



2024 Session 2 Chapbook



Creative Writing 2024

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Volume I: Bonim/Shorashim

Editor's Note

"And there was light" can be a challenging theme among the stresses, emotions, and simple growing pains of being not quite a teenager, but almost. This session's Bonim and Shorashim handled it in different ways, from poetry that meets those feelings head-on to prose that expresses urgency through metaphor, to a simple humorous piece that surprises the reader into laughing in spite of themselves. When discussing how to organize our various works into one collection, the campers agreed that they wanted to start with some of the heavier pieces but move toward lightening the emotional load over the course of the collection.

Working collaboratively on the order of the pieces gave us a wider look at our own work this session, and it was nice to recognize commonalities and differences in the ways we expressed ourselves, and to be able to see a pattern of moving toward light in each other's works.

May you each continue to be each other's light, and to see the light in each other. I hope that in the future you look back on your work as Bonim and Shorashim with appreciation and love for the person you were this summer.

Sincerely,
Meir Hoberman

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Author's Note:

My piece reflects this year's theme of, "And there was light," because the paragraphs in it were written during some of my darker moments. Writing them was my way of processing some of the things I struggled with and finding light within that darkness,

Emma Pun

Sticks and Stones

Emma Pun

Let me take you back to the time when you were fearless. Can you remember? You were the one with maps drawn in skinned knees and a gap-toothed smile, brave before the weight of the world was placed upon your shoulders. Brave before you forced yourself to carry their voices inside your pockets. I wonder what you would think if you could see yourself now. Look forward and tally how you've changed, one line for each regret. What happened to you? To the time when you were unafraid and truly living? Where did that all go? If I had a minute with you, could I make things better? Stop a domino from falling and twist your life in another direction? Sometimes I map it in my head. Plot points on an invisible timeline just to see where it went wrong. It's a special brand of torture, because I'll never know for certain. But I put myself through it anyway, just to see if I can find some remnant of you. Of me. Now you're so aware, of every footstep you take, of the huff your breath makes when it meets the air. Of how your body no longer fits within its own lines. You can feel the weight of eyes at the back of your skull, of heavy words behind cupped hands, of expectations bending, pushing against your back. And aren't you supposed to crave that attention, the weight of all those eyes on you? You suppose you are. And yet... And yet. Your body and voice don't feel like your own, any more than borrowed books. Only tools capable of hurting you, of drawing sideways looks and quirked eyebrows. So you hide yourself, tightening your footsteps, hunching your shoulders, forcing yourself between those silent lines. You tense your breath, your posture, your words becoming muffled and small. Anything to go unseen, to be invisible. And it hurts, hurts like a million shards of glass against your skin, like transparent walls, squeezing you tight. But this is the compromise you have to make, the card you have to trade. You will take the first step, be one move ahead, always. Because if you do, you are safe. Safe from loaded gazes and judgmental frowns and hateful sneers. And that is the deal you strike, the price you pay- to go unseen, unheard in a world where a voice silenced is a victory. You are powerless, and you have made it so.

The first few times it happens, it's like drowning in the air. Your shoulders contract, and your vocal cord and lungs go with them. Your throat feels like it's closing- the words won't come in anything other than a whisper or a full on siren. So you fall back, and as you hear the dull thud of your shoulder blades hitting the chair, that thud of surrender you're starting to get used to, you think, this isn't who I am. But is it who you're becoming? Better not to look back, you think. Just push ahead, frantically through that thick wall of silence and into the color you know is there. But every time you reach the edge, every time your lips part and you move to push that curtain away,

you hesitate. You can feel the heavy heat of someone's eyes on your not quite there, almost there, words. You pause. And then it's too late, and you're falling back into that crushing position of silence. And your disappointment floods you because you know that another small fragment of you just slipped away.

These pockets of quiet are becoming commonplace. Little silences your voice tucks itself into, leaving you to shrink into the shadows. *It's just another one of those moments*, you tell yourself, feeling like you're selling yourself a car. One where the words come out hoarse and strangled, cracking in your throat. Hard to find, harder to speak. If only they could read your mind, could see the battle you wage with yourself. Could see how you fight with your own thoughts, push against their walls even as you lose control. Would that be enough to change anything? Because as hard as you try, you can't stifle thoughts. Only words can be silenced. Pinned down like a moth in a frame, sharp needles through gauzy flesh. You've long mastered that trade. And maybe your wings can still twitch against their constraints. Maybe you'll glimpse what it is to fly again. But the struggle is all too often useless, because you're fighting with yourself, your own body. You shake, the words quiver. You hesitate and they fall too late. And this is what you see, over and over and over. A reel of film set to loop, tightening the inside of your elbows against your ribcage, pulling your knees closer to your chest. Because all you can think is that you're doing everything wrong, that every sideways look is one of judgment. And it stays this way, at least until someone can tell you otherwise. But even then there's doubt, mistrust, because this mind that will always move faster than your lips is determined to undermine you, if only to keep you safe, or under the pretense of doing so. And your resentment is a weight because those things you used to be brave enough to say feel like a lifetime away, and you know you have a part to play in this silence you're so trapped in. *You brought this on yourself*. You pause a moment. The air is coming back now, filling you, grounding you. Your shoulders unravel to a slump, arms around knees. You look in the mirror. Take a breath. And then you step out into the world and do it all over again.

There are so many people you used to know, people who slowly turned into flashes of life through a crack in the door. As you watch them move by, you wonder to yourself. Do they remember you? Can they see right through you, or are they blinded by the fences you put up? When you look at them, do they realize that you've collected their details, filing them away, tucked in your pocket to remind you that you weren't always strangers? Maybe they see you in fragments. A montage of stillness, broken by that glass-shard laugh you use to try and make them remember. A movie, playing behind a pinhole screen. Pieces of a puzzle that are not you, only how they perceive you to be. There are so many bridges that were accidentally burned, let crumble while you turned a blind eye. You can still see their outlines, can trace them distantly across the water you're too afraid to swim. You so badly want to put your hand out as an olive branch, a needle and thread to patch a ripped seam. But they're worlds away, oblivious to your empty hope. You're beginning to understand that something broke a long time ago, but you don't know if it was you or them. Now it's too late to tell them how badly you want to try, that you can still see the pieces of themselves they gave you all those lifetimes ago. You watch them silently from across the room, trying to bridge a small infinity of regrets with a glance. But you know it's impossible, so you leave them with one last thought you hope they're brave enough to hear: *You are not invisible to me*.

You're realizing as it moves that time can be a funny thing. An eternity while you're living it, a blink in retrospect. Years equate to minutes, minutes to years. But you know the only way to push through is to take it one day at a time. So that is what you do. There are the days when it comes easily, natural as breathing, when your voice slots itself into place without a second thought. And then there are the days when everything is harder, when holding your head up is a struggle and your mouth moves in small jabs, enough to make you want to bite your bottom lip and look down. These are the days when the words come out sharp and stiff, hyphens tacked on to the ends, turning them to mangled fragments, twisted beyond recognition. And all you want to do is walk away but you have to keep trying because you're on a one way road, and the eye contact is killing you, but you can't let go now, because you're committed. *There's no way out.* And for a split second, you feel like you're drowning, flailing for air. They're right there, so close you can hear their breath, but they don't try to toss you a line, don't call for help. They give you an ending, an answer, when what you need is a question, something to keep yourself afloat as you're being dragged under. And you're freezing, helpless, so you catch the empty air between you and turn it into a moment, blinking long enough to see the darkness behind your eyelids clearly, to feel the tendons in your hands tense. You're so used to this, this odd little tango of yours. Starting conversations with the hope of finishing them, and then faltering, feeling the words slip through your grasp and the silence pull you under. Hearing that sudden hum of self-consciousness, where every breath you take feels like a hurricane, every gesture you make feels capable of toppling buildings. Seeing those looks of brightness and possibility slowly fade to confusion, close to judgment. And then that slam against your chest, the slam of a closing door, of a back turned towards you. Of a chance taken, an opportunity missed. Or is that just your imagination? You're having a hard time separating it from reality these days. Now you really do bite your lip, opening your eyes to meet theirs. You know what comes next, know this part like the back of your hand. The hasty retreat, the mumbled excuse, the flush under the skin of your cheeks that burns like the sun. The silent berating that sounds like the jabbing of a finger towards your sternum. *You should have known better. You should have kept your mouth shut when you had the chance.*

If there's one expression you're learning to hate, it's "sticks and stones." Because to you, it seems like words are what hurt the most.

Say it like a wish.

Sticks and stones. If you say the words enough, they'll be true, right? Isn't that how it works? Speak them in your head. Out loud. In front of a shooting star, a shamrock clutched in your hand, fingers crossed behind your back. Speak them into existence. Because intangible as they are, they must carry *some* weight. Or is that the opposite of what you were trying to say in the first place? You're still not sure. Round and round you go...

Say it like a promise.

Sticks and stones. Tell this to yourself when you're an inch away from breaking. When all that's stopping you from becoming a full blown volcano is your own two hands, clenched at your sides. Say it enough to convince yourself that you're right. That they're only words, not knives, though they hurt just as much when they leave their lips. Have patience. Try it again.

Say it like you mean it.

Sticks and stones. Scream it to yourself in the middle of the night. Hold yourself still with your own voice, the one that seems to die in your throat whenever you need it the most. Imagine yourself as someone else, pounding these words into your head. Say it, over and over, knowing that it's not true, hoping it will be.

Sticks and stones... may break my bones... but words will never hurt me.

Yeah right.

Suddenly, there's anger. It comes as a surprise- something you've felt before, but not quite like this. This anger is bone deep, rough in the pit of your stomach, radiating towards your own silence. It surfaces in moments where other people's words are glass, shattering and cutting you open, flesh and bone. It comes when you're vulnerable, gutted, though they could never tell unless they saw your eyes. They won't. They look right by you. And you wish you had something to say back to them, but these are the times when your body betrays you, leaving the air empty for their ugly ones to fill, for your rage to seep into the cracks. And then you're suffocating, in quiet, in powerlessness, because you hate every syllable, but yours seem to have wandered away.

And then comes the point where something inside of you seems to break. Suddenly there are shards of glass in your stomach, burning red-hot underneath your skin. Your anger feels like boiling water in your veins, threatening to bubble over. You so badly want to yell, to say anything at all, but you clamp your teeth down hard on your tongue. You can taste blood, can hear it roaring in the back of your skull. Every word they say, every jab they send spinning so carelessly is a knife to your chest, though you know they weren't aiming at you. You barely exist to them anyways, but how you want to in this moment. You're so close to something you haven't felt in so long, close to shattering into pieces, coming apart like a broken kaleidoscope. Fight, you think. Open your mouth and fight. But what then? You just spread your arms wider, making yourself a larger target for their barbed blades. So you fold them around your chest, purposely shrinking away from their poisoned words, their wild eyes, their reckless hands. *Anything and everything here can hurt you.* In this place, the word is a weapon. But you silence yours, making certain no one will see you as a threat, but rendering yourself defenseless. *Invisible all over again.* And as you fold yourself inwards, you let the sting take you over, let it take the place of your outlined voice, hiding from the biting words that they said could never hurt you.

