



A Note from the Editor

Welcome to the creative writing major's second chapbook of the summer of 2023. The theme of this summer is from Pirkei Avot. "Know from where you came, and to where you are going." In creative writing we explored this idea by learning about a concept in writing called "Into the Woods" - and no, it's not the Sondheim musical! The concept of

"Into the Woods" is similar to the idea of the hero's journey. It's the idea that if a character travels into the woods they'll somehow change. They'll gain something or lose something and leave the woods with a different outlook on life. The woods can be anything that forces change: a literal forest, a shopping mall, a high school, a summer camp. This idea of "Into the Woods" fits perfectly with our theme of needing to know our past so that we can move towards our future. This is something very present in the minds of our campers at CAA. How have the actions of people in the past made way for their future? In these pages you are about to embark on countless journeys: some focus on the past, some on the future, and some settle into the present. In this chapbook you will wait in line for an apocalyptic roller coaster, you'll travel from Hong Kong to New York to begin a new life, you'll enter the world of Dungeons and Dragons at a special boarding school, you'll go on a journey with a goat learning to speak again, and explore the raw and painful past of a child coming to terms with the cruelty of the world. You'll sink into a murder mystery, get trapped in an abandoned mall while being taped for the amusement of others, you'll be reminded of the pain of Covid, a pain we often forget is still just as prevalent as the virus itself, you'll witness a deep and beautiful friendship, take on the role of conquerer of humanity, and be asked to betray your true love. The creative writers this session have risen to the occasion! They have written journeys, both emotional and physical. They have workshopped and revised and polished their work. In some cases they were unable to finish, but the thing about this summer's theme is that it can apply to everything, even the writing process. This piece is both where our campers have ended up and where they are beginning. These are first drafts. They are first chapters. They are opening lines. These pieces are where we come from and also where we are going. Enjoy!

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

- Pirkei Avot

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This year's theme was "Know from where you came, and to where you are going."
This story is based on my family and the stories that they have told me about living as immigrants in America. My NaNa (Pronounced Nyeh-Nyeh, or grandmother), YehYeh (Pronounced as spelled, or grandfather) and their six sons immigrated from China to New York City in the 1970s. My family is where I come from, and because of them, my generation has a choice to decide what they want their future, or where they are going, to be.

Finding Home by Emma Pun, Age 12

New York City, 2020

NaNa is still in her apartment, afraid to go outside. The pixelated screen of the TV blares, one angry voice on top of another. The captioning is in bold, a silent shout, a call to action. COVID-19, the virus devastating the world, hundreds already dead. Rising violence against Asians in America. Immigration policies, families torn apart. Picketers and riots, people lying face down on the street, blood trickling from their back. Fences and borders, imaginary lines that people die to cross. Men in suits too big for their hearts call for laws to be passed, for lives to be destroyed. The noise rises, the images swirl, louder, and louder, and louder- *click*. She sits, hands shaking, leaning forward to catch her breath. The images flash behind her eyes, a kaleidoscope of pain and sorrow. Within each of their words, she sees her own, her story reflected in their eyes. It started like this:

Over The Atlantic Ocean, 1971

Among the passengers of the plane is a woman, barely five feet tall and brimming with determination. She is surrounded by her five sons, each of them with an English name and a number for their mother to call them by. Her name is Wing Tai, and she is small, but holds herself with a regal air, eyes burning with hope and fear. She has never seen the ocean before, and now she is crossing it. A 16 hour flight from Hong Kong to New York, 16 hours flying over the great blue expanse that separates her old home from her new one. It's vast, and beautiful, and terrifying, the promise of a new world swirling within its gray waters. Her

bags are full of clothes and mementos, and the corners of photos pierce the fabric of her pockets, small grainy previews of the home waiting for her in America. She closes her eyes. Almost there.

New York City, 1971

She is there. And she is surrounded. By words, by people, by the smell of a new country. She grabs the hands of her children, fighting fiercely to stay together in this foreign land. Native tongues pound her with questions, and the unfamiliar words merge into a whirl of letters and colors. She is handed her bags, her keys and a new name. She is an American now, they say.

Her husband, Hoi To, is there in the apartment. Hours ago, he was an ocean away. Now he stands beside her, reunited after a year on opposite sides of the world. The apartment's floors are made of brown plastic tiles, and the windows are caked with dust. It is small, but it is enough. It has to be. 7 people, 1 apartment. They will make it work.

New York City, 1972

A year has passed, and they are now a family of 8. A sixth son was born in January, his name chosen by his brothers from a list in the back of an encyclopedia. Donald, they decide to call him.

Wing Tai is a seamstress now, working with cloth and thread in a sweatshop. She sews the patterns into clothing, matching one line to another, assembling a shirt out of scraps of fabric. She sews day in and day out, for her sons and for strangers, slowly stitching together her new life.

Her husband has taken a job as a chef in Chinatown, working long hours from the afternoon to midnight. His arms are blistered from the fryers, and he smells of oil and steamed *jiaozi*. He's proud though, of the life they have made. He is proud of his family, proud of their American surname. To him, each burn on his arm is a dollar earned.

Slowly, they are learning what it means to be an American. A Christmas tree in the corner, the waving of a star spangled flag. Their patriotism is reflected in small ways, but for them it is everything.

The oldest is now at college, studying finance. Despite his top marks, his English remains accented and broken. He learns quickly, studying the way his classmates move their tongues and mouths to form words. But for his peers, it will never be enough. Their words are perfectly straight lines, reaching from one point to another. His are fragmented and clumsy, zigzagging from his mouth to their ears.

“What? What did you say?” They ask. “I can’t understand you.” Each comment hides a sharp message. You are not us. You never will be.

New York City, 1975

It’s the morning of the arrival. A silver haired woman greets them at the door. “Wai Po!” The youngest shouts, toddling towards her. Wai Po scoops up her grandchild for the first time.

Soon, the apartment is filled with the sound of Mah Jong tiles clacking against a folding table and boisterous laughter. They feast on french fries and pork, fried chicken and rice, a beautiful medley of Chinese and American together. Happy tears run down their faces, salty as the sea.

New York City, 1978

It’s midnight and the air is thick with heat. A sweet summer scent filters into the apartment through the rusty window unit, and horns blare in the distance. Outside, the city is alive, bright and bustling. Inside, the youngest, Donald, waits with his ear to the bedroom door, listening for the telltale sound of a clicking latch.

Slowly, hinges creak and the bolt slides into place. A chair creaks as it’s slid out from under the table. And then quiet. The boy slowly opens his door, careful not to wake his brothers, nestled together on the too small bed. Slowly, he emerges to see his father sitting, a glass of lemonade in hand.

“Dad?” He whispers. His father puts a finger to his lips. The boy walks forward and settles into the chair next to his father. His face is sweaty, and round like a full moon. The skin around his eyes is creased with smile lines.

The room is covered in shadows. They slowly creep up the walls, soupy and dark. Shafts of light peek through the window, cutting into them with a piercing glow.

“It’s so quiet,” the boy whispers into the silence. His father smiles and nods.

All is still.

New York City, 1989

It’s cold. Outside, in there. The sheets are blue. The color of ice. Cold. The dripping of the IV sends shivers down their spines, freezing their bones. Cold. The air is frigid. It burns their throats, their lungs, their hearts. His moon shaped face is still, his blistered arms unmoving. His family surrounds him. It’s too much. Too cold. Their screams are silent, their gasps for air catch in their mouths. It’s cold. It’s cold. *It’s cold*. The lines on the monitor gather. They fall. The machine beeps, high and long. Their tears freeze to their cheeks.

