



Creative Writing Chapbook

Session Two
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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In my story, I think of "the work" as Violet's life. She never gives up on her life no matter what she's been through or the temptations she's had. "He", who is only a manifestation of her mental illness, makes it seem easy for her to give up. But she doesn't!

On Looking Back By Avery Lansman Age: 16

Violet. She stood tall; her feet planted in the soft, green grass. She'd never seen anything more beautiful in her life. The view of the rolling hills and scattered wildflowers provided only a temporary comfort. It was the time of day where the sky was the bluest and the sunshine was the warmest. She was tired and breathless from running. The end of her white dress was muddy and torn at the ends. Nobody knew what she was running from. It was windy, but it wasn't cold. The breeze felt like an embrace from the fleeing souls of Hades. She brushed the hair out of her face to keep in view of the distance. She focused on all the green. There was so much green, green in the hills, and the fields, and the trees. She wondered how different it would feel if all the green in nature was a different color, like red. She figured it would feel scary.

Violet took a seat on the grass. The moisture of the morning dew seeped through her dress and felt cold on her skin. She didn't wince or react, she just let it be. Something about all of this reminded Violet of a movie she used to watch with her mom. She was only six years old at the time, she did remember, though, that one character, Sophie, didn't know her father either, and that it was perfectly okay with Sophie's mom. One day, a Monday, after they watched the movie together, they went outside to

pick flowers, white flowers. It was dark and cold and Violet wanted to go home, but her mother insisted that they walk to the church. With the white flowers still in her hands, she left Violet there on the church steps and never looked back. Violet had been waiting for her opportunity to never look back, like her mother. She felt it was near.

Violet picked a wildflower that sat in front of her and immediately felt bad about it; the tiniest bee she'd ever seen landed on the white petal in her palm. She worried that the pollen would no longer work properly now that the flower had been plucked. She worried that the queen bee would be angry at the worker bee, and that it was all her fault. She threw the flower back on the ground and the tiny bee flew away. Violet's eyes, which were not violet, but brown, quickly became coated with her warm tears. She did not even have to blink before her eyes flooded and a droplet rolled down her cheek. Her heart rate was still high, and her breath was still heavy, but it wasn't from the running anymore. She felt his presence in the same way she always had. In an instant, the wind grew stronger, and the world became grayer. The once beautiful view of rolling mountains and green fields started to feel like a trap. He was trapping her like a firefly in a glass jar, and there was nothing she could do about it. Not anymore. She couldn't run this time. The end was near.

Violet wanted to scream, and she wanted to bring her chest to her knees and compact herself as tight as she could. But she didn't, she stayed very still and closed her eyes in hopes that he would go away. But he didn't, he also stayed very still, like the calm before the storm.

"Violet," she heard him say, it was quiet and subtle, but she still heard it, "don't be scared."

"I'm not scared," She muttered back under her breath. And it was true, she wasn't. He was no longer a threat to her. Seeing is believing. He'd never made himself visible to her, but that didn't stop her from believing; believing that he had power over her. A lot of the time, the scariest things are the ones we cannot see. Violet stood up, leaving the grass that had stuck to her legs. Her feet, firmly planted, and her hands, forming tight fists. She had accepted what was coming. Running was pain, accepting was peace. Finding peace meant never looking back.

"Violet," he began again, a bit louder this time, "the end is here." She knew she didn't have to listen, or answer. "The only way you'll find peace is if the world gets swallowed up as a whole, and all the stars in all the skies exploded into Heaven and Hell until there is nothing left."

But she did listen, she frowned and shook her head.

"You can't ignore me, Violet, I know you better than that."

And she did answer, "What do you want?" She wasn't angry or sad, she just was.

"It's time to go."

"I know, I know, I know." She was a little angry and sad that time. Violet continued to stand still; she took deep breaths and held her face with both hands.

It was quiet.

"Hello?"

"RUN, VIOLET, RUN" he said very suddenly and very loud. So she ran, without thinking, and she

was so fast that it made her nauseous. She flew down the hill and through the field. The tall, unkept grass lightly scraped her legs as she sped by. She ran until she asked herself, *why am I running?* As suddenly as she started, she stopped. Violet looked back, and there was nothing there. No more trees, or hills, or white flowers, or church steps, or movie characters. There was nothing. She turned back the other way in hopes of finding something; anything. Nothing.

"Isn't this what you wanted, Violet," he echoed, "peace?"

*My poems connect to the theme because they are about mental health and healing is a never ending process. My poems are also about growing up and trying to find a place in the world.
Please enjoy <3*

Poem Collection By Francis Quigley Age: 14

Listening

Blinded in a maze,
Wouldn't you do anything to leave.

Even if you knew
the voice that promised you exodus
Would later come seeking
Something in return?

Of course you would,
Don't be so bleak.

When you have no other options,
And the only thing it does
Is speak.

So, what's the harm?
Of listening to the voice.

If it's promised you exit,
You would take it gladly-

Because if you're blinded in a maze,
Bumping headfirst into walls

Will get awfully sickening,
Awfully quick.

Allergy

I am truly not allergic to much,
I could say my cats or a specific kind of grass.

The thing that hurts most,
Has always been leaving.

My chest aches in the moments leading to
departure,

And the last words you say before we part
Crease in patters across my arms.

My throat closes slightly,
At the sound of footsteps,
Cascading from where I stand.

I'll break out in hives where we hugged,
And my eyes'll grow sore,
Remembering the face you wore.

Mourning Mornings

Dancing with the light from its dew,
It seems to have fallen,
To nothing more than his presence

Birds chirp through the delicate morning light,
And the sun's silent echo paints across the grass
around him.

Down the hill,
Patterns of shade scatter the golden palette of light.

And when the wind blows softly,
He reaches for the air,
He never would've thought emotion
Had such a physical feeling.

During mornings like these,
He misses his family.

Times when they were younger,
Moments they felt blissful,
Mornings where they didn't fight.

He mourns mornings like these,
Where they'd cascade in the pleasant light.

My story tells the tale of a monster-hunting teenage girl and her best friend bidding farewell, as they won't see each other for a while. When I think of saying goodbye to a friend, I think about the next time we'll see each other, but more importantly, the time in between. During that time, it is the duty of both friends to keep each other in their hearts, to keep the friendship alive and not give up, or as our theme puts it, to not desist from the friendship.

Farewell, My Friend (Hello, Monster)
By Abigail Davis Age: 15

"So did this detective say *why* she was sending you to a home for the criminally insane?" Lash jumped at the sudden voice. But that jersey-tipped accent, the Chicago lilt, it didn't take her long to figure out who exactly had stepped into her hollowed-out room this time.

With her back to the door, she continued what she had been doing as if she were still alone. She cleared her throat of leftover ash and soot. "It's a California group home, first of all, and second of all, no," she said calmly, "she didn't."

"Oh, oh, oh," Andrew laughed, braced on the dark wooden doorframe, "Flying in blind, are we? New home, new you? Fresh start? Hey, maybe it's finally for a good reason that you're being sent away. I mean—" He paused; Lash grinned to herself. "Wait, you know! You're just not telling me, are you?"

"Ding, ding ding! Oh look," she said, waltzing over to her dresser, "we have a winner! Mr. Andrew Linsky, where and when would you like to collect your prize?"

She yanked on the circular dresser knobs, forcing the short dresser open with a harsh creaking sound, and after she'd snatched the pair of socks she wanted, it closed with an even harder thud that shook the wardrobe.

Andrew watched, his eyes drawing together in confusion. "Jeez," he said, scratching his neck, "I just asked a question."

"And I just answered it. Go away. Bye-bye. *Auf wiedersehen. Chao.*"

"*Por que?*"

She whirled around and chucked the pair of socks. They slammed into Andrew's chest, but it was a tender throw compared to how she treated her monstrous enemies. At least the monsters had the class to not wear shoes in the house. And in her room, too! The nerve of this boy.

"Screw you. Oh, wait, politely, of course. Oh," she said, giving an overdramatic sigh as she twirled airily around the bed, "oh how I'd hate to disrespect poor, rich, Andrew Linsky."

Her lips twisted from a fake, sickly sweet smile down into a scowl. She turned her back to him, grabbing yet another pair of shorts and another handful of shirts. She shoved the articles of clothing into her open suitcase, forcing them on top of the piles with such harshness that the stacks tipped over. The blisters and burns that littered her fingers smashed into the mountain of clothes, but even if she had thrown a full-blown punch, there wasn't enough pain, there was no satisfaction, the entire thing was pointless.

Pointless — just like everything else had been. Even her pursuit of the evil, cascading around the town like some sort of hero, the entire one-person

war she had fought had been pointless, landing her back at square one. No, she was at square zero. No, even worse, she was in the negatives. The realization made her even angrier, if that was possible at this point.

She was angry that the pack of monsters she had been chasing got away. She was angry she had to burn down a monument to get to them, and she was completely enraged that even after all of that, it didn't work, and worst of all, *she* was the one being locked up.