All around you, there's darkness. It comes and goes, shifting between the foreground of your thoughts and nothing more than a gentle buzz at the back of your mind. A quiet reminder that seeming whole doesn't mean you really are. Shadows leak from your skin, your eyes, other people's mouths. They move around you in swarms, seeping like ink, enough to stifle starlight. You tuck your arms in a cage around you. This darkness isn't all of you, you know. But it's there, blotting out the world, clouding your vision. And you find yourself searching high and low for where you went wrong, searching for a light in the middle of all this darkness.

And then there they are. The words so perfect that they hit you in the stomach, leaving you empty, hollow and hungry for more. You hold these words in your hand, testing them, rolling them to see how they feel against your fingers. Each letter holds a small eternity, and you wonder as you

study them if they've been here, waiting all along. Waiting for you to pick up and pen and jot them over your hurt, turn them into the uppermost layer of a palimpsest. You can feel them pouring out of you, in the form of stick figure verbs, canvas nouns and adjectives so full, so tangible, that you can feel them bursting against your skin. Words that are written in movements, in candid moments captured on film. Words made from squares of fabric pierced through with a needle and bright thread held taut between your fingers. Words that form stories, patchworks of sentences, slashed and spilled over pages in ink deep with color, like ashen footprints in the snow. Words from different perspectives, from stories told by a single facet of a glass paperweight, meant to be held up to the light and watched as a rainbow refracts and dances within it. Words in the form of thoughts, long trailed off and begging to be written, sometimes rambling like all the little universes that cross your mind when you know you have nothing to say. These are the words that you choose, the ones give you hope. These are the reasons you keep waiting, the way you keep on going. Because you know that even if they're lost, they can find their way back to you. And that's where they went wrong- words hurt more than sticks and stones ever could. But they're the reason you try anyway.

Author's Note: In the two poems I wrote, there are a lot of connections to this year's theme. The first one is about looking back at the light from childhood, and the second one is about a person who was in my life that sort of made it a dark time, but the last few stanzas are healing from the pain.

Note

Bee Kohlbrenner

Memories

Bee Kohlbrenner

BROKEN CRAYONS

we used to play
we may still now, but
the laughs that emerge from our mouths
are scarce
and
even the word
play
doesn't sound right
on our tongues

we used to talk
talk about our dreams, hopes
what we
knew
would happen when we grew up
we grew up
and
i still don't know
(anything)

we used to pretend
pretend to be fairy princesses
with 1000 ruffles on our sparkly dresses
mermaids in turquoise oceans
and handsome princes with slicked-back hair
now
we pretend to not care about
what other people say
when they think we can't hear

we used to hide
solely for the purpose
of being found
giggling in the dark of our parents' closets,
seeing the door open, the light of the hallway coming in
and

laughing all over again
the reason we hide now
Is so we can stay there, alone in soggy in the ocean of our heads

we used to be wise
well, wise in the sense that
we had so many questions
“where do rainbows come from?”
“how many grains of sand are on a beach?”
“why is everybody so sad?”
and we
didn’t bottle them up
like we do so often now

looking back won’t solve
our problems
but,
it might make the storms of our lives a little easier
to withstand
we could be that little kid again
making
lemonade out of lemons,
light where there is darkness

I THOUGHT IT WAS TRUE, I THOUGHT IT WAS YOU

I thought it was true
I thought it was you
I think you love me
I think you do?

we sit in silence
not quite alone
i stare at you, you look down
this routine is set in stone

your eyes are like stars
so far away, yet
so beautiful
its hurts me that i cannot
reach them
it's like a scar

when we are together
i try to figure it out
why do you ignore me,
what is it about?

i'm floating when i see you
your feet are on the ground
i tell myself,
"she'll come around"

Its almost perfect
It's almost right
It's almost empty
It's almost night

I'm gripping your hands tight
The tears run down my face
I let go, and
I'm falling in the void of space

I'll miss you
I'll miss you
I'll miss you
I'll miss you

You didn't seem to notice
You didn't seem to care
When I put out the flame between us
It wasn't out already, I swear!

You told me it was my fault
The words stung like an enraged wasp
Like a dagger in the throat-
know looking at it will have consequences

Author's Note: This piece is a dystopian spin on the summers theme. The light is the fire at the end- The End of the World.

Note

Bee Kohlbrenner

The End of the World

Bee Kohlbrenner

March 12th, 2039

Zoey knew it was all over. She wasn't necessarily fighting the fact, and she already said her goodbyes. Now it was just her and her rocking chair, sitting on the porch and watching the world go up in flames.

2 months before the world ended

It was just a normal day at school. Everyone sat in their little groups and passed notes in class. The teachers droned on and on about the Civil War and geometry, which of course no one would use after high school. Partly because half of the kids weren't even going to college, and also because they wouldn't live long enough to have a chance. The popular girls would meet up in the bathrooms to gossip, and the jocks would hang out in the parking lot and smoke. This day was the same as most others, and it's surprising these kids don't go crazy. This generation apparently lost the sense of paying any attention at all to the world around them.

20 minutes before the world ended

Zoey Sky having trouble thinking straight. Something was going on around her, but she couldn't tell what. She wasn't supposed to be the main character in this story, but it seems to not matter, because everything is being cut short anyways. The smell of burnt rubber was floating through the air, and it got caught in Zoey's nose. Her phone alert went off, and she saw it was her mother, who, for some reason kept going on and on about how she is the most precious child, and how she will miss her dearly. Zoey told her mother that she would miss her as well, but this was not true. Truth be told, she wouldn't really miss anyone. She was sick of everything, of everyone. She stepped outside to the porch, to witness the earth's last minutes in a comforting place. It was getting hotter and hotter, and she could see that the infinite fire was spreading to the ground below her. When the fire reached her shoes, happy memories did not flood her. This was the only time that she had ever been truly happy.

Author's Note: This year's theme is "And there was light!". I wrote this piece to let others know that they aren't alone in the recovery process. The process may be hard to get through, but you will get through it. There's always light at the end of the tunnel.

Zel Schneider

Surrender Surrender Surrender

Zel Schneider

You lay awake each night
Thinking about those before you
And those who will come after you

You lay awake each night
Wondering why, why does the Earth revolve around the Sun
Or something stupid, like is your hair half blonde and half brown

You lay awake each night
Thanking the person who saved you when things got dark
And wondering why you had to part ways

You lay awake each night
Asking when things will finally change around here
When you're finally free of the body you never wanted

You lay awake each night
Making such an effort to not look in the mirror
Because it will make you see things that aren't even there

You lay awake each night
Curious if you'll ever see a ghost
Because the dark is so inviting

You lay awake each night
Grateful to still have a heart, mind, and body
Grateful that you can still peacefully live with yourself the way you are

You lay awake each night
Recognizing how far you've come
And recognizing that you made it out alive and are able to tell your story

Author's Note:

I wanted to make a piece that was sad and emotional, but also has that theme of a light changing someones life.

Ash Crum

A New Light

Ash Crum

Thoughts, my thoughts are like a loop, they never end. As I lay in my bed they keep playing in my head, over and over again.

As they repeat, I try to sleep, oh how I wish I could just hit delete.

I lay alone on my phone but this doesn't even feel like home, so I stay as still as a gnome.

I'm so scared, but no one even cares, so I cry into my teddy bear.

I talk to myself, hoping it helps, but it makes my brain melt and I just destroy myself.

I wish I was a friend of me, but I'm really my own enemy, I think this will be the end of me.

I'm so annoyed, I want to have joy, yet I stand like a plastic toy.

I haven't gone outside in days, I stay in here as I may, because I don't deserve to be okay.

But today I felt something else, I really want help, I don't want to destroy myself.

In the middle of this night, I use all my might, I open up the door, and then there was Light.

I wish I did this earlier, its like a four leaf clover, but I'm just happy it's over.

As I see this new day I know I'm okay, and here is where I will stay.

I made some new friends, I love the happiness they send, I hope this will never end

My life's no longer sour, I enjoy every hour even if I spend it sniffing a flower.

I enjoy the little things, the trees, the birds, the bees and the gentle breeze, even if it makes me sneeze.

I feel so free, like I could fly up high, like a dove going into the sky.

I can finally express my distress, and go home only to rest because now I'm at my best.

As I go home I know I'm not alone, and I sleep off into a peaceful zone.

With all these new sights, I know that even at night, there will always be light.

Author's Note:

I wrote these poems to reflect the seasons. They may not accurately reflect the seasons everywhere. But they do reflect how I feel about the seasons, and how they are like where I'm from.

Alex Nessel

Poems For The Seasons

Alex Nessel

A Season of Change

Autumn

A season of change

A crisp, cool feeling in the air

A spooky sort of time

Preparations begin

For Halloween

For Thanksgiving

I turn a year older

People carve pumpkins

And jack o'lanterns sit out on front stoops

The colors change

It's autumn

A season of change

Leaves start to fall

Crunching under my feet

School begins again

Scary decorations

Appear on peoples yards

Jackets are pulled

Out of the backs of closets

A pumpkin-y taste

Is preferred

In autumn

A season of change

A beautiful one too.

The Coldest Time

Winter

The coldest time

Snow blankets the ground

The leaves are gone

The birds have left
Outside is cold
Inside is warm
Sometimes
Adults still must work
Kids still go to school
But they play in the snow too
In winter
The coldest time
Snowball fights
Snow forts
Snow angels
Snow Everything
Then vacation comes
School takes a break
Sometimes work does too
Then they come back
No snowflake is the same just like people
During winter the coldest time
But it holds beauty too.

A Rainy Season

Spring
A rainy season
Trees begin to bloom
The snow melts
Revealing the dead grass
Passover begins
And ends
Rain pours
Nearly everyday
But It is spring
A rainy season
Flowers pop up
School and work
Keep going
Though school nears its end
It begins to get warmer
Then it gets cold again
That's how it is
In spring
A rainy season

But one with beauty too.

A Time Of Heat

Summer
A time of heat
School ends
Work continues
Kids play outside
Everywhere
Sometimes there are fireworks at night
It gets much hotter
But it is summer
A time of heat
People go off on vacation
And away to camp
They make new friends
But keep their old ones too
The leaves are back on the trees
And they are green again
The bees come out
Mosquitos too
Pools open
Ice cream and popsicles are popular
And so is going to a place with A/C
Because it is summer
A time of heat
A time of beauty too.

Fall Winter Spring Summer

Fall winter spring summer
All are filled with beauty
They are alike
And different
But I love them all
Each for a different reason
Fall winter spring summer
All are filled with beauty
I love the feeling in fall

I love the stillness in winter
I love the newness in spring
I love the happiness in summer
Fall winter summer spring
All are filled with beauty
So much beauty

While trying to write this author's note I randomly felt like pressing the J key. I don't know why, I just did. It was very random, just like how I ended up writing this piece.