New York City, 1989

And then came the funeral. There were no *Dearly Beloveds*, that day. Instead, there were Buddhist monks and deep red wine dripping over stone. Burnt paper smoke and the taste of salt against their tongues. Burnt offerings carried a message of love through the air, tinging it gray with smoke. Hai To’s picture now hung in the apartment, graceful and solemn with a gentle smile. Ashes or earth, American or Chinese, it didn’t matter. There was peace.

New York City, 1990

It’s been two months, and a new life has come crying into the universe. The first grandchild. Wing Tai becomes NaNa, and as she holds her granddaughter, she sees the empty spot where YehYeh would have stood. She smiles, bittersweet, as she holds the infant in her arms. This child was the one they had worked for, the one they had cooked long into the night for, the one for whom they had rubbed their hands raw. She was here, nestled into a soft

blanket in her NaNa's arms. And somewhere NaNa knew, Hai To was too. She breathes in, gently rocking the baby back and forth. She looks up to the ceiling, marked by water stains and peeling paint. “看看我们做了什么” she whispers. *Look at what we've made.*

My story relates to the theme because it centers around Mary Anne reflecting upon and coping with her past (from where you are coming) and deciding what she's going to do about it (to where you are going).

Finding Cassiopeia by Annika Liss, 16

The stark white of the envelope creates an empty void against the dark grain of the table. I know I should look away, should throw this in the recycling bin unopened, but I'm stuck here on this couch and I need to stop thinking about her, need to get rid of this blanket of memories that's weighing me down, because the thing about thinking about Cassiopeia is that I know it will end badly, know I'll end up staring out the window waiting for a sign that'll never come, know that it'll be days before I can get her smile, her laugh, her voice out of my head again. Because thinking about Cassiopeia means remembering the safety of her scabbed hands wrapped around mine, the glow in my chest after we stayed up to 2 am just talking and laughing, and that time we raced each other to the park and dared each other to see how high we could swing, no matter how hard it was pouring. But thinking about Cassiopeia also means remembering waking up to find the bed empty and no note and, of course, she could've just gone to the store but she hadn't because everything is so cold and why am I only just now realizing how warm she was? And I still can't help but wonder if it was because of me, because I was too guarded, too paranoid, and it was killing her inside. But it doesn't really matter because now the flat is haunted and she is gone and I am left with only the lingering memory of warm arms around me.

And what am I going to do with this envelope? It has answers, at least, that's what they told me, but I'm not even sure I want to know. Where she's been for the past six years, why she didn't write, why she left. And what if that's not what's in there? The International Society of Witches didn't say much, just that it was about her and that they'd need to hear my decision in the next two weeks, whatever that means. I force myself to retreat to the kitchen to make myself dinner, leaving the envelope where it is.

The envelope remains untouched for the next week. I pass it every morning on my way to the Academy where I teach young girls Nature Magic, while every night I stare at my book, refusing to even glance at it.

It's Sunday evening and I'm washing the dishes when "Rocket Man" comes on and I'm suddenly back in that pub and the floor is sticky with spilled beer and we're definitely both a little drunk but her eyes sparkle in the dim lighting and my heart's beating a little too fast but I don't care because her hands are tight around my waist and we're whirling round and round and the plate I'm holding shatters but I don't even notice because I'm bent over on the floor, trembling and sobbing and Elton John's still singing about how lonely it is up on Mars and I just want her to come home.

I squeeze my eyes shut, hand flailing for the power button. I must have found it because the music suddenly cuts off and everything is silent. I take a deep breath. Then another and another. It's been a couple years since I've spiraled like that. I grab a dustpan and sweep the ceramic shards up, too drained to bother casting a spell to fix it. Once the broken pieces have been dumped in the trash, I return to the living room and the envelope. Maybe some closure wouldn't be the worst idea. I pick the envelope up, my sweaty fingers already creating gray spots on the paper. The ripping noise destroys the silence, like a chainsaw in the middle of a placid lake. I carefully pull the papers out. They feel very thick, very official. A photograph slips out. I freeze. It's a bit blurry, but it's her. It's been years since I've seen her face, years since I locked the photo albums in the closet. She has a few more gray hairs, a new scar on her chin, but otherwise she looks the same. Cassiopeia. Cassie. My eyes burn. I flip the photograph over before I lose it again. I focus on the rest of the papers. The first appears to be her old ISW profile. Height: 5'6", eyes: green, magic type: Jack of All Trades, etc. I put that to the side, I already know all that. Then, a letter.

Dear Mary Anne Wisteria,

The International Society of Witches hopes you are well. We understand that you have not been an active agent in quite a few years. However, we have recently obtained information leading us to

believe that Cassiopeia Withers is in league with Jester's Rebellion. As Ms. Withers is in possession of intimate information regarding our organization, she poses a threat to the safety of witches everywhere, which is why she needs to be eliminated. We know you and Ms. Withers were quite close before her disappearance, which is why we are requesting your aid in our investigation. That said, if you believe you are emotionally compromised and can't handle this assignment we understand and will find someone else to take care of this. We expect to hear back from you by the sixteenth.

Best regards,

Head Witch Mavra Farsight

Head Witch Mavra Farsight

Eliminated. Does that mean they want me to kill her? I don't want to kill her. I don't want anyone to kill her. Even if she never wants to see me again, even if I'm never able to move on, I want her to still be here, living, breathing, dreaming. And sure, I could just say no, could make this someone else's problem, just lie to myself and say it'll be okay, but Cassiopeia has always been *my* problem. I know what I need to do. I need to find Cassiopeia.

I skim the rest of the papers, they're mostly just reports of recent sightings and incidents. I don't need them. Cassiopeia has always loved spur of the moment decisions that would land her in heaps of trouble. But there is one day she's not like that. One day where she is always in the same place. And that day happens to be tomorrow.

Long strings of willow leaves sway softly in time with the chirping of the crickets. The grass is wet with yesterday's rain, the sky streaked with lavender. There are long

stretches between the graves. For a moment you could almost imagine it's simply a peaceful meadow instead of a place of mourning. I walk slowly, though for my sake or hers, I'm not sure.

And there she is. I close my eyes. I can do this.

"Cassie?" I whisper. She turns around.

"Mim?"

She rushes down the hill, arms outstretched. I catch her, bury my face in her shoulder.

I feel so warm.

"I missed you so much," she whispers into my hair.

"Why did you leave?" my voice is shaky with all the tears I'm holding back.

"I didn't want to, but a friend needed me and things went south and I didn't want to put you in danger-

"So it wasn't because of me?"

She moves her hand to cup my face, "Mary Anne, I love you more than anything."

"Then why didn't you call? Or leave a note, or anything? It's been *six years!*"

"I didn't want you to get hurt."

I cross my arms. "I'm a better witch than you and you know it."

She glances away. "I know, I'm sorry."

"So, Jester's Rebellion?" I raise an eyebrow.

"Is that why you're here?"

"Yes, I'm actually supposed to be murdering you right about now."

"Are you going to?" she meets my gaze, mossy eyes boring into me.

"No, I'm not."

She quirks her lip. "The rebels aren't what you think, maybe I could show you what we've actually been trying to do?"

"I'd like that," I smile.

She takes my hand, her palm rough and achingly familiar.

“I still love you too,” I say. She squeezes my hand. We are both quiet, for a while, but it’s the full sort of quiet, the quiet that feels like a warm blanket wrapped around you. I could stay like this for a long, long time.

