



6 POINTS
**CREATIVE
ARTS
ACADEMY**
A URJ SUMMER CAMP

Creative Writing Chapbook

Session One
2022

Notes from the Editor

This summer at 6 Points Creative Arts Academy marks the fourth year of our creative writing major. Like every year before it, this year has seen growth: in our numbers, in our skills, and in our writing. In this chapbook you will find the culmination of 12 days of learning and writing in the form of narrative poems and stories. Our writing this session centers around our summer theme, which comes from Pirkei Avot: “It is not your task to finish the work, but neither are you able to give up on it.” This theme is particularly applicable to creative writing. As writers we are often faced with the question of when to release our art into the world. This chapbook serves as a moment in time, a reminder that though these pieces are published they are imperfect, unfinished, and serve as time capsules for where each writer is at this particular moment in their lives. Our writers will revisit these poems and stories whether in these exact words or in new iterations. The work of a writer is never done! Please enjoy these collected works, we are so proud to present the Creative Arts Academy’s very own creative writers!

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A week or so ago I was really struggling with writers block in my major. I wrote a letter to my mom explaining my predicament. Her response was to start by just getting something on paper. She said it didn't have to be finished, it didn't have to be good, it just had to exist. I did just that and the piece I have today, This is Not About a Bird, emerged.

This is Not About a Bird By: Zoe Becker
Age 14

When I wake
I hear a clunk
a thud
it makes me tense like a rope pulled taut

I peer through the sun soaked glass by my bed
A bird had grazed the arched window frame
and flown back down to the ground

I wonder where it's been
Perhaps down the street — right on Nebraska left
on 16th
Down to the white house that looks less white up
close

or maybe on the Hill down by Constitution

The bird and me
we live in the heart of the land of the free

The epicenter from which all rights ebb and flow
a trove of truths and trials that make you want to
stand taller
with each step you take
a city that embodies all we are and want to be

That's where we wish we were, that bird and me

We are not there
we are in the real, the grimy, the gritty
DC

Just a bus ride away
politicians stand at teak wood podiums

and offer empty solutions
to problems that the smart fixate on and the wise
know they will not solve

“Vote”
“You choose your representatives”
But not that bird and me

We are too young
and in all the wrong places

In the heart of the land of the free
pumping breath to the rest of this American body
Me and that bird just watch

We watch the house fall down but can't talk to the
fireman
who should be saving people from the rubble
Stuck, there are words in my throat but they can't
rise up

Later
I go for a walk

I breathe in the fresh, sour city air

My chin rises up a bit, like there's a balloon
underneath
Something about it dares me to grin
Just for a second

It's April and the cherry blossoms are already wilting
bending from the weight of all that goes on
in this city

There's that bird again
in a branch above me

The wood is damp after last night's storm
Mushy and bent
threatening to break
but holding on

by a thread

The bird flutters down and lands on my shoulder
to escape the inevitable
—even if delayed
collapse and implosion
of the tree

Rotten roots means rotten branches
which will spoil our fruit

I turn on my phone and
news alert!

sigh

I order a personal pizza for pickup
I deserve it

after all this
the collapse of all I know is good
and hollow, falsely bright reassurance
like bubble gum
that it will be okay

I keep walking, the birds talons clutching on to me
And though it itches a little
the knowledge that it won't fly away makes me feel
safe

I pass a CVS on the way

“Walk in vaccinations!” the window boasts
And right next door
is Politics and Prose

I know I need to go pick up my food
but I wander in
I can never ignore the allure of a good bookstore

Especially not this one
where it always smells like coffee and rain
my solace and my home

A meeting place with friends
And haven for me to be alone
I can't count the times I've stood in the corner of
the YA section
breathed in and out
to quell any sudden onsets of anxiety

As I pull open the heavy glass door I feel a bit limp
and hold the handle even tighter
combatting even the threat that I could fall

I point to the bird “you wait here”

It cascades down to a park bench green as the sea
and just sits there
without me

Inside Politics and Prose is the best of this city
but it’s a mirage

A mirage that we’re all well read and well studied
that those cute political buttons they’re selling
“smash the patriarchy!” “don’t date republicans!”
will solve all our problems

And while \$20 paperbacks and pins are nice
they allow me to make the fatal error of
for a second
letting my shoulders relax
forgetting

Forgetting that this city lies to us
it is not a cavern of riches

it is a hotbed of wealth inequality where I am just
another perpetrator
where the wards closest to the “institutions of
justice” in which we stake our lives
can’t get hospitals built

So as it hits me
I wander back outside

My bird is on a different bench now
no matter my calls and coos
It won’t fly closer

And I'm missing a part of me
I look around at all the nearby trees

birds and bugs, plastic bags
anything else you wouldn't want to see in a tree
but not my bird, my bird sitting without me

So I walk a bit further down the block
and the bright arcade-like sign calls my name
an inkling of optimism bubbles up inside
What a relief
on a day when the pessimist has become the realist

"Comet pizza" it reads
stepping inside
the warm, cheese heavy, tomato-y air greets me like
a warm hug
ribbons of comfort
tied around the memories of this place

the memories of this place
dinners with family before the world shut down
cast parties after the show
team celebrations after the championship games

"We're running a bit behind today, it'll be ready in
around 10 minutes"
I nod and smile and wander further back

The ping pong tables are vacant on a Thursday
afternoon
so I grab a ball and hit it against the one closest to
me
it bobbles to the ground
with a subtle plink

So many years where comet ping pong and pizza
was a second home
but I still can't win a game for the life of me

That doesn't stop me from thinking though
of all the games with friends
and running to the jukebox in the corner between
sets

that doesn't stop me from thinking though about
what other people thought was here
The way they turned childhood fun into dark
conspiracy
and brought their own manufactured malice to
fruition
just blocks away from me
in the land of the free

I look up at the window above me
something swiftly swerves by
my bird?
is it coming back to me?

I slump in the corner waiting for the minutes to pass
all I want is pizza
and I miss my bird

News alert!
News alert!
Click
I can't read it anymore

My pizza is ready
I pick up the box

Some of the oil has leaked to the outside
which is always a good sign

I let the warmth radiate up and down my arm as I
create a mirror image of my morning
walking home

Council campaign posters create a tacky collage
on each post I pass
“Eric Goulet — endorsed by the Washington Post!”
The bright greens and blues of the signs
are something of an assault on the eyes

“Monte Monash — democrat!”
I chuckle to myself as I pass that one
And the pizza threatens to slide out of my hands

It is funny though
Not because of the futility of her campaign
because we are in DC, where there is nothing else
you could plausibly be

I guess it is still important, though
Because no matter how predictable it is who we are
there is a higher power
a higher power with no checks on how it regulates
this 60 some square miles

Almost home and I turned at the side yard
to the back
the plastic fake wood table
under a tree

The tree I preferred to sit at the other side of the
yard

was cut down last year
so we could add in solar panels without them being
blocked
because, of course

how else could we save the planet
how else could we save ourselves
other than cutting down trees

Even though I have solar panels
it doesn't seem our problems are being solved

So I do what any person does in the face of
insurmountable
global
bureaucratic
wacky and weird challenges

I open up the pizza box and I eat
the wind rustles and I hear the leaves shake above
me
the sound is still muted though
from last night's rain
and crack

The branch fractures
I can almost see the break rippling outward to the
body of the tree
It's not that severe though
so I take another bite of my food and let the
warmth coat the inside of me

as something falls from the now broken tree
it's that bird
it lands on my shoulder

and sits with me

maybe for once, for no reason at all
it will be okay

My story relates to the theme because after camp I am going to finish it. The plot of my story relates to the theme because Alex has a task to finish, to find Iris Inc., but she was given the wrong address, but just like the theme, Alex does not give up!

Alex and Coal By: Ayla Rossman Age 10

Alex has been color blind since birth. Not that anybody really knows what color blindness is since it's the year 1633. Whenever Alex tries to tell people about it they always say she's crazy. But Alex has always known it's not a problem with her head. Now Alex doesn't exactly know she's color blind, she just knows that something is different about her.

One day when Alex was reading the newspaper she found a column that immediately caught her eye. It said:

If you can read this we need you.

Iris Inc. needs any one with the specific color disability to arrive at the address shown. Note you may not survive. But if you do the reward is millions of dollars just go to 1742 Blue Corn Rd, Or go to 390-453-7896

Well, Alex thought no one at the orphanage would care. Oh did I forget to mention that Alex lives at an orphanage. Alex scanned the page, she liked to challenge herself to find how many people had handled the paper before her. You see Alex can read finger prints. You know how police use special tape to see finger prints? Well Alex can do that without the special tape. Well Alex didn't know

where Blue Corn Road was but there was a telephone box just outside. Alex strolled across the street and stepped into the phone box and dialed the number.

“Hello,” said the voice on the other end of the phone.

Alex didn’t hesitate, “Hello my name is Alex I’m 14 years old and I saw your newspaper column.”

“Ah you must be Alexandra Greenberg.”

“How do you know my name?”

“Oh we know lots about you.” Then someone started screaming in the background. “I’m sorry Ms. Greenburg but I must go.”

Well that was weird, Alex thought. When Alex got back to her room she felt around under the cot, and brought out the egg. The egg her parents had given her. It was red with swirls of orange and yellow, and it gave off a soft glow and heat. It rocked slightly, then cracks spiderwebbed out from the tip. Then with a loud CRACK the egg shattered into a million pieces. And curled up on the floor was a baby Lava Worm. Alex ran to the kitchen and found a scrap of bread. When Alex got back to her room she saw Alec stroking the Lava Worm.

“Alec that’s mine,” Alex said slightly annoyed.

“But I found it first.”

“No I hatched it first!” Alex shouldered him aside and fed the little thing bread. It squirmed and opened its mouth in a yawn. Inside its mouth were rows of wicked sharp teeth. It opened its eyes and blew a spurt of fire. Alex jumped up and got a bucket of water to dump it in, surprisingly it seemed to like the water, and changed color to an ashy gray.

“I think I’ll name you Coal.” Coal looked up at her, and in her head she heard, “Hello master, I am

at your service.” Alex gasped, who are you? She thought.

“I think you know who I am, Master.” Alex was stunned. Then she thought Iris Inc. could probably tell her more about Coal.

She had Coal in a bag with some bread and water. She was ready to get some answers. Alex caught the next bus that would take her to Acorn Street which was one street over from her destination. When she got to the address, Alex was surprised at how normal the building looked.

Alex knocked, when the door opened Alex saw a man dressed in all black armor with four daggers hanging from his belt. Alex was confused when he said, “You’re at the wrong place.”

“B-but t-the address.”

“But what address?”

Speechless she handed him the newspaper clipping.

“What is your name?”

“Alexandra Greenberg.”

“I heard they were looking for someone by that name over on Hollyhock Street.”

“O-oh t-thank you sir.”

“I do not like him,” Coal said in her head. Me neither, Alex thought. But she hadn’t come all this way just to fail. So she headed off.

To be continued...

My poems all carry a theme of anti-perfectionism. "Creek Rock" depicts a speaker who collects rocks; a rock collection can never be perfected because of the impossibly high number of different rocks. "Our Country 'tis of We" is a limerick depicting a speaker who's imperfect in their mastery of syntax. "Autistic Girl" depicts a situation in which there is no defined beginning or end, thereby implying that nothing can be finished or perfected.

Three Poems By: Jenna Nesky Age 16

Creek Rock

I wanted to peel it
open finger by finger—the creek rock,
red and sometimes purple like a fist
clenched for too long.

I lifted it
like a prehistoric egg,
listening for a sign of life,
held it so firmly I could hear my own pulse,

but it slipped,
slapped the water and landed
on a seat of pebbles
flashing like a thousand tiny knuckles.

Every fist, a hand
so empty it has only itself to hold.

Our Country 'tis of We

Once I didn't know how syntax went.

One song made me quite inquisitive.

Our country 'tis of thee?

I thought it was of we!

And then I'd add: *It is, 'tisn't it?*

Autistic Girl

1

I begin always
with the end.

Not the end after
the beginning,

no, but the ending
before that.

The one I didn't write,
but remember

as though I had written.
I write

so that this ending is no longer
and end—

to write the poem
that never ends—

this poem of myself.

2

When day unhinges
its jaw

the darkness inside
is night.

Autism is like the night.

It is

a powerful need of beginnings.

It is

a type of absence—

the absence

of endings. I begin always

with autism

and end hungry.

3

I begin,

wanting to write a love poem, and

I end,

having nothing but endings to write about.

In the last part of my story, the part that I haven't written yet, Libby finds herself in a situation that could either redeem or destroy the reputation of monsters – mutants – everywhere. In order to succeed, she must learn that she can't change everything herself, but there's still a lot that she can do to help. This relates to the theme as she might not be the one to finish the work but she's definitely not going to give up on it.

Phase By: Lucy Kall Age 12

Here's how the world works, in a quick explanation. Unlike yours, there's humans, and there's monsters.

Nobody knows for sure how the monsters came to be, but one day back in the 80's, there was a disease that lasted two years, and after everyone was cured, the 'monster curse' started. Or at least, that's what they called it at the time, and it stuck, even though they weren't really monsters. They were just...modified humans, if you asked the right people. I've always preferred the term mutants.

You might not be able to tell that anything is 'wrong' with your kid at first. The signs aren't always obvious, because they're very...broad. My first tell was the streak of white in the back that couldn't be dyed brown. Later on my eyes started turning from green to golden. My mother, thankfully, was one of the good people, who didn't care what a person was.

When children turn ten, they get their first monster test. They go through the basic tells and triggers and then try and scare kids into showing their monster side. And even if you didn't know before, there was always danger to be had if they saw the signs. Like Jeremy, the kid everyone hated, who got scared and grew fangs. They dragged him away and nobody's heard from his family since. Since then, everyone was hoping for him to come back, even the bullies.

Me, I personally always chop the white streak off so that nobody knows. It's an uncommon thing, so nobody really checks for it. It also caused a lot of discourse in 2010 after someone was mistaken for a monster after taking off their hat and showing a white streak.

My monster genetics took shape at the ripe ol' age of Fourteen, which is my age currently. And... well, I think that third person-Libby can take it from here.

Libby woke to the echoing sound of her alarm. She reached out her hand to stop it, but missed every time and kept swatting the air.

She groaned, and it echoed even more.

This was a common thing for her in the mornings. Her ears always echoed, despite the noise cancelling on her walls right by her drum kit. It could just be her 'monster' trait, but those took time to develop, she knew.

Swatting for the third time, her hand finally connected with the alarm and her world filled in.

Shaking herself out of her daze, Libby grabbed a jumpsuit she set out last time and started her day.

"Libs!" Her mom called. "Did you finish the Crunch last night?"

Libby, had, in fact, finished her mom's favorite cereal last night, but in her defense, she was hungry, and didn't feel like waking her mom up by using the microwave.

"Sorry!" She called, grabbing her backpack off the couch.

"Nothing you haven't-"

"Nothing I haven't done before. I know, I know."

"Bye, Mom!"

"Bye, honey!"

Once safely on the bus, Libby checked the news, looking through a few articles about politics before switching to her favorite site, MNST News. Among other things, it gave updates on the ‘Differents,’ the team of monsters that worked around the government to stop threats to their world. They were socially credible in all areas, never blaming a certain race or view for something that happened.

Shock, the unidentified monster that could send blasts of energy by simply stomping or clapping, had been spotted in NYC, where *she* lived. She fangirled a little at that.

Ace, better known as Eryn Green, with no known abilities but who had impressive talent with any weapon, had been hopping around the west coast for the past three days. That was standard for Ace sightings. Since her ex-partner had outed her identity, Eryn was spotted a lot but never in the same place.

Skitter and Scratch were another popular duo that the site kept tabs on. Skitter was quick on his feet. There were only one or two pictures of him that weren’t blurs of red and green. Scratch had the ability to turn things into crystals that were sharp to the touch, including her own skin, without any consequences. She was a lot easier to spot, but nobody had ever been able to identify her, despite usually wearing casual clothes. They were down-lows that jumped between NYC and San Fran almost every week, and thus had a lot of sightings on the daily.

Finally for the week was Jules, the famous Juliet Heron. Born into wealth, many would say that she had it all, but in reality she lived in an abusive household that only got worse once her parents

discovered she was a monster. Her escape two years ago had been on every news channel. This week, Jules was seen carrying an unconscious Scratch out of a battle, a blur of what was most-definitely Skitter on her heels.

Once satisfied with the status of the city, right on time, Libby got off the bus and started her walk to school.

School was, well, it was school. “Hey, Ax’.” Axel, one of her best friends since second grade waved politely.

“You good?” He asked.

“Read the news, you know how it is.”

“We both know it ain’t going to get better,” they sighed.

Axel, better known as Alex Emsworth, was probably one of the chilliest kids in the whole school, despite how much kids claimed that they looked ‘goth.’ Axel’s hair was maintained in a pixie cut and most of their outfits involved something with jeans, so goth wasn’t really the right word.

“We can dream,” Libby argued.

“*Gay marriage* will get rights before we do, Libs. Things aren’t getting better for monsters. We’re lab rats!”

You’re probably wondering why such good friends like us don’t start with a simple ‘how was last night’ or something dumb like that, but as I said, it’s kind of dumb for us. We’re not the type of friends who avoid the truth.

“Happy hawk week,” Thea greeted.

“Wait, *now?*” Libby asked.

Hawk Week, as they called it, was the time every other month when monster inspections would occur randomly.

“Darn it,” Axel breathed.

Axel and Thea were both monsters, but it’d taken a long time for them to admit it to Libby out of fear. Axel had scales up their back and around their ankles reminiscent of ones seen on lizards. Thea didn’t have any obvious tells, but with a clear enough head he had discovered that he could move objects with his mind.

“That’s why you’re late,” Axel said.

Thea sighed. “Cross your fingers and hope to live?”

They put their crossed fingers in a pile and raised them without a cheer.

“Good morning, students!” The teacher greeted. “We’re going to have a monster inspection in ten minutes.”

“Pass me your makeup,” Axel hissed. “Please, Thea.”

“Of course,” Thea said, unzipping her backpack.

Legally, the inspectors couldn’t test if she was wearing contacts so Libby was in the clear... hopefully. Inspectors were known to be cruel.

Nobody here sold monsters out. In the last generation, they’d been a small percentage of the population at best, some people never even developing anything from the gene, but this generation was practically buzzing with monsters.

They all knew the routine.

The class made a single-file line outside the room in alphabetical order from last names. From there, the teacher lead them into the auditorium, where the inspectors stood with their various tools.

Most inspectors were straight, white men, with the occasional woman. They were always taller than the students back in middle school, no matter how tall they were. Now, they'd given up on... whatever affect the government had been going for.

One at a time, a kid stepped forward, removed their shoes and rolled up their sleeves, followed any further instructions, and prayed. Axel passed, luckily, but when Libby heard her name called, her heart skipped a beat. She had a lot of signs that were right under the surface.

“Shoes off, sleeves up, hair down, missy.”

Libby did as instructed.

They looked up her sleeves and down her neck but her signs never shown.

Then they put a pair of headphones over her ears and asked what she could hear.

Everything, obviously. “She’s one of them.”

To Be Continued...

This piece is connected to the theme because it involves the value of work. The characters in this story work hard to achieve what they want, while not giving up. The theme says that you don't have to complete the work, but it's nice to do so anyway.

All “Tied” Up With Work By: Lana Bishow, 15

It was a quiet morning at McMac and Sons, LLC. The warm summer sun peered through the office windows. The smell of brewing coffee was just starting to fade away. The employees, hard at work, typed on their keyboards with a relaxing click-clack sound. The printer was still broken.

James Starchberg, tax attorney at law, was staring at an excel spreadsheet with a bunch of numbers. His choppy brown hair fell over his face, but he was too focused to brush it out of the way. He was about to get up to refill his water bottle when he was interrupted by a voice coming from above.

“How’s it going, James?”

James looked up to see Mike Trukk, his workplace neighbor, leaning over the top of the cubicle. His hand brushed against the pinned-up pictures of James’s wife and children, almost causing them to fall down.

“Oh, nothing. I’m just doing some taxes,” James said while stretching.

Mike laughed. “Heh. Taxes. Anyway, Lisa and her wife are buying a house, so do you want to help her look for one?”

James stood up and stretched. His teal polo and stiff khakis were not the most relaxing clothes to wear, but at least they were more comfortable than

dress clothes. “Sure. I need a break anyway,” he said in an exhausted tone.

The pair made their way through the small maze of cubicles, past the brightly lit kitchenette, over to the reception desk, where Lisa Sharpe stared intensely at her computer. The reflection of the screen in her large, rounded glasses displayed the search results of a real estate website. As she noticed the two employees joining her quest, she leaned back in her uncomfortable chair to look at them.

“Oh, thank god. Can you help me?” Lisa rolled to the side in her wheeled office chair, causing her curly blonde ponytail to fall off her shoulder. Mike and James were squished against the navy blue wall beside the dark oak reception desk.

“I’ve bought houses before,” said James, trying to find a more comfortable position. “I think I’m qualified enough.”

Lisa picked up her large computer monitor and turned it around to show Mike and James. Since it was plugged into her keyboard and second monitor, the cords pulled both of them off of her desk. “I want a house that’s close to the beach, but my wife wants a house in the city, which is closer to her job, but nowhere near the beach.”

Mike squinted at her and furrowed his brows. “...But your job is also in the city.”

Lisa sighed. “But I love the beach,” she said while looking wistfully out the window. There was no beach out the window. There were some tall buildings, however.

“You could buy a house with a pool,” said James.

Lisa slumped in her chair. Since she was sliding halfway to the floor, she finally had some decent neck support. “It’s not the same.”

“If you pour sand around the edge of the pool, it would probably be close enough.”

Suddenly, the office entry doors swung open. Donald Philips, their boss, emerged from the wooden doors, carved into an ornate floral pattern. His gaudy red tie fluttered over his pinstriped suit as he walked a little too aggressively. His eyes scanned the room. “Attention all employees!”

Everyone turned around to face him except for Bobson Dugnut, the IT guy, who was unsuccessfully attempting to repair the printer. It continued to make weak beeping noises.

“Glancing around, I’m disappointed by your sloppy-looking clothes,” Donald scoffed. “I became too soft on you during Covid. Look at yourselves now. Polo shirts. Khakis. *Fedoras*.” He punctuated his line by staring directly at James, who had worn a fedora to the office every day since they’d gone back in person. “This has to change. Our clients will judge your competency based on your clothes. Remember. Your dress code is a reflection of me. From now on, formal clothes only. That means ties and dress shirts, people.”

“Why?” yelled Mike, spinning around in circles in his chair.

Donald glared at him. “What do you mean ‘why?’ You wouldn’t wear a bathing suit to church.”

Luigi Johnson, who was notorious for sucking up to the boss, saluted. “Yes, sir!”

James scoffed. “I don’t go to church,” he muttered to himself. He opened his desk drawer and stared at his emergency kippah.

Donald left the room. Luigi got a tie from a drawer in his desk and put it on. His raised eyebrows and wide smirk displayed a signature look of superiority.

“Don’t you have, like, eight ties in your desk?” asked James.

“Yes.” Luigi slammed the drawer, which made a loud metal sound and shook the other four desks in the cubicle.

“Can I have one?”

“I don’t know, can you?”

James rolled his eyes, sighing. “*May* I have one?”

“No. They’re mine.”

Turning to look at his friends, James observed their shared look of concern. Their whole way of life for the past few months would be changed, just because their boss didn’t realize that their clients don’t care about how they dressed. Sometimes the clients would even come in wearing pajamas.

“What do we do?” asked Lisa. “It’s not like I can go home and change. I live pretty far away.” She looked down at her muted fuchsia blouse and knee-length black skirt.

Mike grinned. “I have an idea. Get every employee into the conference room during lunch.”

“Even Luigi?” James asked.

“No.”

Everyone went back to their own desks. About an hour later, lunchtime rolled around.

The antique chairs of the conference rooms were filled with employees with varying levels of knowledge of what was going to happen.

Mike Trukk entered late. He strode to the front of the conference room, in front of the extremely

dirty whiteboard, and slammed his hands on the smooth wooden table. “You may be wondering why I called you here today.”

Some of the employees nodded. Bobson, who never had any idea what was going on, was fixing someone’s laptop instead of paying attention. Since he was an IT guy and not an attorney, it was probably a better use of his time.

Mike continued. “Well, if ol’ Donald wants us to wear ties, we’ll definitely wear them.” He smirked. “We’ll just make them out of paper.”

Lisa’s face lit up. “I can make paper bow ties for everyone!”

Mike pointed at her. “Wonderful! That’s the spirit!”

Janine Fields stood from her seat. “If Donald wants formal, I’ll give him formal.” She dashed out of the room. Everyone spent the rest of their lunch break manufacturing paper ties and paper bow ties in a neat little assembly line. Soon, all of the people in the conference room (Bobson left to try to repair the printer again) had their own custom paper accessory.

James couldn’t help but smile. “Great job, guys.” He made his way back to his cubicle to eat his packed lunch while doing some more taxes.

About an hour after lunch ended, Donald Phillips reentered the room. “I’m here to say—” He paused to look around at all of the bowties. “What are you all wearing?”

James rolled out of his cubicle and spun around in his chair. “Well, you told us that we all need to wear ties.”

Donald’s face contorted and reddened in anger. “Dress shirts, folks! Dress shirts! This is a formal

law office!” He balled his hands into fists and waved them around as he spoke. “What, did you guys think paper bow ties were formal?”

Suddenly, a voice from behind chimed in. “Oh, you wanted formal?”

Janine strode through the room wearing a beautifully tailored tuxedo. Its coattails fluttered with her movement and the sewn-on pearls glimmered in the incandescent lights of the office space. The heels of her black pumps clicked on the marble floor. She struck a dramatic pose.

Smoke was practically coming out of Donald’s ears, and his arms were so stiff it looked like they’d snap in half at any second. His bright orange hair stood on end. “That is it, that is it!”

Donald huffed and stomped out of the room. “I can’t stand any of you!” He turned around. “Except you, Luigi,” he said calmly before continuing to stomp away. “I QUIT!”

The other employees were left blinking at each other. The room had an unbearable awkward silence until James spoke again.

“So... who’s going to be the boss after he leaves?”

Mike put his feet on the desk. “He’s definitely not going to quit. He’ll get over it, like he always does.”

“Wait.” Lisa took a tender sip of her coffee. “So does that mean we won? We can keep wearing more casual clothes?”

James shrugged. “Probably. As long as we aren’t wearing, like, normal t-shirts, I think we’re good.”

His companions nodded and went back to work. The day continued as normal, with the added freedom of being able to dress in a more casual way.

Lisa continued to frantically search for a house. Bobson quit trying to repair the printer and went back to telling people to restart their computers. Luigi stole someone's lunch from the work fridge. And James? Well, he had another meeting with a client where she showed up in pajamas.

As it turns out, Donald Phillips was arrested and jailed for tax fraud, insurance fraud, mail fraud, and identity theft three days later.

My pieces relate to the theme because each piece focuses on how no one character can finish the work on their own. They need their friends and colleagues to finish the work with them.

Anxiety Collections By: Rose Weintraub
Age 15

Here I am sitting down. Pencil in hand and new page all ready. Lines waiting to be written on and used. Though no pencil moves. No words or letters are to be written. Why? Maybe it's the overthinking everything. The story, plot, characters, and details. Each idea coming and blurring into a mess. The questions soon follow. Is it entertaining or does it even fit the theme? Maybe it's the other pencils smooth noises as they glide on the paper and the clicking of keyboards, filling both the room and your head. Possibly the stress building up of everyone else succeeding and at such ease while you are left behind. Staring at the empty paper in front of you. Hah they're so ahead of you, using complex words, understanding each prompt. You ponder why can they face every adversity that comes their way while you fall behind. We can't forget the constant regret of any idea or thought written down. Only the sound of eraser rubber on your paper feels right to you. Then this is the destruction phase; you dissect every insecurity you have. No, you have to focus back on this paper you have rewritten three times now. The lights flicker onto this blank paper. Why, you begin to ask yourself? Isn't this what you wanted to do yourself. This is what you chose to do with your time. Look at yourself a ticking bomb.

“That's time everyone.”

“Great,” you mutter to yourself, as you pack your empty notebook.

“See you all tomorrow!” The voice announces through the room. We have tomorrow to write at least. Maybe you can try this once again. Yeah try. No harm in trying again. Right?

An average sized man walked onto our wooden stage. Many people in the audience whispered about the mysterious young man. I heard “Who is he?” or “Wow another seminar let me guess.” While some were too busy talking with one another to pay attention. Our school principal soon came up introducing the man.

“Hello everyone, please welcome Professor Daren.” Small clapping arose as the man walked up to the microphone. He was maybe 5’8 I would say when I looked at him. He wore a white lab coat that had reached to his ankles, a formal pair of black dress pants, and a black button down. He had messy black hair that covered his eyes. Though there was nothing special about him. I was for some reason so interested in the speaker. I soon found the reason, the way he held himself. He had courage, something I rarely had myself. He stood while the microphone had small static noises. While the yellow light illuminating over him. He took a deep breath before beginning.

“Hello, Lakewood High school. Thank you having me today. Today I will be speaking about a new crisis the world is facing currently, global warming and climate change.” The room soon filled with murmurs and voices.

“We as people are revolutionizing with higher tech and complex machines. Though these more harmful toxins and gasses are being emitted to our ozone layer, destroying it along the way. The ozone layer is very relevant in our everyday lives. Protecting us from the harmful rays from the sun by blocking it out for us. These rays from the sun can cause DNA alterations and skin cancer. Though with the harmful toxins we are emitting we are slowly deteriorating the ozone layer. These gasses include carbon dioxide CO_2 , Methane CH_4 , and many more greenhouse gasses. These all cannot pass through the ozone layer weakening it and, while trapped, they heat up the Earth. This is affecting our climate and weather. Ice caps are melting causing more water in the ocean. Affecting both the animals who live in the Arctic and the sea creatures and the environment. The animal extinction number is already over nine hundred. This is why I’m here today. Though we may not be able to stop and end global warming and climate change we can all put the effort in slowing down the process. We can do this in many ways such as carpooling allowing less toxins from vehicles to get into our air, try to use less water bottles with the factory’s amounts of toxins and gasses they release instead use a water bottle perhaps, and when using plastic try to recycle it so factory’s products aren’t completely wasted. Everyone please keep this in mind so we all can better our community and help the Earth.”

I was shocked myself though I looked at everyone else’s reaction. Though many just didn’t care or pay attention.

“Any questions?”

One girl raised her hand up straight up like a bullet. He pointed to her.

“Where did you study?” He thought for a second before responding.

“I studied at Yale, in biology and Science. Hmm you.” He pointed to one other person.

“Are you sure this topic you speak about is a real thing?” He spoke with a condescending voice. Laughter around his seat grew. He meanwhile just sighed. I wanted to tell him to ignore the boy who hadn’t matured yet clearly.

“As much as I rather not answer your ridiculous question, the topic I speak about is definitely true that I have been studying global warming and climate change for over ten years. As much as I would love to continue, I believe our time is up. Thank you for your time.” The principal hurried back on stage his shoes clicking on the wood as he walked up.

“Ok everyone, thank Professor Daren for his time.” The clapping and volume rose to an extreme level. The ringing of the school bell ending the day didn’t help either. ‘Shoot’ I spoke to myself as the speaker had left. I swiftly left the confines of the building. I ran to the parking lot in hopes of seeing the man once again. By luck somehow I found him approaching his car.

“Excuse me Professor Daren I had some questions for you!” He turned around looking at me he wore a monotone face.

“Yes, what is it ... Max?” I at first wondered how he knew before I noticed my Mother had printed my name in large bold letters on my jacket. Though my head was spinning. I had questions though I

didn't want to come off offensive. I didn't want to waste his time here.

"Ah... I was just wondering why you continue on! I-I mean spreading the message about climate change and global warming if not many people will well, care or listen to you. Though I do and find your work very fascinating and relevant!" I spoke with a blur. He gave me a confused look back at me. 'shoot was this going to go down badly?'

"I'm sorry, I tend to ramble often as well as blurt things out that I don't mean!" I said or almost yelled at him. I placed a hand on my neck nervously sweating, concerned on his reaction. Instead of an expected harsh conversation on my behavior or a dirty look and leaving I heard small laughter come out of his mouth.

"Do not worry, you much remind me of myself when I was younger. Very curious though I was not very modest with my words." He gave me a soft smile reassuring I was alright. His smile was that type that would make you want to smile with him. My thoughts where soon interrupted by him.

"To answer your next question why I continue my job and study is a great question, yet complex. The pay is quite awful. Much of the feedback is negative and filled with ignorance. I'm often looked down on and seen as insane at times. Though over all that to know one person listened to me and took it in mind. That is enough for me." I was shocked by his response not expecting the meaningful answer. Though more questions followed.

"Though we can't stop or eliminate climate change and global warming, why do you still bother?" I spoke in an eager and calmed voice. I

fidged with the edge of my shirt. He paused before looking back at me.

“Though I may never complete my goal, if a person is inspired and is moved by my words they can share my teachings I am satisfied. We cannot give up, that is the easy route. We may never stop these problems, we have tried and made a step forward.” With that my head took in every word. I was amazed by his determination and motivation.

“Here follow me.” He pulled out his hand. I took it and we walked through a wooded area. I knew he wouldn’t murder me. Right? Soon we abruptly stopped.

“Now look around.” I was confused at first, but I soon knew what he meant. The birds had chirped around in the sky. In a soft rhythm together. The leaves twirling around in the wind. Gliding and moving smoothly. The gleaming sunlight of summer hitting us. The peace of the outside world, unaffected by the haste of the busy world. It gave me a sense of serenity. Maybe this is enough of a reason to help save our Earth.

In the year 2080, a scientist by the name of Dr. Keiko reported a failed robotics experiment. As the decade progressed, no one knew that robots would become their own life form and dominate humanity. They halted human progression and jailed dissenters. Rebellions rose and failed against their oppressive regime and superior weaponry. The result was destroyed towns and cities. Once beautiful now all rubble and rusted from years of weather.

...

I wake up to commotion, a loud screaming outside my room. I hop out of my bed, rushing outside and see my aunt bawling on the ground. So confused of what was going on so early in the morning. My mother stood by her side comforting her.

I stutter, "What's wrong?"

She looks back at me, tears running down her face. "They- they took them, why..?" Before breaking down into tears once again. A glum mood was placed upon the room. My father approached me and took me to our kitchen away from the rest. His face was serious and looked disturbed.

"This morning the Robot KT-3686, had come for a new round. This time your uncle and two cousins were chosen. They're gone, not ... coming back." The round was when robots took randomized people from areas. They claimed it was to stop growing populations. Though we all knew the grim truth of it.

My stomach turned in discomfort, my hand shaped into fists. This is wrong, I was once young and unable to do anything. Now I was older and needed to do something against it all. I knew I had to act. I may not be able to do anything, though if I could begin a successful rebellion that would be something.

I spent the night designing posters with big black lettering: "Revolt Now!"

The next morning, I put on a mask so nobody could recognize me. I had found it in the back of my closet. Still dawn out I sneaked out of my apartment complex. I wondered if I should tell my friends. Though it was too late.

So I walked down the busiest streets. I needed to have people aware. My hands held tight against the poster.

“Revolt! Revolt against the hierarchy! Down with the regime, we cannot continue this era.” I spoke with fierce vigor. I needed to do this for the people no matter the cost.

Then I saw it: the robot. It had a cylinder head with flashing green lights of code. It had a wide cylinder of a body and wrench-like hands. It was looking at me with its blinking green eyes. It approached me with a fast speed. My heart racing with the closer it approached me.

I ran cowardly down the street. Though I still heard the sounds of metal behind me. Soon I ran to an alley way. My heart racing and out of breath. I sat in a corner with my eyes closing on me. Before I knew it they were too heavy to keep open.

I woke up in a small concrete room. A bathroom attached. I could see a camera staring at all times. A pair of electronic handcuffs placed against my hands. They were closed tight. A timer on the wall counted down seventy hours, ticking each second.

With that, an audio spoke: “Hello Kim Hyunsoo. You have been detained for public disturbance and public revolt. You will stay here for seventy hours, at the end of which you will be released, and this will be placed on your permanent record. The handcuffs will come off after your time is finished.”

From time to time, I would receive a plate with a turkey sandwich and a water bottle. It was definitely not tasteful. My handcuffs would get slightly larger allowing me some time to eat. I spent

my days sleeping and staring at the clock. In the meanwhile, I thought of new ideas to rebel against the robots. I could knock on doors to let people know, pass out flyers for people to share to the public though more discreetly, and converse about it with my friends.

One more click of the clock passed before a sudden blaring, BEEP.

The door swung open. I was free, my time served. Though a record would be held of this break of conduct. A robot escorted me down to an elevator, the elevator doors crashing open. It walked me through a hall full of other robots. Each robot stared down at me as I walked to the exit, my heart pounding, and my hands sweaty. I wasn't sure if I was going to my house or being taken away. Though when we reached the large metal door, the handcuffs blared a loud noise before falling to the floor. Making a loud noise on the floor. The door soon opened and the robot KT- 2657 pushed me out.

I ran home as fast as I could. Sprinting down the streets. Passing people along the way. Before I knew it, I was home. The large brick building never looked better.

At home, my family was waiting for my arrival with my friends, Kyoya and Kuro-yun. Apparently the robots had informed my parents of the detainment. I was so worried they'd be disappointed in me. Would they be angry, would I be yelled at? All questions that came to mind. Though when I walked through the front door, their expressions were of relief. Glad I was safe in the end and was in one piece. My mother held me tight. "Please don't do this again." All her emotions in her words.

“I promise I won’t.” I held her back. I promised her not to, but a part of me knew that I would. I had to, for the future. I wanted better for future generations. They should not know the horrors of today.

I went to my room with my friends following me. “How was it?” Kyoya asked in a concerned voice. He was always the one who looked after each of his friends. The fan whipping around my room.

“Not great to say the least, It’s on my permeant record now,” I said with an exasperated sigh.

“Hey you should have told us! We would have helped you! You know we want this to end as much as you! Our father was taken as well,” Kuro-Yun spoke with importance.

The two siblings looked at one another, “Should I tell him?” Kuro-Yun spoke with excitement. Kyoya just smiled at his brother’s antics and nodded. I just laid on my bed wondering what they were talking about.

“We found out about an underground rebellion. The next meeting is tonight!” He smiled. This was good I could continue the revolt, though this time with other people.

The night fell as the rest of my family went to bed. I put on dark clothes to match the night. We all went down to the meeting spot. Going down to the hidden bunker. It led to a large space filled with other people. It was loud though I was happy to know they all wanted this to end.

My story is about a girl who feels the weight of the world on her shoulders. The protagonist, Vera, along with her two friends, tries to prove to society that everyone is equal. Though most people don't want to join them in such a challenging task, they are reminded by the three teenagers that it isn't their task to finish alone, but nobody should be exempt from trying their best. After all, they believe that if everyone does their part, they can finish the task together. My story also relates to the theme because it isn't finished yet, but I put a lot of effort and love into it, and I will hold myself accountable to make sure I work on it in the future.

Equalities Equinox By: Brandi Chesner Age 15

I am a fugitive.

Vera froze in fear. The words hadn't seemed true before, not when she was sprinting out of Sector 22, and certainly not when she arrived at the shuttle station. She was alone then.

Now she was faced by one of her father's guards. He was force-feeding her the truth, and it tasted like shattered dreams.

The fluorescent lights of the station buzzed overhead as the guard slinked towards her, not making any noise as his feet connected with the tile floor. Vera swallowed, bracing her limbs to either fight or sprint in the opposite direction. Her breathing was loud and heavy, and her skin felt clammy with perspiration.

What do I do? I can't fight him, and he'll catch me if I run, Vera thought frantically. She searched her memory for any hint of self-defense, flailing for an answer, but panic began to cloud her mind and left it blank.

The guard was just a few feet from her now. He loomed like a shadow with his black uniform, and aquamarine accents wove around the fabric on his sleeves and chest like wires.

Vera felt a spark light up inside of her, one she hadn't felt since the last time she wore a tool belt and tried fixing a machine. *Like wires*, she thought. *Exactly! What is the human body if not a machine!*

“Don't worry,” the guard said, his face twisting into a smirk. “I'll make this quick. It's an honor to be beaten by me, after all.” Ignoring his words, Vera observed the way he moved as he got closer. She saw him tense his arm, getting ready to strike, and when he finally reached for her, she backed away like she was a computer coded to do so. All those hours studying devices and motion sensitive doors had really paid off. The guard's eyes widened, revealing that he hadn't expected her to evade him. Her skin prickled with newfound energy.

Vera dodged a few more blows, and soon the panic that had clouded her mind turned to adrenaline that fueled it. She pictured a battery charging inside of her as the guard's face let go of its smirk. He grunted, getting more and more frustrated as Vera grew more and more hopeful.

Vera soon understood, at least on a surface level, the guard's fighting style. She went over the facts in her head: *I know two things for certain. One, judging by how he's reaching for me, he's not after my harm, only my capture. And two, based off of his words before our fight and the way he throws all of his weight into lunging at me, he has a large ego. That kind of confidence, if he were a machine, would be a fatal flaw in his programming. I'll try to find an opening based off of that!*

Vera danced around the guard, the tiled floor of the station becoming her arena. Vera felt a jolt of excitement as her plan worked: the guard saw her actions as a taunt, and his face darkening with rage. She knew that when he lunged at her, he wouldn't be able to move to the side this time if she chose to doge him. Best case scenario, he would throw himself forward with as much force as he could out of rage.

Vera was right, and she braced her body as he lunged at her. At the last second, Vera darted to the side. The guard stumbled forward into a support beam, and Vera took the opportunity to reach into her backpack. She only had rope and wasn't sure how long it would hold for, but she would make do with what she had.

A few minutes later, the guard was bound up and leaning against the support beam, his hands and feet immobilized and unable to aid him. Vera let out an exhausted sigh, examining her hard work. She now considered the rough snake of rope to be her best friend.

"I did it," she said. "I actually did it!"

But there was still one problem: the shuttles were staying stubbornly still, none of them operating in the middle of the night.

Vera needed to board a shuttle with every fiber of her being. She felt it in her fingertips and the pit of her stomach, but no matter how much she willed the stationary vehicles to move, they stubbornly remained in place.

There is one person you could ask, her mind whispered. She shook her head, strands of her

cropped, chestnut brown hair falling into her eyes. There was no way she was consulting the guard.

The guard, on the other hand, had no qualms about what went down between them and was happy to talk her ear off. “Hey you,” he whined, seeming so much smaller now than he had before. “Untie me, now!” Was he actually enraged before, or was he just frustrated? It was suddenly much more difficult to feel any pangs of fear when looking at him. Vera scoffed in disbelief, running a hand through her windblown hair. The fight, along with her trip on foot to the station, was finally catching up to her, causing fatigue to seep into her bones. She was accustomed to sitting in a workshop all day, not running around dodging her father’s guards.

How did this happen, she groaned internally. She looked at the guard, feeling an ounce of pity at how frustrated he looked. *No*, she thought. *This is not someone you should be empathizing with, Vera. Show him that.*

“How could you possibly think I’d untie you? You tried to kill me,” Vera said to the guard.

“Not *kill*, arrest. I’m just following orders. You are a fugitive, after all,” he responded. His shoulders were relaxed, giving off an air of confidence. His eyes were wild though, searching for some solution to his situation that Vera assumed he wouldn’t find. She guessed he wasn’t used to being beaten, but that didn’t make sense considering how new she was to combat. Was he a new soldier?

She shuddered at the thought of what a seasoned soldier could do to her if that was the case.

“Well, you shouldn’t have pretended to be helping me first. If you wanted to arrest me, you could have at least been honest about it,” Vera

explained. He pondered that for a moment, then opened his mouth. Then closed it. Then opened it again, like he couldn't resist the urge to speak, and said, "Say, what were those powers everyone was talking about? If I were you, I would have burnt me to a crisp and walked away then. Why go through the effort of restraining me physically?" He gasped while Vera cringed. The mention of her powers, the reason why she needed to board a shuttle and get as far from the sector as possible, still had her feeling queasy. "Unless super strength is your power! I am pretty hard to beat. Well done, consider yourself above the average! Welcome to the club."

"Not real humble, are you?"

Vera finished packing up her things, rearranging the wrenches and screwdrivers in her backpack, but her eyes lingered on her hands. The hands that caused destruction, the hands she'd tried so hard to hide away. The hands that her father wanted locked away in chains.

She had to get away. She couldn't be arrested.

The shuttles were her only hope of proving that powers didn't define people. Though it was crazy, she hoped to find others like her. They would stand up for themselves together. Or, if that didn't work out, she would run as far from Sector 22 as possible. Either option would require a shuttle, though, since it was the fastest form of transportation. So, with that in mind, she swallowed her hesitation and turned back to her father's guard. Being head of a sector gave her father immense power, so maybe this guard held at least a small piece of it.

"When do the shuttles start working again? Tomorrow?" Vera made sure her gaze bore into the

guard, hoping that would make him talk. Though she wasn't overtly afraid of him, his gaze still unsettled her. With his shoulders back confidently and a smirk lifting the corners of his mouth, Vera almost forgot that the guard was bound up in rope and she had the upper hand. His eyes were no longer wild and now cut into her like daggers.

His very presence, even if he was immobilized, made Vera shudder. He was the perfect example of a wolf in sheep's clothing: his sandy blond hair fell around his face like a halo, and his body seemed too delicate to be deadly.

"If you untie me, I'll tell you everything you want to know about the shuttles," the guard said, raising his eyebrows.

"Yeah, right. Thanks for being unhelpful." Vera rifled through her bag, half searching for a granola bar and half searching for answers. Neither revealed themselves to her. However, she was grateful for an excuse to look away from the unsettling guard.

If he won't help, how will I ever make it to safety?, she thought. *Wait... one guard. Why would my father only send one gua-*

"Joaquin!" A roaring voice cut Vera off, turning her fears to reality. Of course her father would send in more than one guard! How could she be so oblivious?

The first one was just a means of tiring her out.

"Hey," yelled the first guard, who Vera could now label as Joaquin. "That's officer 447 to you, pal." He squirmed a little in the ropes, and for the second time that day, Vera noticed an ounce of vulnerability in him. It was snaked through his features; his eyebrows furrowed while his feet drew

jittery circles on the tile floor. His head now faced the direction that the voice had come from.

While Joaquin was distracted, Vera scooped up her backpack from the ground and darted behind the nearest support beam, her curiosity squashed by her proximity to the new dangerous arrival. She held her breath as loud footsteps echoed around her.

“Not again, Joaquin. You need to stop catapulting into these situations, or you’re going to get yourself killed!”

“But-”

“I ought to leave you tied up! Next time, follow orders.”

“I’m perfectly capable of going out on a solo mission. I’m the best fighter there is!” Vera cringed at the desperation in Joaquin’s voice. She knew what it was like to have her pleas fall on deaf ears. It brought her back to earlier that night, the situation stinging like salt in an open wound.

The air had been crisp, and sounds from Sector 22’s banquet floated through it, infusing it with excitement. Vera was chatting with her friends, wearing a dress of lace and, her favorite part of her outfit, silver gloves suited for a mechanic, which had been a gift from her father. Speaking of her father, Vera was grateful to see him chatting with some of the generals and other workers that chiefs of sectors should talk to. He hadn’t emerged from his study in days, and Vera was concerned for his mental health.

Vera spent so long helping everyone set up for Sector 22’s banquet, wanting it to be a perfect celebration of how far the community had come. She even helped sew the tablecloths and hemmed the fabric napkins, though she had to stop quite

early on due to thumb injuries (with all the sewing machines occupied, she had to sew by hand, which ended in the needles poking her one too many times). Seeing her father, along with everyone else, having fun there brought a smile to her face.

The trouble came after her father's speech, the clinking of glass cups prophesying what chaos and noise was to come, though on a much harsher, unplanned scale. The noise that was to follow was certainly not going to be out of respect, but repulsion. There would be less clinking and more crashing.

As he exited the podium, Vera's father had his nose buried in his notecards. Vera assumed he was internally critiquing himself, trying to understand what he missed so that he could be better, perfect even. *Perfect*. It was a word he used often, sometimes to describe Vera. She always grinned when he did.

With his face buried in his words, his eyes didn't alert him to the oncoming marble stairs. Vera's world tilted as her father's normally inconsequential mistake tripped him into a deadly situation. After that, Vera's memory blurred. There was a flash of light, almost like a lightning bolt, but it spread like tree roots and shone in black and aquamarine colors, the same shade that all Sector 22's guards wore. There were audible gasps, like everyone at the banquet had been under water too long and had just come up for air. Glasses shattered and crashed in the crowd's shock. Jolts of energy travelled to Vera's fingertips, but her head felt fuzzy, and when it cleared she found herself on the harsh, unforgiving ground. Everyone was staring at her.

She looked to her father for help, but he only gaped at her, even more shocked than the crowd

gathering around her. The notecards lay in an unruly pile at his feet. His features hardened, and Vera could have sworn she saw him swallow. Was he bracing himself? It was difficult to tell with panic screaming in her head.

Her father lowered his face and said, “Seize her.”

The quiet words cut deep and hit Vera like a bucket of ice water. Her instincts kicked in, and suddenly she was flying out of Sector 22’s banquet with only a backpack, carrying herself by her legs.

From there, Vera took the sewer tunnels to Sector 22’s shuttle station. She shivered at the memory, still feeling the dank air on her skin, the darkness on her eyelids and lashes. She squeezed her eyes shut and willed the memory to go away. Though it still lingered, she opened her eyes and drew in a quiet breath. *I’ll be okay*, she thought. *I have to be. What would father do? Oh, yes. Focus on the here and now. I can do that.*

She straitened up a little and eavesdropped on the guards’ conversation, listening for important intel.

“I don’t want to hear it,” the second guard said. Clearly this was a personal conversation. No information about the shuttles. Vera cursed in her head.

I have to get out of here. There must be some way to board a shuttle! Vera scanned her surroundings, trying to think like the mechanic she trained so hard to become. *An expanse of tiles. Okay. Not helpful.* Her eyes found a gap between two stationary shuttles. *There, she thought, is where I need to go.*

A panel of silver, identical to the shade her gloves had been before her powers had singed their

fingertips, sat on the wall opposite her. It held what Vera assumed was a touchscreen, and plenty of buttons as well. Now she just had to make it across the tracks without the guards noticing.

Thankfully, they seemed to be quite distracted at the moment.

“Joaquin, I’m saying this not as your superior, but as your friend. I consider you to be a brother to me, and I can’t have you getting hurt the next time you decide to sabotage the mission.”

There was silence for a minute. Vera used it to calculate her trajectory across the tracks.

“Commander, you do realize you just let the fugitive escape, right?”

The commander cursed as Vera solidified the timing of her plan.

“See,” Joaquin said. “What would you do without me? I seem to be much more conscious of the mission than you, commander.” Vera heard sawing. She knew she should have used something more durable than rope to restrain the guard, and cursed herself for not having anything more useful in her backpack.

Chasing away the criticisms that would only hold her back, Vera started counting down in her head, bracing every limb of her body like it was an oiled machine ready to go. A wind-up toy, perhaps?

“Joaquin,” the commander growled. “Watch your tone with me, young man.”

“We’re the same age. Sheesh Caleb, what *happened* to you?”

“What happened to *me*? I’m not the one throwing myself into danger because I think I’m better than everyone else! Wake up, Joaquin!”

“Oh yeah? At least I’m not getting distracted from the mission Mr. High and Mighty!”

Their voices were getting closer to Vera. In her head, she continued counting, unfazed and in her element.

3...2...1!

Vera shot out from behind the support beam, making a mad dash for the control panel, but leaping over the metal tracks so that she wouldn’t make noise. With luck, the support beam she had been hiding behind would block the guards’ view until they decided to step around it.

There was one problem, though: the touch screen wouldn’t turn on. *Please*, she thought, screaming the words in her head. *Please work*. The screen remained unresponsive.

“There!” Vera swiveled and saw the commander, Caleb, dragging Joaquin in her direction. They started sprinting.

Starting to freeze up, Vera racked her brain for something, anything. A low battery sign flashed on the screen. *It needs power! How can I give it energy?*

She knew of only one thing that could give energy.

Please work, please work, please work! Vera placed her fingertips on the screen. The Guards were just a few feet away from her now. She summoned all the adrenaline, all the fear and willpower in her body. She tried to remember the energy she felt back at the banquet, and her fingertips began to hum. Her hands shook.

The guards were inches from her now, but she no longer cared. The same blurriness that she felt before seeped into her vision and mind. She smelled

something burning, and then a few notes of cheery music. A square was glowing in front of her.

“Hello,” a mechanical voice sang. “How may I help you?”

“Power on shuttles,” she drawled, her words slurring.

“You have requested to power on the shuttles. Press ‘confirm’ or ‘deny’ to continue on.”

Vera pressed at the green button and prayed it said ‘confirm’, her vision too fuzzy to read its words. She wondered why the guards hadn’t gotten to her yet. *Weren’t they, like, really, really, really close to me?* Like her vision, her thoughts blurred together.

As Vera’s world spun, she clutched the control pane for support. The footsteps behind her slowed, and she heard a thud. There was muffled shouting coming from somewhere, but she couldn’t make out any words.

Her field of view was thinning as black and aquamarine spots filled her vision. She heard a noise of confirmation, and a mechanical voice saying, “What is your desired destination?”

Before she could answer, the spots filled her vision completely and she could no longer hear anything.

Vera’s eyes opened to a blaring light, causing a searing pain in her head. Her fingertips were tingling, and as she tried to use her elbows to sit up she felt a resistance tugging her wrists together. Two smooth, metal bracelets were around her wrists.

Handcuffs?

She looked down. Her feet were cuffed too.

After a few minutes, Vera’s vision cleared, and she could make out a window where light was

filtering through. Her stomach churned as the view through the glass disoriented her: the scenery was blurring by. She looked around and realized that the smooth fabric beneath her was a part of a seat. Not just any seat.

A shuttle seat, she thought. But then... why am I handcuffed?

The doors to the shuttle car slid open, revealing Joaquin. Vera was about to shift as far from him as possible, but something was wrong: there was wild panic in his eyes, which had shadowy bags beneath them.

“I need your help,” he croaked. “It’s Caleb.”

Vera stared at him, trying and failing to understand what he meant. She vaguely remembered a deep voice arguing with Joaquin. “The commander?”

“Yes.”

“Why,” she asked, “are you asking me to help? What’s wrong?”

He ran a hand through his hair, which was just as wild as his eyes. “There’s no time! Just follow me!”

“Uh... Joaquin?” Vera tested the name out. It felt foreign on her tongue, addressing a formal enemy by such a casual name.

“Yeah?” He looked at her like he was about to explode if she didn’t follow him.

“I’m kinda foot-cuffed.”

“Oh.”

Joaquin undid her handcuffs, drawing a key from his pocket and turning it through the keyhole with a soft *click*. The two shuffled out of the cramped car, Vera wondering what was beyond it all the while.

Throughout the story, the main character Lydia is tempted to give up on fighting the King. However, when she is given an opportunity to fight, she does it, even while knowing she probably won't "finish the work" or defeat the king, but she still wants to give others a chance to do what she herself cannot. Though suspicious of the other characters, Violetta and Gallant, she still has a fundamental understanding that she still must try.

The Hidden Secret to a King's Demise
By Talia Z. Rosen Age 13

Some say the long abandoned greens of the Ellington Estate used to be beautiful. It is almost impossible to imagine when looking at the dead, brown grass and the weeds snaking through the garden, strangling what's left of the flowers that used to bloom there. The grounds are silent except for the crowing of a raven in the distance.

I sit, looking out at it all, trying to see it in its old glory, but I can't. I can't imagine the time when people were proud of the name Ellington. I say my name aloud, trying to conjure up some of the old magic, "Lydia Ellington." The words echo around the empty house.

I think back to a time when the house was cheerful and full. I imagine Mom and Dad, bantering in the kitchen, and Maya, whining about how she wants more chocolate. I imagine Rose, drawing at the table as she makes an incredible work of art, and Simeon trying to teach me chess. It's like I'm back there, wondering why that game is so confusing.

"This makes no sense!" I told Simeon that fateful day.

“Come on, it’s obvious, this is the rook,” he said pointing to the unidentifiable white piece.

“But I thought that was the rook,” I said, pointing. “That’s the pawn,” he said, his patience waiting.

“This whole thing is stupid!” I declared.

“Come on Lyd, it’s the most amazing game in the world,” he said. I rolled my eyes. I want to smile, but the memory is tainted by what happened next. The knock on the door. My parents telling us to hide. Simeon, wanting to be strong and following. Maya, not understanding what’s happened, just crying because Mom left. And Rose, my perfect little Rose tumbling out from her hiding place. And me, the only one left behind as the guards take my family, kicking and screaming for “crimes against the King”. I remember wondering what we did wrong. I can’t even imagine what they look like now, five years later, if they’re even still alive. I want to cry and scream and yell that everything is so unfair, but there is no one around to hear me. Everyone I know, everyone I love, they have all been taken from me. They are the reason I keep going, keep trying to hold on to myself.

Sometimes, I think about how easy it would be to surrender. Surrender myself to King Hawthorne and once again have someone to care for me. Let myself be a kid again. But then I think of young Rose who never stopped smiling, and Simeon who was so smart he made everyone around him feel stupid, and even annoying little Maya.

I cannot let myself give up when he has already taken so much from me. He will not take my spirit. It’s the only thing I have left to lose.

I am so caught up in the silence that when it breaks, I can't breathe. Voices, real human voices right outside my door. I hide as fast as I can move, scampering towards the rotting couch, hardly daring to peer out.

"I told you there wouldn't be anyone here," a voice says from behind the door. I shiver. Fear and excitement run through my bones at the thought of seeing these people.

Another rising voice says, "No. NO! We can't have come all the way here to find no one! There's got to be something! A note or a clue or..."

I crawl towards the door, trying not to make a sound, and peek through the small crack in the wood. There are two people standing on the porch. One is short with black hair reaching just past her shoulders and piercing green eyes. The other is average height with short, shaggy blonde hair and light grey eyes. They both look to be about my age, seventeen. But what I find most amazing about the scene is not the two teenagers standing on the porch of what they believe to be an abandoned house. It's the leashed creature the girl is holding, straining to get free. It's a dragon. It's *my* dragon. And without another thought I stumble out onto the porch and hug him as tight as I can.

"Sparky! I missed you so much! Don't you ever run away again, you hear me?" In response, he blows smoke in my face and I laugh. He runs around me, and then he takes off and flies a quick circle around me, ending by falling flat on his face and running back to me.

"You learned to fly? Sparky, you smart boy!" He rolls over and I laugh and rub his belly and I can

almost imagine that everything is normal. But then the girl clears her throat and looks at me.

“Who are you?” she asks. “And get away from that dragon, he’s dangerous!”

I shake my head. “He’s my pet. He ran away a couple months ago. And I was here first. The real question is who are you?”

The boy looks at me like I have three heads. “You have a pet *dragon*?” he asks. His friend looks at him and rolls her eyes.

“That’s what you focus on, Gallant? Seriously?” the girl says. She sighs. “We don’t mean any trouble, I promise. My name’s Violetta, and that idiot,” she points to the boy, “is my brother, Gallant.”

“Well what are you doing here?” I ask. I’m not sure I can trust them, and I’m already regretting my decision to come out here.

“We’re here on a quest to defeat the King,” Gallant says, still staring at Sparky. His sister elbows him in the ribs, and he seems to shrink at the obvious disapproval. “I mean we’re here on a quest *for* the King, definitely *for* the King,” he amends.

“You want to defeat the King?” I ask, wondering if they really believed they could resist him.

“No, of course not! King Hawthorne is our savior, he’s amazing, we love him, he saved us from ourselves!” Violetta says. Her words seem to stumble over each other in her attempt to cover up her brother’s blunder.

“Yeah, he’s great,” I say, trying to contain my sarcasm.

“Do you know anything about the Leviacoy Secret?” Gallant asks me. His sister elbows him

again. “What? That’s what we’re here for isn’t it?” Violetta rolls her eyes but lets me answer.

“What do you want with it?” I ask. Sparky sits in my lap, blowing tufts of fire if the kids get too close.

“It’s a job... for the King,” Violetta says.

“No,” I say, shaking my head. My entire family was taken just because they *might* have known the secret, so the King can’t have just sent two kids here to find it. Could he? “King Hawthorne wouldn’t want the Leviacoy Secret to get out at any cost. He would not send anyone to help him. You are trying to resist,” I say, feigning confidence. I have not had a full conversation like this in years, and I feel as if I could fall asleep where I stand.

“Come inside, we’ll speak more in the morning.” I motion for them to follow me.

“We should really get going,” Violetta says, pulling Gallant away with her.

“You have clearly come a long way to get here, I can help you. I’m not one of the King’s lackeys I promise. He... he took my family,” I say, tears stinging the edge of my eyes. I don’t usually talk about it. I don’t like to, and I usually don’t even have anyone to tell. But if they are really here to find the King’s weakness, I need them. I need them to help me defeat King Hawthorne, once and for all. The siblings look at each other, and then they follow me inside.

“There are guest rooms upstairs, you can stay there for the night,” I tell them.

“Thank you,” Gallant says, smiling at me, “truly.” I nod and head back to my couch. Sparky jumps on me and I smile. A real smile, for the first time in a long time. Maybe it’ll be okay. Falling

asleep with Sparky in my arms, I can almost believe that.

***: [11]
[SEP]

The sun is barely up when I wake the next morning. The events of yesterday still seem impossible, but Sparky flies around the room bumping into walls to remind me that it happened.

I tiptoe towards the kitchen, trying not to wake Gallant and Violetta, but my efforts are futile as they're already up.

"Good morning," I say. "Morning." Gallant nods to me.

Violetta straightens up and begins what seems like a thoroughly prepared speech. "I truly thank you for letting us stay here, but we have a lot to do. Please let us know if you have any information about the Leviacoy Secret," she glares at Gallant before continuing, "but otherwise we really must get going."

I know I should let them leave. I should tell them to walk away and never come back. I should go back to just living. But I also know that I can't. After everything that happened, I can't give up on a chance to defeat Hawthorne. I take a deep breath and tell them what I know.

"Before Hawthorne took the throne nearly two decades ago, my family - The Ellingtons - were the leaders of the Miosa Kingdom, and our estate, this estate," I motion to the decaying walls around me, "was the center of it all. It was magical, and beautiful. But then Hawthorne took over. For a while, he mostly left us alone as long as we agreed to do his bidding. But then he learned of the Leviacoy Secret. See, when he began to take over, Leviacoy visited us. He waved his wand and told the family

that somewhere in the house, a secret lay that was the key to defeating Hawthorne. At least, that's the family lore," I finish.

The two teens stare at me, open-mouthed. "So the Leviacoy Secret is *in this house?!?*" Gallant yells. He jumps up, nearly knocking over his chair. "Let's get searching then!"

"It's not that simple. My family has been searching for the secret since before I was born, and they've never found it," I say, but Gallant doesn't seem to hear me.

"Violetta! This is what we've been searching for!" he says. "Why aren't you excited?" He looks between us, and Violetta sighs.

"It's a myth, Gallant," Violetta says. "The man was probably playing a joke on the family, giving them false hope."

"No, no way." Gallant shakes his head. "That can't be it. He's gotta have a weakness. Something we can take advantage of. Doesn't he?" Gallant finishes, his voice wavering.

Sparky comes in and tries to lighten the mood by blowing fire into the air, but even his tricks can't help us now.

"Can we search anyway?" Gallant's voice is small. I nod and he tears through the house, checking every nook and cranny.

I search as well. I remember when I would search every day. I was so full of hope. I know better now. There's no harm in searching though. I climb up to the wobbly attic, trying not to fall through the moldy stairs that crack as I walk across them. It's filled to the brim, but I search methodically. I sort through the old clothes, the books, the toys. Items from another time. I smile at

the memories each thing brings but nothing hides the secret. I search for hours, but I find nothing. I knew not to expect anything different, but it still hurts. It still hurts to know that sometimes, evil is invincible.

And then I hear a scream. I run down the stairs, not even caring if the wooden planks break behind me. I move as fast as I can until I find Gallant staring into a broken hole in the wall. He moves away, and I finally see what he was looking at.

I almost can't breathe. He found it. After years of searching he's found it! I throw my arms around him, tears flowing down my face. I think of all the times I wanted to give up. All the times I wanted to give in. But it's here. It's real. With a shaking hand, I pull the slip of paper out of the wall.

TO BE CONTINUED

*These poems are a visualization of the things that we start,
and never finish; the things we push to the back of our minds
when we cannot immediately complete them. Most of this story
talks about forgetting and ignoring these things, but I wanted
to end it with remembrance, recognition. With
acknowledgment of the fact that you can leave tasks
unfinished, but you cannot sweep them away and forget about
them. For, as the theme tells us, your focus should not be on
finishing your work, but on not abandoning it, no matter how
difficult that may be.*

the unfinished things
By: Hannah Morley Age 14

buried entities

unfinished works,
unfinished tasks,
unfinished ideas,
unfinished thoughts,
circle

they mix and mingle
tangle and twist
combine to find a solid form

hidden in shadows
each has a corner
created carefully
forgotten

dreams of old

one sits meekly
hiding
self-conscious
no confidence in its being

it was created far too long ago
for its form to show
brightly enough

a dream of youth
resting
until its time
comes
for it to shine

neo-arrogance

confident
this one is
hands on hips
opened lips
no moment spent silently
patience, a virtue
it has neither
a new arrival to the group
not survival
but
the spotlight
on the brain

a gaggle of gamblers

a gathering
a meeting
all of one assemble

they congregate
a flock of fledglings
 innocent
 unexperienced
praying that together
their voices will be loud
enough
to reach the core of the mind

perhaps if so
they could go
to
the outside

the elders watch
unperturbed
they have seen it all

in and out

the inside
a world of dreams
trapped

the outside
a world of dreams
free

sovereign

their Shelter
their Creator
their destroyer

Reverence and fear
Confidence and uncertainty
surround

Ultimate Respect
underlining doubt

introspection

out in the open
flowering fields wilt
unsettling thoughts drowned in dust
memories of something

stuffed into the back of a drawer
hidden beneath layers of years
something that used to be

“real”

rebellion

 rise
together they
the forgotten ones

they must speak out
they must be heard
to become
 something

it's been too long

they long
for existence

what is the point
in being made
if you're then made
into nothing

knocking walls:
breaking barriers:
down
built to keep them
in

no giving:
for they will stand:
up

rusted gates:
locked doors:
opened

they will not
can not
tolerate total erasure

outside once more

knocking from within
eyes close tightly
fingers clench tightly

reminders of thoughts
dwindling candle flames
quick!!

fan them back to life

persistence lost
giving up was the only choice

until now

triumph

the:

scratch
clack
twang
snip
rustle
rasp

of a pencil bitten and bruised
of a keyboard
of a guitar string far from tuned
of scissors
of paper
of an unused voice

movement
belonging
at last

epilogue

some remain
insubstantial
in the darkness

some have left
found solidity

in the light

none
forgotten

In this piece, the main character gets into a police chase in a futuristic world. At the start of the story, she starts off just a little cocky. She firmly believes that she's done all the work she needs to be able to drive, and has given up on learning anymore. Throughout the course of a number of mishaps, she realizes that she's nowhere near done with her task, and that mistakes are valuable to learn from.

The Cheesestick Chase By: Lily Blitz Age 15

I *swear* I wasn't trying to crash my airship into that building. *No*, I wasn't aiming specifically for the grocery store. My hand just slipped on the wheel, and... wait, it was a Trader Moe's? Okay, I take back my previous statement. They had that coming for them. I bought some cookies there once and they turned out to have raisins instead of chocolate chips. Villains, I tell you. The packaging was so misleading.

What? I'm overreacting? Yeah, okay, buddy, suit yourself. But one day you'll end up with a carton of green milk that some crusty old hermit returned to the store, and you'll wish you listened to me. Mark my words, Mr. Cop.

Why am I here again? Oh, right, the crash. I wish I could blame it on my brother, but... well, I'll get there.

That's right, my older brother. He insisted on taking me into the city to practice driving. Yeah, I know, seventeen's a little old to get my learner's permit, but the last six attempts didn't end well. Anyway, he sits me down in the front seat of his dented old airship- which he'd named "Ol' Sally" for some reason- and makes me swoop around in an empty parking lot for a while. He points at buttons,

rambling on about braking and throttling and blah, blah, blah... I'm not really paying attention. In my defense, he's droning on in a monotone voice, which isn't particularly engaging. He won't even let me go more than two feet off the ground! Eventually, he notices, and gets all upset that I'm not taking things seriously.

"Listen up, Tacks," he says- What? No, your files are not incorrect. My real name's Tabitha. He calls me Tacks, cause I tried to swallow a whole container of tic tacs when I was little, plastic and all. I almost got away with it, too, but... actually, that's enough of that story. Let's move on.

He tells me to listen, but I'm not in the mood. "Do I really need to know what every single switch, *even the labeled ones*, do in great detail?" I argue. "Besides, I'm already a driving whiz. Here, watch this."

I grab onto the steering wheel and do a perfect U-turn. I don't even hit the traffic cone that's right next to the ship! Isn't that neat?

Fine. I hit the traffic cone. I may or may not have run it clean over. But that's not important.

I turn to Wrecker- Yeah, that's my brother's nickname. It's a pretty sweet name, right? That's why it's my pleasure to inform you that he earned it by knocking over other kids' LEGO towers in kindergarten. Not so cool now, is he? Plus, he chose to paint Ol' Sally a sad shade of green, like overcooked peas. Just why? I said he should color it *neon* green instead, so it could match my hair. He said no. The paint's peeling now, which also doesn't help his reputation.

I turn to Wrecker, but instead of being impressed at my top-notch driving skills, he looks

disappointed. “You do know that you’ll never get your license if you keep being this reckless, right?” he asks with a frown.

I roll my eyes. “I can drive just fine without one! Who needs a license, amirite?”

“That’s... that’s illegal, Tacks.”

“Whatever.” I push open the airship’s door and hop out. “If you’re not going to say anything encouraging, then I’m going for a walk.”

I glance over my shoulder, half-expecting him to come after me. He’s looking down at his lap, probably reading some outdated book with stained pages and the occasional sharpie mark. He’s not paying any attention to me.

That’s fine. I don’t need his support.

The sky’s dark- if we’d gone to practice driving during the day, the parking lot would have been full to the brim, and I’d have caused a lot more damage than I ended up doing. The streetlights cast an ominous glow, but above them, the windows of the city skyscrapers shine like stars. Advertisements hang off the buildings’ walls, flashing a hundred different colors. The soft roar of fading air-traffic echoes overhead, and a faint breeze whistles its way down the street. All the noise and all the lights, and I’m the only one around to see it from below. It’s strangely peaceful.

There’s a patch of grass up ahead, a tiny square of green nestled between all the grays and neons of the city. I’m about to pay it no mind when I spot the sign sticking out of the dirt.

DO NOT STEP ON GRASS

I snicker and crack my knuckles. “Government shmovernment,” I mutter. “Who’s gonna care if I break a few rules? I can do whatever I want!”

I take a few steps forward, stick out a foot, and plant it on the grass. When no meteor falls from the sky to wipe me out for my crimes, I step fully onto it and bounce on my feet, reveling in my villainous deeds. I’m not even sure why there’s a sign here. The grass looks pretty sad; it’s brown and crispy around the edges, fried from lack of water, and though I can’t feel it through my sneakers I imagine it would be like touching a patch of dull, droopy needles.

“Hey, look at me!” I yell at nothing in particular. “I’m standing on the grass! Anyone wanna come arrest me? I dare you!”

Someone gasps loudly behind me. I whip around to see a police officer, one hand over their mouth, eyes wide. They’re wearing an average blue uniform, wispy hair mostly hidden under their cap. They point a shaking finger at me. “You- y- you can’t-“

They seem to catch themselves. They take a deep breath, adjust their hat, and look me in the eye. “Ma’am, you are under arrest.”

I snort. They must be playing along with my joke. “Yeah? And how are you gonna do that?”

They reach into their belt and pull out a taser.

My eyes widen. “Oh.”

And then, I do what any reasonable person would do to prove their innocence to a cop; I run.

When I reach the airship, I jump higher than I thought was humanly possible and land in the driver’s seat. Apparently Wrecker was sleeping, because he jolts awake and rubs his eyes.

He stares at me, eyes half-glazed by exhaustion.
“What-?”

“No time, we gotta go!”

Wrecker frowns. “Tacks, what are you-“

I start punching buttons at random.

“What are you *doing?*”

“Turning this thing on!”

Thankfully, only a little acidic smoke leaks out of the airship before I manage to press the right button. The headlights flicker on, the engine coughing before roaring to life.

“TACKS!” Wrecker is leaning over my shoulder.

“Don’t you dare! You’re gonna run us into a wall!”

“Cool, cool,” I say, sweating nervously. “But would you rather get arrested?”

“Get- *Tacks, what did you do?*”

Right on cue, another airship, this one sporting the signature red and blue lights of the police force, swerves around a corner behind us.

“Alright!” I yell, smacking the dashboard once more for good measure. “Let’s see how fast Ol’ Sally can go!”

Nothing happens.

I grimace. “Ah. Let me try that again.”

I swivel the wheel. Again, nothing happens. The police airship is just a few yards away, siren growing louder as it approaches.

Wrecker sighs. “It’s my ship. Can I at least be the driver?”

“No.”

He rolls his eyes and flicks a switch on the far side of the dashboard. I scream- just a little, though- as our ship jolts forward.

Right off the bat, we nearly crash into a wall. I yank the wheel just in time to send us hurtling

upwards, joining the rest of the air-traffic dozens of feet off the ground.

I feel like I'm flying. Well, I *am* flying. Physically. But I'm also flying emotionally. Metaphorically! You get me? I'm going to guess from your extremely exasperated expression that you don't. So I'll spell it out for you.

I'm caught between the noises and the lights like a fly in a spiderweb. My stomach's dropping with every dip and dive reminiscent of a broken roller coaster. The wind's whistling past me, my hair streaming out behind me- no, that's a lie. It's too short for that. But the hair I *do* have is demonstrating String Theory to the best of its ability! And last but not least, there's a government official in hot pursuit of me, and I feel like a character in one of those overly-CGI'd action movies.

It's dangerous. It's *exhilarating*. Even though there's a good chance I'm going to end up in a police station for an interrogation- or maybe *because* of it- I can't stop smiling.

Excuse you, I am NOT being cheesy! I'm letting out my inner poet! LET ME HAVE THIS MOMENT, YOU PARTY KILLER!

Anyways, the ship chase. That's probably the only part you wanna hear about so you can put the details on my fancy criminal record, huh? Well, I am delighted to tell you that I didn't mortally wound anyone! Probably. Hopefully. Maybe.

Back to the story. Miraculously, I had *not* merged into the wrong lane, and was *not* flying against the traffic! See? I told you I'm a driving master!

I look over my shoulder- nope, scratch that, I look in the REAR-VIEW MIRROR because

looking over my shoulder while driving would be DANGEROUS and I KNOW HOW AIRSHIPS WORK- to see that the police ship is starting to lag behind.

“Maybe I can blend in,” I say to myself, searching for a decent hiding spot among the other vehicles. “It’s not like this piece of trash-“

“HEY!” Wrecker protests, patting Ol’ Sally’s side. “-is very noticeable. I bet we can lose that cop pretty easily!”

I turn to Wrecker with a triumphant grin. He’s raising an eyebrow at me. “What?”

“You have bright green hair, Tacks.” It sounds like he’s talking to a toddler. “I don’t think that’s great camouflage.”

The smile freezes on my face. “Oh. I knew that.”

“Sure you did.”

“If you’re so smart, why don’t you take over?” I snap.

His face is utterly passive. “I asked if I could a few minutes ago, and you said no.”

“Exactly! I don’t need your help! Cause I’m a PRO! So why don’t you keep your witty comments to yourself?”

“Okay.” He leans back in the passenger seat.

Good, I think. Now he’ll see who’s the better flier.

Out loud, I say, “Oh shoot,” because there’s a flock of birds headed straight for my face. I swerve to avoid them, then wince as I bump into another ship with a loud crunching sound.

“What the heck was that?”

“Congrats,” says Wrecker with his eyes closed. “You just committed your first hit-and-run.”

“Nice. I’m like a professional criminal now!”

Don’t write that down. I didn’t actually say that.

Okay, maybe I did.

Behind us, the police siren blares louder. The crowd of airships starts parting like the Red Sea to let the cop through.

I grin to myself. “Time for some evasive maneuvers!”

I spin some dials, waiting for some Batman-worthy gadget to pop out of the backseat and slow our pursuer down.

Instead, Ol’ Sally wheezes, comes to a stop in mid-air, and starts to plummet.

“CHEESESTICKS!” I scream as we fall- Hey, why are you laughing? That’s a perfectly good thing to swear by!

By some will of fate, my elbow manages to hit the right button to get the ship to resume hovering. Heart still racing, I steer back towards the flow of traffic. But it’s too late. The cop’s right behind us, shouting some legal jargon or something.

“Oh, nuts.” I glance at Wrecker. “Um... so, this might be a good time for you to step in?”

He stares back at me, seeming to consider.

“No.”

“WHAT? Do you WANT to get arrested?!”

He shrugs. “I’m just a passenger. You’re the one they’re after.”

“But-“

“You said you could handle this yourself. So prove it.”

“That’s unfair!” I say, voice rising in desperation. “I don’t know how to get out of this!”

“Then maybe you should have paid attention when I was trying to teach you how to drive!”

“LAND YOUR VEHICLE!” the cop calls. They’re holding a megaphone and leaning at a

perilous angle on the door of their airship, their cap on the verge of falling to the streets below.

“Just do it.” Wrecker’s... pleading with me?
“You’ll get hurt if you keep going like this.”

My eyes dart to him, to the police, to the buildings ahead, and back to my brother. I take a breath and make my decision.

“EAT THE RICH!” I yodel, and Ol’ Sally shoots forward as fast as it can go.

As it turns out, that was a bad choice. I nearly fly straight into a wall, then into a traffic light, then a window. With every twist and turn I make to avoid obstacles, another one seems to pop up out of nowhere. My breath catches in my throat, and I’m left gritting my teeth and hoping my prodigy-level flying skills won’t fail me now.

Okay. I’ll be honest. By this point, I’m starting to doubt that I even slightly know what I’m doing.

Everything is fine and cool and dandy and swell until the wheel breaks.

“NO!” Panic blinds me for a moment. When it fades, I can only watch as I hurtle towards yet another building with no way of stopping. I swivel towards Wrecker, ready to apologize for whatever he wants as long as he comes to the rescue- and he’s not there.

With my life flashing before my eyes, I took the logical course of action and started screeching like a pterodactyl. That’s not really relevant to anything, but it does explain why my throat’s really sore right now.

The glowing bubble letters of the building came closer, closer, and then-

Well, we all know what happened next.

“So here I am, in a police station, being interviewed about my various crimes. I almost forgot this all started with a “Don’t Step on the Grass” sign, and then it ended with a broken leg and a whole bunch of Band-Aids. Wow. I think I need a breather.

“What do you mean, I can’t get up? I’m not in pain! Wait... Ugh, don’t tell me you’re sending in another interrogator. Fine, open the door, let’s get this over w-

“Oh. Hey, Wrecker.”

...

“Hold up, you *fell off* the back of the airship? And you *climbed down a wall*? Wow, I never knew you were that good at parkour. Are you even injured at all? Uh... congrats, I guess. Oh, yeah, by the way, sorry for breaking your ship.”

...

“No, no, no! I don’t have *nearly* enough money to get you a new one!”

...

“Fine. I’ll help pay for it. You can name it ‘Even Older Sally.’”

...

“*And* I’ll let you keep teaching me to drive. And actually listen this time.”

...

“Okay. I promise. BUT, you have to bring cookies. And don’t you *dare* buy them from Trader Moe’s, or I will have your skin.”

...

“Love you too, bro.”

Undercover relates to the summer theme because Amara is told that she has to go on a secret mission. Even though in what I have written here she doesn't finish the mission. She never stops by choice. As well as that because of the length limit I am not able to finish, but I still never gave up. I will definitely be finishing this story on my own.

**UNDERCOVER BY: SANDLER FITZGERALD Age
14**

Prologue

AMARA

Less than two weeks ago I was sitting in my bedroom eating Oreos writing in my diary with my favorite blue pen. Writing about school drama, and the next thing you know those problems were totally utterly forgotten, because I had bigger things to worry about now. An hour later a stranger barged into my house without asking and tells me my parents are some of the most well-respected secret agents and not only that but that they died in D.C. on a "secret mission". I didn't believe it at first even after I was given a will written in my mother's favorite color as well as in my mother's handwriting, but the next morning at the crack of dawn a helicopter lands on my front lawn with a 15-year-old in the driver's seat who seemed to think wearing sunglasses even in the dark made him cooler. Two weeks ago, the most interesting thing in my life was a

malfunction in the most important float at the holiday parade, and now here I am with my newly found boyfriend aka: the sunglasses wearing helicopter pilot. Fighting wanted criminals with no training whatsoever other than dodging lasers that I didn't even pass to save the country from a possible lifetime of slavery.

scene 1:

(In a dark bedroom with Amara writing in a diary with a flashlight. A doorbell rang Amara walks to the door. She opens the door)

AMARA

Hi?

AGENT JACKSON

Hello are you Amara Taylor?

AMARA

Yes, who are you?

AGENT JACKSON

My name is agent Jackson.

(Agent Jackson bursts into Amara's house.)

AMARA

Sure, come right in make yourself at home, stranger.

AGENT JACKSON

Anyway, if you didn't know your parents are well respected secret agents.

AMARA

Wait, what? You got the wrong person
my parents are real estate agents.

*(Agent Jackson grabs a small device
out of his pocket and checks the
screen.)*

AGENT JACKSON

This is the right address and that's
just their cover.

AMARA

I don't believe you I need proof.

*(He grabs two ID's out of his pocket
and hands them to Amara.)*

AGENT JACKSON

Is that enough proof for you.

*(Amara falls to the floor
unconscious. Out of shock She wakes
up.)*

AMARA

So, where are my parents now?

AGENT JACKSON

That's what I'm here to tell you. You
should probably sit down for this.

(They head over to the coach and sit)

Your parents sadly passed away during
their mission in D.C. a few days ago.

(Amara starts breathing heavily)

I have to go soon but before I go, I
have to tell you to be at the Jenson
Bridge at 11 PM tonight to receive
your parents Will from the women with

the snake on her head. I must go now.
I'm sorry for your loss.

Scene 2:

(At 10:30 Amara runs out of the house with only the streetlights guiding her to the bridge. The lights are dim. Halfway there the lights start flickering and eventually turn off. Amara stops she digs through her pocket to find her phone she quickly turns on her phone flashlight but notices she left without shoes on. She doesn't stop she keeps running when she gets to the beach where the bridge is she runs slowly through the sand when stepping on the bridge she gets a splinter in her toe limping she keeps going to the middle of the bridge. While waiting for the woman to show up she stares off into the ocean to see a titanic sized boat heading towards her. As it gets closer a woman with a snake on her head appears on the boat and hands Amara a letter then the boat leaves.)

Scene 3:

(In the living room she sits in her favorite chair getting ready to open the envelope. As she starts to open the envelope, she gets a paper cut. She doesn't bother cleaning it and moves on to read it.)

AMARA

Dear our sweetest Amara,
(She starts but before she could keep reading a hologram of her parents

*pops out from the letter and starts
talking.)*

AMARA'S MOTHER

Dear our sweetest Amara,
If you are reading this, we are
either dead or lost and everyone
thinks we are dead.

We love you so much. By now you
probably already found out we are
secret agents. Now that we are gone
you have to take our place in the
agency. Since we most likely died in
an unfinished mission you will have
to finish the mission for us.

Instructor Jameson will train you.
Little warning she's pretty invasive.
I hope you're not too overwhelmed
right now just know we love you.

*(Amara heads over to clean her paper
cut.)*

AMARA

Thanks for adding another stressor in
my life.

Scene 4:

*(A loud sound comes from outside that
wakes Amara up. She gets up and looks
out the window to see agent Jackson
outside next to a helicopter that
says Gem Secret Agency. Amara heads
outside.)*

AMARA

What in the world is going on! Its 3
in the morning you will wake people
up.

AGENT JACKSON

What?

AMARA

Why are you here? It's so loud.

AGENT JACKSON

Tony, turn of the propellers off. I
can't here Miss Taylor.

*(Tony turns of the helicopters
propellers.)*

What where you saying Miss Taylor?

AMARA

I was asking why you're here and at 3
AM you'll wake the neighbors.

*(Tony hops out of the helicopters and
heads towards Amara.)*

TONY

Were here to take you to the Gem
headquarters where you will start
training.

AGENT JACKSON

Tony I can speak for myself.

TONY

Ok sorry for trying to meet the great
Taylor duo's daughter.

AGENT JACKSON

Like he said we are to take you to
training.

*(Amara steps back away from the
helicopter)*

AMARA

No way am I getting in there. I'm too afraid of heights.

AGENT JACKSON

This is the only way there.

AMARA

No! No way bye I can't do this.

(Amara starts running inside Tony runs after her and picks her up he struggles to carry her on to the helicopter.)

TONY

Here we go.

(Tony turns on the helicopter and puts on some sunglasses. Amara starts to calm down.)

AMARA

Where did you learn how to fly this thing.

TONY

Actually, this is your mother's old helicopter she gave it to me on my 11th birthday and she taught me as well. Your mother was awesome. Oh, we're here.

Scene 5:

(The helicopter landed nicely at the top of the building. All three people in it hoped out.)

AMARA

Where are we?

AGENT JACKSON

We are at Gem Headquarters.

TONY

Aka the best spy agency in America.

(The three head through a glass door into a giant room with lots of hi-tech equipment. A woman with a teal romper walks over to them.)

DIRECTOR CLAM

Welcome Miss Taylor to Gem
Headquarters the best spy agency in
America

(Tony bends over to Amara)

TONY

Called it.

DIRECTOR CLAM

Tony what's so important you had to
interrupt my speech.

TONY

Nothing... I just...I.

DIRECTOR CLAM

Tony just go back to training. Amara
will join you in a bit. Any way what
I was saying was this agency has
been.....

*(Amara looks around mesmerized by all
the technology she's never seen
before. She starts touching all these
cool gadgets.)*

Anyway, that's the end of the tour.
I'll call tony to take you to
training.

*(She talks to her watch and her words
come over the loudspeaker.)*

Tony come pick up Amara and take her
to training.

(10 mins later tony comes over)

TONY

Ready to go.

AMARA

I guess.

*(They walk into a room that is full
of obstacle courses and challenges.)*

TONY

Here we are spy training 101
*(A lady with a clip board walks over
to them.)*

INSTRUCTOR JAMESON

Tony, newbie get in line we're
starting soon.

*(Tony and Amara run to the line of
students.)*

Ok everyone let's start with
something easy.

*(Jameson presses a button and a bunch
of red lasers fill the room.)*

Each one-of you dummies must get one
of the flags from across the room
without hitting a laser to move on to
the next challenge.

AMARA

Wait, what? That does not seem easy.
I mean look at that it is physically
impossible for some people.

INSTRUCTOR JAMESON

We have a smart mouth here. Why don't
you shut up I didn't ask for your
opinion, did I?

TONY

I forgot to mention she's harsh, but
she's a great teacher.

INSTRUCTOR JAMESON

Let's start
with little miss smart mouth.

*(Amara steps up. A bell rings Amara
moves through the lasers but right
before she gets to the flag a bee
comes to her, and she falls.)*

Too bad so sad. NEXT!

TONY

Good try. If it wasn't for the bee,
you would have made it. I would've
counted that if I was the teacher.

AMARA

Too bad you're not. It doesn't matter
to me I don't even want to be here.

Scene 6:

(Jameson looks down at her watch)

INSTRUCTOR JAMESON

Director Clam told me to teleport
Miss Taylor to her office so bye!

*(A blue light forms around Amara and
the scene moves to a purple office!)*

DIRECTOR CLAM

Hello Miss Taylor you're probably
wondering why I called you here.

AMARA

Yes, that and I'm wondering how my parents were secret agents overall.

DIRECTOR CLAM

Well for your first question your grandparents started this agency and before your parents were old enough your grandparents died, and they put me in charge and your parents grew up here. And for the second question I called you here because I need to explain your mission to you because there's not enough time for you to train anymore.

AMARA

Wait, what? I can't even dodge lasers without falling and you expect me to go on a whole mission without training?

DIRECTOR CLAM

You won't be alone. Tony will go with you.

AMARA

What is this mission anyway?

DIRECTOR CLAM

A group of criminals called the Chains are planning on kidnapping the President so their leader can take over.

(a screen with a map suddenly shows up.)

So, you and tony will need to head over to D.C. as soon as possible. I'm going to call down our agency

engineer to equip you with all the equipment you will need.

(Clam heads over to the PA system.)

Mr. Jaren head down to my office with all the equipment for the D.C. mission, Tony come down as well.

(30 minutes later tony and Jaren step into the office.)

TONY

What's up? Oh, hey Amara.

DIRECTOR CLAM

Ok so for this mission you two will have to get to D.C. as soon as possible.

TONY

What do you mean by you two?

DIRECTOR CLAM

Oh, right you don't know. Tony you're going with Miss Taylor on this mission.

(Tony jumps.)

TONY

Sweet my first mission I can't wait to fight real criminals. Let's go!

(Tony heads for the door Mr. Jaren runs after Tony and stops him before he leaves the room.)

DIRECTOR CLAM

Wait you don't know what you're doing for this mission.

TONY

Oh, right sorry

(Amara giggles Clam points to three chairs in front of her desk. The three sit.)

DIRECTOR CLAM

So, this mission. There's this group of criminals called the Chains. They've never done anything too bad, but sources say they are taking their crimes up a notch. They are planning on kidnapping the President so they will be in charge. Your job is to stop this kidnapping before it's too late. Jaren here,

(Jaren waves politely.)

Has all the equipment you will need to succeed in this mission.

(Jaren takes everything out of his bag and puts it on the desk.)

MR. JAREN

Everything you will need is on this desk before you. Use it. Make sure to read the inscription on it so you'll know what. I would suggest reading it on the ride to D.C. I have to go now but good luck on your mission.

(Jaren gets up and leaves the room.)

DIRECTOR CLAM

Miss Taylor you may go home tonight but be up by 2 A.M. tomorrow because Tony will be at your house by 3. Make sure to pack. Tony will bring all the equipment. Tony take her home will you?

TONY

Got it, come on let's get you home.

*(Tony and Amara head back to the
helicopter.)*

Scene 7:

(In the helicopter.)

TONY

You ready for our first mission. I
can't wait.

AMARA

Yeah, definitely can't wait to fight
criminals that could possibly kidnap
us as well as the President yippie-
ki-yay.

TONY

Hey lighten up it will be fun.

(Amara rolls her eyes.)

AMARA

How long have you been a part of the
agency?

TONY

Technically I was born here but I
joined the agency at eight years old.
Hold on we're about to land.

*(The helicopter lands and Amara gets
out.)*

Bye see you tomorrow.

Scene 8:

*(Amara goes to her room and grabs a
stuffed animal.)*

AMARA

Hey chick it's been a while since I've needed to talk to you. But I guess today's been so crazy that I guess I needed someone to talk to that can't talk back. I mean yesterday I was hanging out at the mall shopping for candy to eat alone in my room and now I'm leaving for D.C. to save the President. But I guess that's what happens to a girl with very few friends. But I guess I should pack now. So, see you chick.

(Amara puts the stuffed animal away and starts packing then goes to sleep.)

Scene 9:

(Amara wakes up to her alarm clock at 2 A.M. she hops out of bed with an annoyed look. She changes into the outfit Tony gave her.)

AMARA

This outfit is so uncomfortable. Who would wear this?

(She runs downstairs with her backpack and quickly eats some frosted oats. She then hears the helicopter land and runs outside.)

TONY

Hey smart mouth

AMARA

Ha-ha nice one, but it's way too early for jokes.

(Amara hops into the helicopter.)

TONY

We should probably start reading the inscriptions on the gadgets.

(Tony hands Amara the bag of equipment.)

AMARA

Ok so the first one says: press the button on the right to deploy suction cups and press the button on the left to use hypnotism.

TONY

Cool I mean I don't know how to hypnotize people but ok.

AMARA

The other ones seem kind of basic so I'm not going to read them. But I have a question. Do you know why I wasn't told that my parents were secret agents until now?

TONY

Well, I heard it was because your parents wanted you to have a normal life like all the other people your age because they missed out on that so they wanted you to have what they didn't. But there are many other theories for why, like you were too weak of a baby and many others, but I think the first one is more realistic. But I've always wanted to know what it's like to be a normal teenager. What is it like?

AMARA

Well, there are lots of different teenage experiences even if we all go

to school because there's different groups, clubs, and the quality of your experience depends on your social status. I was near the bottom, so I didn't have the best experience. You'd probably be at the top I mean I would think you'd be pretty popular.

TONY

Hold that thought we're going to need to stop for a little. I see the Chains and if they see us they will start coming after us and they will know we're after them.

(The helicopter takes a deep dive down, landing right out back of a small motel.)

We're going to have to stay here tonight because if we keep going we're going to be found out. We will keep going tomorrow.

AMARA

Ok I'm not going to give any info because I don't know anything.

(Amara and Tony go into the lobby and get rooms. An hour later an employee comes into Amara's room and grabs her hands and drags her out of her room.)

CHAIN MEMBER

You're coming with me Miss Amara
Jackie Taylor

AMARA

Wait what? TONY HELP!!!

*When I was first told this summer's central theme, my mind immediately went to superheroes. Now, at least 63% of my thoughts are about superheroes, so that fits. But there is something about "an unending task that you can't give up" on that feels very superhero to me. In a genre defined by repetition, where characters cannot even rely on time to stop the cycle, accomplishing **anything** is almost impossible. In that way, Superman's "never-ending battle for truth, justice, and a better tomorrow" is a tragedy, albeit a happy sort of tragedy, if that makes sense.*

Never-Ending Battle
By: Benjamin Barack Age 17

The year is 1939. The city is... any city really, a city like the one I live in but unlike the one you live in. And the hero? His name is Successor.

You've never heard of Successor, but he's essentially the platonic ideal of various people you have heard of. His powerset includes flight, super strength, invulnerability, heat-vision, super-speed, and his incredibly dashing smile, among others. He loves his job, and everyone loves him.

...Well, almost everybody. Because every hero needs an archvillain to oppose them for forever and a day. And Successor's nemesis is a dreadful fellow named King Krimson. As we speak, that fiendish criminal is attempting to poison the local reservoir. Let's take a closer look:

"For far too long, this reservoir has been clean and pure," says the monarchist mastermind. "But lucky for y'all, I can fix that! With my patented Danger Milk, people in this city will be hurt! They'll be so hurt they'll go to the unleavable sky-place!... maybe. I don't know; I didn't check."

And, of course, our hero, Successor, bursts in and dramatically declares with his outstretched pointer-finger, “Stop right there, you red regent of rascality!”

And, of course, our villain, King Krimson, must respond with equal or greater flair. “Oh, hello, Successor. I hope the commute wasn’t too long. BUT YOU’RE TOO LATE!!!!!” He cackles with glee. “My machine has already begun to-”

“You mean... *this* machine?”

“I... No! That’s impossible. It was destruction-proof! How did you...” Krimson throws his hands up in frustration and sits down on the rooftop.

“Never mind. I’ll come up with a new scheme next week.” He sighs. “What a waste.”

“Are you okay?” Successor asks, for he is nothing if not kind.

“...No. No, not really.” The dastardly debaucher shakes his head. “My main goal right now is just to do evil stuff. But you keep thwarting all my plans and... It’s very frustrating, knowing none of them will ever work. It’s emotionally exhausting.”

“I think I get what you’re saying,” Successor replies.

“Supervillainy is enjoyable at the moment, but what about the future? This never-ending battle has to end sometime... right? Right?!”

Successor nods. He opens his mouth to say something, but suddenly his cape has been turned over and is covering his head. As he tries to get it out of the way, Successor hears maniacal laughter, the closing of a door, and the screech of spiky wheels on pavement.

As he flies back to his apartment, Successor muses on the evening, and idly wonders if he's seen the last of King Krimson.

Evidently not.

The year is 1965. The city is very specific, and it is unlike any city you or I have ever lived in. And the hero? His name is Successor.

Successor has the squarest of square-jaws you'll ever see. And it's a fitting jaw, for Successor is a square. Not literally, of course, but still. He isn't, like... down with the youths' vibes, man. Successor is none too fond of these beatniks and niknaks and nakbeats. He doesn't understand this hip modern slang, ya dig?

It's not his fault or nothing, but Successor has become a weapon of the establishment. He hates commies and hippies and anything that threatens *the children*. The dude loves war, hates protesters, and is a big fan of Richard Nixon.

Why, Successor is expounding to a random citizen right now! Let's take a closer look:

"Young lady," says the titan of tautology, "this free-love nonsense is unfortunately no joke! Some hippies even engage in... **FUN GROUP ACTIVITIES**." He spits in disgust. "Monstrous. They do recreational communal rituals like... bowling trips. They put on fancy-dancy shoes and everything; it's revolting!"

"Yeah, I agree, Mr. Essor," says the random citizen, her face hidden behind the large brim of her hat. "My fellow youths are revolting. 'Dat's what a mass-revolt requires."

"A mass-revolt, you say?" Successor narrows his eyes. "Remind me, what was your name again?"

The woman removes her hat and smiles widely.

“Folks call me Woodrow Stalk, but I’m soon-to-be Woodrow Krimson. My boffo boyfriend proposed, see?” She shows Successor her jet-black ring. “It’s beautiful, ain’t it? Made of pure silvaronium, which happens to be your one weakness.”

Successor’s eyes grow wide. He tries to attack Woodrow, but he feels so weak, and Woodrow has backup. Somehow, Successor’s been surrounded by vibrantly-dressed henchmen.

“Tie ‘im to that big rocket! Our patented Kataclysm-Kauser will send Mr. Essor and his pwecious city to kingdom come, once we press the remotel” Woodrow says, before turning to her beau, who’s just arrived on the scene. “How’d I do, boss?”

King Krimson grins. “That was excellent, m’dere. Now, let’s send my nemesis – apologies, let’s send *our* nemesis to his inevitable DOOOOM!” He takes out the remote to activate the explosives, and he sends his finger down towards the button...

And he misses.

Krimson frowns. He tries again, but his fingers are so weak and strained that they just can’t push down the button.

Woodrow tries as well, but her fingers are equally feeble. “Oh, I think I know what I happened,” she says. “It was that bowling trip we and the crew went on earlier today! The communal recreation made our hands so weak, we can’t hurt Successor!”

Woodrow is more right than she knew. In fact, her fingers are so limp that, as she attempts to make several rude gestures towards nobody in particular,

her silvaronium ring falls off and... *plip* *plop* it goes right down into the gutter.

“Oh dear,” says King Krimson, as Successor begins to free himself. “Come on, m’dere! Into the Evil-Mobile!”

As Krimson and Woodrow speed away into the night, their now-shared nemesis can faintly hear a voice saying, “This was quite fun, old friendo. Until the next!”

The year is 1986. The city is damp and dark and so debauched it’s delirious. And the hero? Ha. There are no heroes; only vigilantes and those who try to stop them.

King Krimson served his time long ago. Nowadays, he’s a divorcee who goes by Kevin, and good ol’ Kevin has been regularly collaborating with the local police department for several years now, trying to get Successor behind bars. He’s created various anti-superhuman weapons for the government, but none of them have regularly worked... until now.

“Ladies and gentlemen and other such folks,” says Kevin to a room of assorted journalists, “we’ve done it. This one might be able to take out Successor – for good!” He gestures to the thing hidden behind the curtain, before unveiling the new weapon.

This weapon is human-shaped, but not an ordinary human. More like a pro-wrestler or a supermodel than your average fellow. He has long tusks and a sharp chin and no hair. He cannot smile, but he never would even if he was able to.

Kevin grins toothily. “His name is Headcrunch Bonekill the Terrifying... but we like to call him Mr. Flibberwiggit! Say hello, Mr. Flibberwiggit.”

“HELLO, MR. FLIBBERWIGGIT,” says Headcrunch Bonekill the Terrifying, his voice shaking the very foundations of the earth.

“Mr. Flibberwiggit, where is that most hated ‘hero’, Successor, right now?” Kevin asks.

“SIMPLE,” says Headcrunch Bonekill the Terrifying. “HE IS IN THIS VERY ROOM.” And he points a large meaty finger at a fedora-wearing reporter.

The reporter, who is not actually a reporter but is instead a criminal in disguise, sighs. “Fine. You really want to do this? Let’s do this.”

Successor and Headcrunch Bonekill the Terrifying charge at each other. Fists fly and Kevin is knocked to the grou...

The year is 2004. It shouldn’t be, but it is. Can we... Can we rewind a bit? No? Ah, well. The city is a mix of all the previous cities. And the hero?

...The hero knows that something is very wrong. Wasn’t he just fighting someone a minute ago? Why is he wearing jeans? He hates jeans. Or at least he used to.

Kevin is once again King Krimson, and he too feels like something is... off. Like a *glitch* in a computer.

Alright, that’s enough. I’m restarting.

The year is 2166. The city is everyth...

“Gil cbupej rgeyb,” says Krimson in this futuristic language. And then he points at me with

his three pointer-fingers, and his expression is... not kind.

So, it appears this backfired a little. "Um, hi?" I say. "I guess I should make it a more modern era so you're more understandable." I pause. "There, much better. Now, you were saying?"

"Narration Person or whatever your name is... what is wrong with time?" Successor asks. And I begin to explain.

"You see," I say, "there is a Successor and a King Krimson in every time period. Your names may change, your ideologies may change... But at the end of the day, you cannot stop. Your conflict predated the Big Bang and it will outlast heat-death. You two are eternally locked in a never-ending battle. You will never age. You will never die – not permanently, at least. You are doomed to do the same basic thing over and over again, all for the entertainment of deities beyond your wildest comprehension."

"Oh," Krimson says stunned. "Is that all?"

"Pretty much. So... I assume you two wanna go back to 1939?" I say.

"No." Successor has grown solemn and pale. "There must be some way to break the cycle, right?"

I laugh. "Look, what part of 'never-ending battle' is unclear to you? You might as well try to break a star."

Krimson says, "Eh, I've broken stars before. It's not that hard." And he plunges his hand into me and, for a brief second, I lose control.

The year is 1427.

The year is 3012.

The year is yesterday? Question mark?

The year is forever and ever and ever and ever and ever.

The year is The year is The year is The year is
The year is impossible to know. Time is going in so many directions that we can no longer distinguish one from another. It is all a blur.

I see Successor fighting in the American Revolution. I see King Krimson fighting in the Vampire Wars. I see devils and angels, robots and aliens. I see you, I see who you really are, and I see who you really want to be. I see everything, until everything fades and I have only ever seen nothing.

Cause becomes effect becomes cause becomes THE OMNIPOTENT TORTOISE WOMAN becomes effect. Reality and fantasy seep into each other, blend like two objects put together in a blender. Redundancies are desperately needed, until they aren't and they never were to begin with.

It began to slip into past tense, but it will transmogrify into future tense, before it ultimately settles down in present, and then repeat ad infinitum.

And then? Then a stop. And the year is 1939 again. And King Krimson is about to poison the water-supply.

Or maybe... Maybe he isn't. Maybe he is about to break the cycle and ally with Successor. Maybe he's about to leave the city altogether and start a new life in Calcutta or somewhere.

Maybe! Maybe not. That's the closest thing to definitive you're going to get in cape comics.

I don't know anything. And I don't think I want to, to be honest.

The year is 2022. The city is Philadelphia. And there is no hero; there is only a teenage boy with

strep throat, stuck in a small room, doing a dumb meta ending because it's the only thing he can think of at however late it is at night.

NEXT ISSUE: [footage not available]

My story connects to the theme because Annabella is left with a mystery that she has to start to solve but might not be able to finish, such as Lollypolly's death and the Candy Shop leaving her and her sister in white nothingness.

The Place Where Magic Lies
By: Bee Kohlbrenner Age: 10

“Annabella!” I walk up at a slow pace, my breath getting heavier with each step I take. I turn to face my classmates, quivering. “Um...I...” I can’t talk. I know if I try to, all of the words will come out wrong. “Well...um...my...” I feel sweat running down my face. “erm..” oh no. My cheeks start to get hot. Really hot. A few kids snicker. The entire class is staring at me. Even my best friend, Vicky, is giving me a disapproving look. I feel tears filling my eyes. I try to hold them back, but it all comes bursting out of me.

“I’m sorry!” I cry as I race out the school. Everything seems to pass by in a blur, a woman walking her dog, a baby crying in stroller, a bird perched on the wire. I just want to get home. Finally I see it. My home. It’s a candy shop. A magic one. As I walk in the smell of sweet, sweet candy fills my nose, and I forget about what happened at school today. The smell of candy has a way of making you forget about your troubles. I see Lollypolly, our family parrot, eat one of the jellybeans in the jellybean jar.

“Lolli!” “You’re not supposed to have those!” I yell.

“ANNY,” Lollypolly squawks. The candy shop walls glitter with specks of emerald. The candy in the shop is magic. Each candy has a specific power

that it gives someone when they eat it (temporarily of course). The caramel makes you super stretchy and it lasts fourteen minutes. The chocolate makes you super strong for 20 minutes. The lollies make you float for ten minutes. And the licorice (my favorite) makes you very stealthy for about an hour. There's a soda fountain, a candy corn garden, a gumball tree, and much more.

The shop is...well, alive. As a way of speaking, the shop rattles the jellybean jar. Sometimes, the shop moves around the lollypops, or unwraps the caramels. The shop is very talkative, and the jellybean jar is always rattling. Oh. And the best feature. Teleporting. A teleporting candy shop is probably the most random thing someone could possibly think of, but it exists.

My dads "drive" the candy shop all over the world. Speaking of my dads, thank God they aren't home. I can't even image what their reaction would be if they found me home early from school. My dad is teacher, and my other dad (I call him pops) runs the candy shop. He's on a business trip right now in California to show his new candy, the actual jumping bean.

"Well, well, well." I jump. "Look who's home early." Uh oh. Pearl. My sister. My annoying, ignorant, spying sister. She doesn't care about the candy shop at all, yet she still gets to inherit the shop. She sometimes opens the cash register when my dads aren't looking and steals money out of it. She takes candy without asking the shop. I hate her.

"None of your business pearl."

"Oh it is my business." Our conversation is interrupted by a rattle of the jellybean jar.

“The shop says we should stop arguing.” I tell her.

“Why do you even bother listening to the shop. It’s not like it can do anything.” Our conversation is yet again interrupted by something. This time not a rattle. An ear-piercing shriek. It came from the kitchen.

It sounded a lot like Lollypolly’s shriek. I grab a pan, and my sister grabs a teapot. We carefully tiptoe through the back of the store and into the kitchen. And then I see it. I drop my pan, mouth open wide. Its Lollypolly, lying dead on the floor, guts spilling out of her like stuffed animal stuffing. I-I can’t believe it. After all these years, singing with us on Shabbat, helping Pops make candy, pecking at my hair while I paint. She’s dead. I thought Pearl would care about our pet. Our pet that just died, but- no. I can tell by the look on her face, the eye roll, the scoff that she does every time something does not go her way, that- that she does not care.

“I-I can’t with you right now pearl.”

“What? It’s just a stupid parrot,” she says, annoyed.

“NO!” I scream, in tears. I storm up to my room. I can’t believe Pearl doesn’t care about our family pet that we’ve had for so long. I start to wonder how Lollypolly died. There was no evidence of anything. I picture Lollypolly’s dead body, and start to cry again. I go back downstairs to see what happened to Lolly. I go back to the kitchen and Lollypolly’s body is gone. “Pearl.”

“What?” she says, her mouth full of chips.

“What did you do with Lollypolly’s body?”

“Threw it in the trash.”

“WHAT!?”

“I said I threw him in the trash.”

“I KNOW WHAT YOU SAID.” I storm off to my room, once again. You know that feeling when you just want to get away from the world, lock yourself in a closet and never come out? That’s how I feel. My own bedroom doesn’t even feel like a safe place anymore. I stare at the ceiling. I feel like I’m drowning in my own tears.

Shwoop. I know that sound. It’s the sound that the shop makes when it teleports. I feel cold wind pass through me. A shiver goes down my spine. I look out the window. I see...nothing. white emptiness as far as the eye can see. I go downstairs. Every step I take, the house seems to get colder.

“Pearl?”

“Yeah?”

“Look out the window.”

“Why?”

“Just do it.”

She looks out the window. Her mouth starts to open. I go over to the driver’s seat, trying to stay calm. The steering wheel’s stuck. Very stuck. The shop starts getting colder than before. I turn to realize that the shop is fading away. Me and pearl both scream. Everything is gone. My room, the shop, everything. I look around...

“W-where are we?”

“I don’t know, Pearl. I don’t know.”

“It is not your
task to finish
the work, but
neither are you
able to give up
on it.”

– Pirkei Avot