Alex Nessel

Alex Nessel

How could it be so hard to find a book on penguins?!

The penguin librarian seemed annoyed.

"No, I checked, they don't."
"Which bookstore did you check?"
"The one on squawk St."
"Check the one on Emperor Ave., I'm sure they have a book on humans."
"I checked there too, and they don't."
"I'm sure somewhere in this arctic circle has a book on humans. Oh, did you check the bookstore on Waddle Ct.?"
"I checked there."
"The penguin elementary school's library?"
"I checked there."
"The penguin middle school's library?"
"I checked there."
"The penguin high school's library?"
I checked there too."
"Huh well I think that's all the places with books in this arctic circle."
"Oh."
"Why do you want a book on humans anyway?"
"So I can learn about humans!"
The penguin left the penguin library.
How could it be so hard to find a book on humans?!

Volume II: Olim/Gesher

Editor's Note

Something magical happens when a group of writers come together to share their experiences and their words with each other. Over the course of this session, we dug into prompts that may have seemed silly or academic at first—a hero writing a letter from the end of the story to himself at the beginning, or “what does it smell like in a spaceship”—but as we played with them, something special came to fill the room, and the works that came out of that were more thoughtful, more creative, deeper, and more heartfelt for having been workshopped together.

May we each bring the light that filled our conversations and our writing this session with us to the conversations and the writing we do in the future.

Sincerely,
Meir Hoberman

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Author's Note: When coming into creative writing, I had nothing. But after a prompt on the first day, the task of writing a letter from a hero at the end of a story to themselves at the beginning of the story, I came upon the tale of a time-traveling cyborg. Over the past two weeks, it's been cultivated, snippets and paragraphs all over my google drive. Alas, most of it could not be included into the chapbook, but this was my favorite piece, the one that felt the most me, about a character who does not feel herself.

Fayvel Selch

Replaced

Fayvel Selch

Your hands have never been soft. They used to be cold and steely, same as the parts you spent all day making. Working in front of a conveyer belt, dragging machinery to and fro. You had hands of a worker, hands of eighteen hour days, hands of someone who had never touched another, not since leaving the womb. Your hands were never soft, because they were never allowed to be soft. They ached, pained, cracked apart, calices crystalline and fingernails fractured.

In your first accident, an act of hesitation leading to a hand no longer attached, you splurged. It was inane, but so was forgetting your place when working with a saw blade. You'd never seen the machine work so quick, so smooth, as when it split right through you, slicing with no end in sight. The saw was spinning, so hypnotizing, and you couldn't look away from the scene. You couldn't look away, not when you felt sick, not when you felt dizzy, not when you felt like you were about to pass out, as you held the stump of a hand once was. A stump that would become something new, a silicone hand, replicating human skin, and more importantly, feeling, bursting to the brim with touch sensors. Every sensation more vivid than you had ever felt, almost overwhelming, as the thick layer of calluses was suddenly gone. The hand moved unnaturally, wrinkling and writhing at any command. It was clear it didn't fit, like the first pair of coveralls you ever owned, too big, too weird, too much. You already had a ball joint at the elbow, a phase from time passed, what was popular when you were a kid. It was your first surgery, and the only one you had ever wanted. Now, you would get it again, a ball joint at the wrist, so that you would never have to make contact with that cursed replica, not more than you would have to. A reminder of your mistake, stuck forever. A reminder that you are as replaceable as your hand, that you should be thankful for such a good job, a job that takes your body piece by piece, a job that you will never leave. That terrible silicone hand.

The second accident had cost more than just a hand. A paycheck poorly rationed, a new cartridge, upgraded locks, belt repairs, the little savings that you had were gone in an

instant. So, you would have to steal. You had done it before, pieces from the factory, food from shops, it didn't bother you. But you're getting old, and you can't do this for much longer. Dressed dark as night, dark as the dirt that keeps you apart from the sun, you run. A bottle of nutrient slurry and a bag of viand discs, that's all you need, that's all you take. You pass the exit, pass more people on the street, mindless zombies not knowing that you're committing a crime, or if they do realize, they don't speak, because they've all had to steal to get to this point. You're unobserved, almost free, until you run right under a camera, and that's when it sees you. A drone comes quick to follow, up in the skies where you can't fight back, not that it would make much of a difference on the ground. The iron in your veins means nothing to the steels in its make. It fires, you duck. It fires, you duck. It fires, you duck, and it fires again. Having nowhere to go and no lower to get, it hits you right in the shoulder, blowing the whole limb off. These drones have never been one to send a warning, you're lucky the damage wasn't worse. All you can do is bite your lip and keep on running, ignoring your surroundings, ignoring the pain. The burning in your legs almost takes the focus away from your arm. Almost.

Now, learning from your mistake with the silicone hand, you bought the cheapest metal arm on the market. Standard muscle optics, basic joint pulls, it wasn't fast, nor was it high tech, but it was functional, and that's all you needed. Plates of chrome run from your new, delicate fingers, all the way up to your unbeating chest. Where the metal meets the skin, it's red, swollen, scarred. Silver, shining, and patchy red. The difference would be amusing, if it wasn't so painful. The difference would be amusing, if it didn't cost an arm and a leg. The difference would be amusing, if it didn't cost you your arm.

Your hands have never been soft. Once, they were flesh and bone, coarse, jagged, and for a while, they were not. They were smooth and unseemly, off putting and odd. They weren't hands. They were a disguise, an illusion of fullness, in a life with nothing to be full of. But they were still not soft, not even for a moment. Wires bristled inside their silicone cage, jutting and jamming together and apart, taking in any bit of information they could. On the other hand, your metal hand, was nothing. Impenetrable metal, formed from a mold. No wrinkles or creases, the most efficient formation. You're not sure there's anything inside it, if it's even hollow, because you can't feel a thing. It moves smoothly enough, but you find yourself wrapping your fingers around the handle of a screwdriver, holding it tight, because at least, when you work with your left, you can't feel it, and that makes it all the less unbearable.

Now, your hands still aren't soft. That's what you assume, at least. More often than not, you wear a pair of what were once hardy leather gloves, a gift from a friend. They pale in the middle, the skin wearing down just like yours did once before. Despite it all, all you've been through, all you've put these gloves through, they're still soft, if not softer than before.

They're thin and kind and wrap around your fingers loosely, the way the stars hang around the moon. You're sure you'll need to get a new pair soon, and maybe you needed a new pair long ago, before you started redoing the seams, patching up tears. You're not sure you'll ever let them go, though, not before they lose all their original fabric, and they've been replaced, just like you.

Author's Note:

Great creativity causes great pieces of work!

Finn Stupp

Collected Works

Finn Stupp

What does it smell like on a spaceship on Shabbat:

"You shall not bring fire, food, or other items not approved by the O.O.S.T.A.R. (Organization of Space Travel and Regulation), is that clear?" The general spat in our faces.

The candles and matches felt heavier in my pocket, and a thin bead of sweat trickled down my cheek. I silently prayed to god. I stared at my feet until we suddenly stopped, and I looked up. I glanced nervously at the tall elevator doors leading to the launch platform. "Good luck, Astronaut," the guards sneered as they saluted me. My mouth felt dry but I managed to cough out a course, "Thank you". The soldier gave me a weird look and the world froze, my thoughts raced. He paused but then brushed off my visible anxiety as pre-flight jitters and saluted me again. The doors shut behind me with a dull hiss and the elevator slowly began to move upwards. I could hear the wind howling before the doors even opened. I stepped onto the launch platform and made the mistake of looking down. I stumbled but caught myself on the thin metal railing. As the crowd cheered below me, I forced myself to look forward and took a shaky step, and then another. Soon I was walking and the fear had faded to the back of my mind, and adrenaline took its place. I paused and breathed in the sky's last stripes of sunrise yellows. I was awoken from my trance by my fellow astronaut's voice, "Get going you fat loaf of bread," and he shoved me hard. I grabbed hold of the steel frame and I stepped into the capsule.

The Shabbat contraband weighed heavily in my pocket. I took my seat and my hands began to do the standard procedure but my thoughts were elsewhere.

Prompt: What does it smell like on a spaceship:

I watched a rock float and in an instant, it was gone. Spaghettified into the very atoms that created it, and then eaten by the vast black hole. My attention was drawn to a human spaceship drifting through the crisp vacuum that is space, oblivious to the danger just feet from it. The astronauts inside laughed but the sound died before it reached me, as sound doesn't travel well in space and, neither does smell. Thank god I couldn't smell them or I would surely gag. As I was preparing to leave, the spaceship swerved towards the black hole. I readied myself to witness a horrible accident. By some miracle, the incompetent astronauts jerked the ship out of the way in the last second. That was the only thing keeping the human race alive: stupid luck. I shook my head, the audacity of those humans to clutter up space and then to assume *they* were advanced ones. We "aliens" mock their prehistoric practices.

Poem on God and Actions

God is abstract but your actions are not
When we are led by passion and distraction
We have no traction

God is in our voice
God is in our poise
Without God, we are no better than schoolboys

We are like God in so many ways
His ability to praise and embrace
He even helps us remember to buy presents for the holidays.

God is our world in so many ways
Always be brave and get out of your daze
He helps us carry ourselves with grace
As we punch a jerkface

God is brave just like us
He is there with us on the school bus
He helps us put up a stand
To the problems at hand

Be content
Repent your wrongs and your rights
It should not cause you sleepless nights
Relax and breath
You're human and God approves

Angel Story

Once upon a time, there was a beach hidden in the folds of Heaven's plush clouds. The beach was full of glowing stones, each emitting slightly different colored light. God chose twelve faithful humans to become his ever-faithful servants and appointed one of them as the protector of heaven's magical beach. As a show of gratitude for their sacrifice, he gifted them each one of the enchanted stones. These stones acted as keys to the heavy gates of heaven; and allowed them to fly freely.

On one fateful day, the appointed angel strolled through the grand beach of light when, suddenly, a loud crash echoed throughout heaven. She cried out as the ground split beneath her feet, causing her to tumble into the sky. As she fell, powerful winds swirled around her, and her struggles became useless as she lost grip on her stone. She splashed into a muddy lake and was shocked by her surroundings. From above, the Earth appeared bright and inviting, but it was a frozen and lifeless wasteland upon closer inspection. The only light source was a greenish glow in the distance, moving through the sky like a gigantic snake. A roar filled the air as a mammoth, pursued by cavemen, slid off a cliff. The innocent angel winced, but the cavemen cheered. The angel, desperate to return to the warm and welcoming folds of heaven clouds, chased after the snaking green light. She ran for miles- climbing the tallest mountains and braving the fiercest animals on her journey, and not once did she rest. When she finally stumbled onto the icy ground her beautiful garments were torn and her tight braids had come loose. She squeezed through a gap in the rocks and found herself in a small clearing; for a moment she mistook it to be Heaven. Plants and wildlife thrived, and tall cherry trees stood on either side, their branches forming a canopy above her. A green light glowed from a well in the center of the clearing. She stumbled in awe towards it, upon peering in she saw her glittering stone sitting at the bottom of the well.