This story relates to our theme of knowing where we came from, the school, and to where we are going, currently the lake, with a few bumps along the way, such as the random fighting going on near the gate.

Astrantia by Hannah Rosenstock, Age 13

Prologue

In a far-off land, hidden in plain sight from monsters and creatures, alike, lies the famed school of Astrantia.

“Fwaushhhshsh.” Iggy whirled happily as I handed him a piece of my sandwich. I always eat with Iggy, my Imp familiar, out on the battle fields, in the courtyard, so we can watch some of my dad’s older students battle cool monsters like Blights or Mimics. Today, I was watching my dad teach some of the newer kids how to fight a Cockatrice. I giggled as I watched the kids run around sloppily, like chaotic, terrified, little Monodrones, barely avoiding the Cockatrice’s uncoordinated lunges and pecks. Honestly, I was surprised none of them had been petrified yet. Last week, it took the Cockatrice only two minutes before everyone was frozen.

I munched happily on my homemade PB&J until I heard a loud high pitched, shriek, and was almost toppled by a large clump of skin and feathers. A slick, slimy, forked tongue slobbering all over my face as I, unsuccessfully, attempted to resist a childish giggle.

“I can’t believe you sold me out for a sandwich,” I whispered to the Cockatrice.

“Betrayed by your own food,” my dad chuckled as he climbed his way up to the hill she was sitting on. “Great view of the field,” he paused. “But how many times do I have to tell you that you can’t be here, Cindie. What if you got hurt somehow, or something else happens to you.”

“Sylvie would never hurt me,” I scowled. Sylvie let out a shriek of approval.

“Okay, but what if we weren’t fighting Sylvie. What if we were fighting something more dangerous.”

yellow glowing eyes and some of them have black spots or stripes on them. Iggy has stripes on him. They also have large-ish red bat-like wings and a scorpion like stinger tail. They can see in the dark, turn invisible, and have slight resistance to magic and weapons that aren't silvered or blessed. They are also immune to fire and poison. They can speak infernal and common, and can shape-shift into a rat, a raven, or a spider.

Mimics: Mimics are medium sized shapeshifters, most known to look like a chest with teeth and a long slimy purple tongue when it attacks. Mimics are able to shape-shift into any inanimate object, most commonly doors and chests.

Monodrones: Monodrones are part of a group of constructs called Modrons. Monodrones are big mechanical eyes with small, feathered wings and lanky arms and legs, often times looking rusted or poorly made. Modrons are constructs made to serve a specific purpose or preform a specific task. Monodrones, such as their name states, can preform one simple task, or can relay a single message with up to forty-eight words at a time.

Blights: Blights are awakened plants with the ability to move and think. Most blights aren't very dangerous. The strongest ones being Vine Blights and the weakest being Twig Blights. They basically look like small Groots made out of sticks or vines.

Cockatrices: Cockatrices are like a mix between a small dino, a lizard, and a bird. They are boney and fleshy with a few feathers on the back of their head and on their spine. They have large bat-like wings and a forked tongue. Cockatrices aren't inherently dangerous, as their diet mainly consists of berries, nuts, and small animals. Its main defense is that its able to turn anything it bites into stone for a day. However, they are very jumpy and will react like this when startled making them an animal one would not want to come across in the wild.

Cindie: Cindie is one of our main characters. She is the youngest of the main characters and has lived at the academy for presumably her whole life. She is a Tiefling Druid with periwinkle skin and short, almost bob like, silver hair. She has long elf ears and an Imp

familiar named Iggy. Her Dad is the head of the Astrantia. Her birth name is Cyra which means fire.

Astrantia: The school of Astrantia is known for being the best and safest school for aspiring adventurers. It is protected by being separated from the mortal plane by a magical barrier. The school sits on a floating piece of land being held up by two giant, ancient bones on a small island, surrounded by an equally small town. The school is made up of three main sections. The main section and the two side ones, put together like a U, and being closed off by the front gate of the school.

Tieflings: Tieflings are half devils being recognized by their fiendlike qualities such as large horns, long tails, pointy teeth, elf-like ears, and vary skin colors. They can also see in the dark and have resistance against fire damage.

Druids: Druids are spell casters who get their magic from either the moon or the earth. They can command the forces of nature, summon beasts, and even shape-shift into one on occasion.

This piece relates to the summer theme because the main character Charlie, much like many other people nowadays, barely knows where he came from or where he's going. He's a lonely kid lost in a big world, and he has no idea where to go next.

Escape by Roman Schibel, Age 17

Charlie smiled, his face lighting up in a toothy grin at the masked figure in front of him.

“Hi, Mother S!” he said. She shook her head. A broken fluorescent lightbulb hung over her head. It swung slightly and occasionally cast her masked face in shadow. As Charlie gazed around the room, the exit signs flickered on and off, the E and T were almost completely out. This mall they inhabited, though abandoned, was bursting with life. The rats and other creatures that lived there had become Charlie’s friends, ones he talked to when reminiscing about his past and his mother. Eerie Media, Mother S’ employer and Charlie’s keeper, had filled this mall with their own crew of employees years ago.

The leader of this experiment was a masked man that Charlie had only ever known to be called H. He had been orchestrating a television show starring Charlie and several other characters that were played by other children that had been transported there. These children had either tried to leave and failed greatly, or had been there all their lives.

This television show was binding for Charlie. The Eerie Media employees would lock him in his room. Perhaps they would even turn the lights off if he did not want to participate. Some days he had cried himself to sleep, tossing and turning until dawn. Other days, he would try to make the best of it, making up little songs or jingles to pass the time. He often turned to Mother S for comfort or the rats he had met in his isolation.

“Hi, Mother S!” He repeats, poking her arm.

“You cannot call me that, Charlie. You know this.” Mother S placed her hand on his shoulder and crouched down to his level.

She sighed deeply, lifting her black hood and mask off to meet his eyes. Her curly black hair was twisted into a tight bun and her sun-kissed face had freckles that looked as if they were stars fallen from the galaxy.

“Fine. You may call me your mother under two conditions.” Charlie nodded, his dirty blond hair swishing along with him. “One: you must *never*, under *any circumstance*, call me this in front of anyone in masks. It is very dangerous for you, and I do not want anything to happen to you. Two: you must not actually believe that I am your mother. You know what happened to her. We do not need that happening to you.” Charlie nodded solemnly.

After looking around for a second, his eyes landed on a small broken tricycle in the corner of the room, which blended in quite well with the deep browns of the grout and floor and the green hues in the wallpaper.

He pointed to it excitedly, grabbing Mother’s hands and pulling her to it. “What is this?” he asked her, tilting his head toward it and staring at her with wonder. Mother S smiled. “That is called a tricycle.”

“Play time!” He raced to the tricycle, wriggling in the seat. Charlie blinked at Mother S. “What happens now?”

She chuckled, turning the bars of the tricycle so he’d go in the middle of the room and gestured to the pedals. “Put your feet on here, move them in a circle, and push down while they are circling.”

He did so, giggling as he moved. He stopped, craned his neck to look for Mother S, and kept going, making a small circle in the middle of the room. “Yippee!” He threw his hands up in the air and shouted.

Suddenly, a loudspeaker rang out, H’s words echoing off the walls of the mall.

“Mother S, report immediately to the boardroom.”

Mother S stood quickly from where she had been sitting watching Charlie play, the color draining from her face. She ran to him, clutching his small hands inside her own. “Charlie, listen to me. No matter what happens to me, you need to get out of here.”

My story relates to the summer theme because my main character, Aries, is making a journey both physically and emotionally. He has to leave his loved ones behind at the end of my story and knows where he comes from. In this case he comes from his mother who loved him and the mountain top where she was born, which is where he is journeying back to.

Silent Goat by Bee Kohlbrenner, Age 11

They say goats can't talk.

They're not wrong.

For us goats, it's all in the eyes.

In our eyes, we see stars.

Constellations.

Supernovas.

We do talk, however, only when it's necessary.

I've never talked.

Not once.

Ever since my mom died, I've been mute.

Silent forever.

Andromeda. That was her name

She was filled with wonder.

Her mouth was overflowing with questions.

Her ears, capable of hearing the unspoken.

When I was born, she had been thinking of my name for months.

Whispered it right in my ear.

“Aries, you can achieve anything and everything. Let nothing stop you from that. And no matter what, don't give up. Ever.”

You see, goats were the first astronomers.

Long before Galileo, we knew the sun was centered.

Issac didn't discover gravity, we did.

We knew all the secrets of the universe.

But that, that was hundreds of years ago.

Now the best we can do to honor our past is name our children after universal phenomenons.

Like Aries.

Like me.

+

“Good Morning!” I hear hooves clattering behind me, and I immediately know it’s Sun. Who else could it be? It's not like there are any other goats in this place.

“It's your birthday! Happy Happy Birthday!” he yelps. As he continues to dance, I slowly awaken. I realize I'm starving, and I go over to my food bowl, only to discover there's no food. Like most days.

“Why aren't you excited?” he asks. I give him a look that says, *I'm just tired*. A long time ago, when Sun was newly born, he gave me a “birthday”. I don't know why he thought I needed one, but whatever makes him happy makes me happy. He first came here when he was about... I’m not sure. He either didn't have a name, or didn't remember it. So I named him Sun. I don't know why I did, but I did. He doesn't know his name, but I do, and that's all that matters. It actually, now that I think of it, describes him perfectly. A very energetic soul is what Sun is for sure. He nudges me, and I come back from my daydream. I've been having a lot of those lately. Wait. if it's my birthday, then that means.....

“Jess! Jess-jess-Jessy! Aries! Jess is coming for your birthday!” Sun practically screams. “Hello? Aries? Come on, Talk! It's your birthday!” He has been trying to get me to talk for as long as I can remember. He doesn't know what happened, and I don't blame him. I'm too excited to feel guilty right now. My favorite day of the week is here! Jess comes every Saturday morning, without fail. She has slightly ginger hair, warm brown eyes, and the sweetest soul ever. At least a thousand freckles are splattered across her face like paint being flicked across a canvas. The skirts she wears always flutter in the wind when she twirls, and some type of shiny shirt is always clinging to her chest. The man that comes with her, who I'm pretty sure is her dad, has bright blue eyes, dirty blond hair, and wears this...thingy on

his head. It looks like a hat, but flatter. It's usually this silvery kind of white. Like the color of the moon. Jess wears it too.

Our petting zoo is attached to an ice cream store and I know Jess's order by heart. She always gets chocolate brownie swirl, heavy on the brownie, in a sugar cone. The brown creamy goodness drips from the cone onto her hand. She always asks for a chocolate covered strawberry too, but she never eats it. She gives it to me. And every Saturday, while she is eating her ice cream, she comes to the petting zoo. The owner of the whole place actually lets Jess *in* our cage. Sun gets scared most of the time, but I like it. Jess pets me, and plays with me, and makes me feel loved again. It makes me think of my mom. How she told me stories about her life before the zoo, how she was born on a mountain. Mount Aphrodite. She described its beautiful landscape, the flowered fields that lay before it. How when you get to the top, you see things. She never told me what those things were though. But, as soon as it starts, it ends. Jess waves goodbye and says, "I'll see you next Saturday!"

"Goaty!" Jess cries out as she runs up to me and Sun's cage, her chocolate covered face smiling. She calls me Goaty, and I guess I don't mind. Perhaps that is the only name she could think of. She starts chattering on and on about school, how she hates her substitute teacher, and then I learn a new word. *Syn-a-goge*. She says she's been studying for her Bat-Mitzvah. She told me about that before, about 2 visits ago. "I-I-my mom says I have to wait another year...I can't understand the Hebrew." There's worry in her voice. I see her eyes starting to well up. Before I know it, her face is damp with wet, salty tears. I try licking her face, but she just pulls away. *I need to do something*, I think to myself. Before I can do anything, she just gets up and runs away. Step after step after step, she just keeps on going. Past the store, past the parking lot. Each stride she accomplishes, the more empty I become. Even though I know this moment will pass, it feels like forever.

Suns asleep, and Jess is still sitting on The Big Rock right outside of the parking lot. Her dad is there with her, but it's obvious he's not helping. That's when I notice.

The gate

The gate

It's open.

The doorway to my freedom is lying right in front of me.
And I back up.
Far, far away, to the edge of my cage.
Which in reality is only a few steps back.
But still.
This is my chance. Probably the only chance I will get.
Ever.
I need to run. As
Fast
As
I
Can.
Sun. jess. Everything.
I can't
But I must.
I must.
My life can't just be
Sadness.
Living in an
Eternal Cage.
So I run.
All of the emotions are hitting me. Fear. Anger. Guilt. Freedom? Question mark?
I'll miss Sun.
I'll miss jess.
It seems the cons of this outweigh the pros
I'm just starting to turn back, but
Then I truly feel the wind rushing through my fur
The question mark after freedom slowly fades away as
The green fields lightly brush my hooves and

I see a shape in the distance that
Looks like a mountain because
It is
The sparkling mass of land may not look much to some people
But for me its
Everything
Its where my mother was born
And where I will die
It is where the birds rest during migration
And the whales look to as a sign of hope.
It is what humans see as a challenge
And I see as a final destination
And then, I speak my first words.
“I'm coming.”

This piece is a work in progress...

Murder at Stromview by Lucy Ringel, Age 14

At 4:30 pm, no earlier and no later, Clarisse Winston died. This event went unnoticed by multiple people. It was no surprise really. Clarisse was a bit of a nobody as of the past couple of days, which was such a shame. She used to be so lively, and made friends all over school. Friendless, and quiet, she had nothing left to lose but her life. However, the way she lost her life, that is something that no one could predict.

+

J raced down the hallways of Stromview with his mind only focused on one thing: getting to class on time. Not because he cared about school or whatnot, but because if he got one more detention, well, it was safe to say that J wouldn't attend Stromview after that. J was a troubled kid. No. He was just a kid who caused some trouble. And trouble typically leads to punishment, no matter the cost.

"Mr. Ardenly. Class started nearly 15 minutes ago, and I do believe tardiness is a means to detention" This sudden interruption was made by none other than Mrs. Worhol, the Dean of Students. While spending most of her time with the attendees of the school, she absolutely detested them. It was a wonder how she came to be in this position "I do hope you know that this is your final strike. One more mishap and", she paused, mocking J's misfortune, "You might not make it to graduation."

J stopped almost comically and swiveled around to face the Dean of Students herself.

"Why Mrs. Worhol, we must stop meeting like this. And I must say that you are looking really-"

"Your pitiful attempts at flattery will get you nowhere in life, and I expect to see you actually make it to detention this time Mr. Ardenly. Move along now." Mrs. Worhol made a shoo'ing

motion with her hands as if to swat at a pest. J took the hint and continued his walk to class, but with a higher sense of urgency.