Andrew casually sat himself on top of her desk: Lash secretly hoped a pen was standing up when he did. "What did you even do?" He grabbed her flask, taking a swig of the soda she had hidden inside.

"Brother Landon seemed upset. I gotta be honest, I had no idea that man could curse. It was unnatural for him, I'm telling ya. Unnatural, Lash, unnatural."

Lash paused, pursed her lips and considered. It *would* be sort of nice to tell him. Either way, at this point, what was the harm now? "I might've burnt down Ashking Manor."

The moment he choked was the moment she almost laughed for the first time in days. She peeked while he was sputtering around the soda. His eyes had gone wide to an almost comical extent. "That was you? You did that? You did all of that?"

"I mean I personally didn't do *all* of it, but yeah." His eyes were still as wide as a human's could be. Even a monster's were smaller — she knew.

"Hey! It was abandoned."

"It was arson."

"Abandoned," she said, emphasizing the important word, "no harm, no foul."

He nodded to the suitcase, leveling her a flat look. "Oh look, it's a foul."

She rolled her eyes. "Listen, can we just, like, not talk about it? At all?"

"No, no," he said, shaking his head, "I think it's important. You know, the tiny, unimportant, minuscule detail where you burnt down a manor."

His words were playful. They were sweet. But she only heard the accusation. She never wanted him to find out about any of it. Now he was asking questions that had the worst answers. He was getting closer to the truth that nearly burnt down half of a forest a few nights ago.

But most of all, he was getting closer to finding out what she was. What she was, was a girl who had her hands stained deep red. She was a girl with an assortment of weapons packed into the bottom of her suitcase. And she was a girl being shipped off across the country, a girl who wouldn't see her boy for four entire, awful years.

Lash tensed. "It was haunted?" The lie sounded half-witted, even to her own ears.

"That's not any less concerning," Andrew thought for a moment. "Yeah, no, that's even more concerning, come to think of it. The heck do you mean, it was haunted?"

She winced. Quick as a flinch, her shoulders hunched over. "Can we not talk about it?"

"Are you actually upset about this?" He was aghast, he watched her with his jaw dropped to the grounds the manor was built upon. "Seriously? You're not upset by anything, but four weeks away is what gets you? God," he said, scoffing. "That's sad, no, no, that's almost pathetic—"

Dipping her head in shame, Lash interrupted, for she couldn't bare another moment of his hopeful tone and talk. "Four weeks? Four weeks?" she asked, echoing his words. They hollowed her dried mouth. "That's how long they told you I'd be gone for? Four weeks? That's it? Andrew," she turned around to finally and truly see his face, "it's years. I'm going to be gone for four years."

Maybe later, she'd regret turning around. Because when she said that, when she told poor, rich, Andrew Linsky her fate, the smile, *his* smile, vanished. The realization hit him slowly, but quickly his gaze dulled and his shoulders sagged, he looked unhappy and more unlike himself than he had ever been. Gone was his mischief and gone was his laughter, and she wouldn't be there to see it return, for she'd be gone, too.

That was the straw. When it pulled, tears welled up, and without his smile, she began to cry. "Oh, Lash," he murmured.

He stepped forward with his strong arms raised in the gentlest of embraces. She didn't move until he had wrapped his arms around her, and then she sagged into the warmest, nicest hug anyone had ever given her. Her arms wound around his waist, and she squeezed; she held onto him for the life she held dear, and the life she was now terrified to lose.

For moments, minutes that seemed to flash to hours, they stood there. The world faded to nothing, for in each other's arms they had everything. To stay in that moment, to never let go, they were complete, content, it was safe, and it was enough.

Reluctantly, albeit quick as it was still Lash and Andrew, they pulled away. Lash wiped her eyes; she noticed Andrew did the same. She snorted. "Sap."

"You started it," he said, sniffing.

"Did not."

"Did too."

"Loser."

"Arsonist."

Lash opened her mouth, thought for a hot second, then sighed and rolled her eyes. "Okay, that's fair. That's fair."

They pulled away. She now plopped herself up on the desk, jumping up with ease. He hopped onto the bed. She sat with her legs criss-cross, and he had his hands in his lap with his legs out and his ankles resting over one another.

"Why'd you do it, anyways?" Andrew asked.

She reached into her pocket, pulling out an amulet with a meticulously linked golden chain that had no clasp. The crystal was a dark red, deep in hue. Golden runes were inscribed on each and every side. She dangled it into her hand. Letting go, the crystal fell into her open palm, a familiar weight. The rest of the chain dropped like the stream of a majestic waterfall.

"You wouldn't believe me." Although she'd seen it before, her eyes stayed transfixed on the runes, the language that seemed to kiss her lips each time she uttered a single word.

"Don't be so dramatic," he said. He flicked a hand with a smooth laugh. "I'm the most open-minded person you've ever met." He snapped with both hands and then pointed at her with ringed fingers and a sly wink.

"Try brussels sprouts."

"Heck no."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," she paused. Carefully, she unwound the amulet, slipping it on.

The amulet nuzzled back into its normal place over her heart. "Okay, I'll tell you. But you have to know that I'm completely serious."

Andrew nodded. "Okay, I'm with you. What's up?"

"Ashking Manor was haunted. Hey, hey," she said, raising a warning hand. "You promised you'd let me talk. Thank you. Listen, you know how I'm into demons and monsters and Satan and all that jazz, right?"

He snorted. "Obviously, sunshine. Go on."

"Thanks, Four-eyes. Anyways, I have something to tell you. It's something I've always known about myself. And I've never told you because it's dangerous."

Andrew leaped to his feet. "I knew it, you're gay!"

"No kidding. But no, not that. Yes that, but well, not today. Okay, shut up." Lash paused. Her hand flew to her chest, she held the amulet. She breathed in deep, letting go of the fragile crystal when she exhaled out. "I'm a demon hunter. A monster hunter, really. Ashking Manor was haunted. The thing is, I've been doing this sort of stuff for a while. Ever since you knew me. The problem with the group home is that if I leave now, then there's no one there to protect us, or save us from him."

"Him who?"

Lash winced. "The monster in our house?"

"The what—"

In this story, Maine isn't the type of character to give up. However, later in the story when it's finished, she is tasked with trying to bring monsters and humans together. But she can't do this alone. She'll need the help of her monster friends and the human ones too. She may not be able to finish bringing them together, but that doesn't mean she'll give up on her cause. That's how my story connects to our theme.

House of Monsters
By Hannah Rosenstock Age: 12

Prologue

Maine stood outside the absurdly tall building. She stood there looking at the two-story entry with a rather large door and a window on top. It was made from a dark reddish-brown brick and had a roof on top. Behind it stood a mammoth sized tutor home that looked like it was built somewhere in the 1920s.

The upper part of the old-fashioned home was painted an old musty gray, which was odd cause most of the tutor homes that Maine had seen were white, though she hadn't seen many.

On the left of the entry there was a little, or smaller compared to the rest of the home, bump out with only two stories. There was a big rectangular window on each story.

On the section to the right, there were 4 stories. The first story was made from the same reddish brick as the rest of the floor. The other 2 stories were still painted that dark musty gray, but the top story was made from 2 dormers on top of the dark shingled roof. The bottom window was horizontal, and the ones above it were vertical. And on each dormer, there was a square window. But

there was at least one thing that all the windows had in common, they all had the same dark wooden dividers.

Maine walked over and pulled at the dark, creaky old doors. She pulled with all her strength, but it wouldn't open. Then she noticed an old but semi shiny big brass knocker in the shape of an owl next to the door but still above the handle.

However, because Maine was quite short for a 14-year-old, she couldn't actually reach the knocker.

"How in the world am I gonna get in!" she said to herself, looking around for anything she could use to make herself even a smidge taller. She looked around the lawn and saw something strange. When she had first arrived, the lawn had looked dirty and messy, but now, she couldn't find anything out of place that could help her. So, Maine headed back to the door and took off her shoes. Climbing was one of her few skills.

She hopped onto a bush that was next to the door. The leaves felt old and crumpled up and were wet on her feet. Maine crunched up her nose as the smell of wet dog fur drifted under as an overlaying scent. But surprisingly the bush could hold her weight. Well, she was depicted as lighter than she should be.

Maine leaped onto the handle, gripped it tightly and pulled herself up. This however did bend under her weight, and as it turned and twisted, it broke, almost dropping her to the floor, but, she had managed to grab the other one before she fell.

Maine turned her head and looked down and what she saw terrified her. What should have been only a couple inch drop, now turned into a dark

endless void beneath the bright, golden shine of the handle. Though she wasn't afraid of heights, it sure felt like she was, then.

Maine could taste the sweet, sea salted sweat dripping into mouth, as she attempted to reach the still shiny, but now dimmer brass knocker. But she still couldn't reach.

"Stupid short arms!" she muttered under her breath as she tried to get even closer. Now her leg was dangling over the edge of handle and her other foot was on its tippy toes trying to be as far from the edge as possible without falling off. Her slim olive fingers gripped tightly onto the rusted metal of the old knocker, as her foot gave way and she toppled over.

Maine was now hanging off of what she was trying to reach. Could this situation get any worse! Well apparently, it could, cause when Maine looked back, she could see that instead of the handle being a few inches away, like where it was when she had fallen off it, it was now multiple feet away from her. This didn't make any sense! How could a human, especially her, jump that far. What was going on with this place!

Maine turned her head back to the knocker. She had to focus if she didn't want to fall to her doom. And seriously, she didn't.

She slowly place her feet under the knocker and pushed off hard. Maybe a little bit too hard, cause she lost her grip, because of the sweat she didn't know she was sweating. She flew back, into the black abyss. As Maine was falling into the void beneath her, she heard the loud booming of the knocker's handle hitting against its owl shaped

holder and the door started to creak open. She was saved!

Maine groaned as her butt hit the solid concrete pathway with her shoes plopped down, right next to her. Had she just been imagining the whole thing?

“Mama?” a squeaky voice said. It was coming from a small girl, almost smaller than Maine, with pale almost white skin and shocking blue hair.

“What is it, Elenora?” a deeper but calming voice spoke from behind the girl. The voice belonged to a tall woman who was rather pale, but as pale as the girl in front of her. She had deep blood red lipstick and long, streaky black hair that was outlining her boney face.

“There’s a girl standing at our door,”

“I can see that, Elenora,”

“Mama, why is there a girl standing at our door?”

“Why don’t you go inside. It’s quite bright out here,” the woman spoke, ignoring her question.

“Ok, Mama,” The small girl said before she scurried inside.

“Are you Mrs. Goth?” Maine asked while fumbling her papers that she had previously taken out from her bag.

“And you must be Ms. Ellen,”

“Well actually, you can just call me Mai,” she said in a voice that’s higher than she would normally speak. It’s just that the strict and structured voice of Mrs. Goth was half scaring her and half putting her to sleep.

“Why don’t you come on in, Mai,” Mrs. Goth sounded as if she was unsure about saying Mai’s first

name and that she had thought of saying it at the last moment.

Mai started to get up and she could vaguely hear a conversation starting in her head. But she could understand anything that was being said. All she could make out was this:

“Don’t go in. They’re not who you think they are. They could find out *what* you are.”

“And that’s exactly why she needs to go...”

*In my piece I write about large, broad issues that torment me.
Personally, I only have two hands, and nobody has more than
two hands. If we can all use what we have to make change,
our little bit can make big change. This pertains to the theme
because we cannot finish the work alone, but that does not
mean we can give up on it.*

America through my eyes
By Shira Flores Age: 14

Dear US Government

Dear US Government,
Young me hoped everyone could live under your
law
She thought it was the best place one could live
The immigrant's view
Golden

Land of the free home of the brave
Brave enough to fight
Brave enough to scream
Brave enough to make the change

Do you care?
Young children
Shaking under desks
Holding megaphones at protests
Personalities marching into the horizon
No, you don't care

And your lack of action makes it apparent

Vote, too young
Write, no response

Protest, no ears

Care about the next generation
Prove to the younger self the gold
Make this place accessible for everyone
Not just for the Anglo-Saxon man

The Man That Haunts Me

He's disintegrating
A slow shatter
My clock continues to tick while he turns back time

Capitol building, white house
His matted hair after he rolls out of bed
What I have fought for is disregarded

I brace myself before he speaks.
Talking with a slow, monotonous cadence
Thoughts and prayers slide off the tongue.

He smells like crisp paper dollars

Leathered skin
The cracks like craters
Festering dirt stuck inside
A handshake unbearable
Encapsulating my hand in disease

Our Barbie Dolls

Time wasted as a child sitting in dark classrooms
under desks
Cold linoleum seeps through my sweatpants as I lay
on the floor

Commented [CW1]: an

The clocks ticking gets louder by the second
My *I love you* text has typos because of my shaking
hands

Fire drills turn into directions for lockdown
Code words and colors for different scenarios
My Jewish day school doesn't have a sign in front
Security guards constantly patrol the perimeter
On my way to the restroom, where are the exits?
I thought this was a safe space

News spreading like an angry rash through hallways
Cheers, sobs, signs, walkouts
This essay needs to be finished, 11:59 tonight
But I would rather be in the streets

I am spending time
Living in dystopia
Without a last page

What I have always dreaded is now
All the fight
All the time
Has rushed down the drain
Gone

Instead of Barbie doll dreamhouses
We are playing with real lives
Your life, my life, our lives
Is now what takes up our time
Where are all the barbie dolls?

Star, Sea, and Forest
By: Annika Liss Age: 15

In this story, Maura and Lysander start the work of restoring their kingdom. They are able to prevent the loss of the stars and make steps towards saving the forest. However, even at the end of the story, the forest still has yet to be saved and the sea is still empty, but both Maura and Lysander are planning to continue to try and solve these issues in the future. Lysander and Maura have not finished the work, they're not even sure if they can, but they're not giving up either.

My name is Lysander. I am a prince. The prince of Laryngitis, to be specific. I'm not quite sure how I feel about that. You see, I don't really know much about politics. Or diplomacy. Or ruling a kingdom in general. They say every king is different. Which is fine, I suppose, but I don't really know what sort of king I'd want to be. A good one, I guess. Kings are also supposed to be married. After all, what's a king without his queen? But I don't want a queen. I don't want another king either. I guess I just don't want much of anyone at all. At least, in that way. Romantically. I would greatly appreciate some friends though. I'm rather lacking in that department and it's quite lonely.

The only thing I'm sure about now is the stars. I love the stars. My room is covered in astronomy charts and my ceiling is painted with the constellations. The stars are constantly changing, but in a very consistent way. I sort of love that. The stars are out tonight and I am sitting up on the roof. It's been cloudy lately and I missed the sky, so I was excited to reunite with it. It's so peaceful up here. No father ordering or mother fussing. The only

noise is the soft hush of the cool autumn breeze that tickles my cheek. My eyes are filled with silver dewdrops on a field of purple grass. Suddenly, I hear the clang of metal on shingles. I shift my gaze from the stars and towards the direction of the noise. I jump to my feet, lose my balance, and almost fall off the roof.

I'm just able to catch myself on the chimney. Now in a somewhat secure position, I return my attention to the source of my distress. The intruder. They stare at me as they wind up the grappling hook. I can't make out any defining features, their eyes are shadowed by an oversized hood and the bottom half of their face is obscured by a black bandana. I should probably scream. But I'm all the way up on the roof. There are no guards around and no one knows I'm here. So yes, I could scream. But the odds of anyone hearing me are low and the odds of the intruder killing me are high. I remain silent.

"You're the prince," the intruder says. Odd. They sound more thoughtful than accusatory. I'm not quite sure how to respond so I don't.

"Why were you on the roof?" the intruder asks.

"I-I wanted to see the stars," I say. "I like them."

"You like them in the sky?" the intruder confirms, I can almost hear them frowning.

"Yes," I say, puzzled. "Where else would they be?"

"So you don't know that they're stealing the stars," the intruder says, more to themselves than to me.

"What?" My voice shoots up an octave.
"Stealing the stars! Who would do such a thing? Is that even possible?"

"Your father, actually," the intruder says.
"And yes, it is quite possible. Just like it's possible to murder the forest and drain the sea."

"But that didn't happen," I frown. "Why would anyone do that? We need the forest and the sea and the stars."

The intruder sighs and sits down next to me. She flips her hood off. I'm surprised to see that she can't be much older than me. She has a ragged mess of dark brown hair and her eyes are the same shade of green as my favorite lizard in the menagerie.

"Look," she says quietly.

"At what?" I ask. "The grounds? I see those every day."

"No, look beyond that."

I turn my gaze outward. W-what is that? Wasn't there be a forest there? But now all I see are charred husks of life. How long has it been like this? Why did I never notice? No, no, I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation. Why am I listening to an intruder anyways? She's probably trying to trick me.

"Why did you show me that?" I ask.

"You're going to be king someday," she says. "I figured you deserve to know." She hesitates before continuing. "I'm also hoping that you won't be like your father. I don't know if we can reverse everything he's done, but if someone on our side is in power, we can at least begin to try."

"Oh," I say. I had not been expecting that answer.

"Now turn around," she says. I do. On the distant horizon I can see a gaping hole where the sparkling blue sea used to be. It looks like someone has attacked the land with a giant axe, leaving an ugly yet bloodless wound. Why didn't I know about this? Why wasn't I looking? I turn to the intruder.

"W-why?" I ask.

"If you're the only one left with plants, you control people's hunger. If you're the only one left with water, you control people's thirst.

"And the stars?"

"If you're the only one with power you control people's lives."

I...I don't know what to say. I think back over the past few years. Memories that once seemed so insignificant begin to pile onto each other. A conversation with mother:

'Mother', I ask. 'Are we going to the beach again this summer?'

'No, not this summer, wouldn't you rather just stay home anyways?'

'I guess. I wanted to go swimming though.'

'Oh, well...why don't you go play with your dolls now?'

Dinner last year: 'Has there been another fungi outbreak? These berries look weird.'

Oh, don't worry about that,' my aunt says. 'It's just a... new type. Recently discovered.'

'Oh, okay then.' The next day I saw the berries in the greenhouse. Oh, well, I guess they were just so good that we decided to grow them ourselves.

Just last week in the hall with father: 'Father!' I called. 'You said you'd help me with my math work!'

‘Did I?’ He doesn’t even turn around. ‘Sorry, son, but I’ve got a meeting. A very important meeting.’

‘But this is the third time you had something come up! I’m never going to understand how to multiply fractions at this rate!’

‘Don’t worry, Lysander. It’ll all make sense soon.’ I scan the rest of my memories, desperately trying to find anything to prove myself wrong. But there’s nothing. Why did I never question my parents? Why have I never questioned anything?

‘How can I help?’ I ask.

She smiles. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know where to get a master key, would you?’

‘I have one, actually,’ I smile back and pull it out of pocket.

‘Excellent! Now come on, we’ve got some stuff to blow up!’

We’ve snuck through what feels like hundreds of corridors and stairwells before we finally reach our destination.

‘All right, this is it,’ the intruder (I should really stop calling her that) says. I unlock the door and she pushes it open. I gasp, more with horror than awe, as I stare at the monstrosity before me. It is a gargantuan piece of machinery with a round center, identical cone shaped spikes burst out and through circular holes in the wall.

‘So, what exactly is this?’ I ask.

There’s a beat of silence before she says, ‘Sorry, did you say something. Her eyes are laser focused on a small file cabinet in the corner.

‘The machine? What is it?’

"That's what they're going to use to suck the stars out of the sky."

"Oh," I take a small step backwards.

"Your key's gonna be too big," she reaches into her backpack. She pulls out what looks like a couple elongated needles and starts wiggling them around in the lock. "There's some explosives in the bag. Would you mind putting them in the machine?"

"Will do," I say and reach into the bag. Inside are what looks like a bunch of...

"Are these coconuts?!" I exclaim.

"Homemade explosives," she shrugs. "You work with what you've got."

"Uh, okay then," I gather up an armful. I walk over to the machine, "What's your name? I'm Lysander."

"I know," she grins. "I'm Maura! Aha! Got it!" I hear a soft click and Maura pulls the drawer open. She rifles through a bunch of papers before pulling one out and sticking it in her pocket.

"How are the coconut explosives going?" she asks as she stands up.

I look down at the bag. The only thing left in it is a battered copy of *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

"I think I'm done, actually," I say.

"Great!" Maura takes out a piece of twine and starts to connect all the explosives. "Go stand outside. I'm gonna light the fuse in a second."

I nod and quickly move outside. I have no desire to get set on fire today. Maura joins me outside, still unspooling the twine. She cuts the end and lights a match.

"Want to do the honors?" she asks.

I take a deep breath before accepting the match. I bend down and connect flame to fuse. Then we both run, as fast as we possibly can. We're almost back to my quarters when I hear the captain of the guard's gruff voice from around the corner. Maura darts into a broom closet, gesturing for me to follow, but my feet are glued to the floor, palms sweating up a storm. A jet black boot steps into the corridor. Maura pulls the door shut, leaving me stranded. What if I'm caught?! What would father say? What would he *do*. I better think of an excuse. Fast.

"Your highness," the captain says as he comes into view, bushy mustache moving in time with his mouth. "It's late, what are you doing up?"

"I-" A loud BANG interrupts what would have been a sorry attempt at a lie. "Oh dear," I say. "You should probably investigate that."

"Right away, your highness." The captain runs off. I wait until his footsteps are no more than a distant echo before I open the closet door.

"You good?" Maura asks as she steps out.

"I think the captain's a little preoccupied," I reply. We grin at each other as the sweet coconut smell of success fills our noses.

"Well," Maura says, "looks like you've saved the stars."

"For now."

"For now," she agrees. We walk the rest of the way in comfortable silence. When we're safely back in my room, I say, "So this is goodbye then?"

"Until my next mission, at least."

"Maura, what was the paper you took?"

“Oh, that. It’s the ingredients list for the poison they used on the forest. We’re hoping to use it to create an antidote.”

“Well, if you ever need anything from the palace. I can probably find a way to smuggle it out for you.”

“Thanks, Lysander,” Maura smiles. “You’re going to be a good king someday.” I start to say something, but she’s already gone. I stick my head out the window. I can just make out a small, dark figure dashing away, the stars smiling down at her. I think that I have made a friend today. It leaves a warm snuggly feeling in my chest. Today, I have also decided what kind of king I will be. A king who makes the world a better place. Not for himself, but for his people and his country. For the first time in a long time, I find myself looking forward to tomorrow. My eyes are open now and I will not go back to sleep.

In my piece, I'm writing about my own life, but styled as a back-and-forth Dungeons & Dragons game, an adventure, if you will. In the piece, despite the "damage" I take, or how badly things go, I still have to keep moving along, I can't give up on the task ahead of me. Life doesn't have extra lives, and neither does Dungeons & Dragons, really, but it's a good game metaphor, so pretend it applies here, too.

Roll Initiative By Fayvel Selch Age: 15

You wake up, in wrinkled sheets, and the whispers of whatever terrible music you were playing last night. You got a long rest and have been fully healed from the day before.

"Alright, I'd like to take a shower, and then put on something cool."

Roll for performance.

"Cool, cool, let's see... 16! But my charisma is minus 2... that's 14."

You put on a worn-down tee and baggy shorts. It's not particularly good looking, but it's comfortable. It's masculine, in a way that will make your teachers second guess your name for a moment, and it gives you confidence. Do you want to do anything else before you head out?

"What time is it? Would I have time for breakfast?"

It's... 7... 14. You have sixteen minutes before you need to catch the bus.

"Sweet! I never have time for breakfast! I'll toast a bagel, yeah?"

Could you roll for survival? There really isn't a skill closer to roll for.

"Ah, natural 1! Please, please, please don't burn my bagel!"

Them's the rolls. Someone else in the house was toasting on a higher setting, and as you scrolled through your phone, you forgot to change it. The bagel comes out like someone threw it in a fire, the butter melts and just as quickly evaporates when you spread it on. Take a six sided die worth of psychic damage, for the emotional damages.

"I take 3 damage. It's too early for this. I take a bite out of my bagel, devastated, mind you, and throw it out. Is there anything else in the house to eat?"

You look around the kitchen, trying to find something to eat, but you've looked through these cabinets a million times, and you know it's all bags of nuts and cans of chili. Thinking about these things almost makes you lose your appetite. Almost. With a few pangs of hunger like short swords in your gut, your eyes stop on the clock in the microwave, and you see that your struggle took ten minutes, making it 7:24 now. You should probably grab your bag and shoes.

"Yeah, yeah. I put on my crocs and start walking out. I'll pick up something at the school vending machines."

You head to the bus stop and there is one other person already waiting there. A nondescript woman, you'll forget her by the time you get off the bus. When the bus comes, it's two minutes late, and the woman by you pushes on before you can even get to the curb. Roll insight for me to get a good seat.

"16!"

You make your way to the back, seeing that no one has taken your favorite seat, the one right behind the single seat, with bars in the front to lay

your bag and put your feet, and there are a few people around, not that you dare to look, but you know by the sounds of the thoughtless chatter.

"Nice! I want to put my bag on the bars in front of me, like always, and turn on the podcast I've started listening to, with headphones. I can already hear someone playing videos in the background, and it's driving me crazy."

The sweet sounds of your... "niche internet micro celebrities" sweeps through your ears like a broom sweeping dust to its dustpan, it's exactly where it's supposed to be. As the ride continues, the bus fills up with a few people, but no one in the seat next to you. When you make it off and walk into the school, it's 8:02. Your first period is on the second floor.

"Second floor has the best vending machines, cause even though the first-floor arts wing has root beer, it's like a ten-minute walk there and back. The ones in the middle of the hall are on the way to class, so I'll head there."

You walk up to the snack vending machine first. As you look into it for your favorite blueberry cookies, you see... they're fully restocked, but only in the cinnamon flavor.

"Oh, gross. I guess I'll get a drink. Is there still cherry cola?"

Roll without adding anything, just for luck.

"Is a 6 good?"

Even if the vending machine did have cherry cola, they all just got turned off for the school day, and it swallowed two of your quarters when you put them in.

"I'll head to class, then, even without a cherry cola. I need to see the teacher about extra help."

You walk through the north wing of the school and all of its twists and turns, the terrible LED lighting, the rows and rows of lockers to get to your first class. It's 8:06 now. You know that if you go in, you'll be the first in there. Roll persuasion to try and get yourself to talk to the teacher about help.

Disadvantage, because you know you'll never do it.

"17, that's just the first, it could be lower.

Another 17! With my charisma that's still 15!"

Okay, you walk into the room, feeling the change in atmosphere, and the change from linoleum to carpet. You head up to the teacher's desk immediately and greet him. As you ask him about some previous work, he helps you and it becomes easier to understand.

"Nice, I need to move my grade up a little."

The bell starts to scream like a loud sheep dog, and students follow in like the sheep it herds, just before the teacher closes and locks the door.

Now, get ready for combat, and roll initiative.

*In this story, Chad had to work to overcome his fears.
Overcoming your fears is always a work in progress, and the
work might not ever be done completely.*

The Farm By Olivier Miclea Age: 11

CHAPTER 1

The Drive

Chad always had a dream... his dream was to have a farm. Why did Chad want a farm? Well, since he was a child, he always wanted to be around the animals, and do what farmers do, also because his dad was a farmer.

But today's story is about the peculiar story of what happened many years ago... after he bought that farm.

Chad bought a farm online and had to drive there so he can move in and look around. Chad hopped into his shiny, red truck. He put his pointed keys into the keyhole and turned them, starting the truck. He pressed down on the accelerator and drove off into the distance. On his way to his farm, he started to see more and more roadkill, and litter. Then he saw a small, black rectangular box.

He slammed on the brakes with a loud screech. He ran out of his truck and curiously picked up the box. It had blinking red lights on each corner but one. That corner had a blue light. He stopped once he noticed the blue light was stable and the reds weren't. Then it made a loud beeping sound which startled him. He struggled to keep it in his hands as he almost dropped it from the terrifying noise.

The box was smashed open, but it really didn't matter as it wasn't Chad's problem but then... there

was a loud clank! He looked around and saw nothing. He simply walked to his car and got in slamming the door and dislodging a screw or two. He sped off and saw more roadkill.

Chad saw another box on the side of the road... a box just like before. He slowed down his truck and got out and the door fell off. Chad sighed and walked over to the box he picked it up... it had a strange smell, like bleach or something. Chad saw a small, square button on the back. He imagined what would happen if he were to press the button. Chad pressed the button after deciding that it was a good idea. When he pressed the button a camera popped out and took a picture of Chad, giving him flashbacks.

He was taken back to a time when he was just a wee child. Chad was getting his picture taken for his passport. The flash from the camera hurt Chad's eyes and he cried and was embarrassed. Chad remembered that day like it was yesterday. Chad would never forget that day. Chad didn't know quite what to do anymore, so he put the box into his pocket which was wet and gooey from sweat that descended from camera flashbacks.

Then Chad got back into his truck and started it up as he drove off.

He was almost at his farm he put more pressure onto the accelerator and sped off to his farm. Chad finally made it to his beautiful farm, it had a large glistening pond with lots of water lilies. There were long pastures, fruit trees, and plants. Chad saw his farm and with a smile he walked to the farmhouse.

CHAPTER 2

Farmhouse

The farmhouse was a common red and white farmhouse, but it was peculiarly large. The farmhouse was square, about 20 feet tall, and around 21 feet tall. The door on the farmhouse had a sign. The sign read: Hop Hop Farms. The sign was next to the large, oak door that had a small ripped spot next to the rusty handle.

Chad slowly opened the door, and it made a loud cracking sound. When he walked in it smelled like sweaty socks, and what he saw was not expected.

He saw animals, yes. But not live animals... they were robots!? Chad walked over to a pig and saw a smash on its head and some wires spilling out. Then he looked at each animal and saw that it was the same with them. They were broken robots. No this couldn't be possible, there had to be an explanation for this madness. Chad searched around for clues and saw more of the boxes, and they snapped pictures of him. Chad got scared, and he ran away.

When he got outside, he saw small, square security cameras around the farm, and his run from the cameras continuously pulled Chad back to one spot... the farmhouse. Chad remembered the many times he saw cameras, like on school picture day, he didn't go as he was scared of cameras, family photos where he was forced to take pictures, and when he found out his phone had a camera, he covered the camera and found a way to delete the camera app. Chad had so many times where instead of facing his fears, he had run away from his fears when he

should have faced it... no matter what Chad wanted to do cameras were in his way.

Then Chad remembered, there was a day when Chad faced his fears... one day. That day wasn't the best day for Chad, and he had enough, and he had decided he would stand up to the cameras, and although he tried to shield himself from the flash, he still stood up for himself against a camera, his worst fear. Chad finally faced his fears, by allowing those cameras to take pictures and record him, he was triumphant. He walked into the farmhouse, and there were no cameras, no robot animals, only real animals. Only once Chad had finally faced his fears could he be truly happy.

"Turning Fifteen" is surreal and uses ambiguity. These techniques point to unfinished work, a void of ideas not put into language. "Autistic Girl" is a revision from the last chapbook, yet unfinished. It carries themes of beginnings and endings, which also point to unfinished work. And, both poems were revised up to six times before their final form, another indication of the theme.

Collected Poems By Jenna Nesky Age: 16

Turning Fifteen

1

In my search for a form I found
a vanishing point. The old man, I mean—
the hunch of his old age was the trustfall
into vanishing. White hair leaned over
his knuckles like the dead
bark on the blooming trees, striding and slouching,
out the train window
with their hands in pink scalps.

As the train sped
down the knuckle of a mountain, my lover
hummed. *Every song without words,*
she told me, *is a song about love.*
The old man stared between us, counted
years on our faces. My lover hummed
louder. Notes leaned
against each other,
a wheelbarrow gnawing an uneven path,
a wheelbarrow of cherry blossoms.

The old man's throat tendons bobbed like black piano keys
 as if he was trying to speak, and I realized—
 if every song without words is about love,
 every song without sound is about vanishing.
 My lover hummed louder and the train
 went faster—trees went by so fast
 the distance between was filled
 with vanishing. My hands flapped
 so fast the distance between became a third
 hand, the “with” between “girl” and “autism.”

The old man still stared at us, searched our faces,
 flowerboy searching for the bride.
 Look how the petals fell—
 like a breadtrail in a labyrinth.

In another version there was no lover.
 She vanished into silence and I
 was alone, and ran out of “with”s,
 and wanted
 to be called a woman and not
 a girl now that I turned fifteen.

I rose from my seat and paced the aisle
 in the counterclockwise-to-clockwise course
 that follows a snagged thread. The man
 trembled up, the sound
 of his scream weaving a muscle between my heart

and ribcage: *Where/ are you going/ pretty woman!*
I've told this story before, and in my search
for its form found petals
falling around me like empty boats.
I've told this story before,
exchanging words for sound and sound for words.
In every version I was silent. But look—
didn't I glide like a woman?
Wasn't my womanhood so big it overlapped itself?
Didn't all the stories I told vanish
into each other like petals in the tide?

Autistic Girl

1

Today all shadows point toward the end,

meaning they point in all directions
at once—light comes

from everywhere all
at the same time

and I don't know which way
lies the soul or the body,

the autism or the girl,

the long downhill
shadow of the cherry blossom tree

at the end of the path.
I begin always here, at the end.

Not the end
after the beginning, but the ending
before that.

I begin so that this ending is no longer
an end, to begin

the poem that never ends,
this poem of myself.

2

I end only when there's nothing
but endings left to write about,

when day
unhinges its jaw and the shadow
below the tongue becomes night.

Autism is like the night, the hungry
moon, the bloodless knuckles of its hunger

forced inside it—a fist inside a hand.
Autism is

a powerful need
of beginnings.

It is

a kind of absence—
the absence

of endings. I begin always
with autism and end

hungry.

3

I begin as a petal begins
to fall

from the cherry blossom tree,
its shadow

growing large as it falls until
the petal and the shadow

are the same size,
meet like two tongues.

When I end the ending is a shadow
of myself.

Each character in my story has a mission. To save the world, to bring back their savior, to keep their family out of danger.

*Though they may not be able to successfully complete their missions, they can always try. Start the process. Also, I could not complete this story in the time I was given, but I hope to continue it in the future. :) (*As a side note, the child in this story, Tali, goes by all pronouns. Simply to make the story easier to read, they are written with solely they/ them pronouns)*

The Child By Ezra Zahalsky Age: 15

A fire sparked, illuminating a small forest clearing, as the sun made its decline into the earth. The trees stretched upward, covering the rest of the world in shadows. A small child stood on one side of the fire, facing their two guests. After greeting their guests, they spoke:

“They were a child. A child who could fly. You probably wouldn’t think they could possess such a power by looking at them. Aside from the way they glow slightly, if it is dark enough. But they could fly, nonetheless. They flew from village to village bringing freedom along with them. Until one day, they were captured by the very same people they were trying so hard to be rid of, never to be seen again. Dun dun dun.”

They laughed, leaning on a large tree to support themselves as they quickly ran out of breath, rough bark digging into their hand. “That was—that was it,” they said, still gasping for air. “That was the story they all told.” They looked around the small clearing, surrounded on all sides by a thick forest, waiting for a reaction from their new guests. Neither

of the guests spoke. Instead, they both stared back at the child, wide eyed with confusion.

The child's excited expression started to fade into a small frown. They wiped a stray chunk of hair out of their face, looking between their two guests. This was not the reaction they were expecting.

"And," they continued, trying to lighten the mood, "as far as everyone knows, I'm still there. Captured. Isn't it funny?" They looked between their two guests again. The guests stood still, a slight wind wiping their hair around. Their expressions had yet to change.

The fire burned brighter in the silence. The forest went quiet, somehow understanding the awkward mood of the clearing. And chirp or buzz that was heard seemed to echo across the clearing. Neither guest said anything as they continued to stare down at the child, who was much smaller than both of them.

"Um, so," the child said, unsure about how to respond to the growing silence, "tell me about you." Their sentence was phrased more as a question than a statement. They hadn't had human guests in a long time. Though the forest wasn't hard to find, it was isolated from most of civilization, and people were not often allowed in. The child wondered why these two, who looked as though they weren't yet adults, had been allowed to visit them.

"You're alive?" the guest on the right asked. She had long hair, tied down her back in one large braid with a couple of flyaway pieces floating around her head. The other guest didn't speak.

"Yup." The child sat down, leaning against a nearby tree. Bugs scattered away from their body

“Are you?” They picked at the grass, trying to focus their attention away from the faces of their guests.

The ground was cool, slightly damp after being shaded all day. Bugs hurried from flower to flower, desperate to get the last drops of food before retreating home for the night.

“How?” The same guest spoke, moving slightly closer to the child as if trying to see if they were actually real. She squinted her brown eyes, still not trusting what she saw.

“Do you want some tea?” the child asked, instead of answering. Without waiting for a response, they dug through their bag, which was previously hanging on a tree branch, for cups and herbs, and set them on a platform they had made above the fire.

How they had escaped. It was a question they dreaded answering. Because in truth, they hadn’t escaped. They were still in captivity. And now, their two guests were probably trapped too.

The guest on the right sat down, taking one of the cups from the fire. She sipped slowly and looked expectantly to her partner, waiting for him to sit down as well.

The other guest hesitantly sat down, brushing some bugs out of the way, before he finally spoke. “Why haven’t you come back?” he asked. “Out of hiding.”

The child took a quick breath. They didn’t want to explain themselves. To explain how they continued to fail.

The sun finally set, its residual light quickly fading. As the world went to sleep, the child said, “You two should leave.” Maybe they could make it out. Maybe they could get some help.

The guest on the right put her cup down. The forest immediately started to claim it. Hidden bugs swarmed, trying to feed from any leftover liquid. "We just got here," she said, glancing to her partner and back. "We're not leaving. Not without you."

The child sighed. They had to get back to their captors before they got in some sort of trouble, and their guests had to leave soon if they wanted a chance at escape. The longer they stayed in the forest, especially if they were close to the child, the greater chance they had at being caught.

"I can't come with you," the child said. "I have...work to do here." They knew the excuse didn't sound convincing. They knew their guests thought highly of them. Most stories depicted them of being godlike, a savior. And yet they were unable to help.

"We can help you," the guest on the right said, her unsure voice wavering. She looked up from her empty cup, now crawling with life, and into the eyes of the child. "Let us stay tonight and we'll set out for home tomorrow."

The child looked up at the sky. It was completely dark, clouds obscuring even the brightest of stars. They sighed again, staring into the dimming light of the fire. It was definitely too late.

"Fine," they whispered. There was no point in hiding the truth now. They kicked out the rest of the fire, taking all of the untouched tea for themselves. "Follow me."

Now with the fire gone, the only light around the group was that of the child themselves. They led the way through the thick forest on the path they followed every night. It was a path they had made

themselves, winding around plants and trees in order to avoid messing with nature.

This forest was as much of a home as it could be. It gave the child a slight freedom in their captivity, but it also trapped them in with the people they despise. Despite that, they tried their best to connect with the forest, spending as much time as they could outside, lost in nature.

The group walked in a dull silence. The journey wasn't long, but it was slow. At first, the braided guest, who eventually introduced herself as Ayla, frantically asked questions, trying to understand the child she thought so highly of. She stopped, however, after multiple minutes of forceful silence. The only thing the child said was a correction of the pronunciation of their name, which was Tali and not Talia, as many stories had told it to be.

They soon arrived at their destination. It was a building. A huge one. It wasn't a nice wooden one, reminiscent of home. No, it was large and concrete. Bright lights streamed out of its windows, illuminating the area with an unnatural glow. Its unwelcoming façade was the opposite of comforting. The building of the child's captors. Their place where they were destined to stay. Forever.

The child walked over to one of the looming doors. Concrete and heavy, just like the rest of the place and went to open it. As they did, they felt a hand on their shoulder. They pressed their lips together and looked back at their guests.

Ayla was holding onto their shoulder and the other guest stood a couple of steps back. Both of their faces were serious, almost disappointed. The

child couldn't stop tears from bubbling in their eyes. They slowly shook their head as the other guest, whose name was still unknown, looked straight at them and said, "You lied."

The child wiped their face with their arm before turning and heading into the building. "Yeah, I did," they said, their voice fading as they walked farther away. "Yeah, I did."

Maple Fungi felt trapped in an unfair world, where beauty meant everything. She decided she wanted to give up on that kind of life, and start a new one, a life where she isn't just eye candy, and is accepted for who she is inside. She was willing to put in the work in order to feel happy. She realized that being true to yourself is the best way to be happy, although it's not easy, she was not going to give up. Although it does sound cheesy, in modern life, people are pressured to be something they're not. I wrote this to prove that nothing should be expected of you, and you can be who you want to be. (Yourself)

It Isn't What You Think It Is
By Hazel Schneider Age 10

Good morning, afternoon, or evening. My name is Maple Fungi and I live in the enchanted and protected forest. Today, I'll be going to another interview. I've gone to these before, it's the third one today in fact. As a young shroom in a vegetable sprout, I was always in a lab getting tested for all my extra spots while all the other young shrooms were playing outside. I wish I could've had a normal childhood, why did I have to be the daughter with extra spots? There's a saying in our forest that goes something like, "More spots equals more beauty."

Everybody seems to be jealous of my beauty, but they clearly don't know the truth. I loved my sister so much. When I was born, I was "apparently" so much more beautiful than my sister, that my parents treated me so much better. I felt bad for my sister, she treated me amazing, and not just because of my appearance. All the attention is overwhelming, and maybe even a little bit painful. As soon as I was born, my momshroom knew

something was up. As long as I could remember, I've been poked and prodded with pointy objects held by scientists trying to figure out what's wrong with me. I had extra spot cells in my blood. My head was red and almost completely covered with white spots, and a beige stem sticking out of my cap. My assigned description was "looks like an umbrella". As soon as I could talk, I started doing interviews. When I started, I had so much anxiety about them, and now it's just a daily thing.

That doesn't mean that it's not scary to relive the cycle over and over of the interview...

I grab my keys and get into my strawberry. The blueberry wheels skid across the road as I stop at the tomato stoplight. I park at the waterfall showers and reserve one for myself. I let the cool water run down my face. I lather up my bar of rose soap and rub it all over my stem. I still don't feel truly clean though. I think about what I am going to say at the interview, probably the same as always, maybe then they'll get the memo. I peek outside of the curtains and see some social mushrooms laughing together. Maybe I'm showering so I can't tell if I'm crying or not, or maybe I feel so isolated that I need to wash off the lonely mood. If those shrooms knew who was in this shower they would stare in awe, all while dismissing the thought that I might be nervous despite my looks.

I turn off the water and dry myself off with some moss. I run to my strawberry before anyone can see me. I start to drive away fast enough so that they won't recognize me, but I'm below the speed limit. Something is bothering me, but I don't know what. A drink would calm my nerves. I drive to The Kale Café in search of comfort. I put on my grass

hoodie and walk in. I get a cucumber leaftte with no ice and sit down to sip my drink nice and slow. There's a sticker on the cup that says "Sponsored by Moss Mocha." The warm scent of coffee beans and vanilla relaxes me. I wish I could've stayed here when I was a young shroom. I could've had joyful memories, but instead I had to have demanding crowds. It's weird that the café is empty. I finish my absolutely perfect leaftte and jump right back into my strawberry and start driving. This is getting out of hand, it feels personal, even though I know it's not. I need some time to myself, some personal space. So, I pull over to my favorite place, a place I've gone since I was a young shroom. My second home.

I go to The Broccoli Forest, the opposite of a tourist attraction. I can feel the smell of the oak and the pine surround me. I feel the warmth of the setting sun against my skin, the heat is so intense that it feels embracing. I lift my head to look at the canopy and I see the sunlight peeking through the trees. I turn to the area I'd like to call my own. Log tables and chairs, just sitting there, waiting for me. I created this spot when I was that same young shroom, to be able to have a place I could relax in all by myself. I sit down on a stool and let my mind wander even further, I need to show them me, the real me, the me that's not just beautiful. I soak in as much sunlight as I want, then jump in my strawberry, and drive at a normal pace.

I arrive at the location for the interview, a tall, tin, and quite intimidating chicken soup can. I walk through the double doors, and they bang shut. The cold air conditioning feels fierce and angry. I come

on stage and a huge round of applause pierces the silence. I sit down and answer their weird questions. This is the moment, this is my chance, they need to hear my voice. I try my best to make it sound casual.

“I’m not just eye candy, you know that right?”

Silence. Just silence. No one had thought about how I feel. I exit stage right and leave the building. I step outside and stand my ground, I slowly look up. I see the stars, contrasting against the deep, black sky. The tiny dots seem to be winking at me. I take a deep breath, and smile. Somehow I know, that everything will be okay.

My story connects to the theme from Pirkei Avot because Logan and Ollie are each individually doing their part to resolve their family feud. They know they're not the only two people in their family to have to come to the table on this issue; therefore, they are not going to resolve the issue on their own.

Yours Truly, A Hero By: Elly Schibel Age: 16

Dearest Ollie (Oliver? Please tell me what you prefer.),

I've been thinking about you ever since we had our first fight as adversaries. You *may* have almost ambushed me with your skulk of foxes, *and* your unkindness of ravens ~~severely~~ ^{minorly} injured me, but I'm alright now. Your bale of turtles seems very sweet. Turtles are very nice animals. What are their names? I would love to help you name them if you need. I think the smallest turtle's name should be Bobby. It fits him, because he is small, and it is a short name. Short and small are similar... never mind. I find your animal communication power very cool. I think we should have your ravens deliver our letters. Anyways, as I was saying, I do believe I've been thinking about you ever since that day a year ago. I know this is sudden, and I know we're just 16, but I just wanted to inform you. Our family feud saddens me, and I do hope I will not have to pretend that I hate you soon.

Your friend,
Logan

My friend,

First of all, I'm so glad to talk with you again! That fight was rather legendary if I do say so myself. I missed our banter! It's so nice to get back in touch with old friends. I prefer Ollie around my friends. Oliver is mostly used by my family. It's one of those things that's more a formality than a humanizing characteristic if that makes sense. I hope my ravens apologized! They are a lot to handle. The turtles do not have names, no. You can help me name them, yes! Bobby seems like a very good name for the smallest turtle. I do believe that feeling is mutual, for I too have been thinking of you since then. Thank you for the power compliment! Yours is very cool as well. Also, we should try to meet up tomorrow, maybe, and secretly spend time together. Let me know what you think.

Love,

Ollie

Ollie,

I like that idea! I'll make up an excuse and meet you in the park at 6 pm. Also, those are all very good things to know. If you can tomorrow, bring your turtles and we can have a naming ceremony!! That is a very exciting prospect in this dreary lifetime. Thank you for this, Ollie! Thank you for everything. See you tomorrow, my friend. I'm very excited.

Love,

Logan

My Oliver,

Lately I find my mind drifting back to that fateful night a week ago. The moonlight glided

across our interlocked hands and lit up our faces with warm, buttery moonlight. Our first kiss... It was as if the world fell away. It felt as if we were the only two people in the world. Thank you, Ollie. I adore you with every fiber of my being. I wish we did not have to hide our love.

Yours truly,
Logan

Ollie,

I think my father found a letter I was going to send to you but never did. I'm going to meet you in the alley at 10 pm to talk. We can figure everything out then.

Love,
Logan

Logan,

Be right there. Please, be safe.

Love,
Ollie

My lovely Logan,

I miss you so much. Ever since my father put me in this strange and lonely cabin in the woods two weeks after we last met up, (with not much but a couple snacks and water), I've been thinking about you every day. It is as if you occupy my every thought. Just thought you would like to know. It is a cabin that I believe is a couple miles from my house. We visited here a week ago, actually. Please come rescue me if you can. It's horrible being stuck in here. I love you.

Yours,
Ollie

My dearest Ollie,

I *despise* having to hate you. My powers are getting more temperamental each day and one day soon I fear I may accidentally thunderstorm on you. My family would love that. I hate our family feud. I want to go full daredevil and elope with you. Tomorrow, 6 pm, I'll sneak out of my house, and we'll go. Bring anything you brought to the cabin, and also call your animals. See you tomorrow my lover. I hope it shall be exciting. Seeing you will be, certainly.

All my love (and hate),

Your Logan

I began this project in session one and I had a very specific plan and as most projects that I start do, it has changed. A lot. But that's okay and I think that this relates a lot to our summer theme this year I didn't finish the project but I think I still completed it. I still wrote about my personal experience as a trans man that I hope can educate others bring comfort to other trans men and help them to feel heard.

**Growing up trans.
By Kooper Kfir Kniaz Age: 14**

1

Being trans is being in the wrong body.

Being trans is feeling excluded by people of both genders.

Being trans is growing up different and not knowing why.

But you already know all this.

You already learned all this in the five minute videos your boss made you watch for

DIVERSITY TRAINING!!!

But that isn't what it is, or that at least isn't all of it.

Because being trans is doing damage to your body.

Not because you want to,

But because that's all you can do to even feel close
To comfortable in your own body.
Being trans is screaming at the sky
Screaming at the sky wondering why any person
God
Or spirit would do this to someone.
And it's hard
And it's not fair
And it
Hurts.
But that's okay.
Because there is never pain without joy
There is never light without darkness.
Being trans is beautiful,
We are beautiful.
Because being trans is looking in the mirror
And for the first time
Finally seeing yourself

Finally seeing yourself

Finally seeing a boy.

It's getting call "sir" by a worker at a carnival

And carrying that memory with you like a token of
joy

Like the moment a television set clicks from static

To a scene of euphoric color.

Being trans is knowing that,

One day,

The pieces will all fall into place,

And you can look at yourself in the mirror

And finally

See you.

2

Nine.

That little girl wondering why

She's the only one who feels like a boy.

And why she keeps getting told

“You’re too young”

“Put on a dress”

“You’re always my little girl”

Eleven.

That little girl ... maybe?

Wondering why she still gets called a girl

When she knows she is not

Twelve.

A little boy

Crying in his room

Because he is sure he is a boy

And everyone keeps saying

He is not.

Fourteen.

That boy

Is finally a boy

Fighting for his life every time he goes out in public

But still always looking back

At that little girl

Hoping she can see that she finally

Got to be

He.

Dear Future Child
By Marti Weisberg Age: 12

This year's theme tells us to never give up. The world will never be perfect, but that doesn't mean we should stop fighting for the right causes. Take a stand, make a change.

Dear Future Child,

This is your mother, Regenalda AKA Ren Imperies from the year 2022. By now, it is probably the year 2080 or something, and I have passed to the great beyond, whatever that is. At the time of writing this, I am 23. I thought I should write a letter to you as a bit of a time capsule of how the world is the way it is, for the better or the worse.

Protests have been big the past few years, and I've been going to most of them in my area. I went to one the other day for Black Lives Matter, a movement that protests how racism has been affecting Black people's lives for the worse, and this organization promotes inclusivity, regardless of people's ethnicities.

When I went to a protest on Tuesday, I was on the streets and looked at my favorite stores. Julia's Bakery had signs promoting All Lives Matter.

That grimy bakery always triggered me, and this pushed me over the edge. It was an awful bakery anyway; the windows always dirty with brown muck, the once bright and vibrant sea foam green paint from the 1980s was chipped and peeling, and the icky yellow sign was missing the S, E, and R, spelling out Julia Baky.

The inside was even worse. There were flies on everything out on display, the check-out counter was about to snap in half, cockroaches were skittering

around the cramped room, and the wooden floors were saturated with water, about to sink into the Earth. The pastries were disgusting, and the staff was always rude. I haven't been in there for a while, but I've heard it's gotten worse. As I looked at the sleek stores and eateries compared to Julia's Bakery, I decided to never think about that place again.

The saddest part is my favorite clothing store, *Aerie*, is right next door. The gold framed glass doors that were always propped open made the store a welcoming and friendly environment. The neon gold LED sign illuminated the entrance, whispering for me to come in. I was tempted to leave the protest and shop, but I pushed on.

I protested alongside hundreds of others, passionate for Black Lives Matter, just like me. As we moved further down the street, a bystander on the sidewalk started to boo. I turned to the perpetrator in disgust. They were right outside a local ice cream parlor and held a cone with two scoops of vibrant blueberry ice cream. The group in front of me slapped down his cold dessert. The guy swallowed an unexpected dose of rage, which coursed through his veins. He stuck out his foot from the medication taking over his brain.

While I was walking, I didn't see his foot and tripped over it. As I slowly made my decent to the rocky Earth, I dropped my sign. The rocks scratched the paint of my lovely poster, reading "Black Lives Are Just As Important As Any Life!"

The guy let out big belly laughs, clearly amused by my misfortune. I scowled at him and snatched my sign from its previous resting place. I looked down at my newly scraped knee but decided to keep pushing

forward. One narrow-minded person wasn't going to stop me, no way.

When I arrived back at my humble abode, I cleaned up my battle wounds and touched up the paint on my poster, so I didn't have to do it further down the line. As I tucked myself into bed that night, I wondered what made that guy so riled up.

What really riles me up with today's society is how everyone is handling global warming. As greenhouse gases are being released into the atmosphere, our planet heats up. That warmth radiates off of the polar ice caps, melting into water. The newly melted liquid sinks into the ocean, causing sea levels to rise. The unnatural height of our sea is not ideal for the environment and damages our Earth in the process.

As the ice caps melt, deforestation is also harming us. There's a huge rainforest in South America called the Amazon, not like the company we all know and love. By the time you're reading this, I'm not even sure the Amazon Rainforest will even exist. It might be all chopped and burned down for cattle to roam, only to be slaughtered for meat.

The Amazon Rainforest is the biggest rainforest in the world, at the time of writing this. But sadly, every second it grows smaller and smaller. People have been burning and cutting down this ginormous rainforest for years, and the carbon dioxide released from these trees is unhealthy, contributing to the high temperature of our wonderful planet.

Everyone around the globe is trying to stop this unworldly crisis. I would become vegan, but I can't give up meat. I love burgers too much! But I'm contributing in other ways.

Every Saturday, I venture out to the Cleaning Our Planet center. A group of fifteen or so people travel

to a busy highway to clean up other people's messes. In our bright orange and yellow vests, we take a pointy stick and jab it at the litter standing in our way. We then place the unwanted items in a white garbage bag and haul it back to the center.

For two hours, I struggle through the early afternoon heat to make our Earth a cleaner place. Although I'm not the biggest fan of this volunteer work, I do it to make sure that you can have a future.

I hope that after this letter, you know how the world you're living in became the way it is, whether that be people stood up and made a change, or they decided to ignore the issues we are currently facing. I hope that you, my dear child, choose to stand up and make a change. The world is your oyster.

My piece connects to the theme because you the work of asking questions never terminates.

The Interview
By Aidan Shimansky Age: 16

In the URJ camp system. The 6-Points camps focus on specific areas. In Westtown Pennsylvania, a dedicated staff serves one of these camps, known as the Creative Arts Academy. These are their stories.

DUN DUN

The following are interviews from four staff members. They work at the Creative Arts Academy. They have worked here for varying amounts of time. They have agreed to be interviewed.

The questions asked were very specific, making sure we could get as much information as possible without being intrusive. Here are their answers.

What's Your name?

Eliana: Eliana [REDACTED].

Carly: Carly [REDACTED].

Jo-Ellen: Jo-Ellen.

Tirosh: Tirosh.

What do you do here?

E: I am the artistic Director at the URJ 6-Points Creative Arts Academy for this summer, 2022.

J: I'm the camp director.

C: I teach creative writing to lots of children.

T: I pretend to teach theater.

We got the interviewees comfortable. They all seemed very calm at first, excited even. With the basic questions out of the way, we got straight to the interview. These were the questions that we spent hours on making. It can be safely said that we got more than we asked for...

What's it like being old?

C: My knees don't work anymore so that's not great. And I don't understand Tik-Tok™. Everyone talks about Tik-Tok™ and I don't get it. So, I feel like that's what it's like being old.

J: Tiring. Very Sore.

You were a former KGB spy; can you share what that experience was like?

E: I can't tell you much. What I can say is that the media does not portray it accurately. There were a lot more just strange missions. One that I am legally allowed to tell you is: it involved a... a bar of soap, a giraffe, and a confetti canon in the state of Nebraska.

When and how did you discover your left hand?

C: I think it must have been in ballet class when I was like three. I feel like before then it just didn't exist. And then all of a sudden they were like "Put your left hand on the barre," and I was like "I have another hand?" 'Cause I was always right-handed. And then I was like "What?" and it was just there.

T: I was about three years old, and I'd grown very attached to my right hand. I loved eating with it; I loved painting with it. And then one day I got a prick on my finger from a... I was trying to sew when I was three – I was a prodigy. They thought I

was gonna be sort of the next Betsy Ross, but unfortunately I quit sewing when I was six due to differences with my teacher. She believed in sort of chevron patterns, and I thought that they remind me of the oil company and I'm anti-oil, so I quit the class. But I got a prick on my finger when I was three from the sewing needle and I realized that I couldn't pick up my fork as easily. And then I realized I had a left hand.

E: It's an interesting story actually: I was four years old, and I was eating ice cream, right. I was a pretty precocious four year old. And so, you know, I'm eating it with my right hand, just using the spoon, and then I decide that I'm just gonna start using my hand. So, I just take it and I [chomping sound], you know, and I'm scooping it into my mouth with my hand. But then I drop it onto my left hand, which I don't know, I don't know what my left hand is at the time, right. And suddenly I just feel this really cold sensation. And I'm just like "what is happening on the left side of my body?" And then I look and then I notice that I have this thing that is similar to my right hand, and I start freaking out because I've never seen this before. So, I run over to my mom, and I say, "Mom what is this?" and she goes "Oh my gosh! My baby discovered her left hand!" And then we had this whole party; it was a pretty big affair. It was great! It was awesome! And then I started eating ice cream with my left hand.

How would others describe you in one word?

C: Multifaceted.

T: Gassy

E: Vibrant

J: Old

Is Australia Real?

E: I hope so

J: I've never seen it for myself, so I have no empirical evidence to substantiate that report.

Favorite Number?

T: 6

C: 37

E: Probably 7

J: 18

Least favorite Number?

T: 666

C: 24

E: 7.4

J: 0

Here is where the most important questions were asked. Pay attention – you don't want to miss this. Every answer given revealed a plethora of information about what life as a staff member at 6-Points Creative Arts Academy is like...

Who would win in a fight: Queen Elizabeth II or Pope Francis?

E: If it was a fair fight, Queen Elizabeth. It won't be a fair fight.

T: Queen Elizabeth II if it was a fair fight. Pope Francis is known to cheat, and I think would find a way to, much like Tanya Harding, he would bust her leg before the fight. He would hire some of his goons...

How many bonimers can you bench press.

J: 60... 120... maybe 3 of 'em.

T: 6, but if I really worked up to it, 7

E: Probably 7

C: Probably 17

This camp has six incredible values that describe how we create our art. However, there may still be some values missing. With that being said, who killed Tupac?

J: I think it was Notorious B.I.G.

C: JFK

T: I think it was... it's... Unpopular, but I actually think it was Lee Harvey Oswald acting as a lone gunman

E: Probably Pope Francis. Like I said, it wouldn't be a fair fight.

If you could have dinner with any dead person throughout history, who would it be and why is it James Dean?

E: Well, James and I go way back, in the 1800s, we were...we lived on a ranch together. We herded cattle. We ended up actually running a saloon, but all we sold at that saloon was sparkling lemonade; it was a very interesting saloon. It would probably be James Dean because I'd just have another glass of sparkling lemonade with him, that's all.

J: Oh, the jacket.

Where did you learn to play the accordion?

C: From watching videos of "Weird Al" Yankovic as a child

E: OH! Okay so I'm five years old, right. I've had my left hand for a year. I'm in Vienna, Austria; my family did this like exchange thing, like, Swap-A-Kindergartener™. So, I'm in Vienna, Austria, right.

And my host family doesn't actually speak Austrian, they only speak in accordion. It was a very interesting time. I very much enjoyed getting to know this family. But in order to communicate with them I had to learn how to play the accordion. So, I learned, and then for the next six months following my host stay I actually tour with like this really renowned accordion group of elementary school students. But that was when they realized I wasn't actually Austrian, so they sent me back home. It was great, it was awesome. I think there's like a video of it on somewhere like Vimeo™ or something.

What's your favorite social security number?

E: 7

J: 000-00-0001

T: 749-61-3810

What does CAA actually stand for?

C: Cats are awesome

E: Compulsive Anteaters Anonymous

J: Carbonized Atoms in Action.

T: [After 13 seconds of thinking] Left Handed Dolphins

Am I awake?

Eliana: Am I prepared?

Am I prepared?

Carly: Probably Not

Are you listening to my prayer?

Tirosh: John

Can you hear my voice?

Jo-Ellen: Yes

Can you understand?

Eliana: I think so

Tirosh: Mostly

Am I awake?

Jo-Ellen: Yes

Carly: No.

Am I prepared?

Eliana: I already gave you that answer

Carly: Not Really

Jo-Ellen: Yes

Tirosh: Coffee

Where are they now?

Eliana became a world class boxer and will soon face off against Pope Francis.

Carly started an ongoing search to discover what Tik-Tok™ is.

Jo-Ellen continued directing the camp, making the groundbreaking decision to move the camp to Idaho.

Tirosh moved to India and became a prolific Bollywood director.

The interviewer joined an MLM, selling essential oils.

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