She was going to reach inside, but a cry startled her and she glanced back to the cold and bitter world behind her.

She remembered her journey and realized that protecting the light in heaven was doing more harm to the earth than good. At that moment the stone began to glow with pure light and God appeared before her. She knelt and as she stared at the thick grass below her feet, she realized that God had sent her to Earth. She understood now what life without light was like and asked God to release the stones.

God cried out, "Let there be light" and the stones began to fall from Heaven bathing the earth in warm sunlight.

Not all the stones fell equally, so some places remained frozen while others became incredibly hot. God cast light in the shape of a green snake to fly in the North and South poles where ice was at its thickest to remind the world of its past.

Author's Note:

I lost someone close to me recently, and I didn't really know how to process it. Part of me wanted to just shut down and stop, especially when it came to anything art related. This piece is a very dramatic retelling of that experience, and how I figured out that you have to keep going and find the light.

Aster Perotta

Hidden Colors

Aster Perotta

There is a preconceived notion of what fire looks like. Big and bright, with those bold triangular flames jutting upwards. Red orange and yellow. You know. You've seen the emoji. The movies. But the movies lie.

If you see a real fire, a *true* fire—its roar cutting through the harsh chill of a starry summer's night—you will know that notion is a lie. In person, it blazes red, yes, and perhaps orange and yellow too. But nobody tells you about the other colors.

Where the fire meets those red-hot coals, it is not red, as naming conventions would suggest. No, those tongues of flame burn *blue*. Blue as the sky, blue as the sea, blue as even the ice. Where the blue ends the blaze turns a pale color, maybe white, maybe a color with no name. It certainly never shows up right on any camera. On film it's just those same yellows and oranges and reds. No one knows about it, but I've always remembered it, that hidden color, stark against a dark sky.

And that color, the pale one with no name? It is the exact color of my heart as it sits in my palms.

That was a misleading sentence. Apologies. It does not sit. It moves. *A lot*. And it does not look like a heart. More like a wisp of light, threading through my fingers. But it *feels* like a heart, or maybe a soul, because I can feel all those emotions tangled up inside it as it brushes over my fingertips and knuckles.

It keeps moving. It's going faster now. Frantic. Like it knows what's coming. Maybe it does, it is my heart, probably. Or soul, maybe. It came from my chest, and it's the color that doesn't have a name, that bonfire burned into my memory. If I look at it too long my eyes begin to burn from the remembered smoke, the tears welling up. I blink them away before they can even think about falling. I haven't cried in so long. If this goes right I won't ever have to again.

No matter how fast it goes, it is still remarkably easy to find a jar and dump the maybe-heart-and-maybe-soul inside. *There*. No more hurt. No more happiness either, but I can survive that. At least now I can finally sleep at night.

I peer at the wisp in the jar, luminescent when it catches on the last dregs of sunlight coming through the window. Remnants of its former glory. Once that hidden color had been the fabric of the fire. Now, it looks like a sad little piece of scrap. I try to muster up some sadness, some yearning for what once had been, as a test almost. Nothing came. There was nothing in me that could feel, anymore. My head is as empty as my chest.

I roll over and finally, *finally*, go to sleep.

Even after waking up, I stare at it. The maybe-soul shines just slightly, like one of those glow in the dark stars you stick on your ceiling that have long since lost their luster, and will soon peel off and fall unceremoniously on your face.

It is the color of nostalgia, if that has a color. Like a memory half remembered, a word that doesn't translate. They fit well together, a color with no name and a word with no equal.

It is the color of a dress in a painting. A painting that almost no one has ever seen, that hangs in no museums, no classrooms, no memories. A painting in an apartment where no one lives, anymore. Before, I wondered what would happen to it. I pictured an apartment emptying, growing cold, dust collecting on careful brushstrokes. And something in my chest rioted at that imagined picture, the coals in my chest turning on their spits and wanting to spill out until I was empty too, because it *hurt* to think about. But I can't hurt anymore. I can't anything anymore.

I stare at the thing in the jar, which is the color of nothing at all. I put my hand up to my heart, or rather, the empty space where it used to be. Nothing. Good.

I've been staring at the jar for a long while. Musing. Had time to think of a little thought experiment.

How do you know when your life is going to change?

Because the answer is pretty simple. You don't. We aren't characters in a movie who can hear the score fill with dread of what's to come, or genre-savvy protagonists who can stare straight through the fourth wall with judgmental eyes and turn everything on its head. We just are. We have to roll with the punches and stumble and *keep going*, because what else can you do?

So when the adult wants to see you after lunch, and everyone starts *oooh*-ing the way kids always do when there's even a whiff of getting in trouble, then everyone's too busy laughing to even worry about it, you don't think. Don't *worry*. Sure, you theorize, you wonder, but those are all just passing thoughts. And laughing with your friends makes the fire in your chest leap and flare—it's such a nice feeling, happiness, that steady warmth in your chest—much more than brooding over *what if's* ever could.

The you in the moment doesn't know how many times you'll replay the coming sequence of events in your mind over the next few days, wondering if you even had a clue, missing when you didn't have an inkling. Standing up from the table. Walking down the hallway. Getting lost and accidentally going through the wrong door. Then the right one.

A phone on the table.

You pick it up.

"Oh."

You stopped laughing then.

And you wonder why you aren't crying yet. And you wonder if you not crying makes you a horrible person. And you wonder if you're allowed to miss someone you're not quite sure you even knew, if you're allowed to want to sob even though no sound is coming out, and you think of how you'll never get to make her proud again and the hurt keeps going, eating you raw from the inside. And your chest is aching and your eyes burn and you just want to cry and sob like you're supposed to but you can't you *can't you can't*—

And you don't realize how much your fire has gone out until you feel something in your chest sputter and buckle, and then you're heaving what used to be sparks down the phone and someone is telling you to breathe. Because you're breathing too small and too fast even though they're talking slow—and so many people keep talking and staring and you wish they would just look *away*—and fires need oxygen to survive, don't they? And you *know* this and still your breath shudders and catches and you just keep *thinking* and they just keep looking at you with such *pity* and—*Breathe*. Breathe.

In. Out. I stare at it, that rag in a jar that used to be a bonfire. My heart. Me. It's easier now, to breathe. It's the rest that's harder. I stare at it, feeling the absence in my chest where the hurt and the happiness used to be entangled, like the weft and warp, the fabric of a fire, and I wonder if I made the right choice.

Really fun experiment, right?

You want to know another thing those movies lie about? *Hugs*.

People kept wanting to hug me, even before I took my heart out. I looked sad, they said. Tired. Like I didn't know that better than anyone. Now I just look dull. They still want to hug me, though. I want nothing less. Because when someone hugs you, and their eyes soften with pity, you want to cry. You're supposed to feel sad, in that situation. Expected to have your voice hitch, to sob into their shoulder. Even if you can't anymore. Even if that's what you thought you wanted.

There's only one person you'd want to hug anyway, and they're not here. I wrapped my arms around the jar instead. The scrap banged against the glass, trying to find its way back to the empty space behind my ribs. I just held it tighter, trying to delude myself into believing that what I was feeling could be called warmth.

Food tastes like ash now. It spills between my teeth and down my throat, filling the cavities between my bones. I try to sing, or draw or read, but it's hard to do anything but stare at a wall. There's no voice left. My canary is trapped in the coal mine, counting down the minutes until it is choked by the dark. It is trapped within a jar, wilting away, feather by feather.

There's no fire in my chest. No blaze to rage through me, no sparks to heave up. But no flame to kindle joy either. It is cold here, growing dark. If I could remember how to laugh, I would, in an awfully self-pityingly manner. I don't smile anymore. But at least I don't hurt either. And I don't know if it was worth it.

It's so dark in here. Cold. I can't even feel it, but I can see myself shivering.

I miss her. I miss feeling too.

I want to laugh again, I think. I want to cry. *I want a hug.*

I don't even know when I opened the jar. I just know that one moment the scrap had been there, pale and banging fruitlessly against the walls of its enclosure, and the next I was doubled over from the feeling of a flame being rekindled inside me. Is this what it felt like, when Pandora's Box opened? Is this what it feels like when your life changes, but for the better? I start shaking, but not from the cold. Not anymore. There is a little light back inside me, keeping it at bay, like twin Shabbat candles holding back the dark.

I wrap my arms around myself. I can feel the tears start to well up, but maybe, this time, I'll let them fall. Maybe it'll be okay.

Hey. I got another thought experiment for you. This one's happier, I promise.

Goes like this: You are a child—well, I suppose teenager, but *semantics*—about to perform. Big moment. You do not know if your parents are coming. There is a bright red car in the corner of the parking lot. Your parents have that bright red car. No one else in their right mind would have that color car, or park it that far away from the rest of civilization. But you aren't certain. You have jumped as high as you possibly can to try to read the license plate, and even grabbed the tallest counselor you can find, and neither of you had any luck.

So, do you decide to screw it and run outside—*technically* against the rules—scanning the faces of the parents waiting there? And when you hypothetically find them, do you hug them? Do you smile?

Yes to all of the above.

It wasn't all okay. But it would be, someday. You're trying out this revolutionary new idea, called taking it one day at a time. Sometimes it's hard and you stumble over the words of the Kaddish and other times you still laugh and sing and smile and do all the things that kept your fire bright. And you're grateful that you didn't give it all up.

You hug them tight.

Another night, another summer, another fire.

Well actually *fires*. Plural. All arranged in a neat little row. I stare at them. How they move with the wind, swaying in a pantomime of a real bonfire. It certainly wasn't a *true* fire, the evening chill wasn't nearly dramatic enough, there were barely any stars out, and they weren't even wood fires, but some strange *imitation*—I digress.

That isn't what matters. What matters is my friends laughing with me at who knows what, the marshmallows we are failing miserably at not burning or inside jokes or whatever silly thing someone said during dinner and we now all parrot like it is the funniest joke ever told.

Trying valiantly not to have my own marshmallow end up as a mini fire-ball, I start moving away. Before leaving to claim my chocolate, I catch one last glance of the fire. It's hard to see, but if you really stare at it, the color is in there too. The secret one, the one without a name. It's everywhere, if you stare long enough. In all the places you forget to look.

I turn away, hoping she's watching, and that she's proud, somewhere in the hidden colors.

Author's Note:

This piece is the first chapter of a project I've been slowly outlining and making the worldbuilding for the last half year or so. A friend of mine who doesn't go to CAA helped with the characters and worldbuilding, including the main character of this chapter. His name is Ethan Medrick, and this piece is dedicated to him.

Jack Rom

Untitled Mellowahr Project: Chapter One

Jack Rom, with assistance from Ethan Medrick

Sarna stepped out from the sunlight and into what had become a familiar sight: one of the numerous "mining operations" in the mountains surrounding Elis. Sarna scanned the man-made cavern, catching sight of the miners—beaten down and dead-eyed—the managers, and a small office building to his left. The managers were spread across the chamber, making sure the miners continued their drudgery. Since the miners weren't here by choice—as Elisian commoners, they were legally obligated to follow their lord's orders—the managers were armed, with cudgels or other simple weapons that couldn't draw blood, only bruise. Sarna noted how they were spread out across the room, and none were in the direct path from himself to the offices. *I should have a direct path of escape, he thought, though if they hear anything, I'll be surrounded. I'll have to use a substance bullet if so... I should try to keep quiet.*

He started walking across the cavern, heading directly towards the offices. A few managers shot glances at him, but his rich clothing created the illusion that he was a nobleman visiting the mine's owner. He came up to the door and opened it, revealing a line of doors. Only two had plaques next to them, with the name of a nobleman on each. Sarna went to the door marked as Lord Yeilen's office and opened it, revealing three men inside. Two were standing, wearing the uniforms of the Elisian Mercenary Corps, usually hired by the nobility to serve as bodyguards or policemen. The third was seated, wearing a pearl-colored suit and shell earrings imported from the North, a standard among the Elisian nobility. Sarna was wearing a similar outfit, barring the lack of a family crest on his suit pocket and the gun holster at his belt. He called out to the men, "Are any of you Lord Yeilen?"

The seated man replied with a hint of annoyance, "Yes, but who are you to show up unannounced? What family are you from?"

Sarna responded with a smirk, "I don't think my family is of any relevance to you. I doubt you'd know of them, anyway. What really matters is why I'm here, after all."

"And why is that?" Yeilen asked.

"My fellows have been watching your activities here lately—pushing the commoners under your protection harder than even your fellow noblemen. They sent me to confirm it," Sarna explained, "and it seems they were correct."

"And what?" Yeilen said. "You think that means anything? My miners—wait. No...you're one of the Salmini, aren't you?"

"Ah, there's the question I expected. Of course I am! And my role within them is

self-explanatory.” Sarna pulled out his gun. “I’m a scythe of retribution.”

Yeilen jumped out of his chair with a shriek as Sarna fired, annoyed that he wouldn’t be able to keep quiet as planned. One of the mercenaries jumped out into its path and a mass of gold quickly grew out of his fingers and wrapped around the bullet, stopping it in its tracks. *An Imbued!* Sarna thought, reacting immediately by jumping to the side. He switched his gun over to using vinite bullets, standing back and observing the mercenaries. He kept three types of substance bullets in his gun—vinite, which could trap a person in place; ironite, which could stab through them; and one more: his trump card.

At least one of the bodyguards was Imbued—Sarna wouldn’t be able to tell if any others were until they used their powers. The room was quite small—a substance bullet would hit both Yeilen and the mercenaries, but Sarna was in range of the Imbued. If he stayed still too long, the Imbued would just stab him through the chest with a spear of gold.

Sarna decided to run out the door, firing a vinite bullet behind him as he ran. His analysis had proven correct—the bullet shattered against the Imbued’s gold shield, turning the Imbued substance into a growth of vines which wrapped around Yeilen and his bodyguards, trapping them in place. The Imbued created a knife out of gold and started cutting away the vines as Sarna fled into the cavern outside.

Unfortunately, the managers outside had heard the commotion. The miners had taken the moment to rest as the managers began approaching him, pulling out their cudgels. Sarna ran towards the mine’s entrance, hoping to incentivize the managers to try to block his path. They took his bait, clumping up as he fired a vinite bullet at them, leaving them unable to attack. With them taken care of, he turned his attention back to the two mercenaries now exiting the offices—Yeilen had stayed inside. The Imbued stood in front, having discarded his golden shield and knife. Sarna began slowly circling, trying to see what they would do. Neither of them were clearly armed, but both could have been Imbued, with no need for weaponry.

The Imbued rushed out towards him, a gold spear growing in his hand. Sarna fired a vinite bullet, but the Imbued created a mass of gold to wrap around it, before letting the mass fall to the ground. Holding him in place again wasn’t going to be an option. Sarna switched from vinite to ironite bullets, running away from the Imbued as he did so. He’d need to distract him somehow, or run him out of vibrance, the energy Imbued used to fuel their powers. Unfortunately, Sarna wouldn’t be able to tell how much vibrance the Imbued had left, leaving the other plan to be more feasible. Once an opening presented itself, Sarna would be able to kill him with an ironite bullet, stabbing straight through him.

Sarna paused, fired, and continued running, watching as the Imbued responded to the ironite: he created a gold shield, expecting it to be another vinite one. The ironite bullet shattered, sending razor-sharp spikes of iron straight through the shield and into the Imbued’s hand, drawing blood and causing him to scream. As the Imbued’s spear clanged against the rock, Sarna ran around to the side, outside of the Imbued’s line of sight. He fired.

The other bodyguard lifted his hands, somehow deflecting the bullet and causing it to crash into a pile of rock before shattering, hitting neither of the mercs. *Salmin’s scythe!* Sarna thought, *They’re both Imbued!* Imbued were supposed to be uncommon among the nobility since Elisians saw it as unholy. Why were there two of them? Unfortunately, Sarna didn’t have time to worry—he needed to figure out what substance the second mercenary was Imbued with. He’d felt a burst of

wind when the bullet was deflected—perhaps he was using a gaseous substance? Deciding that it was a good enough theory for now, Sarna tried firing again to test it.

This time, the second Imbued deflected it back towards Sarna, forcing him to dodge to the side. Once again, he felt wind. Bullets weren't going to work, at least not from a distance. The first Imbued had taken the opportunity to wrap his hand with cloth ripped from his suit, and was now rushing toward Sarna with the spear he'd dropped. Sarna was forced to continue running, now into the tunnels of the mine. *I won't be able to hit them with ironite. I'll have to use my last type... what a waste*, he thought, before switching his gun over to his final type of substance bullet. He turned back towards the Imbued and fired to the left of them.

The second Imbued seemed to think he'd missed and didn't bother trying to deflect it, with both of them simply moving to the side before it shattered. They couldn't avoid what the gun had fired: a mass of a boiling hot...thing. Sarna didn't actually know what the stuff created by solarite was, but he did know it was hot enough to burn away a body instantly, as happened to the two Imbued bodyguards. One second, they'd been there. The next, there was only a blinding light.

Sarna covered his eyes, silently chiding himself for wasting such a rare substance. Solarite was absurdly expensive, one of the rarest and most powerful Imbued substances. Just getting that bullet had cost multiple lives, with how tight the security on it had been.

Turning away from the solarite, he started down the tunnel, hoping to find a path that looped back around to the entrance cavern. Thankfully, the tunnels were lit with enclosed lanterns and signs were placed showing how to get back. Sarna hadn't expected that, but supposed that the mine's owner would want the managers to be able to return easily if the miners actually hit an Imbued substance vein.

Upon returning to the cavern, he noted that the managers he'd trapped were being freed by another group that had returned from the mine's depths. He shot another vinite bullet at them, trapping them in place. He then turned towards the offices and entered once again.

Yeilen was still sitting at the table, shocked to see Sarna enter the room. "I hope Salmin grants you a worthy punishment in Damnation," Sarna said, before shooting him with a normal bullet straight in the head.



Sarna finished rummaging through Yeilen's drawers a few minutes later, pulling out a letter marked with a seal Sarna had seen among the belongings of other noblemen. Yeilen was just one of many noblemen bearing that seal to find retribution at the Salmini's hands. He skimmed the letter, noting that it hadn't been signed. Some other nobleman had been a creditor to Yeilen, offering him forgiveness on his loan if he could give the creditor a piece of electrumite, the rarest Imbued substance of them all. Yeilen had been pushing the miners working for him to work much harder than even other noblemen had forced them to, but in the end he'd been unable to obtain the electrumite. Then Sarna had arrived to save the miners from their unpaid labor, leaving Yeilen's debts unpaid.

Sarna stepped out from the offices to see other, less combat-oriented members of the Salmini helping to gather the miners and free them from the mines. Sarna smiled. Even if he'd wasted the solarite bullet, he'd still been able to rescue people from the nobility's clutches. He walked over to the other Salmini, ready to help them with whatever they needed.

Author's Note: This piece connects to the theme because when you are open about who you are with others, you feel much happier and lighter. I came up with this piece randomly. I really just started writing and this is the end result.

Sophie Frankel

Acceptance

Sophie Frankel

Being LGBTQ+ is not a sin or a crime.

Being LGBTQ+ is not a choice or something that can be changed.

If we can't depend on those we love to support us, why bother asking anyway?

We aren't a disease you need to wipe clean, and we don't have an illness that you can cure.

We are who we are, and you can't make us fall, because together, we are strong.

We shouldn't have to hide who we are.

We shouldn't have to be afraid that we'll be thrown out on the street.

They say a parent's love is unconditional, but it doesn't always seem that way to me.

Our friends and family should learn to accept us,

And be open to learning what makes us unique.

But if we stand together as a community, we won't have to worry about what others think.

Being LGBTQ+ is something we should be proud of.

We should embrace what makes us unique.

We can celebrate our personalities and be proud of who we've turned out to be.

Author's Note:

This is my unfinished piece about a clay golem named Elio, and zir struggles. The story starts from zir creation. Elio is zir mother's light, her child she loves as if ze were her own flesh and blood. Later in the story, Elio finds light (hope) in a new friend. Zir story is something I've thought about for a long time. I hope you enjoy reading.

Julian Kadesh

Coping Mechanism

Julian Kadesh

The local magician had been very busy. She had many titles; The Hazeltown magician, The human torch, The woman who speaks to flames.

More frequently, she was called Sonia.

Sonia had spent the last five days in her workshop, in her house's turret. Scrolls and papers and dusty old books were sprawled out over every available surface. The curtains were drawn slightly in an attempt to spare herself the headache of staying up too late. Her eyes hurt from double checking her runes, and her back protested her awful posture. Sonia reached for the glass on her side table. She took a sip of water and surveyed the clay figure on her work bench. Intricate runes were scrawled along their arms, and their smooth crystal eyes sparkled with the light from the window. Sonia couldn't wait to meet them.

She just needed to fix the internal mechanism. She opened up the panel on their chest.

"Why aren't the elements lighting up?" She wondered. Sonia was sure she had them all connected to wires...

Upon closer examination, she didn't have the wires hooked up to the power sources. OOPS. She attached the wires, and then very carefully closed the panel on the figure's chest. Sonia could barely contain her excitement. "This is it..."

The figure's eyes slowly began to glow, and though they had no pupils, she could tell they were looking at her. She grabbed the figure's small hand and smiled softly.

"Welcome to the world, Elio."

Elio is much older now, and much taller, thanks to zir mother's genius spellcasting. Ze is sitting on zir front porch. It's a hot summer day. The sky is a clear blue, and sky islands float lazily past. Ze looks out at the road, at the other kids playing just down the way. Their laughter fills the air, joining the droning of the cycle bugs and the rustling of trees in the wind.

Ze can feel zir chest clench. *I wish I was like them*, ze thought. *Normal. Gods above, it must be so easy for them.* For a moment, ze allows zimsself to stew in this awful feeling. For a moment, Elio almost

goes back inside, back to the safety of zir room. But ze remembers something. Something a former friend had said, many years ago.

"I like going on walks," she had said, "it gets me out of my head. Reminds me that the world isn't ending, even if it feels like it is."

Elio stands up. *Maybe I can try*, ze thought. Ze makes zir way to the door and steps inside. Ze find zir bag on the table in the living room and rummage through it, eventually pulling out a notebook and a pen. Ze tear out a page and begin to write.

"Mom," the note read, "I'm going out for a walk. I wont go too far, and I'll be back before dark. I promise! <3

- Elio".

Ze sticks the note on the fridge, under the magnet with a moving picture of a baby griffin. Zir mother loves griffins, and ze fondly remembers getting her that magnet for her birthday. Elio picks up zir bag and takes a final look around the house. Ze can't help but feel like ze won't be back for a while. Ze shake off the nervous feeling. *Don't be stupid, Elio*, ze think. *I've just gotta get out for a minute*. Ze steps outside, out of the dark, and into the warm sunshine.

Elio walks slowly, unsure of zimself. Ze doesn't normally go this way, and if ze has to communicate with someone, well. Unlike when ze runs errands with zir mother, there is no magic here to help. It's just Elio, and zir communication cards. Elio is snapped out of zir worries when ze bumps into someone.

The both of them stumble backward.

"Woah! You should be more careful!" She scolds, but any trace of annoyance leaves her voice immediately when she sees eir shocked expression. "Are you okay?"

Ze shakily reaches for zir bag and pull out several cards, flipping through them until ze finds one that says "sorry". Ze presents the card to the stranger.

"Oh." She says. "It's okay, really." Elio relaxes.

"Hey, I don't think I've seen you around here before." She says. "I'm Ira. What's your name?"

Elio flips through the cards once more, finding the card that says "My name is Elio" and showing Ira that card, too.

She smiles. "It's nice to meet you." She looks thoughtful for a moment, before adding "I'm heading over to Phoenix Fabrics, but you can come too if you want. My buddy Nathan is the tailor's son, and I think he'll appreciate the extra company."

To Elio, this question is a no-brainer. Why would ze say no to someone who seems genuinely interested in getting to know zim? *Okay, ze thinks, I'll give it a try.* Ze nods, and Ira leads the way.

Phoenix Fabrics was just around the corner, next to the apothecary, which Ira said her father run.

"He's pretty cool," she said, "he has anything you could ever need for sicknesses, seasonings, and spellcasting." Ira grins at em. "He even gets the Magician some of her spell ingredients."

Ah. Elio had forgotten that zir mother is somewhat of an important figure in town. As a magician, she has the best understanding of magic out of everyone around here. Magic is very helpful, even for mundane things, and Elio's mother loves helping.

"It's my job, kiddo!" Elio remembers zir mom saying this many times, even as she helps beyond what's required. *She's just cool like that.*

"So, Elio, what brings you here?" Ira asks. Ze shrugs. "Just walking? I don't blame you, it's pretty nice out." She's quiet for a minute.

... "Do you think it's possible to live on those sky islands?" She asks suddenly.

Elio practically scoffs. *Of course not!* Ze enthusiastically shakes their head.

"That's what I said! But I was talking to someone the other day-"

And their conversation devolves into friendly debate. Ira talks enough for the both of them, and for once, Elio doesn't feel so out of place.

This is the end of my unfinished piece! Unfortunately, I have run into the unstoppable force known as time. Regardless, I hope you enjoyed reading.

Author's Note:

My name is Hannah. I am 14 years old and this is my third year at CAA. I came up with the idea for this piece based off of my DnD character, Aric, and their adopted child, Maddy. After their adventures with their party, I imagine that they take Maddy back to their house to train them in the way of the shrooms. The theme for this session was "And there was light". My story connects to the theme because in the beginning, Maddy doesn't want anything to do with mushrooms, but throughout the story, her dedication and admiration to Aric helps her push through and later in the story (TBW) she discovers that she can push through anything for her family. And like a lightbulb lighting up in her brain, so many more doors are open to her. Doors that were always there but doors that might've been hidden by the darkness. And to my DnD party reading this (and if you're not, Aric is thoroughly disappointed in you) I AM KEEPING FEATHERS AND YOU CAN'T STOP ME!!! Enjoy my work and may the day-ball shine down upon thee for all of eternity!

Hannah Rosenstock

Pokeshroom

Hannah E. Rosenstock

Prologue

Aric is a mushroom farmer. They farm all kinds of mushrooms, red mushrooms, blue mushrooms, glowing mushrooms, floating mushrooms. And they do all kinds of stuff with those mushrooms. They grow them. They eat them. They make potions with them. But the thing they like to do the most with those mushrooms is learn about them. Learn how they grow, what effect they have on potions, are they edible? Maddy, on the other hand, hates mushrooms. She finds them weird and gross. But she wants Aric's approval more than she wants nothing to do with mushrooms. So now she's packing her bags to go off in the middle of nowhere to complete her own mushroom grimoire.

Chapter 1

I hurried down stairs to the kitchen where Aric sat on a small wooden stool, eating a shiny, golden mushroom.

"Took you long enough," they said, plopping onto the floor. "C'mon, we have to make it there before noon."

"I didn't sleep in that long!" I responded. Aric just glared up at me before hurrying me out the door and to the wagon.

"Go get in. I need to grab a few things first," Aric said while they hopped back inside, the white, stem door quickly closing behind them. I slowly made my way over to the cart. I opened the bloodwood door, its dark wood slightly scratching my hand. I tossed my leather draw bag off my shoulder and onto the bench across from where I was sitting. I put my arms around the half-wall behind me as a small black crackle, swooped in and landed on my shoulder.

"Hey Feathers, you joining me?" The crackle did not respond. He just stared at me before turning towards my bag and getting himself settled on my shoulder. "I'll assume that's a yes, then."

I waited for a bit with my eyes closed until I heard a faint creaking. I looked up to see Aric shuffling out of the circular door, books upon books in their arms, each one, a third of their size. They made their way over to the wagon and gently placed the books next to my bag. Then they went over to Andy, our resident redfeather froutwills, and untied her reins from the old, leaning fence post near the edge of the farm. Andy nuzzled them, her light brown feathers brushing over and under Aric's paws. Aric hopped onto the front of the wagon, grabbing ahold of Andy's reins. They turned back to me and smiled.

"Are you all ready to go, Maddy?" I turned around to face them. Feathers repositioned himself, annoyed at my sudden movement. I nodded before turning back around and shutting my eyes again.

Chapter 2

It was a while before we stopped. The wagon came to a sudden halt, shaking me awake. I sat up, Feathers fluttering around me. It seems he was also disturbed. To my left I noticed a long, glowing, stream. The water as blue as the sky yet as clear as a crystal. Small blue particles danced above it, dissolving when they strayed too far from the river. I've been here before. I groggily stepped out of the wagon, yawning as I approached the riverbed. Aric was kneeled down, their paw gracefully caressing the stream as it dampened their paw.

I untied my shoes and placed my feet in the water as I sat beside them. The cool waves gently ran up and down my ankles. It felt nice as it whistled by.

"It's about time you woke up," they said, not even bothering to turn my way.

"Why did we stop here?" I asked.

"Magic runs through this river, you know."

"I know," I mumbled, annoyed that they ignored my question.

"Go grab your bag," they said, standing up and making eye contact with me. Even at their full height, they were as tall as me sitting down. Then I felt a weight fall onto my lap.

"Thank you, Feathers," I said, handing my bag to Aric.

Then they tossed it into the river with a loud plop, scattering droplets of water onto the grass.

I stared at them in shock as all my gear I got just for today washed away with the current.

"You won't be needing that," they said, dusting off their paws. I was still frozen. They hopped back over to the wagon and ushered me over to join them. It took me a minute to process what happened before scurrying to hop on the cart as it pulled away. I made it on just as Andy started to speed up, Feathers floating down to land on my shoulder. I was silent for the rest of the ride.

Author's Note:

The haters turned me into Roblox. Also, all the names are completely made up. Sorry if your third cousin twice removed's dog is named Cleram or something.

Gabi Mueller

Burn Away the Dark

Gabi Mueller

The walls of the house were high and wide, with arching windows and pillars throughout the corridor. The glow of the early morning touched the windows with its golden fingers, warming the space while Veldra was growing colder and colder inside. She remembered coming on land and walking through a town while trying to hide her webbed fingers--the only part of her that stayed inhuman while in human form. She remembered a woman ask if she was looking for anything when she stopped at a stall in a market. Veldra saw the woman notice her fingers, and respond with a smile rather than shock. The woman's name, she learned, was Riendith. She remembered a different time they met, in a dim tavern. The light in was illuminating Riendith's face, casting shadows of her eyelashes and lighting up her smile. When Riendith announced that she needed to go home soon, she planted a brief kiss on Veldra's cheek. The feeling it left didn't evaporate quickly. She remembered the day that Riendith revealed that she could transform into a dragon. It came as a surprise, of course, but Veldra greeted the fact with joy. After all, Riendith didn't treat her like a monster upon seeing her webbed fingers.

Walking down the hall, Veldra spotted a door that was slightly ajar. It led to a large room--one much larger than her little bedroom. The walls were covered in tapestries depicting battles from long ago. Some of them involved dragons or ogres. When Veldra and Riendith had become mercenaries together, they saw many battles like them. They were hired by lords to do their dirty work, like storming a rival lord's palace or fighting their way to a sword in a stone (which, of course, no one involved could remove). Veldra would gallantly ride into battle on Riendith's dragon back, knocking knights off their horses and setting fire to anything and everything. They were never defeated.

And when they were done, Riendith would shift back into a human. The first time the two of them won a battle was when Veldra realized she was madly in love. Every battle after that, they shared warm kisses that seemed to last forever.

Until the last time.

A mysterious individual had written to them and hired them to steal four chests of gold from the tower in a castle. The two attackers hid in the forest behind it for a night until the early morning, when the sun was first peeking out from the grasslands to the east. Riendith shifted into a dragon, and Veldra pulled out her sword and climbed on her back. Approaching the castle, it became clear to

them that it could no longer be called a sneak attack. Heavily armed soldiers were lined up on the walls, all holding crossbows. When they spotted the pair, they started firing. Several arrows sunk through Riendith's scales, and she let out a roar, then collapsed. Veldra's foot was stuck under Riendith, making her an easy target for the soldiers. Grunting, she yanked it out just as an arrow flew past her. She picked it up off the ground and brought it to her nose. It smelled like spoiled milk. Just as she thought-- it was a tranquilizer.

Knights on horses began surrounding Veldra and Riendith, the light reflecting off their armor and weapons. Veldra stumbled back to Riendith, who, in her pain, transformed back into a human.

A man in colorful robes stepped forward. "You are hereby under arrest for murder theft, and numerous war crimes," he declared.

Riendith was starting to wake up--her fast metabolism while in dragon form meant that tranquilizers wore off quickly. "Did he say war crimes?" she mumbled.

Veldra took her hand. "I have no idea what lies he's spewing. Just rest until you can get your strength back. All the arrows you were struck with fell out when you shifted."

"Silence!" the man cried. He motioned towards several knights, and they pulled the pair apart.

"Was this all a trap?" Veldra yelled. The knight holding her right arm had removed his gloves and dug his bare fingernails into her arm, making her yelp.

The man rolled his eyes. "Of course it's a trap, I hired you, after all."

That made sense. They had been hired by letter from someone who only signed it as Lord C. Veldra thought nothing of it at the time--she'd gotten plenty of jobs from anonymous clients. Of course, they'd made many enemies over the time they'd been working as mercenaries, but neither Veldra nor Riendith had considered that someone would go this far just to catch them.

The man made some triumphant speech about how he had won. What happened next was a blur, although Veldra closed her eyes for most of it. She locked eyes with her beloved as the knights tied Riendith's hands behind her back with an old, coarse rope and forced her onto her knees. A knight raised his sword.

Veldra couldn't think about the rest. She was sent into the castle not long afterwards--the home of the man who introduced himself as Lord Cleram. He explained that he was starting a live collection of mystical, elusive creatures and that Riendith was too dangerous to keep but, with proper protection, Veldra was perfect for him. So he wasn't even trying to be some sort of hero. He just wanted a trophy that he could show off.

Twenty-four hours had passed since Veldra saw Riendith for the last time. Most of it was spent in her small, decrepit room, until she stepped out in the morning. She wandered the hall for a while--that was when she came across the room full of tapestries. She continued walking, wrapped in the wool blanket from her room until she came across two doors that were on opposite ends of the hall. Opening the door to her right, she saw it led to the courtyard. In the middle, next to a large fountain, there was a unicorn sitting. It had a strong body and a long, shimmering mane. Veldra had seen one before, when she and Riendith--no. She couldn't think about that.

Veldra went back inside, and opened the opposing door. It led to the grounds outside the palace. To her right was the forest she'd originally approached the castle from. She could just walk away, couldn't she? Just run back the way she came?

As Veldra came up to the forest, memories hit her. The blood spraying the ground at her feet...the scream slashing the air that might've been her own...the glinting of light off the sword....

"NO!" Veldra screamed aloud. She threw her blanket on the ground and ran straight towards the trees.

She felt herself crash into something--although it didn't hurt. Veldra stumbled back, then crept up to it again and put her trembling hand out. It made contact with an invisible barrier. Some sort of magic was keeping her within the castle grounds.

A tiny voice from her shoulder said, "We're not able to escape."

Veldra jumped and shouted a word that the author would be scolded for including. Sitting on her shoulder was a little faerie with large wings, only the height of her hand from the heel of the palm to the fingertips.

He flew to the ground and shouted, "Sit down! I want to be able to see your face."

Veldra timidly walked to where she had thrown her blanket and brought it to where the faerie was sitting. "How long has he kept you here?" she asked, sitting down and wrapping the blanket around her.

"I don't know for sure. It's been at least a year. I stopped counting the days at some point. You will too, I'm sure. I'm Datrefa, by the way."

"I'm Veldra," she responded. In the past, she'd been wary of giving her name to strangers, but for some reason, it didn't seem to matter anymore. "So how does the magic barrier work?"

Datrefa stepped onto a stone in the field, and picked a blade of grass with his tiny hands. He started ripping it apart--out of anxiety, Veldra assumed. "Cleram had a wizard build it. The way it works is that any being he's claimed as his own can't pass through it. It'll exist until he dies, and it'll still be up if you kill him. He has to die without any of us involved. And anyway, his collection is small at the moment--it would be hard to team up to murder him. It's just you, me, and Phoebe."

"Is that the unicorn?"

"Yup." Datrefa sat down and ran a hand through his hair. The blade of grass was in pieces. "That's what I call her. Cleram didn't name her, or even ask her. You think unicorns can talk?"

"Maybe, if we listen hard enough," Veldra murmured. "So anyways, how did Cleram catch you?"

"He sent a knight out into the grove where I lived. Caught me completely by surprise. Nothing very interesting." Datrefa put a piece of ripped-up grass in his mouth and started chewing it up. "I don't know how he even found out about my existence. It's possible he can just sense where we are, but if that was true, he'd have a lot more of us. What about you? I didn't see anything that happened. I heard roaring, though; was there a dragon or something?"

"He...lured me here."

The faerie spat out the grass. "Well, that's obviously not all there was to it. It's okay, though. I didn't tell you everything either, and I'm not going to."

As time went on, Veldra's hope that she could escape grew smaller and smaller. Datrefa had been right--she stopped counting the days. The two of them grew close, confiding in each other about the inconveniences that plagued them consistently. Datrefa complained about how hard it was to be tiny in a world built for people Veldra's size, and Veldra lamented about how she didn't get enough water, and frequently lay in the courtyard fountain just to feel like she was back in the sea. Even when she was with Riendith, she went back to the water frequently. But she never spoke of her. And Datrefa never spoke about what was done to him. Maybe he lost someone as well. As they conversed, the two prisoners put more and more of their souls into each other--at least, that was how Veldra saw it.

Night was about to fall. The last bits of day were slipping away into the hills, where they were swallowed by the dark. A dry, cool wind rustled the trees and sneaked into the castle through windows and doors left open. Phoebe, the unicorn, seemed agitated, as if she could tell something was going to happen.

Veldra was sitting in her room--she wanted to sleep. But she smelled something. Something that smelled wrong.

Then a scream pierced the air.

Veldra burst out of her room. A servant she didn't know ran past.

"What's going on?" Veldra asked.

"Fire. It started in the kitchen. Some fool let it burn without supervision," the servant said as drops of sweat fell from her face.

The two of them ran through the hall towards the door leading outside. Then Veldra heard a cry from the room she saw when she was new to the castle--the room with the tapestries. She rushed in.

The tapestries were burning. Smoke filled the space. And in the middle under a fallen beam of wood, was Lord Cleram with Datrefa in his fist.

"Vel!" Datrefa shouted, squirming between Cleram's fingers. Veldra sprinted to where they were.

Cleram grabbed her and tried to push her in the flaming tapestries, but he wasn't able to fully extend his shoulder--it was held back by the beam, which looked to be about five feet long and extremely heavy. Veldra leaned down and bit his hand, causing him to shriek and drop Datrefa.

Veldra grabbed Datrefa and ran out the door as the flames in the room grew larger. The beam of wood caught on fire, and they heard Cleram yell something that sounded like "the haters turned me into--" as the two of them ran in the direction of the doors outside.

The castle was fully on fire. The only thing not burning was the stone outer walls. There were a few servants huddled together outside as they watched it--literal light burning away metaphorical darkness. It was poetic, really.

It was nighttime by then. The barrier was broken--after all, Cleram died without anyone killing him. Datrefa decided to find his home, and the servants, many of them crying, scattered to different places. Miraculously, Phoebe the unicorn somehow trotted out the front with not a mark on her--not even any ash or soot.

And Veldra? She didn't know what to do. For once in her life, she had no idea what would happen next. She didn't know if she'd ever see Datrefa again, or ever learn what Cleram did to him. All she had was a little light inside her. Whispering that it would be okay. *Everything will be okay.*

Veldra walked towards the hills in the east, where it wouldn't be long before the sun emerged. Nothing stopped her from climbing up a hill not a magic barrier nor her own fear. Everything will be okay, she told herself.

And everything was okay. There was a sea on the other side of the hills. The waves crashed against the sand with unmatched power. Veldra could step in and return to her true form--a powerful beast of the sea.

But something held her back. Of course, she'd experienced horrible things on land, but the land had given her companionship. It had given her love. The sea gave her nothing but solitude, and throughout the time she'd lived there, an emptiness existed in her soul. Riendith filled that emptiness in a way she'd never known before. And once she was gone, Datrega was something like a substitute.

Veldra didn't want to spend her life swimming, eating fish, and sleeping. She wanted to have adventures. She wanted to heal from her grief. She wanted to have friends. She wanted to laugh, to drink, to cry, to *live*.

Veldra turned back to the hills.

Author's Note:

This small collection of ten poems was started with the prompt, "Write a Letter to Your Past Self," which yielded the seventh poem in this assortment. While writing "Letter to a Past Self," the process pushed me to look back on the past year or so, which was when I decided to "Write what I know" and use this project to reflect on myself while also using creativity, the poetry skills I've gained while at CAA, and the theme of "And There Was Light!" (reflected in the final poems) to create my final product.

M. J. D.

Life, Learning, and a Letter

M. J. D.

Write What you Know

I have been told
To write what I know,
So I'm looking for
All of life's
Certainties.

But dictionaries
Leave me with questions
For whoever decided
The meaning of things.

Textbooks fail
To teach me lessons,
So I run with guesses
And my own gut instincts.

Telling me to simply
Write what I know
Is certainly not the easy
Advice that I need.

I am no longer sure
I can trust what's inside
I normally go off of feelings.
To tell me this is to get me thinking
with parts of my mind
To which I have no key.

"The apple is red."

Yes, that may be true,
But look at the green spot
On the bottom.

Am I tricked out of a pass
I'm supposed to have?
Well, I'll give it the best that I've got!
Because today in all truth,
I've got only time
And thin, blank, lines upon lines.

What have I learned?

Suppose I could start
From the very beginning?
I don't remember my birth,
So I'll give you the next best thing I can do
And start with what I believe *is* true.

I feel a lot
Sometimes too much
I've heard "It must be tiring!"
To care so much
for the good and the bad
And end up always spiraling.

Good people can be wrong
Or come off far too strong
And hurt others in the process
But in the end, we are all humans
With a great need to practice forgiveness

When someone has it rough
It can be tough
For them to see the light
So I'll try to help them
In hopes that they will find it.
And maybe one day
I can do something right.

Lunch

I sit at the table
With too many people
Laughing at jokes
I don't get.

If I feel sad,
I pinch myself,
And try my best to forget.

If they ask me a question
I'll answer it,
Planning things to say and do
So someday I'll,
Fit into the puzzle that is this crew.

What did I do

Today when walked up to the table
the world around seemed to stop.

No chatter,
No chipper,
No smiles or
Chitchat.

Today when I walked up to the table
Was when I was told to go.
No one wanted to be seen with
Me:
Who's different
With rumors spiraling round
That no one wants to stand up to
For fear of being dragged down

Breakdown

It's a cry in the night
Not unlike a wolf's howl
But this one goes all-around unheard.

From floors of showers
To hidden in sight
These cries are absorbed by Quiet
Into early morning hours

Leave

Today, I tried,
I really did.
I saw a new group
To sit with.
Asked to join
And they all got up with
expressions loud enough
That I knew
when they came back
what they said would be:
We do not want you here,
Now or ever,
Leave.

Letter to a Past Self

If I could go back
A month or a year
My advice to myself would be:.

Cup your ears,
Brace for fear.
Ground your feet
and breathe
thinking of you
I laugh,
now beauty
In naivete
is simple to see.
By now we've grown a shell
To shield us from all darkened hells.
We stand alone
Tighten our bolts and screws
Only when we let others in
Do all things holy fall right through.

When time Passes...

Eventually
The rumors go quiet
And so does the pain I carry
But neither of them will truly be silent
Until I find some real filling
Instead of just a patch
To fix the hole inside me.

Life is not Like a Movie

Life is not a movie
One can follow and predict
Or understand each character,
Relating to the script.

The ups and downs of living
Don't match any story ark
Or fit into neat frames of film
Focus planted, the sound sharp.

A Better Understanding

I've found a few people
With whom I can spend my time.
And through this past experience,
I may have better learned
How to be and stay kind.

Life is Not a Movie, *Cont.*

Life is not a movie,
For Its spirals, shakes, and evening-outs
Cannot be caught on camera.
Films are short and end finitely
Or finish abruptly but wrapped,
What can never be known is the outcome

of a rewind or restart.

Life isn't anything like a movie
It's real life and will forever be.
For all of us are far too special
To be boxed into a screen

We are unable to be switched off
Or paused in time for convenience.
The light from every one of us,
Is shining brightly, our souls are beaming.

Author's Note: I wrote both of these. I don't hate them. Love, Ilana
Ilana Kaufman

Collected Works

Ilana Kaufman

Wednesdays, Am I Right?

The office walls are white and sticky, filled with polite people.

You're told to sit on the chairs so soft you sink. But you sit anyway, your choices, a tall and pretty woman, in a seat, at your side, as older people get called into examination. You wait and wait, with nothing but a blank wall and a broken phone to fight the boredom.

Eventually, they'll call you. Your choices will stand up first, flattening her skirt. As she talks to the receptionist you will get a blue bracelet, the only color that they'll let in. A QR code is sewed in with the number 47726. They lead you in, your choices never a step behind.

They check your heart, your spit, your ear, every nook and cranny where they can jam their fingers. They don't find anything new, why would they? You haven't changed in years.

You must wait again, the man will be here soon. Nothing bad will happen, they say, and your choices agree, but you can't seem to even remember why you came.

You stare at the wall again, your choices tapping away on her computer besides you. The same sticky white you saw before, and your phone hasn't magically started to work. You could know the time, but you can't read clocks. You sit there, alone, really, with nothing but the ticking to remind you that you can hear.

The man walks in, and he checks everywhere your choices demand, as if they didn't check those places earlier. Your choices sit back, smiling to herself. The man says something about how sensory issues can be caused by a number of things, you may have had an infection, or a medication went wrong. Which is fine, all fine, except you don't have sensory issues.

You open your mouth to speak, but your choices interrupt, fake tears spilling from her eyes. She tells a story about how as a baby you were fine with people yelling all the time and how you never once complained but now you simply can't tolerate loud noises. You say that not wanting people to scream in your ear and having sensory issues are two very different things, but the man only stares blankly before asking the choices another question about when you developed these 'issues.'

You fall into the chair, nothing but a drowning mess screaming at the man to help you. They can't seem to hear you anymore, the man doesn't even spare you a glance. You have no choice but to let the man take your blood, your voice, your DNA, anything he can grab. They don't find anything, but with the water in your lungs, you can't even manage an *'I told you so.'*

He grabs more and more of you, searching for the answer to a problem she made up. It's good for science, probably, but you're still in that class, how would you know?

When your body shuts down, with nothing left to grab, the man asks you what happened?
You can only manage to laugh, but nobody notices you.
all you see is white, sticky, walls.

Flat-Footed

“Do you miss yesterday?”
You asked me this, after the event.
When I was told my foot would be taken away,

You asked me if I missed yesterday.
But I know what you meant.
It wasn’t loving what you implied that day.

But, yes? I miss yesterday.
In the way you miss a scent
It’s gone, oh well. It’s not something I can replay.

I don’t hate today.
I don’t wish to go back to before the event.
I can enjoy my body yesterday,

And I can enjoy it today.
It can’t run or dance, but I have no resent.
I might in a sense miss yesterday,

But I am content with today.
I know you’ll say that wasn’t your intent.
But someday,
I hope you stop crying over my yesterdays.

Author's Note: My poem describes the experience of feeling a lack of creativity after the loss of somebody important in your life. Feeling as though you don't have any art to create and a lack of inspiration. This poem is a description of my experience these last two weeks in creative writing. I had been struggling to come up with anything that felt worth writing, so i wrote about having nothing to write.

Note

Kooper Kniaz

A perfect poem

Kooper Kniaz

I'd like to write a perfect poem
Rhyming, rhythmic, and neat
But I've had nothing to say as of late

I was often overwhelmed with thoughts I'd need to write
So writing a poem was never a great feat
And as always, I'd like to write a perfect poem

So I sit in the dark with just a small light
And stay unmoving in my seat
Because I have had nothing to say as of late

I sit with memories of you straight through the night
Brutally aware of my own heartbeat
(and the silence of yours) but still I would like to write the perfect poem

Losing you was never truly my fight
But still I will try to save you a seat
And still I've had nothing to say as of late

But I will fight to find something to write
To get up on stage and speak it into the heat
So here I tried to write the perfect poem
While still having nothing to say as of late

Author's Note:

The theme for this year was light, and I interpreted that as something good coming from something bad, seemingly impossible to get through: the idea of hope. No matter how many rough drafts we go through, or how many times you contemplate variations of your life, none of them will ever be perfect. Sometimes, you have to embrace the flaws to get to where you want to be, something that I've been struggling with. Through the process of writing this piece, I realized that it's okay to not always be perfect, to just be happy with who you are in the moment.

Micki Mermelstein

Imperfection

Micki Mermelstein

Our stories are never perfect,
Crossed out sentences, dashed out paragraphs,
With hidden truths in every line.
A rainbow of ideas, of meaning.

With each passing chapter or verse,
A part of us falls, though tears never come.
And rather, our blood coats the page,
Darkness blocking out all the in-between.

The world was dark, ever so dark, and seemingly endless. My body was stone, frozen in fear. My limbs were weighing me down as I struggled to breathe. Voices kept chattering around me, but the pounding in my head drowned them all out. I was lost; lost in memories, lost in thought. I wanted to stay hidden from reality and at the same time, I wanted to be found. I wanted to curl up in my mom's warm embrace, but I knew what she would say.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I made my way through the room, ignoring the shouts and cries coming from all around. I eased the door shut behind me, as quietly as I could. Taking a seat on the porch where I hoped no one would find me, I dove back into thoughts of home.

A window to the other side,
Shaded and stained, a portion of the truth.
Through the glass portal lies a storm;
Bright lightning streaks met by roaring thunder.

Windows break, falling to the floor.

Stained glass shards lining empty window frames.

Scattered holes across wooden walls.

Shattered glass no longer drowns out the noise.

A rush of sound came all at once, leading my ears to bleed. I wanted to go anywhere else, to be anywhere else, but here. I was trapped; trapped in this land seemingly filled with smiles and shouts of joy, trapped in a mixed world of reality and dreams. I could not even go outside to escape the noise because a raging storm was flooding the square.

Each crack of thunder and flash of lightning renewed my fears. Trees were shaking in the howling wind, each movement a risk of falling. All my hope bottled inside shattered free, leaving me in the omnipresent dark. I was lost. My dread was dragging me down, with no chance for survival.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a light. It was not unlike lightning, but as I saw it, I knew it was something else, a sign. As it approached, I felt the corners of my mouth twitch upward, and for the first time in so long, my heart felt just a bit lighter in my chest.

The masks we wear to hide our face,

Could shatter at the strike of any hand.

Porcelain figures, chiseled faces;

No longer needed or necessary.

Fireflies float through the blank space,

Their melancholy light piercing the dark.

Broken pieces come together,

Writing stories that are never perfect.

Author's Note: *And there was light.* Although the hole provides plenty, most of the characters would be a lot more miserable if they weren't all falling together. They are each other's light, making the fall more pleasant for one another. The story started, as most do, from the first line (the part in normal font, not the part in script). I'd been thinking to do a story where everything was the opposite of its connotation (like a hole being bright and inviting instead of dark and foreboding). Well, I didn't get past that first line. Eventually, the story worked its way into how it is now. Enjoy!

Seven People in a Hole

Ruth Sharlein

The first person

There is an endless hole in the ground. It's warm and bright and inviting, so I jump in.

The second person

Ooh! What's that? I skip over. A hole! It's a hole! Fun! I poke it. Hmmm. I put a leg in. Hmmm. I put my other leg in. Doesn't Hmmm sound good? I think so. Oh! I fell in. I'm still falling. Hmmm. Fun!

The third person

No. I can't. This is too much. Just too much. I run, though there's nowhere to go. I need to get away. I can't get away. I'm trapped. Trapped. I fall to the ground, sobbing. I just can't. It's just too much. No. ...And there's a hole. Why is there a hole? I don't care why there's a hole. I look in. I can't see the bottom. I don't care. I need to get away. I let myself tumble in.

The fourth person

This feels so good. *I* feel so good. There is nothing else in the world I would rather be doing right now than taking this walk. I close my eyes and pause, just savoring the moment. I don't want to open them. This is perfect and I am perfect and the world is perfect in this moment. I step forward, and that's when I fall.

The fifth person

My feet pound on the ground. I hear panting behind me - it sounds closer. As fast as I can run, it's never fast enough. I risk a glance behind me and feel a jolt of terror - they're closer than I thought. Not again. Please not again. I don't want to need to run away from them, but I'm forced to. Even though they'll always catch me in the end. I feel a sweaty palm connect with my back. As they shove me, I brace for the sting of tumbling to the ground. But the sting never comes. There's nothing below me to break my fall.

The sixth person

Why is there a hole here? Well, in my opinion, the only way to *really* find out something is to experience it. In I go!

The seventh person

There's a hole. I jump in.

Seven people in the hole.
All falling forever
But they are together
Somehow all caught up
Though they dropped in sometimes hours apart.

And the seven
Laughing, talking, crying forever
Fall endlessly
Together

Together...

One has seen it all. Comforted by the endless warm light, watching from below as the other six jumped, fell, or stumbled their way in. By the time the last falls, the first is used to the endless motion, watching as the others panic.

Eventually, they all settle down, though many struggle to truly accept the fact of never ending and what that means. The first has always known. The second has a seemingly endless supply of curious energy. The third is... at war internally. The fourth refuses to accept it. The fifth isn't sure what to make of it. The sixth did not want this type of adventure. The seventh doesn't care.

Tears are shed. Many. They fall alongside the seven.

But it's not all bad. They talk, they laugh, they get to know each other. Nothing like falling through an endless hole to help make friends!

So the seven
Fall endlessly
Together.