+

Aubrey Nightingale enjoyed the little things in life. The steam rising from a cup of warm coffee, the sizzle of cold pancake batter meeting a burning hot pan, and the feeling of relief after finishing a paper that was supposed to be started ages ago. She particularly liked how a simple thing such as the placement of a mug, can change a situation entirely. What she did not enjoy was being ripped out of class by campus security just as she was about to start on her assignment.

While she was struggling against the grasp of one of the big and burly guards that held her, Mrs. Worhol walked around the corner and stared at her with narrowed eyes. That wasn't particularly odd, for Mrs. Worhol expressed her hatred for her students by glaring at them, but this was different. Mrs. Worhol was laser focussed on Aubrey, like she had been for a couple of days. In all her years working at Stromview, she had shown equal hatred for everyone. That was routine. That never changed. Luckily, Aubrey took notice of the change in the old Dean of Students' behavior and made a note to herself to find out why this sudden change happened.

As she snapped back to what was happening in that moment, Aubrey fell limp in the guards' arms as her own personal protest to the situation that she was in.

After being dragged until her butt was numb from rubbing up against the old carpeted floors, the officers came to an abrupt halt. Before Aubrey could question anything, she was thrown into a random class room and the door was promptly shut. Feeling woozy and slightly disoriented, Aubrey opens her eyes to be met with an uninvited staring contest with none other than J Ardenly himself.

The theme for summer 2023 is to know where you came from and to where you are going. My character comes from a messed up place, and doesn't know where they're going. They sit there judging everyone for not doing anything about this problem, while they're not doing anything themselves. It's too late to do something with an hour left, so they have no choice but to walk toward nothingness. People in our current world are too afraid to do something, and if we don't soon, there are going to be consequences.

“Waiting” by Zel Schneider, Age 11

WELCOME TO FUN WORLD. OUR NEW RIDE, THE COASTER OF DOOM, IS NOW OPEN. PLEASE MAKE YOUR WAY TO THE ONE AND ONLY COLD SECTION, THE LAST ONE IN AMERICA. WAIT TIME IS 62 MINUTES.

I hate Fun World. Nothing about it is fun. They don't deserve to own the only cold section in America. The ice is melting. The rest of Earth is blazing hot. Some parts on fire, some painfully humid. My school decided to torture us for getting all A's, with coming to the worst theme park for the environment. Fun World only uses plastic, never recycles, they waste three tons of trash per day, and all their brightly colored food is artificial and made with chemicals. They hoped it'd be fun, but only because of the name. No one pays attention to what's going on around them. Cars only use gasoline, 1,000 planes could be flying at this very second. We've made no progress. We're only getting worse. The end is coming, and no one knows it except for me. My friends are here with me, putting on an act to make me like them. I know they're spreading rumors about me. I know it's them. I've heard what they say when they think I'm not around. I don't have a choice but to go along with their idea of fun, which isn't equivalent to mine. They're all dare devils, so they want to ride the coaster of doom. 62 minutes is a lot of time to wait with these ugly souls. But I do it anyways.

We currently have 60 minutes left to wait, and it couldn't be worse. There's booming laughter all around us. I hate people. They're the reason the world is ending so

soon, and no one seems to care. They're all too full of themselves to notice. The news came up and said the exact date we'll all disappear. It's today. It's getting hotter. Water is rising. We'll all either be burned to death by heat, or we'll be submerged in saltwater. Fun world isn't helping. Everyone loves it, but I don't like it. Not one bit.

There's 50 minutes left ahead. I begin to notice the people in front. There's a muscular man with green tattoos of dragons and 2-horned narwhals. He's wearing cargo pants with six pockets and a tight t-shirt that clings to his chest. He has on an extremely worn out belt that's a faded shade of chocolate. He's holding on to a little girl's hand. She's wearing sweatpants and a baggy coca-cola shirt. It's bright red with suns that have faces all over it. She's zoning out. Her eyes are a deep blue, holding secrets behind them. I wonder what she's thinking. 50 minutes isn't enough time to figure out what.

There's 40 minutes of waiting and it's so hot I might pass out. The air isn't natural and it's clogging my lungs. I tell my "friends" to save our spot in line. I run to the water fountain and chug half a gallon of water. I don't feel much better, but I'm living, only for forty more minutes. I feel so helpless. I can't do anything about it. It has to happen. It's like a bridge we're all walking, our destination is death. If I were in charge I would write a letter to the real person in charge and then I... That could have been done already. I could have done something to stop this but instead I just sat there and watched. I could've at least tried. But I did nothing. I'm here judging everyone for not doing anything, while I'm one of them. It's all my fault. When I was a little kid, I was so scared of death, and in 40 minutes I won't exist. It's all that little kid's fault, except I'm that little kid. I'll leave no trace and it's like I'll have never existed. I begin to cry. The hot salty tears run down my face. Everything is crumbling around me and it's my fault. I sit on a bench for a while and try to take it all in. The bushes are currently dying. They're supposed to be bright green, now they're an ugly shade of brown. I accidentally step on one. They crunch when I step on them, making a satisfying sound that calms me down. The leaves are dead. People hurt them, and they're already gone. I'm using them for my own good, even though they're dead. And it's my fault.

30 minutes left. My friends attempt to cut the line. It's half as big as it was before, but still quite long. I follow them, my own attempt to not be left behind. I thought we were safe. There's no one around, until a voice yells from above.

“HEY. NO SKIPPING. YOU’LL ALL GET YOUR TURN.”

Terrified, we run back to our spot. Still no one. It was coming from a speaker.

“WAIT. YOUR. TURN.”

I'm always told to wait my turn. I could wait forever and never get what I want. Sometimes I wonder if there's no point in waiting. Maybe there's a cheat code to get my way sooner, for the torture to end quicker.

20 minutes remain. Life continues, though it will end soon. It's weird that I don't hear screaming. The ride is perfectly silent. Getting closer, the roller coaster doesn't seem as scary. Nothing seems as scary anymore. The line moves on. I take a step forward. The gravel gets caught on my converse, the gray pebbles stick in between the imprints of the tread. I never understand why I chose converse. It seemed like everyone was buying them, and I wanted to fit in. I never even thought they were cool. There was never a point in wasting money. It doesn't matter now. Nothing matters now. A sweat breaks out all over my body. It's still so hot. All the ice has melted here. A few feet away from me are a couple of dehydrated dead plants. The sun is scorching and blazing and sets those plants on fire. I can feel the heat coming off of it onto me, like a cloud heavy with uncomfortable warmth. The reds, yellows, and oranges swirl together. I throw my shoes in, angry. All I see are my rainbow polka dotted socks. My favorite pair of socks since I was a little kid. I guess I'll go as a child. I'll always be that child, who wanted to make their mark on the world. But you know what? I don't care what you think anymore. I'm going to be myself these last 20 minutes, and make sure that little kid dies happy.

Ten minutes. Ten minutes until the world ends.

Nine minutes. My breathing gets faster.

Eight minutes. My heart beats rapidly.

Seven minutes. It's all my fault.

Six minutes. What's on the other side?

Five minutes. Why did I do this to myself?

Four minutes. Why did I let this happen?

Three minutes. I see the bright red exit sign.

Two minutes. I'm happy to go.

One minute. I have no choice but to let it happen.

Three, two, one...

Minute zero. Goodbye.

My piece relates to this summer's theme because it is all about knowing where you come from. My piece is about growing up during the pandemic and experiencing first time things. It also looks towards the future because I am writing it as a letter to my future child. This piece is a work of nonfiction and is about my life.

Dear Future Child by Ella Cohen, Age 15

Dear Future Child,

It is I, your mom, who is writing to you from the year 2025. I hope you receive this letter in the year 2083, in which I will be long gone. In this Letter, I will tell you about the past.

We are at the time of 2020. There is a lot of fighting going on around issues like LGBTQ+ Rights and BLM. Many famous singers like Taylor Swift sang about LGBTQ+ rights in her song You Need To Calm Down. The rights to me were very important because I wanted equality. I also wanted equal rights for women. I hope people still remember The Beatles, Michael Jackson and Taylor Swift. All of those people I just mentioned changed the music industry for decades, hopefully people still talk about these famous people. I adored those people as a young adult. I danced along to Taylor swift songs a lot in my room and lip synched to "Enchanted". I especially loved Taylor Swift, when she went on tour after this horrible pandemic called COVID 19. Anyway, on the first night of her tour, there were about 70,000 people!! I unfortunately did not get to go to the Eras Tour but I did watch live streams on TikTok.

Back to the Covid 19 pandemic. Doctors thought about 1 million people died before the first vaccine came out. Luckily I got the four boosters, though it hurt but it made me feel better. I also got covid unfortunately and I was isolated in my room for a week or so. I was scared and upset because I couldn't see my family and had to spend New Years alone. But during covid, lots of things closed, like people had to wear masks everywhere except in their own homes. It was brutal to wear a mask, it made my glasses fog up a lot. It depended

on the mask I was wearing, but it sometimes hurt my nose and it sometimes got tangled up with my glasses. I was really happy when I didn't have to wear it anymore. Many people were quitting their jobs, it was especially hard in my synagogue. They had to come up with a way to continue services so they decided to live stream the services via youtube live. The clergy at my temple worked extra hard so that we could have services virtually. My mom still sang at the temple but whenever she was not singing she had to put on a mask. They still do this till this day but without the masks, people still watch services online.

One of my favorite stores was called Barnes & Noble, it smelled like warm bread, and warm pancakes with maple syrup. It did close during the pandemic unfortunately but we found a way to get books. Then my family and I discovered this online shopping app called Amazon and you can get pretty much anything from the app. It may take a few days or a week but it made me happy whenever I got a package. I was ordering a lot of things like books, tvs, squishmallows, and furniture but it was mostly my mom ordering the furniture. It was hard being stuck inside with my family but at least we were staying together. But I got to stay in my room a lot and talk to my friends. When we went to the store to get food, we got a lot of it since we didn't want to go out as often. It was hard to concentrate when my mom was singing in her office, though at least she had her job. My mom was the cantor soloist at my temple and she sings pretty awesome. Many people come up to me after services and tell me how wonderful my mom's singing is.

When the pandemic still went on many online platforms became popular like Disney+, and Netflix. I started watching online programs in mid-june or july since I had nothing to do. Many online apps became popular like TikTok, Discord, Snapchat and Roblox. I personally played all of them. I spent a lot of time on roblox and Discord but as soon as I got TikTok and Snapchat I spent a little too much time on those two apps. But I made myself stop during parts of the day. I mostly made my own food, preferably bagels and melted cheese, I personally loved bagels. I didn't have trouble sleeping, but it took me a while to fall asleep since I was on my phone before bed. I was in quarantine for about a year and I had to do 6th grade virtually and that wasn't fun because I wasn't able to see my friends.

I barely went outside but I sometimes worked out inside because my mom turned our garage into an indoor gym. It had a weight shelf for weights of all kinds of different sizes and weights. It had a punching bag and it was great to let out some anger. We also had a yoga mat to do yoga but we sometimes had to roll it up because my dogs kept peeing on it. Speaking of dogs, we got a covid dog! Her name was Penny Lane just like the Beatles song! She was really cute and she was welcomed into the family pretty quickly. She was a poodle mixed with a Bichon Frisé. She had black curly fur and she just barked a lot. But she got along with Whiskey and Toby who were my other dogs. I barely watched the news, but my grandparents would call me and tell me what was going on in the world. I also got sick with covid and it was hard because I couldn't see my family. I had to spend my New Years alone in my room. I was sorta upset that I couldn't spend the last few seconds of 2021 with my family. But I did watch Dick Clarke's Rocking New Years Ever and when it turned into 2022, I played "22" by Taylor Swift because 22.

As soon as covid started going away, many things started opening up again like theme parks and especially concerts. When Taylor Swift announced that she was going on tour, millions of people went on Ticketmaster and waited hours just to get tickets and many people did, but the website actually went down because so many people were trying to get tickets. I unfortunately was not available to go. Speaking of Taylor Swift songs, there were many songs that were associated with how I was feeling, that she could sing about heartbreak friendships but mostly heartbreak and breakup songs. Especially the songs "Exile" and "the 1". I actually sometimes sat in my closet and listened to her sing in her new albums called *Folklore* and *Evermore*. It made me feel a lot of different emotions like sadness and peace. Most of the sad songs remind me of this boy I had a "relationship" with. His name was Henry and I felt like we connected in some way. I later found out that I might have been imagining some of the moments we had that I thought were special. We did have some drama between us, but we became on good terms.

I hope you learned a lot about me and what it was like to grow up in the early 20's. As Taylor Swift sang in "Long Live", "If you have children someday, when they point to the pictures, please tell them about me."

Your mom,
Eliana Cohen

How does this relate to the theme? — “ghosts in tall grass is a collection of poetry and monologues i wrote that show my journey - where i was back in school when i let myself be walked all over and where i'm going as i learn how to speak up for myself.”

 **ghosts in tall grass by Calyx Miller, Age 13**

listen, this story is not about a ghost.

you love. you

lose, and you mourn, and

you learn no lessons. love

again x5.

caring/loving is fickle and

hurts like paprika on your tongue when you are expecting

cinnamon.

caring/loving is giving someone

a piece of your soul, and

letting them tear it apart, no questions

asked. that's

why ghosts are so rare, because not many have enough soul left to

haunt.

your codes of survival

You know more rules than your mother. Your mother barely knows the star-of-david rules- that stuff was swept under the rug when she was learning her rulesets. You know too many. You know the people who won't believe you because of the word 'female' being scribbled onto your birth certificate even though you're not even a girl, you know the people who won't believe you while you're with Bee because of his light-brown skin. You know who not

to respond to because they'll call you slurs for loving or spray your backpack with water because of two-people pronouns. You know the star-of-david rules much better than your mother- don't wear the jewelry, don't mention the holidays, let them make the cruel jokes and pretend not to hear. Don't mention your crystals either- their call of "witch" is an insult and a call for shunning, not that empowering love-filled indicator you think it is. You pretend noise doesn't hurt, pretend not to need movement, pretend to know what they mean, pretend to know what to say, pretend you're happy and don't see a shrink, pretend you don't hear gunshots in door slams. Pretend you don't take meds. Pretend you're normal. Pretend you were always Calyx- or is it you were never Calyx? You get that one mixed up. Make yourself talk, even when it feels like swallowing poison. Don't bind. Don't complain. Keep out of sight when Those Boys come around and if you don't then take insults with a smile and tell no teacher. Keep the list of Those Boys up-to-date and make sure to tell your friends. Don't talk too much. Stick it through- you've got much longer than middle school to deal with bigots who have more rights than you and there's not always teachers to save you ~~they barely do now, what are you talking about?~~. Boys will be boys, right? Grit your teeth and learn your rules- c'est la vie.

·°· Σ → *things you shouldn't know*

You are the one [not the school]

who researches different hotlines and their specifications.

You are the one [not the school]

who pushes your friends to go to therapy and makes them talk to their parents.

You are the one [not the school]

who assembles a dictionary so people can explain their identities and issues to parents who don't understand what the words mean.

You are the one [not the school]

who shares real, positive, experiences with people who are scared to reach for the idea of mental health help they've seen in the media.

You and your friends are the ones [not the school]

checking in on each other daily, seeing if people are ok and making them get help if they
aren't.

You and your friends are the ones [not the school]

who explain homework to each other when people are confused with the way they've been
taught.

You and your friends are the ones [not the school]

who share methods of forcing yourself to do homework even when your odd-ones-out brains
don't let you.

Because if you don't? Nobody will.

·°· ∑ → *relating to dead girls by penelope scott*

you always hated the fact that

mourning/morning

sound

the same. cause one is all

first light and groggy eyes, new chances and endless time

it seems

but the other is all

bitter tears and blood on your sides, people who died too early and names soon to be lost, too
many to remember

and the thought is so different so you think they should sound different, but it doesn't
change the clarification you have to make when you talk about all the kids dead for things
they couldn't control.

those are the stories that

keep you from telling your mother what they call you at school.

those are the stories that keep you vigilant and spreading the word of new
boys to avoid before-

one of

you

joins

that list and

you have to clarify to people which morning you're in.

·°·: ∑ → *trying to learn the rules again*

you're tired. people keep hurting you and you're tired. you're tired of quiet and hiding and alone

what made you so different that you have to take everything they say?

you like the same people they do, but it's wrong- if liking girls is wrong, why can they do it?

it makes less sense than the supposed "basic conversational skills"

people keep telling you you should know. you're

confused by

this idea, but to stand up and speak to this is to put

yourself in the way

of those poisoned daggers engraved with words-

words you shouldn't say here. so you stew in

confusion.

·°·: ∑ → *when sadness learns anger*

the books teach you that

nothing changed till someone stood up.

the books also teach you that

people who stand up get hurt.

but they also teach that

without those people, many more would suffer. you are really
tired of being told you are
always
going to be hurt.

·°·: 𐄂 → *good danger*

you told everything to your mother. you don't want to hurt anymore. you are going to be
helped, and what a concept that is-

·°·: 𐄂 → *good danger;*

take your words in your hand and

stand like they have never hurt you. you are done
sitting down. If they have something to
say, let them feel
consequence.

·°·: 𐄂 → *"not many have enough soul left to haunt"*

you take back those pieces of your soul. it's surprisingly easy. maybe because they were
never theirs in the first place.

·°· Σ → *listen, i am not quiet anymore.*

they waltz in expecting no fight. but they have mistaken this prairie for a ballroom, and there are ghosts in the tall grass.

✂ ----- **end!!** .°°

The idea for this originally came about as part of a monologue exercise. I wouldn't describe myself as a transhumanist, but the idea of a memetic being, a sentient life-form that naturally lacks any of our senses, was fascinating to think about. The speaker's conceptual nature gave me opportunities to treat metaphors literally and to discuss how immortality would affect one's view of the world, which fit with our summer theme related to time and legacy. I'd also like to note that the tone was very much inspired by the podcast Welcome to Night Vale, particularly the way the mundane and the macabre intertwine.

The Consumer: A Monologue by Benjamin Barack, Age 18

I find you fascinating to watch. Not you specifically, of course. Humanity. All that gumption and moxie and pluck! It's so... inspiring.

You should feel very proud of that compliment, actually. It's much nicer than what my brethren would say of you.

Yes, brethren. My species has no exact word for our form, but I'd describe our existence as... What's an appropriate mouth-sound in your tongue? Conceptual? Or, if you're a philosopher, memetic. In the Richard Dawkins 'genes for culture' sense, not the Internet sense. Sentient ideas, thinking thoughts. You get it, right? Good.

So, yes, I will harvest the people of this planet – or rather, the consciousnesses of those people – as food. And no, you can't stop me. It's far, far too late for that. I'm only telling you now because I'm kind of bored.

I don't think of myself as malicious, for the record. Are *you* malevolent when you eat, say, fresh corn on the cob? No! No, of course not. The corn was grown for the purpose of one day being eaten. Just like you were.

And here comes the dawning existential terror, the blubbering, the cries for mercy, the works. It's amazing how similar physical life-forms are from planet to planet. Sure, some of them might have eyes in their armpits or whatever, but when you get down to it? They're all basically identical. They all beg. They all bargain. They all mourn the version of reality

they imagined, the one that never existed and never will. If there is, in fact, a creator deity, I'd say They're not very imaginative.

Then again... even if, on the broadest possible scale, corporeal entities are completely indistinguishable, you cannot see on the broadest possible scale. Even I, for all my magnificence, cannot. I have to possess some members of a species, turning them into conduits of myself, so that I can devour all of them. And so I get a close-up view of civilizations as they change over decades, centuries, or even millenia. It is a unique vantage point, to be sure, but it is one I am happy to have. I'm almost a historian of sorts, when you think about it.

Anyway, where was I? Yes, possession! Each form I have taken had its own quirks before it was absorbed into me, quirks that I must now imitate. I am an old Catholic woman in Italy who carries a copy of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* with me wherever I go. I am a forty-something American doctor who, when playing card games, always sorts my hand into alphabetical order. I am a Peruvian five-year-old who constantly licks sandwiches before eating them. But, of course, I am not really these forms. I do not know why they were the way they were, not truly.

Perhaps the elderly Italian woman got the book from her grandson, and it was the last gift he ever gave her. Perhaps the middle-aged American doctor had trouble learning the alphabet as a child, so his parents used his favorite hobby to try to improve his skills. Perhaps the Peruvian child is simply disgusting, as most children are!

Perhaps. Perhaps not. I sometimes wish I knew. But...

Hmm. Well, I really can't wait to consume your species' collective consciousness. I don't look forward to the *taste*, per se, since my conceptual form – my true form – lacks taste buds. But species do tend to have a certain flavor, for lack of a better term. The flavor of looking up in an area where light-pollution has blotted out all the stars in the sky, and seeing the Big Dipper in all its glory, as if it's taunting reality itself. But that's not quite it either; the flavor is like... like liquids and gasses pretending to be solids, as if they're kids in a trench-coat trying to see an R-rated movie. I apologize for this obtuse language, but there's no way around it. I mean, how would you describe music to a species unable to hear?

I really do love your music, by the way. When the first hominids banged bones against cave-walls, I encouraged them. The sound was truly lovely – it's a shame I couldn't introduce recording-devices to your planet until much later. I will say that, without me, your planet's technological progress would have taken so much longer — in fact, you'd barely have created the lightbulb by now if not for me. You should really thank me for getting your civilization to this point, even if I am going to wind up destroying it.

Anyway, yes, I was there on your planet that early. 3.8 million years, I think? You were a relatively short assignment, all things considered. I remember, during the early days of the universe, the glee I took in the screams. But age has taken its toll. I am the consumer, and all I can do is consume. There is no more glee to be taken.

Okay, there is *some* glee to be taken, I won't lie. A lot, actually. But I am... I'm so old now. I can't even begin to guess how old I am. I don't wish for the cessation of my existence, but I do occasionally wish for the possibility. The possibility of an ending. Even one such as I can only consume so much, experience so much, without becoming tired of it all.

To paraphrase a local idiom, sometimes life's a bench, and then you have to sit on it. Forever. Waiting for a bus that will never come... But what can you do? There aren't any other benches around for miles! What, are you going to bring your own chair from home to sit on while waiting for the bus? You definitely don't have the upper-body strength to do that. And you can't just walk to your destination. You *have* to wait for the bus!

And it's so frustrating, it makes you want to destroy buses and benches on such a deep, fundamental level that they are erased from not just this planet, but EVERY planet! Across the endless abyss of space, benches and buses will cease to be! Thousands of trillions of lightyears away, millions of those people with eyes in their armpits will suddenly fall onto the ground, the buses and benches they were just now sitting on all dissipating into air in roughly the time it takes for you to blink! And so it will be for everyone everywhere! Buses and benches will go the way of the lolk or the derthible, seeming to have never existed at all, and I for one look forward to it!

...Forgive me. I do tend to get excited. I was talking about endings, yes? Your ending – and the ending of your entire species – is nigh. You have craved apocalypses for all your lives, after all. It's intrinsic to your religion, your art, your entire being. Subconsciously, you even tried to cause your own apocalypse, as if destruction on your own terms is inherently more preferable to destruction on someone else's. But it was all for naught.

I'll give you a week to spread the news and put your planet's affairs in order, for I am nothing if not merciful. And when the people ask you who is responsible, explain to them that their last day will not be one of judgment, nor one of honorable battle. It will be a day of revelation for your people as they face their end, for that is the true nature of 'apocalypse'! It is MY true nature! I am Revelation, and I revel in my cosmic duty.

My story relates to this summer's theme because our past selves are a large part of who we are. In this piece, my goal was to focus on each version of Rae (and Mara) through the years, and how they changed and grew. They know who they used to be, and I introduce them in multiple stages to show this. When it comes to where they are going, I communicated that in a more literal sense. My two main characters are quite literally running towards their future, even though they may not know exactly where they're heading.

Me and Mar by Sam Friedman, Age 14

We all did it- or at least thought about doing it. Maybe our parents were “going through a rough patch,” or our older sister called us useless, maybe we had to feed the dog and didn't want to. We wiped our dressers clean, shoving everything we thought useful into our school bags. Adrenaline fueling us, we emptied our piggy banks- or for the more rebellious, swiped a few bills from Dad's wallet. In those moments, it seemed very, very real. We were going to run away.

And years later, we finally did.

-★-

Mara tips over her trademark sage green tote, the contents spilling onto the carpeted floor.

“Shall we take inventory?” She turns to me with a grin, and I nod, returning the smile.

My eyes scan over the supplies as she lists them off.

“Okay. Pepper spray, wad of cash, chargers and headphones, loose tampon.”

“Definitely need the loose tampon.”

“For sure,” she says, raising her eyebrows. I like to think I raise mine back, but based on Mara's laugh and my history with coordination, it's very possible only my nostrils moved.

She continues, counting off each item on her fingers as she goes, sticking her tongue out in concentration.

“Clean socks, granola bars, change of clothes. There's more, too, but I feel like I'm forgetting something.”

“You forgot my-”

“Don't worry, Rae, I have your vitamins,” she says, holding the orange bottle up.

“It's like you care about me or something,” I say, cracking a smile and giving her nose a small boop. Mar doesn't respond, but boops me back. It's always been a thing of ours, the nose boop- ever since our first sleepover when we were seven. We were both different people back then, but like most things, growing was something we did together.

-★-

2013, Mara's house.

“And I asked my mom to leave us alone. Dad too. So we can watch whatever movies we want,” Mara says as she spreads the choices onto the couch.

“We can really watch whatever?”

She nods enthusiastically and my mouth stretches into a wide grin. Tonight was going to be very, very fun.

After watching *Mean Girls* (why were we watching *Mean Girls* at seven years old?) and a generous amount of popcorn, we settle into our beds. Finally, it was time to go to sleep.

“I love you, Rae. Sleep tight.”

I stiffen, and pray the thick, plush blanket hides my hesitation. I don't think anyone besides my parents has ever loved me, let alone a girl I met just this year. I'm almost jealous of the way she says it with ease, as if she loves all her friends. I'm not even sure if I've ever had a real friend, someone to trust. I guess I-

“Hellooo? Are you there?” Mara leans over and boops my nose. I can't help but smile, and after a second, boop her back.

“Iloveyoutoo,” I say, mumbling and not meeting her eyes.

“Hm?”

“I love you too.” Confident this time.

“Goodnight, you goof.”

“Night.” I drift off with a smile, and wake facing her.

-★-

Present

“I think we’re ready, Mar.”

“Yeah, me too. Shall we?” She grabs my hand gently. I pause. For all the times I’ve pictured this exact moment, I always thought I wouldn’t be nervous. It’s not that I’ll particularly miss my family, miss the crying and screaming from this stupid, stupid house. There’s just something about leaving my old selves behind. The scared little girl weeping in her room, the teenager blindly thought to be *confused*, “going through a phase.” Especially the kid stuck in the middle of the two, not knowing where they stand.

All those painful, depressing memories.

I can tell Mar is also considering them because she hesitates.

“Rae?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”

All I needed was her voice, her hand touching mine. We’ll be okay.

We walk down my steps for the last time, leaving a world of pain behind.

-★-

Yesterday

“Mom, stop. I’m not-” Saltwater streams down my face, my head rushing with sadness, rage a close second. I try to start again.

“I’m not crazy. I’m not overreacting, he can’t just *call me that*, he-”

“Your father can say whatever he wants. He is the adult here. You are a child.”

“I’m seventeen, mom. I can’t be dismissed as this lazy little *girl*. He has to-”

She tilts her head, waiting for more.

“I can’t do this. I’m sorry. I - God.”

She can’t keep taking his side.

I start climbing the stairs, gaining speed with each step. When I reach my room, I power on my phone and dial the only starred number.

Mar picks up. Through clouded eyes, I watch her loving face fill the screen.

I want to hide my tears, try to look strong but I can’t. Not this time. This is the last straw. This is it and I tell her that.

-★-

Present

We pass the run-down 7-eleven, its sign flickering in the cold air. I catch her eye. Mara looks away quickly. I don’t blame her.

-★-

2022, 7-eleven

“I just don’t feel like it’s the right thing to do.”

“It’s not a big deal. People take things all the time,” West says, glancing at Mara. They share a smile, and I want to crawl into the ground. Of course he’s done this before.

Westley Gardner- lab partner to Mar, everybody’s favorite guy.

And her latest crush. I hate West.

“But I just think-”

“Raester, I love you. You know that. But it’s really, *really* not a big deal. They’re a huge corporation,” Mara says. I consider this, brow furrowing. I open my mouth to speak, but West beats me to it.

“Rae, right? Can I just talk to Mar here for a sec?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll- I’ll see you?” I ask Mara, looking to her for reassurance. She nods her head slightly. I leave the store, pulling out my phone as I return to the car. I wait, recline in my seat and drum my fingers on the dashboard to an imaginary tune. How long has it been?

My phone dings, and I crane my neck to view it.

Mar <3: sorry raerae ilysm but i think he wants to hang out ???

Mar <3: like hangout hangout 😊

Mar <3: wish me luck !! muah

Me: it's okay good luck!

I just got ditched.

-★-

Present

“So. What now?” Mar asks, setting down her bag.

“I don’t know. But we have all the time in the world.”

“We do?” She looks up at me.

“Yeah. We do.”

It’s just me and Mar.

Signature Page: