



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

Creative Writing Chapbook

Session One 2023



A Note from the Editor

Welcome to the creative writing major's first chapbook of the summer of 2023. This session was filled with so many chances to learn new and wonderful things. We made new friends, explored new places at camp, and within our writing we focused on revision, revision, revision! The theme of this summer is from Pirkei Avot. "Know from where you came, and to where you are going." In the months leading up to camp this year I did just that. I looked back at the years before this, from the inception of creative writing at CAA in 2019, to CAVA our virtual offering in 2020, to now in 2023 and every year in between. There have been parts of creative writing that have remained static. This year I chose to dismantle those parts and start from scratch. In Olim and Gesher this meant asking campers to submit work before camp so that we could begin each morning of our first week with group workshops. For Bonim and Shoreshim this meant introducing the idea of workshopping to the group, something I had before only saved for older campers. Both groups rose to the occasion in the most beautiful of ways. In our Olim and Gesher group I saw bonds strengthen between campers, I saw critique skills grow, and I saw new abilities in offering gentle and helpful comments. In Bonim and Shoreshim I saw a love of writing that rekindled my own. Campers bounced in their seats when I told them we had hours left to write. When I increased their page limits they were so excited they literally couldn't sit still. Their voracious love of the written word expanded to their love of each other's work. They were excited to read work written by their peers and to learn how to workshop it. This summer we are building the future of CAA with a new director, a largely new leadership team, and a theme that allows us to explore the role our past plays in both our present and our future. I know it has impacted the way I structured creative writing this summer. More than that it has impacted the way each camper approached their final project. In the pages that follow you will go on adventures in post-apocalyptic worlds, you'll speed forward to the future, you'll settle into internal struggles and battles in families and friendships, you'll be part of a toy rebellion, and a coronation. Each one of these stories embraces the idea of the past playing a role in your future. I hope you love the worlds these campers have built. Enjoy!

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“Know from
where you came,
and to where
you are going.”

- Pirkei Avot

Contents

“Through the Smoke” by Lucy Kall.....	7
“The Second Worst Concert of All Time” by Lunae Bishow.....	12
“Dear Mother” by Audrey Minkove.....	18
“The Toy Federation” by Cardinal Kametz.....	24
“Rescuing Daisy” by Ella Stromberg.....	30
“F Plus” by Zoe Roberts.....	36
“End of Signal” by Hannah Hechinger.....	41
“King of Nothing” by Chloe Rashid.....	46
“Y3K” by Ivy Cohen.....	49
“I’m Not a Coward, I’ve Just Never Been Tested” by Ben Barack.....	55

My story is set in a post-apocalyptic future where the world was covered by a strong smoke that makes it very hard to breathe. It follows the main character, the only person left in an *entire* city as far as she is aware, attempting to survive despite the circumstances given to her. She reflects on the signs leading up to the end of the world and how little was really done to stop it, and the story would show her learning to move on from the past, which connects to our theme this year.

Through the Smoke by Lucy Kall - Age 13

The world crumbled slowly, too slow in many's opinions. As if the signs coming faster would be enough for humanity to take action, make some sort of inconsequential difference to prevent the years after.

At first it was easy to avoid – people cracked jokes about the world's many flaws, then would go home and sit safely in their beds, entirely ignorant and for the most part happy, as much as any human being can truly be happy.

And even when the signs became more obvious, on overly fogged days and some people struggling to breathe, society as a whole still chose to laugh it off, as if the world's problems would sort themselves out somehow.

But then, finally, the illusion shattered.

Dark smoke floods the streets, invading her eyes and flooding her lungs. Jenn presses her hand firmly against her mouth, trying to limit the amount of 'air' that can invade her lungs, but even still a sour taste coats her tongue, claws its way up her nose, scratches itself against her throat like a million tiny blades.

It's not a very hard decision to avoid home, she can feel her brain beginning to fog over from lack of oxygen, Jenn doesn't think that she'd be able to make it all

the way to her apartment without collapsing, and she isn't carrying any spare cash for the subway.

She tries her hardest to scan the world around her, trying to recognize any of the buildings in the area, but despite having gone down this path home so many times, the dark smog makes it hard to make out any shapes, colors, or any other identifying features; even if they're only across the street.

With no other clear path ahead, she scrunches up her eyes for a moment in order to avoid tears, and begins to retrace her steps.

The end of the world was greeted by silence, or at least the illusion of it.

Panic is a strange thing while everyone's locked indoors, when not even the news knows how to keep up with itself anymore, when electronics are flooded with static on the best of days.

*Supposedly, the president is gone. Not **gone** gone, but missing, a few of his agents with him.*

Reports like that come in for many people in the following days. From million-making inventors to internet sensations, those with enough money and power and strength to be trusted remove themselves from the public eye, where not even their closest friends can reach them.

Some call this the beginning of the end. Some insist that the curtain began closing decades earlier. No matter when, what matters now is that the world has come to an end.

Jenn breaks down into tears in the empty girls locker room, hand trembling as she clutches her barely functioning phone. She's gotten in contact with her closest friend, Helena via Tumblr, which is one of a few still functioning websites that she can find.

It doesn't sound great.

Helena has access to the news. She talks about what all the reporters are saying, adding additional notes that only paint the picture worse. 'I don't think the reporters are going home.

They're going 24/7 and look like absolute junk.' 'Nobody knows if this is worldwide yet' and things following that format *on and on and on*. Sometimes the messages can be delayed minutes or hours, Jenn thinks that the smog might be too thick for signals to reach satellites but then again she's no expert.

Nobody's come back to the school aside from her. Everyone had long since run, trying to avoid the lockdown and find their families before they were separated. Jenn hopes that they did, really.

Living off of the school cafeteria's food is a *drag*, for many obvious reasons. She's raided as many teachers' candy stashes as she can, but some of them left their windows open at the end of school and so the rooms probably aren't safe to enter anymore.

Hopefully, this will all clear over soon. And things can go back to normal.

It's been three years since it all began.

The city's completely deserted, Jenn would later discover. It became just her, and an eternal silence.

Today's stash is fairly decent, as far as non-perishables can be considered decent.

Jenn unzips her backpack, yanking out the two water bottles she was able to locate earlier in the day and dumping them into the filter, refusing to glance at the years worth of dirt that's probably floating around in there.

Her stomach rolls uncomfortably as she goes through her daily routine of stacking cans of green beans and boxes of pasta, slurping on a honey stick to keep herself occupied.

Halfway through she has to pause and scan her stash for a bag of crushed cinnamon, savoring the smell as she tries her best to cover up the stinging scent of smog.

It's slow, and sad, but living is better than dying or giving up. Humanity may have quit on the world, and the world quit right back, but that's not going to stop Jenn from keeping on going.

Even if she may be one of few who are even left to do so.

Every so often, she'll glance at her phone, hung up in an empty glass cabinet like a trophy, wishing things could go back to before. The world was easier when you didn't need to be face to face.

Oh, what she wouldn't give for something as stimulating as a game on her phone. A challenging sudoku, a color by number – she'd literally take anything at this point. Survival leaves you with more free time, and combing through libraries can only keep one sane for so long.

With the help of a few abandoned mp3 players, Jenn's at least acquired a bit of music to fill the silence. She doesn't have a proper speaker that will work with it yet, only headphones, so she's still holding out.

So that's her world. A quiet life within her old high school where nothing ever happens, because the world, for the most part, is dead.

And that's it.

(Something hits against the roof hard enough for it to be heard from inside.)



Jenn adjusts her mask – four layers of cloth which she'd very loosely sewn together – against her face once more before she slips outside of the building, scanning the area around home-base carefully.

The world remains suspended in silence, smog reaching far into the sky and making it hard to see the color. (Silently, she guesses that it's still golden, the blue that used to hang serenely over a happy world overwhelmed by the sour spread of the end.) Jenn groans to herself, wondering what was tall enough to get up on top of the roof.

Luckily, it doesn't take very long to get her answer.

A *bang* of metal rattling sounds not that far away, and Jenn traces the noise until she finds a fire escape, rattling as someone climbs it quickly.

Oh. So someone's here, then. That's... fine. Not what she'd been expecting, but supposedly it's good news.

It was probably self-centered of her to believe that after everything, she was the only one who survived the end, but for so long there'd been no other signs of intelligent life, or life in general after a point, even the call of birds had died off early on. When the world plunged itself into a never ending silence, it became easier to pretend that it was not a result of her self-imposed isolation but rather the world's ever present apathy towards the beings living upon it, the emptiness of society echoing between alleyways and creating a cacophony of absolute void.

But the clatter, the *footsteps*, ringing above Jenn's head as she can only think to stand in place, they're so unmistakably *human* that it makes her chest ache something bitter, maybe even longing. Longing for that connection, that *bond*, someone to talk to, someone else to help her *survive*.

Someone else who can show her how to *live*.

The characters in this story go on a physical journey, one of a band on tour— they know they came from one location and are going to the next— but they also go from a normal band to a not-so-normal one, and have to figure out where they’re going from there, as well as how to work together.

The Second Worst Concert of All Time by Lunae Bishow - Age 16

The five members of Emperor Crimson were never the type to party after a show. They usually played UNO, or watched a movie on the VHS in the living area, or played roadside attraction bingo when they were on the road. But after shows, they always went back to their hotel room and slept. They might have even watched Jeopardy! if they were feeling spicy. That’s always how it is with prog rock bands, isn’t it? Emperor Crimson was full of nerds, quiet and unassuming. But the bond they had with each other was always stronger than their urge to get crazy with their fans, and their priority was getting onto the road and to their next destination.

That is, until the meteor hit.

September, 1980. It was one PM and cloudy that day, and the Emperor Crimson US tour was in the home stretch. Their bus was heading from New York to Trenton, New Jersey. They’d just passed the “Trenton makes, the world takes” sign. The road was mostly empty.

The band sat draped across the leather living area couches, bored out of their minds. The view out the window was getting old and the road was too bumpy for a nap.

“How about uno?” Robert asked.

Sam groaned. “No. We’re already uno’d out. I said that yesterday.”

“I’m hungry,” said Greg.

“You’re always hungry.” John put his head in his hands. “I’ll tell the driver to stop at the nearest McDonalds or something.”

Rhiannon stood up. “How about the insults game? We take turns insulting each other.”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Fine, I get it. Our relationship is crumbling as it is. Unfortunate timing, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we could—”

KABLAM! A meteor hit the tour bus. It collapsed and burst into a coppery green flame. The band members struggled out of the bus, tossing rubble away, scrounging around for any surviving belongings. But it was too late. Everything was gone.

Rhiannon stumbled around, gathering the other band members in a line next to the smoldering tour bus. “Are you okay?” She flipped her twin braids, now dirty with ash, behind her back. “Is anyone injured?”

John, Greg, and Sam shook their heads.

“Can you help me please?” Robert pushed a burnt bus panel off his legs.

The band scrambled to help. Robert wasn’t severely injured, just in some pain.

“It’s a good thing your legs aren’t broken.” Sam put his hater-blocker sunglasses back on. “We don’t have insurance. But we don’t need insurance, because we’re British.” He did a cool pose. No one laughed. This was not an appropriate situation.

Fortunately, none of their instruments were on the bus with them. It was more convenient to store their instruments in a separate vehicle, one that followed them on the road from a distance, especially since they had so many different

percussion instruments to lug around. The band simply waited for it to arrive, then squeezed in.

No one noticed the green glow in the wreckage behind them.

* * *

Finally, the concert could begin. The CURE Insurance Arena was packed and excited, but a bit uncomfortable in the muggy air of the crowd.

Emperor Crimson stepped onstage and Rhiannon hyped up the crowd as the band did a final tuning and warm-up. “How’s everyone feeling tonight?”

The crowd cheered in response.

“Great! We’ll start tonight with some old favorites, then transition into some stuff from our newest album, then get back into more of the first. Like a sandwich, yeah?”

The crowd cheered again. The band played the title track of their debut album, a song titled *The Court of the Crimson Emperor*. It was a slow and melancholy tune, a tale of a king in his court. Sam’s flute solo happened halfway through.

“What’s going on with the tuning?” John muttered. “It’s getting flat.”

A weak burst of hot air expanded from Sam’s flute and wrapped around John like a python gathering its meal. His tuning fell even lower, and he gestured for Rhiannon to take over the guitar. They wouldn’t need two for this part, anyway. He turned his amp as low as it could go and turned his tuning pegs in hopes of fixing his situation.

A loud noise erupted from John’s guitar. “Thanks for tuning into the Disco Channel, the only channel that plays disco anymore. Sad. Anyway, here’s *Staying Alive* by the Bee Gees.”

The song began playing from what seemed to be the guitar itself. John tore the amp cord from the end, but it didn’t stop. The guitar glowed an alien green.

“What’s going on, guys...?” Robert said off the side of his mic.

Someone in the pit at the front ran up to the edge of the stage and pointed behind them. “Someone’s collapsed! Stop the music!”

They stopped. But the sound didn’t. The disco music continued to play from the guitar, and Greg couldn’t let himself lose the tempo, so he quieted his drumming and moved it to the rim of his snare.

It was chaotic out in the crowd. People kept collapsing; their neighbors swarmed around them to call an ambulance. The band remained silent, allowing for medical attention.

Rhiannon stood up and focused on the disco music, still playing. She compulsively began singing under her breath. “Ah, ah, ah, ah, staying alive... staying alive...”

The crowd, engrossed in the medical drama, gasped. The formerly collapsed people stood up, feeling just fine, and ready to continue the concert.

After addressing and apologizing to the crowd, Emperor Crimson played their second song, *Eulogy*. Oddly enough, the guitars remained in tune the whole time. The key difference was Sam, who only played percussion on this one. It was the same with all of the other non-wind instrument solo songs, like *Traffic Circle*, *Reverb*, and *Picture by Picture*. More people, however, were rushed to the hospital.

Their next song was *Moonless*, one of their longest and most dynamic. It started off slow, but eventually switched to 13/8 time with a sharp increase in tempo. This one had an extensive sax solo throughout the beginning, played by Sam, of course.

But it happened again. The warm air, stronger this time, enveloped John, and his guitar became even more out of tune. He tried to tune his guitar again. “Welcome back to the Disco Channel! We hope you enjoyed that little Earth, Wind, and Fire block, but now it’s time for some new disco songs. Next up is *Another One Bites the Dust* by Queen.”

Rhiannon was not only a lesbian, but a huge Queen fan. Of course she kept up-to-date with new releases and learned all the words. Her singing compulsion—something she'd had since she was young— was even stronger this time. “Another one bites the dust... and another one gone and another one gone, another one bites the dust...”

With her words, members of the crowd dropped like rag dolls.

Greg couldn't resist joining into the beat. He played along— coincidentally, the perfect tempo for CPR. The rag doll concert-goers suspended themselves in the air, in some superposition between life and sleep.

“Guys, I still don't know what's going on,” said Robert.

The song ended and everyone remained safe and healthy. The band gathered in a team huddle.

“Something supernatural is going on.” Greg lowered his head to the eye level of the rest of his bandmates.

“Do we all have powers or something?” asked Sam.

Robert squinted. “What?”

“Maybe it was that meteor.” Rhiannon shook her head. “Well, whatever it is, we need to work on controlling our powers. Maybe we'll be a force of good in the world. A literal band of superheroes. Though, that means we have to work as a team. It'll help us in the long run, anyway.”

“What's going on?”

“It might be something to do with my wind instruments.” Greg lifted his saxophone strap. “I think there's weird air coming from them.”

“We all know I can get radio from tuning my guitar,” said John.

Greg spun his drumsticks around with his fingers. “I think my power is controlling people's heartbeats with my drumming? It's really weak, if it's true.”

“And I think whatever I sing about becomes true,” said Rhiannon. “It’s a good thing the songs our band makes don’t mean anything specific.”

“How come I can’t do anything special?” Robert left the huddle and went back to his bass. He began muttering to himself. “This always happens. It’s always me, the falsetto backing vocal bassist, getting the worst luck.”

The rest of the band ignored him.

“There’s only one thing left to do now. Aside from learning control, of course.” John nodded. The bandmates passed the nod around the circle.

Rhiannon stood, went back to her mic, and picked up her guitar. “Let’s rock.”

Dear Mother connects with the theme “know from where you came, and to where you are going.”, because the story starts with Elinora describing the beginning of her separation with her mother, and it closes with her father telling her how they can survive the separation, and where he hopes they are going.

Dear Mother by Audrey Minkove - Age 10

Dear Mother,

I miss you dreadfully. It seems ages since you packed your bags, and walked off of our front porch, waving goodbye. You insisted that you walk yourself to the airport, for we were a fifty or so minute walk from there, and you reminded us that you needed some exercise before your nine hour flight.

Our lives have changed oh-so much since you left almost four years ago, in two-thousand-twelve on your trek around the world. Father is now the head of a new newspaper, and I have joined a book club at my school. Oh the wonderful books we have read there, and it is so nice to be with fellow children who love books as I do. I have also grown more mature. I am no longer the six and a half year-old girl you left that sunny morning.

Yesterday, father chose to surprise me with the birthday invitation Abeline Jarksel, a girl from my after school book club, sent me. It was in a lovely, little, white envelope, on a rectangle of white card stock folded neatly in half, decorated with hand-drawn blooming, pastel flowers, and rich-colored song-birds. In the center, printed in black cursive was, “You have been invited to Abeline Jarksel’s tenth birthday party.” It then had in small print the date, time, and where it would take place.

Aside from that, and the fact that you have still not come back, life is going on quite normally. Please write back mother, it has been almost eight months since you last sent something.

Love,

Your daughter Elinora

Dear Mother,

Yesterday was Abeline's birthday party. Father told me that I needed to socialize more, for he said, 'Elinora, this is a party, you need to talk to your classmates, and not just swing around, thank, and sing happy birthday to Abeline, and enjoy the refreshments and light lunch'. After the party, I finally beat father at Risk. Remember the fun board game we used to play together? You and I would be on the same team, and try to slide the old red plastic war pieces across the smooth, faded map, to beat father. We were always red and father was always green. Father would roll the small, white dice, and take our territory. If not, he would fight on, and always win. Even if he got the worst war cards and his dice were always unlucky.

Mother, are you truly alright though. In the beginning of your worldly trek, you sent a letter, made a call, and/or sent a postcard every month. That went on for one year and four months. Then, they started coming every three months for one year and nine months. Then, nothing. Father says that you are just very busy making new friends and having a good time.

Anyways, if something has happened, please try to reach Father and I and tell us.

Do write back!

Love,

Your daughter Elinora

Dear Marina,

Please tell our daughter what is happening in your life. She pretends to be very calm I say, but I think she really would love it if you could write to her. She and you had, and still have I hope, a very deep connection. A nice, long letter would do. Our family will survive this trek of yours. I know we can.

Do come back eventually, four years is a very long time for a sweet, young girl to be without her mother.

Love,

Clinton

Dear Mother,

Father now says I need some friends. I say Abeline Jarksel is my friend, but father says ‘You need a better friend, for Abeline Jarksel is too minor of one.’ I am writing to you for advice. Father said in that tone of his that suggests that he is hinting at something for an insider, “I cannot give you the right advice. Ask your mother, she will know what to do.”

This week was one of those weeks that are the same as all of the other weeks that are the same. I think I almost prefer those weeks really. We had a book club meeting, where we discussed a very interesting book, by the name of “The Home of Lilac Junippy”. It was about a girl a few years older than I, named Lilac Junippy, who moves from busy city-life in D.C., to a woodsy, forest cabin-like home in Maine.

Please do send a reply,

Love,

Your daughter Elinora

Clinton,

Do you not understand that I am not writing back, because I do not want to? And no, your daughter is still as immature as a six and a half year old, even if she says she is not. I have met a beautiful, mature, polite young girl with soft, flowing golden hair, and kind eyes named Juliana. And even she is not a golden child. I am afraid that she is just too hopeless to have friends, so, no advice for her, ever. Tell that annoying pest not to write again. Have I satisfied you now by writing you a letter? Share it with your daughter if you would like. Let her understand that she is gone from my life now.

Goodbye!

Sincerely,

Marina

Dear Mother,

I understand that you do not want any more letters now. I found the letter that you wrote to father. I will do as you wish. I will not mail this letter. But, to imaginary you, I know it is very childish of me, but I must say, I recoil at your letter, and it hurts more than not having a reply. Unfortunately for me, I still love you rather deeply, so it hurts my soul even more. I cannot bear it any more. Oh, I feel terrible, and I just wish we could have a dear talk together, and I could nestle my head against your warm shoulders, and you could wrap your gentle, motherly hands around my back, and I could cry my heart out. It has been so long since I did that. I am actually crying now, and Father is coming down to see the commotion. Oh, for the first time I do not want to go to school tomorrow.

Father tells me the pain will ease, though very slowly. However, I am writing this letter a week later than when I received yours. I just feel totally and utterly

distraught. My world has been flipped upside down, I cannot even bear to read “The Home of Lilac Junippy”, or anything else.

Still loving,

Your daughter Elinora

Dear Mother,

It has been almost a month now, but I am still deeply hurt, and wishing, wishing hopefully, that the trek will just end, and everything can go back to normal. But now, you are not a contact on father’s iPhone, and I cannot even send a letter to you. I cannot change anything though. I am utterly helpless. I have even been banned from book club, for I cannot read, and am failing in school, because I cannot concentrate, or read. My life has been ruined and destroyed, but I still love you, though painfully so. I cannot put into words how much I just hope you will come back. I promise I will not mail this letter.

Love,

Your daughter Elinora

Dear Marina,

You have turned our daughter’s life inside out. She is too hurt to concentrate on her schoolwork, and for once in her life is falling behind at school. She is deeply hurt, and not comprehending anything. She has completely lost her appetite. I think, if you ever will, it is time to come home now Marina. You should not have written that letter, and I should have hid the letter more.

Love,

Clinton

Dear Clinton,

Absolutely not, I am gone from your daughter's life now.

Sincerely,

Marina

Dear Elinora,

I know life is extremely hard for you right now, but I think, if we try everyday, we could foster a connection almost as deep as the one you had with your mother. Maybe, I could tell you a bit more about what happened. Would that help?

Your loyal father,

Clinton

The central theme of this year was “Know where you came from, and to where you are going”. My story is more of a tale as to what can happen when people do not know these things. The toys in my story, while knowing they were oppressed, do not understand what oppression means, and quickly fall back into their old ways.

The Toy Federation by Cardinal Kametz - Age 14

The Toy House was an attraction that existed outside the town of Cassone in the late 60s. It was, as the name suggested, a house filled with toys, those toys included, but were not limited to the Cymbal Chimp, Chatter Phone, Troll Dolls, Hand Puppets, Marionettes, Wind-ups, and Fabric Dolls as well. It was not the most famous attraction, rapidly losing popularity after the town’s kids realized it was meant to be more of a museum and not a playhouse. The Toy House’s owners, an older couple named Albert and Dorothy Clark, realized that they would be unable to make a living off of it and moved, but left the toys behind. The townsfolk did not know why the Clarks did so, but made no effort to get rid of their toy collection or resell the house. All the while, the toys inside sat in the dark, growing angrier and angrier at their abandonment.

The toys sat alone in the dark for years and years. Only able to talk to one another. Occasionally, some teenagers from the town would go over to the house to party or steal one or two of the toys, those taken were never seen or heard from again. The teenagers never stayed long, and eventually stopped visiting all together. The toys sat in the house. The Chatter Phone hadn’t been answered. The Wind-up toys never cranked. The Hand Puppets laid limp. The Marionettes stayed strung up in the air, their arms and legs unable to change from their torturous bearings. Resentment kept building inside their tiny bodies, the desire to enact revenge grew stronger as the days

went on. Some felt hopeless, knowing that they would never be able to move again, but a few dolls kept trying.

Bobo was a fabric doll. He was dressed as a jester, with a unitard, a fool's hat, and shoes, all green and pink in color. He had triangle eyes, a triangle mouth, and perhaps would have even had a triangle nose, but was not blessed with such. Bobo had long arms that had made him quite famous in the section for other Fabric Dolls, not amongst the other toys, but the Clarks. The couple always made sure he looked nice and positioned him out of reach from the hands of children who never got the memo about the house being a museum. Naturally, he became arrogant, snobbish, and vain, oftentimes saying that the dolls were all lucky to know him. But he was never one to give up, a trait that would have been admirable had it not belonged to him. He was one of few dolls still trying to move, but he fancied himself much smarter than the rest of the toys. He managed to be the first by maneuvering his long arms instead, and then using said arms to lift the rest of his body and walk around on his hands. He knew the other toys were trying to move, and decided that seeing him walking around would inspire hope, and that they would elect someone as great as him to be their leader.

Few toys were inspired, seeing this self absorbed jester roaming around on his hands of all things. They were furious and many opened their mouths to say so.

The Troll Dolls laughed, their colored hair bobbing with their taunts. "The fact that you thought this would make you more likable means that you're a bigger ignoramus than we thought!"

The Cymbal Chimps agreed in their shrieking tongues. The Chatter Phones wanted to agree as well, but with their phones still on their bases, they were silent.

"Now, now," Bobo chastised, "You all want revenge, yes? You all want to move, Yes? As of now, I'm the only one of you that can move! Granted, it's not with my legs, but I can still move on my arms and hands no problem! I can be your ruler!"

Teach you to walk! We can form a plan to get back at the ones that left us! That seems fun, yes? And we toys are all about fun!”

“I think he has a point,” said soft a voice from over near the Hand Puppets. “Bobo might be self absorbed, but he is quite smart, and I would love to move again.”

“I thank you for agreeing with me! May I ask your name?”

“Oracle, I’m a Hand Puppet.”

“See, friends? Oracle agrees with me! Remember, I can help you *move!* Without the use of our oppressors!”

“What exactly makes them our oppressors?” a new voice asked, belonging to the Wind-up known as Polka Dot. He was an older toy, his age shown with dirt caked on his porcelain features, and the large crack that had appeared on Dot’s face one day after a child knocked him off the shelf.

“I’m glad you asked, my friend!” Bobo cheerfully replied, a sickening grin plastered on his face. “They did what they wished with us, no? Picked us up, moved us wherever they pleased. And the elders, they left *us behind*... did they not? And that crack on your face could have been fixed, but the elders left you like that, half blind! Am I correct?” Bobo’s voice raised an octave, like just talking was too much of a task.

Polka Dot did not say anything for a long time. About a minute had passed before he walked up to Bobo, his arms clapping together like they normally did when he was wound up, and simply said to the Jester, “I can see quite well, thank you.”

“May I ask how you managed to move?” Bobo asked, a look of bewilderment on his face, his smile much more forced.

“The mechanism in my body will let all of me move, even if I just focus on moving one thing. For someone who claimed to be able to teach us all how to move, you seem quite surprised? Should we still consider making you our leader?”

“I was not surprised by your ability to move, just... scared. Yes! You moved quite suddenly, I’m surprised more toys didn’t jump or anything! You saw him move, right Oracle, it was shocking, no?”

“...Bobo is right. You moved out of nowhere, it was... shocking.”

“See! No then, as for why I should be your leader, I know how we can find our vengeance! The town isn’t too far away, we can sneak in there, chase the humans out!”

The other toys seemed quite swayed by the idea of vengeance, and the idea of a leader, though not exactly Bobo as one. They asked around to see if other toys might like to run. If anyone had an idea of it, they didn’t say so. Even Polka Dot didn’t stir from the spot where he had last spoken to Bobo. Thus, the vote was unanimous, hard not to be with only one possible outcome.

Weeks passed with the toys working on moving. One by one, they all managed to get off the shelves and tables they were trapped on, and joined Bobo on the ground. Bobo had become quite the icon amongst The Toy Federation as they had named themselves. He was greeted cheerfully by the other toys when they passed him, and many had spoken of how wrong they were to assume that he would not make a great leader. The toys seemed happy, filled with the idea of vengeance.

But as the days went on, Polka Dot became less convinced that they would actually do something. He made this thought known, saying it aloud to Bobo during meals, despite Dot’s assurance that they never required food in the first place, and that the toys were only eating because it made them “feel more real”. All of Dot’s concerns made Bobo angry, the doll saying that they would do so when the time was right, and that Polka Dot was just being antsy or paranoid. The other toys always agreed with Bobo, and Dot was slowly shunned from the Federation. It came as a surprise to no one that when a thumbtack was found in Bobo’s food Dot was seen as guilty.

It had been the first trial in the history of The Toy Federation, with very few toys even knowing what a trial was. A Marionette by the name of Russel had found a book in what was formerly Mr. Clark's study that dealt with the subject of law. In addition to teaching them movement, Bobo also taught the toys to read, and Russel was able to decipher it with little issue. Since they had found it, and thus were considered the most knowledgeable on that subject, Russel was appointed the judge. Bobo was the Plaintiff, dramatically recounting his side of the story, and Polka Dot was the Defendant, though he never really did anything but say that he had nothing to defend. Several toys were chosen to be the jury, and Oracle was to be the Bailiff, purely because of a recommendation from Bobo.

The trial was relatively short. Polka Dot had no evidence to back up his alibi and, with how ostracized he'd become, most other toys wanted him gone anyway. Eventually, he gave up, and said that while he was not guilty, he would accept whatever punishment they chose. The jury found him guilty and Russel was left with deciding his punishment. The book never said anything about what punishments to use for which crime and thus Russel found himself in what one might call a pickle.

"The punishment for the Wind-up toy known as Polka Dot will be fit for the crime he has committed, treachery. The book that I found does not state punishments for that topic, but I believe I have found one," Russel took a deep breath, a small smile spread on his face. "The punishment for Polka Dot will be the same thing we wish upon humans."

Polka Dot did not stir, holding his head high as he was led onto the kitchen counter, not saying a word even as he was pushed and shattered on the ground.

The toys were so busy trying to hide their grins over the demise of the supposed traitor, that they didn't notice when Oracle crept over to Polka Dot's broken corpse and whispered in what was once his ear,

“I agreed with your stance on Bobo, you know. That's why I hid the tack in his food. Such a shame that they chose you to take the fall.”

In “Rescuing Daisy”, Hope and Felicity know that they are going to find Daisy, and have a good idea of where she is. Just like the theme, they know they are coming from home and know they are going to rescue Daisy. They know they may not be home for a while, but they set out anyway. They keep going to rescue Daisy, and use creative and resourceful ideas to get past challenges. But enough spoilers. Go read the full story!

Rescuing Daisy by Ella Stromberg - Age 10

She’s gone. My best friend is gone. As in, she’s gone missing and no one has found her yet. My sister, Felicity, and I are looking for her because everyone else has stopped.

Oh, sorry. I haven’t introduced myself yet. I’m Hope. I have a Mom, Dad, and of course, Felicity. My life was pretty happy until my best friend went missing. Felicity and I are best friends with her.

Daisy is her name, by the way. She’s so nice, I couldn’t believe it at first when the newscaster said they were stopping the search. That’s where I got the crazy idea to go look for her.

We left a note for Mom and Dad so they know we didn’t go missing like Daisy. And after that, we left the house, waving even though Mom and Dad probably weren’t even there.

I look forward now and see that in the distance, there is a gray building with storm clouds hovering over it. It seems scary from here, and I can’t imagine what it will be like when Felicity and I get to that point in our journey. But for some reason, it seems like *that’s* the place where Daisy is.

I tell Felicity my idea, and she agrees. We slow down, or at least, I think we do, as if we're trying to put off the moment when we get to the building. But all too soon, we're there.

The place is massive. And somehow it seems even more gloomy up close. I don't want to go in, but I take the knocker and let it go, letting it swing and hit against the door. Each time it hits the door, a BOOM echoes through the quiet air.

No one answers at first. But then the door creaks open, revealing a heavily shadowed hallway that never seems to end. There isn't anyone there to have answered the door. It's creepy, but I take a tentative step in, with Felicity right behind me.

And then I scream. And Felicity screams. We're both screaming.

We're being lifted up, in something rough and scratchy. It feels like a net, but I'm not sure since I can't see anything. But after feeling around a lot, I'm sure we're in a net.

Soon after, I hear moaning. Lot's of it. And it's not coming from Felicity or me.

I scramble to get out of my trap, but it's impossible since I don't have any supplies. But wait, I do...

I reach for my backpack, trying to remember if there's anything I packed that could help us get out of here.

I unzip it and stick my hand in, touching everything I can. I come across a matchbox and pull it out. I fumble to pull a match out. Once it's lit, I can suddenly see everything.

Below us are gray figures with black, beady eyes and thin lips. They have two slits for a nose and ears so small I can barely see them.

Their clothes are dull colors and are tattered and ripped. I can only describe them as zombies.

I'm terrified. Should I cut the rope and land in the middle of the hoard of zombies, or stay here and have the zombies do who knows what to us? I quickly make a decision.

I hold the lit match against the rope, moving it back and forth, back and forth. Just as I'm about to give up hope, the rope splits and we fall. Down, down, down. Farther than it looked like from up there.

Felicity screams, and I realize that I never told her my plan. Well, too late for that now.

We land on the zombies and the feeling is unpleasant. They're slimy, a feature I couldn't see from way up there.

I scramble to get up, and I realize the zombies we landed on have collapsed. And that gives me another crazy, but gross, idea. I don't want to do it, but as I see the other zombies start to close in, I can't put the idea off into another part of my mind.

I jump onto a zombie, and it starts to collapse. The heads are squishy and my feet start to sink in, so I quickly jump to another one, and another. I don't look back as I jump from head to head to head, so I don't know if Felicity is right behind me or not. I hope she is.

As I keep jumping, I remember that I'm still holding the match. And the flame is *way* too low. Before I can react, the flame reaches the tip of my finger.

It's not that bad at first, so I keep going. But as it gets worse, more and more pain flows through my body.

I can see the door now, and it's close enough that I can put the flame out.

I blow on the flame until it goes out. I'm plunged into darkness, but it's worth it when the excruciating pain eases.

I lunge towards where I think the door is, and I feel wood. Hard, hard, wood. And now my entire body aches, not just my finger.

When the door opens up, I can see again. Better, at least.

But the light is coming from fumes. Fumes from cauldrons. And standing behind those cauldrons are witches. Witches that are looking right at us and slowly making their way towards us, cackling as they go.

The witches have pale green skin and midnight black hair. Their teeth are yellow and rotting, and there are warts all over their noses, their noses look like a wart.

They are dressed in all black, from their hats to their shoes. Their appearance combined with the green smoke is scary.

“Drink it, my dear,” a witch whispers creepily.

I wonder what she’s talking about until I realize she’s holding a cup filled to the brim with an eery green liquid. It has to be poison.

“It’s delicious,” another witch whispers.

Felicity and I try to push through, but the swarm of witches is too big. They sit us down and slam cups full of the green liquid on the table. Some of it splashes over onto the wood table. I try to see if it does anything to see if I should be worried, but there isn’t an effect.

“Drink it,” a witch says, falsely sweet.

When neither of us do, the same witch says more fiercely, “Drink it.”

I lift the cup and pretend to take a sip. But the witches notice.

“All of it.”

I close my eyes and hope to survive this. I down the cup.

The liquid is oddly sweet, but the aftertaste is disgusting. It tastes like what rotten eggs mixed with trash would be if they had a baby.

I look up, and the witches seem surprised.

“If you are still here, go. You have passed our test. Those who can survive the poison have a right to go on,” a witch says.

I have no idea what she means, and I can tell Felicity doesn't either. But the witches make a path for us that leads towards a door.

Felicity and I get out of our seats and slowly make our way towards it, bracing for a catch. But we make it to the door safely. I hope what's on the other side is also safe.

I open the door, and I let out a sigh of relief. There, tied to a chair, is Daisy.

She looks the exact same as how she did when we last saw her. Her blond, shoulder length hair is still perfectly straight, and her clothes are the usual kind of wrinkled. Her pale blue shoes are still untied, like they always are. The only thing that doesn't look the same are her emerald green eyes. They're tired, as if she's been awake as long as she can.

But when she sees us, the tiredness is practically gone. Her whole face lights up, and her smile is as perfect as ever.

I rush towards her, and I hear footsteps coming from behind me. I glance back and I see Felicity trailing me. Together, we untie Daisy's ropes.

"Thanks," Daisy says, her cheeks flushed.

"Anything for our best friend," I tell her.

Next to us, there is a floor-to-ceiling window with the shades closed. But there is a line of space at the bottom that the shades didn't cover. I notice a small crack in the window, and without thinking, I dive right into it. I hear more shattering and know that Felicity and Daisy have followed me.

We decide to go back home even though it is dusk by now. It must be midnight when we make it back home and collapse on the couch. Daisy hesitates a bit before deciding to plop with us.

Almost immediately, Mom and Dad rush downstairs in their pajamas to pepper us with questions, but we're all too tired to answer. They insist on at least treating our cuts and bruises. But finally, they let us go.

“We’re just glad you’re safe,” they tell us.

And those words are true.

We may be tired and full of pain, but we’re finally safe.

This session's theme is "know from where you came, and to where you are going." I believe that my piece is a good example of this theme because Amanda, as a former gifted "straight A student," is completely used to a life full of academic ease. So when she learns she's failing math class, she completely freaks out. Fortunately, she is able to pick herself up and acknowledge that while she may have discovered a new challenge, she also knows how to deal with it and ask for help.

F Plus by Zoe Roberts - Age 16

March 29th, 1991

Dear Diary,

The rain was pouring down harder than usual today, which really sucked because today was none other than the Jefferson High School choir performance. After I finish this entry, I'm going to perform at the concert, but we had to do a preview during the assembly for the entire school. Unfortunately, it's a long walk from where my bus parked to the auditorium, so by the time I got there, I was pretty much drenched. At least I wasn't alone - literally everyone in our high school had at least one piece of clothing totally soaked. Still, it was so unfair! Picture 50 damp kids standing awkwardly while belting *Amazing Grace*, and 800 more staring at them, luxuriously cuddled up with their friends in the creaky gymnasium bleachers. I know, I know - no one FORCED me to join choir. I did it all on my own accord. Even then, I didn't realize there would be so much singing in front of people. The seniors told me I would get used to it eventually. Right, like that'll happen!

Love,
Amanda

April 1st, 1991

Dear Diary,

Today was April Fools Day. I don't exactly mind the holiday itself, but I do mind the buffoons in my grade taking it WAY too seriously. Scott MacIntyre, who sits behind me in math class, decided to get to class early and stick a layer of clear tape on all of our chairs so the tape would stick to the seats and we would stick to the tape. I was lucky enough to notice, but a lot of people fell right into his trap. That freckle-faced fool!! Katarina Saunders had it especially bad, since she's 5 feet tall and particularly skinny for her height. The substitute barely batted an eye because he's a million years old and can't even remember what day it is. I, as much as the next person, don't mind that our class moves at a particularly slow pace. But you have to admit that this is a blatant abuse of the educational system. At least I'll get an A in the class? Also, about my last entry, the concert went as well as it could for me considering my stage fright. I'm not sure why there's so much disco, though. Maybe it makes Ms. Blaine nostalgic for the glory days of 1970.

Love,

Amanda

April 2nd, 1991

Dear Diary,

I know I don't usually write to you two days in a row, but I really need your help. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I'm an idiot for telling a diary that I need help, and you're thinking I'm an idiot to assume that you can actually think. And normally I'd listen to you and tell my friends, but I don't think they'd get it. Also, this isn't a thing I exactly want to tell them, because although we

hang out at school and stuff, we aren't actually that close. All they know is a good student who gets mostly straight A's and actually does extracurriculars, which is more than I can say for any of them. But the honest truth is that I have no idea what I'm doing. "What?" you say. "This can not be true!" But unfortunately, it can be. I don't really know how to say this without sounding like a snob, but I'm used to being good at things. Because of that, everyone EXPECTS me to be good at things. And I'm not sure what part is worse because I've finally met my match. That's right, I'm failing algebra. I have an F+, to be more specific. Obviously, I'm freaking out because I've never gotten below a B, let alone failed a class. But my history clearly doesn't matter. My parents are going to murder me and bury me in all of my failed tests! I feel so sick it's messing with my head. No, I mean it. My stomach is flipping around, and I think I'm going to throw up. It's so easy to blame it on someone else, like my incompetent math teacher or Scott MacIntyre. But I know that it's all my fault. I hate Algebra, and I hate asking for help. I know I need to, but it's hard. Why would anyone want to help me? I certainly wouldn't help them.

Love,

Amanda

April 4th, 1991

Dear Diary,

My math grade is still eating me up. I've been staying up until at least 12 AM each night looking at the material. I usually get a good night's sleep, so this is a bit of a change for me. Ugh, I hate this!

April 5th, 1991

Dear Diary,

We have a math test in two days. I'm probably going to bomb it, so I'm doing my best to prevent that outcome. Study, take a nap, eat, study, go to class, talk with friends, study, study, study. It sucks! No matter how hard I try, the material just isn't getting into my head. Serves me right for being too overconfident.

April 5th, 1991

Dear Diary,

Sorry to write to you twice in one day, but it's so urgent. I need somebody to reassure me, or whatever. I ran out of the choir classroom crying hysterically. We were singing a song about getting through the hard times no matter what, and it reminded me that I don't know how to do that. I feel like I'm constantly being reminded of my inadequacy. For ABBA's sake, why am I so upset about this? The world has billions of people. There are starving children in Africa. And I'm just some 14-year-old who's tearing up over math.

You know what? This is really stupid. So what if I suck at math? From an objective viewpoint, this isn't the end of the world. I'm going to dry off my tears and work it out.

April 7th, 1991

Dear Diary,

Sorry for not writing to you earlier - I swear that I was planning to. Right after my fit of tears, I decided to talk to Ms. Blaine, just because she was the first person I

thought to talk to. As a 20-something choir teacher, I didn't exactly assume she was good at math, and I was completely correct. But she did provide some emotional support. She told me that everyone has shortcomings, and that for what it's worth, I have a great voice. I did know both of those things, but hearing them out of someone else's mouth made it that much better.

Katarina Saunders is in my choir class, and she was kind enough to ask me if I was okay. I told the honest truth - I didn't get math. She's really smart, so I thought she'd be judgmental about it, but she was super nice. She actually invited me over to her house so we could study, and just like that, I got it. Obviously, I don't totally get it, and I fumbled some of the more difficult questions on the test I just took. But you know what? I definitely passed, so that's something.

Love,

Amanda

My piece represents the theme of “Know from where you came, and to where you are going” in a very unique way. The way I see it, the connection comes into play in my story during the time where Ivy relies on other people to come save her. She knows that people think she’s lying, but she also knows that someone will get her out someday. Her journey from denial to acceptance is one that I truly admire.

End Of Signal by Hannah Hechinger - Age 13

Distress Signal- In Need Of Rescue. (day 1)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

Hello? Please listen to me... assuming you’re even hearing this. My name is.. I.. can’t remember. Just, call me Ivy. There's some of that growing on the walls. Anyway-! I need your help. Someone put me into some sort of-shelter? They left their radio. I’m using this to ask you for help. There’s limited resources. I’ll need more, soon. I have about a week of rations along with a bed mat, and a toilet and sink. It’s dark down here. The only light is from the *tiny* screen on this radio, and a small light on the wall. Just- just come soon, please? I’m going to need help. I don’t think that everything here is what it’s supposed to be.

End Of Signal

~+~

Distress Signal- Assistance Required. (day 2)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

Hello. Ehm, it’s me again. Please don’t leave me here. I’ve slept through one night, and I’m not entirely sure I can do it again. Before I went

Distress Signal- Get Me Out. (day 4)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

The crying is back. Louder and louder and louder. You probably can hear it, over my voice. It's driving me *crazy*. Last night some... er... things got into this room. Little snakey things. Whispering over and over and over in this deep voice that shook me- 'I'm Larry. He's Larry. She's Larry. They're Larry'. Again, and again, and again, and again. Left real fast, like the bird. Not fast enough though. I don't know what's wrong, but something is. There's this- er, rather odd feeling I got when I first woke up here. It never left, it's gotten worse. *Much* worse. Kind of like an impending doom sort of thing. Like the one you get before it rains, or when your parents want to talk with you. I think I need help. There's something inside this place. Or there's just something wrong with me. Heh. Heh. Pfffffftttttt-

End Of Signal

~+~

Distress Signal- I'm Going Crazy. (day 5)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

Sorry if I sound a bit... er... distant today, I'm not facing the radio. It's sitting on the bed. There's something in the corner of the room. Last time I looked away- Let's just say I have a new, rather nasty scratch. It feels like a blistering burn when it rubs up on your clothes. I swore yesterday I was hallucinating. I don't think I am. This... thing... is as real as the cut on my leg. Anyway- I'm starting to get scared. My provisions are running pretty low. The screaming, crying child is right in my ear. You- You hear it, right? I'm not insane, not crazy, not hallucinating, not imagining, and *definitely* not

lying. You believe me, my friend. Right? You're coming soon. These days are miserable. I need you to come and get me, to believe me, to believe that *I* exist, and so do these *things*. Thanks..

End Of Signal

~+~

Distress Signal- Help. (day 6)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

The funny corner creature is still here. Every time I fall asleep, I wake up with a new gash. I don't understand how. It looks like a *doll*. I found myself wondering last night if it's really there. Every time it moved, it blinked, it *breathed*, I'd panic. It *breathes*. This is terrifying. I need someone to get me out of here. I don't know how long I can last with a *day* left of rations. I wish I kept a few 'Larrys' from the other day. They looked delicious. *Keep It together, Ivy*. I don't know why I'm here. If this is some kind of test, I resign, I've failed. I just want to *get out* of here! Stop sending those *things* after me. I don't want to be here anymore! I just want to be *home*. Just... let me out. Please, I'm desperate.

End Of Signal

~+~

Distress Signal- Here Goes Nothing. (day 7)

Scroll For Transcription ↓↓

Day seven. Wow. Rations are gone, my hope has gone! All the noise? It's gone too. I don't know why, or *how* it all left. The corner buddy up and left, as did all the Larrys, and the wailing. It just- *stopped*. I awoke to a silence that was louder than all of those

noises combined. I do think maybe they were never really *there* in the first place. I have a good feeling today- but I'm not sure why. I do hope you have come to get me out. I will say hello when you come. Please hurry. I'm not sure why, but I think that this serenity is going away soon. While I wait for you, I think I'll sleep. I need it, and it's so *quiet* now...

End Of Signal

Westtown News:

Teenager Found In Old Bomb Shelter- All Of Those Radio Alerts Were True!

Local police were inspecting reports about a teenager using radio signals to call for help when they found her sleeping in an old bomb shelter. Audio recordings of these signals had gone viral. The crazy tales they stored led many to believe she was a liar. However- all of the distress signals had nothing but truth within them. The girl was found with gashes all over her legs, and the suspect, or 'corner creature' was found right where Ivy described it. The so called 'Larry' worms were surrounding her while she slept, doing their iconic whisper. A bird with a woman for a head was outside, wailing like a child. Police wore headphones while retrieving the young woman, as the police chief was worried about the effects of these creatures. Everyone made it out safely, but all the creatures refused to leave. When police tried to capture a 'Larry' for testing, every creature reportedly disappeared.

Two things have been left undiscovered – Both the radio and whoever trapped the young woman have yet to be found. The teenager has not woken up yet, so police will question her when that time comes. If you have any information, please call your local police's number.

In *King Of Nothing*, a prince is being crowned king. This connects to the theme because he is coming from his status as a prince and transitioning into kingdom.

King of Nothing by Chloe Rashid - Age 16

“Your highness, please stop biting your nails, you’ll make them unsightly,” the majordomo requested, nonetheless too busy straightening some ugly quilt to actually look up at me.

“Right, right, sorry sir,” I said. The jagged edges of my nails chafed against my skin as I rubbed my hands together. It still didn’t distract from the pins and needles skewering my heart. The organ pushed against my ribcage, desperate to break free and avoid its fate.

“There’s no need to call me sir, your highness,” the majordomo said, finally leaving the bedsheets alone to address. “Do you remember your lines for the ceremony?”

“Yes, I start by taking the watering can and watering the rose. Then I pick the rose and place it on the podium under the flag.”

“What then?”

“I give the speech I wrote, then kneel in front of the priest and let him put the crown on my head.”

“Very good. You’re ready to start. I’ll prepare a carriage.”

“Um, but-! I yelped. It was far too soon for this. Or maybe it wasn’t and I was just in no mood for this ceremony.

“You know all there is to know, don’t you. You’ll do just fine, your highness.” The majordomo adjusted the prince’s cape, and stiffly walked toward the phone.

“O-oh. Of course. Yeah, you do that,” I said, the panic setting in. I’d hate to ruin the coronation robes with copious amounts of sweat, but clearly my body had no respect for the sanctity of the monarchy.

“Very well, your highness, the carriage will be ready shortly.”

+

I slinked underneath the floor of the carriage, clinging to the planks of wood that stuck out. It was not a safe ride, but I figured it would get the job done for the time being.

I always get this feeling during a job. The tingling in my hands and feet, the sounds and sights of everything narrowing in until only my target matters, and the euphoria at a job well done.

I could hear them now, boarding the carriage. The floorboards groaned in protest, and I briefly feared I would fall onto the ground below.

But the wooden planks held strong, and the carriage began to move.

“Majordomo... Do you think I can do this?” the target asked. His voice was quiet, barely even audible over the clunking of the wheels on the stone road.

“Of course your highness. I believe that in no less than an hour, I will be calling you ‘your majesty’ instead,” the majordomo said. According to my boss, the target’s majordomo used to be a general in the army, and was trained in many forms of combat. If I had any hope of escaping this mission alive, he needed to go.

“Sometimes I wish you had less faith in me,” the target said. I thought to myself that if the target wanted a majordomo with no faith in him, perhaps he should’ve called me up for a job.

“Whyever do you say that, your highness?”

“Well, if you have no faith in me, I can only really go up from there, can’t I?” the target chuckled. The majordomo was silent for a moment. The potential that the majordomo was just as disappointed in the target as I was warmed my heart.

“I suppose. But you are more than my master, your highness. You are an important person in my life. Whenever you need help, I will give it, not as your servant, but as your friend.”

“...Thank you, Lucas,” the target said.

“My pleasure, Jacob.”

The carriage lurched to a stop, and I held on tight to avoid being shaken off. “We’re here, your highness. I wish you the best.”

I slipped the knife out my belt, and gripped it tightly. I lowered myself onto the ground, crawled from underneath the carriage, and hurled the knife at the target’s skull.

My story connects to the theme: Know from where you came and to where you are going. This is because in the story Koda has to journey from the screening room to the outside world that we have no idea about. This was also an internal journey of realization and knowing that you could do things by yourself when no other options present themselves.

Y3K by Ivy Cohen - Age 11

The clock's little stick swung to the second on the wall. I was the only one drawn to it. The rest of the audience was staring at the bright screen cheering the final numbers until the next year, 3000. The movie screen's violent colors made my tired eyes hurt more. Y3K was within those final seconds. My head was still turned to the face of the clock. The people around me in the theater chanted louder and louder. The colors became more vibrant, the screen betraying the excited emotions of the people waiting on it. I closed my eyes but color still hid under my eyelids. 3...2.....1..... black.

My muscles relaxed. Confused voices filled the room. Children started crying. The annoying chiming on the count down video was now nowhere to be heard. The satisfying ticking of the clock was the only thing that made a sound over the chirping of the audience. I opened my eyes. And then opened them again. I placed my hand on my eyelids to see if they were open. They were. But the room was pitch black and not a single thing could be distinguished from the movement of people running towards the no longer illuminated exits and just twitching around in their seats.

I slapped my slumbering hand on the keyboard of commands for my chill-out-chair. I tried to click any button that had found itself under my sticky palm.

“Work you stupid chair!” Yelled an invisible figure next to me. It was a little girl stuck in her chair too.

I stretched my hand over, trying to calm the girl. She slapped the keyboard in frustration over, and over, and over. There was light for a fraction of a second as the girl screamed in horror. She bounced up and down in her cushioned seat and then dropped into a sluggish position, legs sprawled with her head on her arm rest.

I wish I could say that this didn't happen to anybody else, but that would be a lie. I heard yells of distress and screams that made my thoughts seem quiet. Unlike everybody else, I relaxed and let myself fall off of the chair that had taken me hostage. On the popcorn piled floor, I crawled on my knees to an exit. I was kicked, jostled, and even walked upon, but finally, I saw an opening. A void of empty space that people had walked into for a nice new years countdown with a smile, awaiting a good year. Yeah right. I guess Y3K is real. On the perfect year technology actually stopped working.

I wrapped my fingers around the frame of the door, picked myself up, and ran through the patterned carpeting that just looked black by now.

“Koda!” I heard my name being called. It was probably one of my friends who I had come with. I didn't care about them. I was getting out of here.

I flew down the movie theater aisle in search of a shelter. Stands of gummies, hot dogs, and artificial sweets were all passed in my hurry. After the hall of food, I found a slick entry door. I pushed on its handle which buckled under my weight. I pushed harder. I had never had to use so much strength to open a door. Shoot. It was an AI door.

My eyes had now adjusted to the blackout. I could make out a few shapes, such as the bathroom's woman-with-a-dress sign to the right of the hallway. I pressed my hands on the metal handle of the warped door. I lost my balance on my magnet shoes and hit my chin on the checkered floor. My magnet shoes may have been trendy, but when it came to their chunky exterior and their blocks of metal and striped red and blue lead paint, they were hard to move in.

The sharp tile dug into my neck, causing blood to trickle down my paper sweater. There was no washing that out. Ever since the cotton shortage stupid paper had to be used. Paper sucks.

Out of the blue, a group of people stampeded through the door. Feet and arms grabbed on to wall and ground. The clump of people were each pushing each other lower onto the floor to lift themselves up. There was not enough capacity in the room for the hundreds of people to fit. I ran to the first tiny stall in the room. I had used it before Y3K. One of my friends had made me and I thank them now because I know that there is a an old dusty vent waiting for somebody to climb into it. I banged on the stall door and realized that it was locked. I dropped to the floor and slithered my way under.

Sweaty fingers grabbed my ankles and tugged me out of the stall that I had almost made my escape in. I gripped on to the door and kicked the person who was taking me to who knows where. The person won the fight when they pulled the final tug, hitting the top of my head against the bottom of the door.

I was unable to move as the person pulled me out on to the cold floor. My jaw bobbed along the bumpy ground. I watched as the person took my place in the stall. Their feet disappeared as they started their climb up into the vent.

“THERE’S ANOTHER VENT!” Screamed a silhouette in the dark.

A clump of people pushed into the family stall all the way at the end of the bathroom. I picked myself off the ground and crawled through the legs of the hopeful. A man stood on the rim of the toilet reaching up to the vent on the corner of the mildewed ceiling. A chunk of the raging crowd pushed the man up, whereas some pulled him down.

I stood up when I made it to the man. You could tell he had been wearing glasses from the marks on his face. Now, they were crushed rectangular objects swimming in glass. He had already fit half of his body into the tiny little vent. My

eyes widened when I came to the realization that he wasn't going to fit. His green plastic cloak was too bulky for the microscopic escape route. As the man came to this conclusion he was pulled down onto the floor as others tried to hop into the vent. I pressed my shoe onto the rim of the toilet only to be torn down. To think that people would be so selfish that they wouldn't let a kid go first. This was an every human for themselves game and I was going to play it. I stepped on peoples' hands like they were roaches and lifted myself up. Another person stood on the toilet, trying to do the same thing as me. They wore an itchy blue button up and torn up jeans. They had dark black eyes and a troubling grin. They looked like they would go through any extent to throw me off. I would go through any extent to throw them off. The vent's grate was already removed so it shouldn't have been too hard to get in.

The person launched themselves hands first but I kicked their legs just as they jumped sending them flying into the toilet. I shoved myself up by resting my foot on the scraped metal flusher. I flushed. Since the toilets had been replaced with the new advanced A4O product, the challenger spun around in terror, saturated by the toilet water.

I gripped onto the metal surface and let my feet dangle. Nails scraped and tore at my legs leaving behind scars of pain. My expensive shoes were stolen by the crowd. My sticky socks gripped in between my toes. I pressed my hand on the corner of the wall so I could hold myself up instead of down. Hands pulled at wallpaper. Feet left marks on polished floors.

Finally, I made it to the dark and gloomy concealed vent. I wasn't the only one inside. I was trapped with two other people in front of me. We all shivered in the wind of the blowing AC. One was a small child wrapped in knitted paper and the other was incognito with a hat, sunglasses, and a thin coat that made the box stuffy and hot. I couldn't lift my head in the vent. The walls seemed to be closing in on me. They seemed to be chanting the final words I would ever hear.

You're not going to make it.

I heard more grunts from in the bathroom. Somebody else was climbing up. Their hands brushed the frame of the vent. I stopped moving for one second just to hear the cheers after the person had made it. That is not what happened. Instead, I heard a piercing scream and a squelch. I kept moving.

The leaders of the group greeted each turn with a groan. The metal sides made it almost unbreathable. Echoey voices trailed behind us. The bathroom now was out of ear shot. How big could this theater be?

"I found a grate!" Yelled the young child.

The adult stopped and looked down. I couldn't see over the shoulders of the group.

"We made it!!" Shouted the person in disguise. They pushed down and... well... it wasn't outside. The darkness made it impossible to tell that we were over the original screening room where we started.

I tried to grab the adult's coat, but it was too late. They had hopped down the long fall from the vent to the movie theater. Their hat fell on one of the various seats. They bounced off the staticky floor.

They looked up in shock, their arm reaching to the sky. "Wait! What do I do?" The adult screamed from down below. The child peered down at the adult.

"Go back to the bathroom!" I shouted to her.

They shook their head. "I can't! I already made it..."

"I'm sorry," the little child whispered softly.

After a second of contemplation, the grown-up nodded, picked themselves up, and walked out of my peripheral vision.

"Keep moving," shouted somebody from behind.

That's what we did. As the condensed pipe water dripped upon the crawlers

and I, we kept moving. It had seemed that my legs had slid back and forth just to be sent back to where I originally was. I was going nowhere. I wasn't the only one.

At least we had been making a forward motion. Until an abrupt stop made my burning hands jump up and send me chin first, crashing towards the metal. A loud booming noise dragged like a reused tune. I took my arms and pushed the child father into the tunnel.

“Stop!” The child cried.

“Do you listen?! Keep moving!! We are all going to be trapped if you don't move!” I screamed.

The child burst into tears. The vent repeated the cry to all the people who crawled behind me. My cheeks grew hot in embarrassment. My burning hands pressed on the not-so secure ground. I moved my shaky head to the child's ear.

“Don't you want to live?” I asked.

The child sniffled and pushed forward. I instantly felt bad, but that was life. Conversation traced from wall to wall. I'm so “glad” people are having fun.

“Do you smell that?” I asked.

The little child looked around. “I don't think-”

I screamed. I no longer saw the child. Only her paper blanket. I scooted awkwardly to the the blanket and my heart jumped in my throat. I had know idea what was happening as I tumbled from the vents, down a brick wall, and on to pavement.

“Ow,” I moaned.

Before I could move, four other people fell from the wall and on to my legs. My knees bent uncomfortably. I winced.

“What's that?” Asked the child as they pointed in a direction.

I traced my eyes to her finger. I gasped. I'd never seen that before.

The superhero is a distinctly Jewish invention, which may explain why I hold such extreme fondness for it. For this piece, I was very inspired by the 1998 event comic DC One Million, which visited the 853rd century of the DC Universe – fitting, since our theme is all about the past and the future. That story took superhero iconography and screamed it through a megaphone, with the future Superman’s logo having abstracted so far that it’s now just a series of yellow lines on a red background. I consciously tried to emulate that approach here, and I found it a very fun experience. It was also a fun opportunity to write a protagonist who, while not evil per se, is comically bad at basic morality.

I’m Not a Coward, I’ve Just Never Been Tested by Ben Barack - Age 18

When the world was at the brink of collapse, billionaire Morris Goode gathered together the smartest people in the world to create the literal Platonic ideal of “superhero”! Thus – Successor, the Posthuman Prototype, was born! Disguised as moderately-popular novelist Brandon Brightman, Successor uses his astonishing abilities to protect humanity from those who would do it harm!

Our beloved hero is currently off on a well-deserved tropical vacation, so let us take a brief detour to the far-flung future of 3906 A.D.! It is a time when the realms of the physical and the conceptual are intertwining as one, a time where superheroism faces very different challenges...

—

Corporal Matt MacArthur hated getting splinters. He prided himself on his hands; his ex-girlfriends had all said that they were by far his most valuable asset. But he was a superhero now, Matt thought to himself as a wooden hand violently

crunched in his fist. And superheroes had to do things they didn't want to do a lot of the time.

The tree-man, a globally-known freedom-fighter by the name of Branch Oakley, howled in pain at his now-broken hand, and Matt's super-hearing caused the noise to feel almost deafening. So, he punched Oakley right in the kisser, hard enough that he'd fall unconscious, but soft enough that he'd live.

Over the comms, he could hear Senator Goode grunt approvingly. "Very nice, Bright-Man," they said, using the callsign Marketing had agreed upon. "But don't show off too much. Your job is to rescue the diplomat, not massacre these subversive shrubs."

Matt nodded. "Right." He had to find a way around the battalion of plant-men, preferably without dirtying his brand-new white uniform. It was his first real assignment, after all, and he needed to look as cool as a sunglasses-wearing, motorcycle-riding cucumber if he wanted to impress the public.

After all, Matt had recently been selected as the heir to the greatest superhero of all time. Goode Industries, fulfilling its duty as a subsidiary of GovCorp, had injected the last remnants of Successor's DNA into him, granting him powers beyond human imagination – flight, enhanced strength, light manipulation, telepathy, and so on. It was everything he had ever wanted, a chance for him to prove himself to everyone – and also save people, of course. Like he was doing right now, rescuing Princess Fluffernutter of Cattopia from her kidnappers, the Plant Liberation Front.

He considered the current problem for a bit, as he roundhouse-kicked two sharp-toothed sycamore trees into the wall. Well, if plants thrived on sunlight, and Matt now had the ability to manipulate light... Then maybe...

Matt began to glow as bright as the Northern Lights at their peak. All around him, the plant-men surrounding Matt suddenly found themselves growing in size. And they grew and grew and grew, until...

Over the comm, Senator Goode heard a cacophony of loud cracking noises, and then silence. “What was that, soldier?” they asked. “What did you just do!?”

“Have you ever heard of the square-cube law, sir?” Matt smirked. “Finally, tenth-grade physics class pays off!” He carefully levitated around the recumbent chloro-fiends, only dropping to the ground when he reached a chained-up door at the other side of the room. The lock dissipated into air when Matt lightly blew on it, and the door was easy to punch open. Inside sat the princess, who had already undone her own bindings.

“Well, the Cattopian Empire owes you a debt regardless,” the young royal shouted as Matt carried her in-flight over to GovCorp HQ. “Thanks to your help, our police will capture the PLF and any of their sympathizers. And then our scientists will turn them into living scratching-posts! They’ll be unable to move at all, yet still fully aware... and in complete agony the entire time!”

“Oh,” Matt yelled, “cool!” There was a brief lull, before he asked, “So, would you like to go get a drink sometime?”

—

Having successfully accomplished his first mission and gotten a date, Matt retired to his new home. Successor’s old satellite base had fallen into GovCorp’s possession at some point during the past thousand years, and Senator Goode had gifted it to Matt.

The base had all the things you’d expect – the most extensive library this side of the Andromeda Galaxy; a cellar of wine brewed in the hearts of collapsing stars; a huge swimming pool, filled with holographic fish so real you could actually catch, cook, and eat them; and so on. There was even an area for pets, where Matt’s dog Sarah was currently playing catch with J33-V35, the satellite’s AI butler. The historical documents gave no indication that Successor had ever owned any pets, so

Matt guessed that he installed the section in anticipation of those who would follow in his footsteps, which was an awfully sporting thing to do.

Matt made himself a nice dinner, picked out Hemingway III's masterpiece *Mobius-Dick: Crisis Of Infinite Whales* from the nearest shelf, and turned on the TVCR for some light background noise. The reporter, Pierra Puzo, was saying something about a spacetime anomaly that was destroying reality while simultaneously NOT destroying reality, but whatever it was, it could wait until tomorrow.

Matt retired to his bedroom, Sarah padding close behind him. Only J33-V35 remained, the android cleaning up after his new master and not paying much attention to his surroundings as a portal opened up in the living room. A man, wearing a red costume with a blue cape, was thrown face-first through the gateway. And J33-V35 was astonished to realize that this unconscious intruder, whose blood had so rudely stained the carpet, was none other than Brandon Brightman – the original Successor!

In our next installment: Humanity's successor meets his own! Plus, extreme(!!!)-terrestrials, gratuitous violence, and even shocking revelations about Princess Fluffernutter! All this, and more, in... "NEW PHONE, WHO DYS... TOPIA???"

Signature Page: