority. “You can take a break and get what you need. Stretch out, get some fresh air, whatever you need. Home is still far away and I don’t want you to be frustrated and hurting yourself the rest of the way there.”

Brooke glanced at him. His arms slumped to his sides, the fingers faintly touching in his lap. Her eyes… his eyes… their eyes were forlorn. Brooke looked away. She couldn’t forgive him, not yet. There was too much left unsaid, too many unanswered questions. Brooke shifted out of the car and said a faint, “Thank you.”

The rest of the ride was long. Even with her phone keeping her entertained, Brooke could feel the sun setting. By the time they had reach the destination, the sun was dipping into the horizon. Brooke had stopped counting the songs at thirty, but many more had passed since. The car moved into a parking spot and, for the first time since Brooke had met Mr. Meridine, completely turned off. Brooke stepped out of the car, the taste of salt faintly in her mouth and the sound of crashing waves and chirping seagulls ever present. She walked towards the place before stilling. Mr. Meridine got out too. He walked next to Brooke and gently placed a hand on her shoulder. Softly, he said, “Welcome home.”

A stone path started at Brooke’s feet. Fields of light green grass surrounded the area, blurring the path until it neared the sand. The path moved to three destinations: the house, the tower, and the beach. The house was larger than any Brooke had ever seen. Even with the distance, Brooke could make out there were four floors of windows. While the building was clearly a rectangular prism, each part of the building was defined against the blue paint, like the building itself rippled with waves. The front of the house held a courtyard, with fountains and statues shaped like some aquatic animal Brooke couldn’t remember the name of.

To the right of the house sat the tower. The tower was closer to the sea, but sat upon a cliff high above. While it looked like a lighthouse, that was clearly just and aesthetic choice. The tower was at least twice as tall as the house, and Brooke could only imagine how dreadful the climb to the top was. *I’ll climb it someday*, Brooke thought, *the view would be worth it*. Carved into the cliff below the tower, Brooke could ever so slightly see a large open area carved out. It was too far away to make out any further detail though.

Then there was the beach. Brooke walked along that path, but stopped when it steeply dipped downwards. The beach was empty, and *huge*. A golden paradise stood before her, held on both sides by rocky beaches. The blue waves lapped at every corner, soaking in the last of the sunlight. Despite better judgement, Brooke ran to the waters. She shuffled down the steps and darted through the sands. She could hear Mr. Meridine calling for her to come back, but didn’t listen.

When Brooke was at the edge of the water, she stopped to catch her breath. Glancing back, she saw two other figures coming out of the house. Brooke’s mind was racing. *I have to know*, she thought, *I have to*. As another wave crashed towards her, Brooke jumped in.

The water rushed around her. Salt bit at her fingertips and sand gave in, pulling her feet a bit down. Brooke was soaked. The water was so sharp and so powerful and so *cold*, but also so nice. Brooke laughed, all the stress and fear washed away with the tides. So this is what the ocean felt like.

The two dots reached Brooke as the second wave was receding. Turns out they were two women, wearing matching uniforms. They asked if Brooke was ok or needed anything but Brooke was still laughing too hard to answer. Once it was clear Brooke wouldn’t stop, they placed a towel around her and started walking her back to the grasses. The sand stuck to her shoes and salt water dripped from her untamed hair. Brooke couldn’t stop laughing, she was wild and free.

The madness died down as the three reached Mr. Meridine. Brooke made the mistake of looking at his face, and she faced the wrath of those cruel mirrors. It was only as she calmed down that she realized she was shivering. Her mind raced. *Why did you do that, Brooke? You could’ve waited. It’s not like you were going to some other guardian’s after. No one knows you’re here anyway. All you did was ruin perfectly good clothes. Stupid Brooke, stupid, stupid…*

Despite the coldness in his eyes, Mr. Meridine was merciful. “I’d try not to do that anymore if I was you,” he told Brooke, not threatening but more concerned, “the waters do not get any warmer around here.” He then turned his eyes towards the two women and said, “Lady LeBlanc, get Brooke warm and cleaned up. I don’t want her getting a cold. Lady Smith, bring Brooke’s luggage to her room. Get her acquainted with it once Lady LeBlanc is done. Once both of you have finished, tell me and I will get to work on dinner.”

The two women nodded and got to work. As Brooke was being escorted towards the house, she could see Lady Smith working the bags out of the trunk. Brooke returned her eyes to the house when the sound of fountains ringed in her ears. Looking at the marble fountains up close, Brook could see what those creatures truly were: manatees and mermaids. They were swirling around a tower, the manatees spewing water into the fountains, and the mermaids had gems in their eyes. Depending on how the light hit the gems, their color changed. Sometimes they looked blue, sometimes green, and occasionally one or two looked gold. Brooke couldn’t help but stare, the fountains were beautiful.

Lady LeBlanc noticed Brooke’s amazement and smiled. “Some believe that when sailors spoke of mermaids, what they truly saw were manatees.”

Brooke looked back at the lady as the fountains left sight. “What,” she said, “because they could breathe air?”

The lady giggled. “No, for… other reasons.”

The house moved by in a blur, too fast for Brooke to fully process anything. One moment she was in a hall, then being washed, then dressed, than alone in her new room, her luggage against a wall. Brooke thought she heard one of the maids call her “Ms. Meridine”, but her mind had not registered any memory of such. Her whole body was warm: from the warm waters to the warm nightgown, to even the warm bed. The room itself was larger than some homes Brooke had lived in, and the walls were tiled with a mosaic. The mosaic was of the ocean, with all sorts of fish jumping out of the blue waves into the orange sky. Brooke’s mind darted to all the new places she missed out of seeing, but her body was too calm to move.

Then came the sound of a voice singing. The voice was a man’s and the tune in a foreign tongue. While the man’s voice was just decent, Brooke was calmed by it. The tune was strangely familiar, ringing in her head until she drifted to sleep.

In her dream, Brooke was singing the tune. She was in a wide space looking out at the ocean, with all the fish jumping out of the waves to listen. Once her singing ended, she turned and headed towards the large house above the beach. Faintly, a voice whispered her home’s name in her head:

“The Manatee Manor.”

**Leg Swinging by Zoe Becker age: 13**

*My story primarily connects to the third clause of the theme “Make for yourself a teacher. Acquire for yourself a friend. And, find in every person their merit.” because ultimately my story is about the realization that the main character, should distance themself from their old friends because they don’t see the character’s merit, and don’t lift them up. Additionally, it connects to the part that says “acquire for yourself a friend” because the main character realizes that they have not actually acquired a friend and they must do that because those they called friends don’t actually value them.*

It is my longest held belief that people are dumb. And my dear reader, I’m afraid to inform you that you are no exception. I’d like to tell you a story of some of your most fatal missteps. And a triumph, once in a blue moon. I apologize in advance for the deflation of your monstrous ego. And to those of you with an extra monstrous ego, borderline narcissistic, saying to yourself along the way, “I would never do this!” I kindly ask you to suspend your disbelief and remember that you are not as perfect a person as you think. It’s just not in your nature, because deep within every human being who has ever graced the earth is a shortsighted, irrational, monster who only cares about themself. With that said, let us begin.

Your feet dangle off the side of the hammock, swinging right then left, right then left. You’re tired of your surroundings. In fact, you’re so tired of being in the bland, bleak, greyscale reminiscent countryside without anyone else to talk to, it’s nearly impossible for you to explain how much unused energy is surging through you. It’s energy that’s willing you to leave the countryside and return to the city you once called home.

Everyone told you that you would get lonely. They all told you that your distaste for gardening and hiking would make it a dreadful experience. But you needed to get away from them. You needed to get away to prove you could survive and live a peaceful life without their coddling. Deep down though, you knew you were wrong. You knew you depended on the job they gave you as much as you hated working in the museum. You hated being a vessel for children on tours to vomit on. You hated murmuring meaningless facts as you struggled to hold your head up while your feet dragged through the cavernous halls. Most of all, you hated the way your friends, the museum directors, treated you like a meritless baby who didn’t know what they were doing. It was infantilizing and offensive. You knew you needed the support they gave you, even if it felt demeaning, and restricting. But alas, you are a human who does not care about what they need. You only care about what you want. And, you wanted to prove something. But you failed.

Not only did you fail, you are left with no good options. You could return the city and be ridiculed for your choice. Or you could stay in the countryside, dreading each day to come and regretting each day that passes. And that’s it. Funds and resources don’t permit heading anywhere else and you feel directionless and lost, like the first day wandering through a new school building.

You glance down at the forest green, rope hammock. Your feet are still swinging, your legs bouncing in rhythm with them. The rhythm of your anxiety. Your hands have become red from clutching the plastic rope supporting you. But you’ve learned that you need the support and something, anything, to hold on to. You can’t go home but you can’t stay so you just close your eyes and hold the hammock a little tighter.

Embarrassment is a funny thing. And frankly, I don’t even know what it is. Is it shame? Is it disappointment? Dear reader, I’m not sure. But I am sure that it’s usually irrational. It keeps us from taking risks and achieving new heights. It’s keeping you from returning to the city you love. So, ask yourself, is it really worth staying in a place you hate to avoid a temporary feeling that is universal and pure?

The booking site you used referred to the cottage that you don’t dare call home as rustic and quaint. You call it dank and outdated. The stone floors are cold and rough. Walking across

them sends shivers up and down your spine. It’s an incredible discomfort, like the feeling you get when fork tines scratch a ceramic plate. Every tap, the kitchen sink, bathroom sink, and shower, provide an offsetting omnipresent leaking sound. As if a thousand small hammers are tap tap tapping on your brain. Disabling you from ever thinking clearly. Your one connection to a time in this century is your phone. The small metal slab connects you to the world you left. But does it really? It’s full of fake friends and people whom you regret to call family. Those who like to say they're your friends, the ones who provided you with a merciless job at a museum and support that only makes you feel worse, haven’t contacted you once since you left.

You creep across the floor and plop yourself onto a large brown chair. It was once a deep plum purple and plush, there are traces of its life in the armrests that are often untouched, but now it’s brown and deflated. You stare down at your fingertips, cracking and broken. And then you return to one of your favorite, recently discovered, countryside pastimes. Staring at the wall in your living room! And like all good things, staring at your wall longingly is only good in moderation. So, soon enough you’ve transitioned to staring down at your phone. The phone is hot and your hands have become clammy and red.

Now I’d like to step back for a moment for a brief discussion on modern technology. And maybe this is just me, but perhaps you too, my dear reader. *I* think of the term world wide web as a literal one. A massive web upon which we are all little, directionless spiders being blown about by the wind. But does modern technology really unite the world? Or does it divide us? Would you even have fake friends if you hadn’t reached out to them online? Is the small metal rectangle in your hands enriching your life or causing its downfall? I guess we’ll never know, but you do know that it certainly complicates your life. Allow me to explain.

As your hands continue to sweat profusely, they start to shake. Given the current state of your life it would make sense if it were the result of pure anxiety but that’s not the case. It’s two text messages in a row, with their binging sound and vibrating haptics. It’s someone from your old life. The life you left when you left the city. We all have people like this dear reader, so I beg you to imagine yours. When you first see that a message has come through you are elated. Your eyes start to glisten and you feel light, like you could just float across the room. But soon, a darkness settles over your initial feeling and you slump down into your chair, feeling more weighed down than before. Because you remember that you can’t respond. Or at least you shouldn’t. You shouldn’t talk to people who haven’t talked to you for months. It’s bad for you, and you know that.

But in a way, maybe it’s good. Maybe you need the contact. You inhale deeply and brace yourself for a rude or sly comment and you bring the phone closer to your face and read the two messages.

*hi.* With a period at the end of the message. Oh no, unfortunately my dear reader this conversation is not going well for you.

*just wanted to let you know that we finally found a replacement for your job in the museum.* Also, with a period at the end. And that’s it. They didn’t care about you or your new life, they just wanted to tell you that you are replaceable and no longer needed in the city you can no longer fathom to call home.

A tear streaks down your cheek, and then another and another as you sink deeper into the once purple chair. You quiver and shake, anger bubbling within you like you just might burst. You need to throw something, crush something. Your anger needs to go somewhere. And you’ve

decided that, that somewhere will be your phone. You’ve resisted the urge to crush or smash your phone. In a very tense and aggressive manner you open up your messages app. Your head is throbbing as tears keep continue streaking down your cheeks. But why bother wiping away something so pure? Nobody else is around, and in a way it’s freeing. You quickly type a response to the prior message, too quickly to think about it before clicking send. It’s a simple message and all it says is *i hope you haven’t missed me too much.*

Ah my dear reader let us step aside for a moment, for I’d like to do a little analysis of that text message you sent. The one that read *i hope you haven’t missed me too much*. It’s wonderfully passive aggressive and the period at the end effectively shows that you mean what you’re saying. Was it a bit petty? Sure. But I’m proud of you, you’re moving towards righting the wrongs of your old life in the city.

You hear a familiar swooping sound as the message is delivered and almost instantly three floating dots in a little text bubble appear beneath your message. In other words, the most anxiety inducing sight one can ever see. Soon enough a response has come through, the buzz of your phone jolting you to sit up straighter. *nope*. That’s it. That’s the whole message and it leaves you confused, as if your head is spinning on an invisible axis. Were they being genuine? Or sarcastic? If it was genuine then why did they ever care about you at all? If it was sarcastic, then why not reach out before? You knew that you had made a mistake by leaving the city so abruptly, it was a fatal mistake and painfully obvious. But maybe it wasn’t so bad. Because regardless of if the message was sarcastic or genuine it shows you one thing. Your friends never truly cared about you, they used you as a resource to feel good about themselves. They never saw you for

the wonderful, beautiful marvel you were. That doesn’t change how miserable the countryside is, but at least you now have a positive spin on this whole situation.

My dear reader, I hope you’re satisfied with the little epiphany you just had! I am quite proud of you and I hope you’re proud of yourself. These months have not been easy for you and you deserved something of a triumph. Congratulations. For better or worse, our story is not yet over because you still have a decision to make. You still must choose whether to stay in the countryside, a place that makes you miserable, or return to the city, a place full of people that make you miserable. Now, let us return to your countryside plight, but this time with a slightly more positive outlook.

The screech of bird chirping at an obnoxious high pitch, a sound reminiscent of children screaming, wakes you early in the morning. The blankets and sheets that were given to you when you rented the cottage are crisp, and not in a good way. They feel rough against your skin and even on the warmest of nights, they fail to make you feel cozy and safe. But this morning you’re filled with the slightest bit of optimism. Because yesterday, for the first time in a long time, you truly felt something. And for the first time in a long time, you have the motivation to truly do something.

Your day today, like most other days in the cottage you have come to hate starts with a bowl of bland, slightly gooey oatmeal, the extent of your cooking abilities. This morning, as you spoon oatmeal into your mouth, you hunch over and stare at your phone which rests on a splintered, pale wood table. It seems to be what you would typically categorize as a coffee table but it’s in the kitchen so why not call it a kitchen table? It does seem a bit more proper to eat your breakfast on one of those.

In an effort to achieve some sense of catharsis, you delete text conversations with those who still have the audacity to say they’re your friends. And then you’re bored again. And you once again find your legs swinging right and left and right and left on the little stool in the little kitchen. And you’ve returned to your favorite pastime of staring blankly as a wall as your entire being becomes engulfed in sadness and desperation for something more than this life.

My dear reader, it’s that time again! Time for our little sidebar. I hope you’re enjoying them and that they’re doing an adequate job temporarily distracting you from your struggles in the countryside. I hate to inform you that soon you will struggle more, for you have finally experienced a sense of closure on your city life and now, all that is left for you to ponder through your empty days is whether or not to leave your countryside life. Let us return to that story.

As you continue to stare at the wall you begin to feel a sense of deja vu. Your feet once again swinging in anxiety and your mind once again blank as you gaze at a wall of chipping paint. you feel that watching paint slowly chip away is the only mildly interesting thing for miles around. You will never feel at home here. It is bleak and boring, and you crave more. You crave a world where you can build relationships and new facets of your life. And though you hate to face the fact, you realize as you’re staring at the chipping paint, the most interesting part of your cottage, that only the city can provide you the excitement you crave.

Within mere minutes of this realization you’ve busied yourself once again on your little metal rectangle booking travel plans back to the city, reaching out to your friends about getting your job back at the museum, and any other necessary arrangement for you to be able to create a plentiful, enjoyable, new life in the city you will hopefully once again call home.

Well my dear reader, I’d like to congratulate you on making a decision! It was not an easy one but it seems to be the right one for you, you who desires a life filled with a hustle and bustle that only the city can guarantee.

Over the next days you do everything you need to pack away the regrettable months you spent in the countryside. Every item of clothing, every piece of kitchenware, toiletries, linens, and more are stripped from the cottage and tossed into boxes. You sweep and mop with vigor, singing and dancing as you go, excited that you will no longer have to live in this cottage you will never call home and that some new tenant will have to experience its so-called “rustic charm”.

Soon enough all the arrangements have been made. The house is clean. And despite how much hurtful resistance from your friends they eventually cracked and the far from ideal museum job is once again yours. And it’s time to go. Time to hop on a rickety train and return home. You lug each box from your cottage out to the stone path leading up to it until all that is left inside belongs to the landlord, and not you. You take one last look around, rotating about yourself and gazing up at the walls with chipping paint. And in a strange way, it does look quaint and rustic and not necessarily in a bad way. And in an even stranger way, it feels a bit sad to be abandoning the tears you shed within these walls but it’s time for a new chapter, in the city.

Hello again dear reader! I would once again like to extend my congratulations on your decision. As I write this it is your first month back in the city and you have returned home from your job at the museum. I hate to inform you that our story of your countryside plight is not yet over.

During your time in the countryside it seems you didn’t remember the extent to which you despised your job in the museum, and how horrible those who still call themselves your friends are. And city life, is overwhelming. The screeching of trains in the background is constant, and the crowds are unavoidable. You feel that you are no longer the center of your own life, there are a thousand forces of the city around you, pushing towards you, causing you to collapse into yourself.

Each day when you return home from your abominable job at the museum, where you are underpaid and disrespected, you collapse into a worn dark chocolate brown chair in the corner of your living room that you bought off craigslist upon returning to the city. It’s very similar to your deflated brown chair from your countryside cottage. The chair that probably holds water damage from your tears. Sitting in the cheap chair in your living room, despite how upset you often are is the best part of your strenuous days in the city, it reminds you of the home you once had in the countryside. The home you have begun to long to return to. As you think about the simplicity of your life in the countryside, you begin to shed tears on your city version of the brown chair that’s always there for you. And you come to a terrifying realization. You will never be at home in the city, because it will always be full of people who treat you as less than you are. Only the countryside will let you live as you. And you must return.

Ah my dear reader it seems you have changed your mind, and I’m personally getting a bit of deja vu. I would like to warn you that you may never truly settle down and your life may be an eternal loop of country then city, country then city. And yes, of course I know that may sound distressing but do not worry, you can relax. Take a deep breath in, and a deep breath out. Remember that the rollercoaster of your life is not a copy of anyone else’s. Always know that rollercoasters are nearly always moving. There will be moments of dissatisfaction for you in the city and the country and that’s okay. Just remember that although parts may be bumpy, it’s important to enjoy the ride.

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

**– Pirkei Avot**