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Poetry

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Beware of Autumn

by Elizabeth Elow

Autumn, oh how I love thee
 Beautiful colors surround all around me
 Cat's meow echoes in the hollowness of
 the night
 Dark shadows creep up, without a flicker of
 light in sight
 Every Hollow's Eve, my heart skips a beat
 Fire crackles and burns, not a whisper is to
 be heard
 Gourds, pumpkins and hay bales, galore
 How the décor must bring on the horror
 Indian corn, mums line the porch
 Jam, cider, apple pie, oh how I might die
 Knitting and stitching, a scarf so warm
 Leaves falling in chaos all round
 Moon so bright, the werewolves delight
 Not a single cloud in the sky
 Oh, wait, what is that sound?
 Popcorn and scary movies, oh my!
 Quietness fills the room, as screams echo in
 the distance
 Rustling of feathers, as the crow crows
 Stay far far away, from the haunted house,
 he woes
 Trick or treat, the children say, but they are
 out to play
 Unicorns, fairies and witches, oh how they
 give me the twitches
 Vampires and shapeshifters, lurk in the
 shadows, awaiting their next victim to

dishevel
 Wind whistles all around, a chill causing me
 to make a sound
 X-rays show the skeletons bones, so white it
 gave me a fright
 Yellow rotten teeth, bulging bloodshot eyes,
 "Brains!" is on the zombie's mind
 Zoo of creatures, out in the night, beware of
 the knife.

Fly, Bird, Fly*by Elizabeth Elow*

Fly, bird, fly
 Into the sky, with broken wings
 The pains of yesterday are fleeting
 By the pale moonlight

Into the sky with broken wings
 Soaring among the trees
 By the pale moonlight
 The dew is fresh on the grass

Soaring among the trees
 The past will not contain me; I'm free!
 The dew is fresh on the grass
 A new perspective, the scenery forever
 changed

The past will not contain me; I'm free!
 And the stars twinkle against the sky
 A new perspective, the scenery forever
 changed
 While the joys of tomorrow emerge

And the stars twinkle against the sky
 The pains of yesterday are fleeting
 While the joys of tomorrow emerge
 Fly, bird, fly

Peace, The Ignored One*By Elizabeth Elow*

I am the wind
 I am the grass
 I am the flowers of the field
 I am here and there
 I am everywhere you look
 I am not noticed.
 I am the sunshine on your face
 I am the melody of the blue bird's song
 I am the joy in a loved one's smile
 I am the one who calms your nerves
 I am peace ignored.
 I am here
 I am there
 I am everywhere before you
 I am the first sip of your morning coffee
 I am the kiss goodnight from a lover
 I am the laughter from a silly joke
 I am the one who is taken for granted
 So, who am I to you?

The Things I Carry

by Rebekah Hedeem

**Second Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award,
Poetry**

Worrying thoughts,
Cloudy mind.
Lips peeling, hands shaking,
Vision fading and focussing on to one
 singular location like sniper focussing
 on their target.

Shakily finding something to grasp,
A necklace,
A simple chain with a charm.
Symbolizing love, loyalty and friendship- to
 remind myself where I'm from.

Voices around me begin filling my mind,
Reversing the hyper focus that once
 encapsulated my every thought.
Returning to the present,
I begin familiarizing myself with any
 person willing to engage with a girl
 cloaked in a smile.

Hiding who I am in a deck of cards,
Never showing the Ace of Spades and
 holding my heart close like that of the
 necklace,
Flaunting every flush to gain recognition that
 may never come,

I turn to good works, attempting to fix every
 broken soul in hopes that it will fix
 mine.

Concluding that fixing others will not result
 in a happier me,
I change my focus on loving instead of fixing,
Building healthier relationships instead of
 focussing on filling a void,
And staying loyal to myself.

Peaceful thoughts,
Clear mind.
Lips smooth, hands still,
Vision clear, gently focusing on what's before
 instead of the emptiness that lies
 behind.

Chocolate Chip Cookies

by Gabriella Hudziak

Beautiful browned dough,
chunks of dark and milk chocolate,
the whole thing the size of my hand.

A favorite treat for my sister and me,
When we were four and five respectively.
Splitting just one in half was almost too
much to eat.

It's still a favorite today, something we look
forward to,
on Fridays, the finales of long, grueling
weeks.
spent among the books, the scent of brewing
coffee milling in the air.

Maybe not every week,
but every so often it'll call us both back.
It's a destresser that we both share.

Even though we'll now get two,
sometimes we'll share the bag the cookies
come in,
and just break off pieces of both.

Chapped Lips

by Isabella Hudziak

Mountains have
formed on my lips
Bumps and valleys
take shape. The rivers
and streams have run
dry. The wind slivers
sharp and wraps
these mountains
to make them
unsteady,
fragile, and raw.

Through

the cavern a giant of pink
rumbles the pe ace. The peaks
tumble, quake, te ar and fly until
a rough, pained hum
reverberates aloud. Flecks & specks
of hardened skin wears &
she tears from the wisp
of winter's kiss

Lemons*by Megan Nolan***First Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Poetry**

They say “when life gives you lemons, make
lemonade”.

When I get a lemon in my water at a
restaurant,
I take it out.

I throw that lemon as far away from my glass
as possible.

I don’t even give it a chance,
gone before my lips hit the cold glass.

Now clearly, the saying isn’t about actual
lemons.

So, how many figurative lemons have I
thrown out of my figurative water?
How many opportunities have I let pass me
by?

How many memories did I miss out on?
How many people did I let slip away without
realizing it?

How many times did I throw the lemon out
because I was too afraid to try it?

When will I stop letting life move on without
me and start making lemonade instead?

The Red Light*by Megan Nolan*

Sitting at a red light, watching the other
lanes move.

Sitting at a red light, watching the cars line
up behind me.

Sitting at a red light, searching for the perfect
song to listen to next.

Suddenly,
everything stops.

No one is moving.

We are at a standstill,
something I love.

All the lights of this busy intersection are red.

For a split second, the lights lag and no one
can move.

For a split second, we are all sitting at a red
light together.

The world is silent for that one quick
moment.

We all stare at the light, willing it to change
so we can go again.

We look at each other, but try not to make
eye contact.

We wait and wait for what feels like an

eternity.

We cannot handle the silence, the stopping,
the waiting.

We are movers, ready to get on with our day.

And suddenly,
it changes.

Green light,
and we are gone again.

Moving on with our lives, forgetting that split
second, where we were all red together.

Take a Minute

by Megan Nolan

Surrounded by uncertainty.
Surrounded by questions.
Surrounded by chaos.

Take a minute, I say.
Look up at the sky.

See the moon?
It is the same.
It did not change.

See the way it comes out every night?
Despite the challenges of the day, it comes
back.
Shining above us through this darkness.
In its variety of beautiful sizes and shapes.

Look up at that moon, it will bring us back to
normal for a second.
Look up at the moon, it will connect us when
we cannot be together.

While the world is no longer the same as it
used to be,
hold on to what we still have.

Take a minute and take it all in.

Let the moon show you what we have not
lost.

Let the moon bring you peace.
 Let the moon bring you comfort.

And let the moon bring you the reminder
 that,
 if it can withstand the troubles of the day
 and still find the power to shine, so can
 you.

Truth or Dare

by Megan Nolan

The world dares you not to be you.

It tells you to hide,
 It tells you to cover up,
 It tells you to lie,
 It tells you to pretend.

But what if you take the truth instead of the
 dare?

Tell your truth to the world that dares you to
 hide your light.

Tell your truth to the world that dares you to
 cover up your flaws.

Tell your truth to the world that dares you to
 lie about your feelings.

Tell your truth to the world that dares you to
 pretend you are someone else.

Then, turn around and dare the world to
 accept your truths,
 for they are real and they are yours to tell.

Icarus*by Danae Rivera*

Darling, Dearest, Dear

Some things make you so sad to hear
 Self-destruction has done it again
 This is to be my end

The sky beckoned me like a windowsill to
 your room
 These wings of mine are melds of wax and
 feathers and earthly devices
 Far inferior to your heavenly glow

Each touch you give sends sun kisses down
 my shoulders
 Sweet kisses litter my cheeks like rain and
 I'm falling
 I am falling again but your kisses burn my
 shoulders and stain my skin
 I am falling backwards

Falling for you for the second time
 Smothered In the oils of these earthly melds
 I fizzle and burn out

Divine Eyes and a body of Stardust*by Danae Rivera*

Come my love
 Let me taste the softness of your skin
 As I drink in the starlight of your eyes
 I am made holy and divine by the gravity of
 your gaze

Bless me with a night of calm and free of
 strife
 Abduct me from my woes and pain
 Let me sleep like a child in the garden of
 Eden once more

Place a gift upon my brow and shield me
 from all that lurks and creeps in my
 halls
 My dream catcher
 My Eden
 My sun and moon

I am yours
 At your command
 Now and forevermore

~ & ~
**Art and
Photography**
~ & ~



Punabbhava

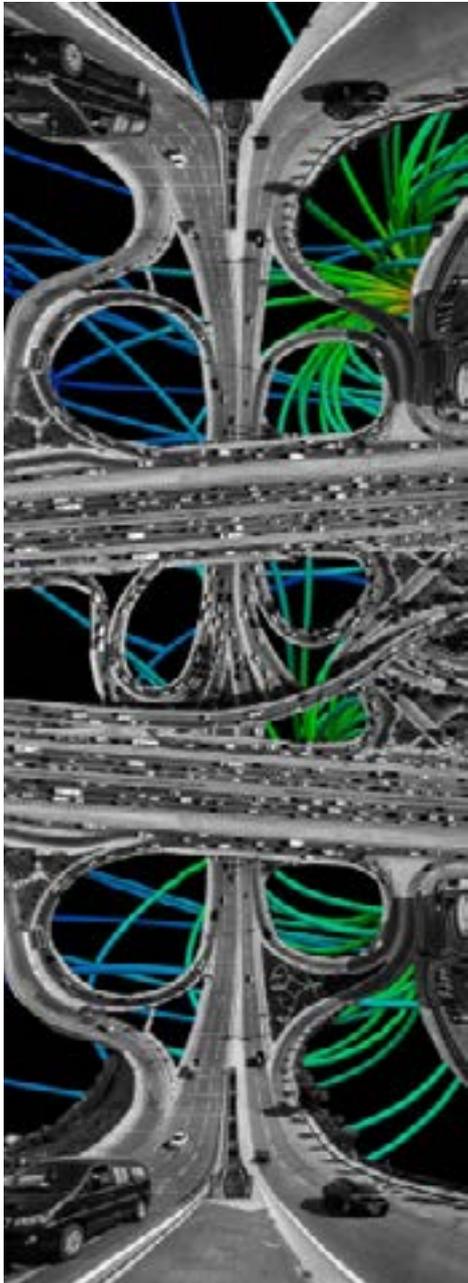
by Dr. Jeff Miller

**Trilakshana**

by Dr. Jeff Miller

**Sota**

by Dr. Jeff Miller



Dyson Traffic
by Kyle Riecker



Travel 1 & Travel 2
by Kyle Riecker



Untitled
by Kyle Riecker



Priorities
by Kyle Riecker



Water on Rocks Jr.
by Anabella Rossi



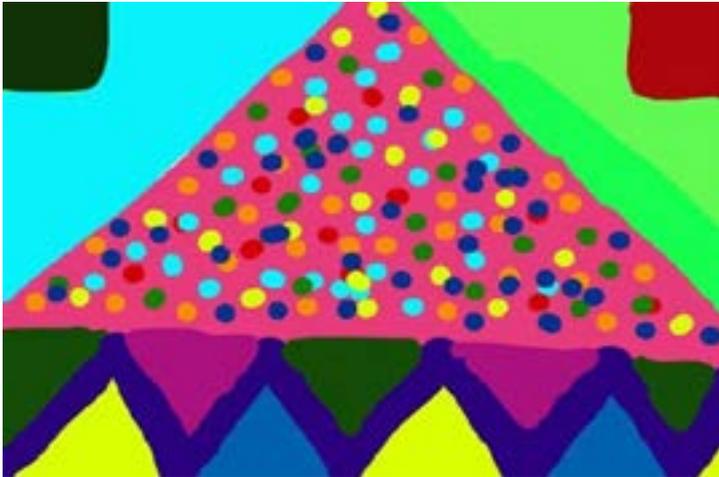
Shrooms
by Anabella Rossi



Holland Farms
by Anabella Rossi



Water on Rocks Sr.
by Anabella Rossi

**Confetti**

by Emmalyn Ylaya

~ & ~
**Fiction and
Prose**
~ & ~

Plant Power

by Kaitlyn Egan

We were face to face, alone in the sticky hot forest. The slight breeze felt heavy and the midnight crickets seemed to scream. His cruel, empty eyes met mine. There was something too familiar about the muscular, black figure before me. As I tried to speak, foul vomit came out. Regret flooded my system, this is not what I paid for.

Up to this point I felt so stuck in life. My once fun filled free spirit, interested in late night dancing and early morning talks with the sun turned quiet and suppressed. I was still meditating every morning, except for those that I accidentally woke him while tiptoeing out of bed. I was still journaling, although I had to constantly find new hiding spots for my words from him. I was even still eating my beautiful whole foods, though it meant cooking two separate meals and sneaking in bites of mine between his disapproving glares. I was doing all the things that used to set me free, keep me happy, and feel fully alive, but they no longer were enough. Everyday I woke with more anxiety than the day before, my stomach knotted tighter, my nails bitten shorter, and the light in my eyes duller.

As I laid not fully awake but in my heightened state of consciousness one night two weeks prior, she came to me, mother

Ayahuasca. I cannot remember how or what happened exactly, but since that night this plant medicine was the only thing on my mind. She consumed my days with endless history, research, data, and stories. I sifted through the good experiences, the traumatic ones, and all of the strange in between. I read all of the stories and knew that some people simply fell asleep under the pulsating stars, feeling like they wasted their ceremony. Meanwhile, others faced the gates of Hell and fought violently. Others purged out of both ends and ran around naked without a care in the world. The one thing most people had in common however, was that she changed their lives. People were able to understand their purposes, heal their traumas, and most intriguing to me, get unstuck. That is when I realized that mother Ayahuasca was telling me it was my time to meet her.

Not once did I look back or doubt that I must follow through with this, not as I spent my savings on booking a last minute flight to Peru, not as I came up with the perfect lie as to why he could not come with me, and especially not as he tried to tie me to the bed the night before I left. Only two hours before my first ceremony I was meditating peacefully in my suite. I had just finished my organic, vegan, gluten-free, everything free green juice. I wrote with my deep blue ink pen in my cheetah print journal my intentions: figure out what was blocking me, reconnect with myself, and experience true freedom.

My footsteps from my suite to the outside ceremony circle felt light and as if they were being guided forward for me. Everything was exactly as it should be, after all she had told me to do this and my gut approved, my intuition is never wrong. Even as the thick, syrupy dark brown liquid entered my throat, I felt ready. It was only at this specific moment that the medicine started to affect me and I started to trip, where I felt his masculine, oppressive presence, that I began to regret my journey to Peru.

There I was in this psychedelic state, his hot angry breath with the faint smell of corona with two limes causing me to purge again. It was so familiar, but I had not figured out exactly who or what this figure meant for me. I tried to call out again, and this time instead of vomit I was able to scream. Immediately I felt the presence of soft hands on my shaking shoulders, releasing me from my trip for a brief moment. It was the beautiful woman guide of the ceremony, Aiyana. I was reminded of my breath and inhaled the thick air of the night. Just as I started to gain my composure I fell back into the trip and felt the eyes of the presence glare at me with lasers of jealousy. Burning tears filled my eyes, a feeling so familiar I almost took comfort in. The comfort was quickly interrupted by a sudden immense pressure in my chest. The black figure had grown vine-like hands that reached toward my chest. They wrapped my ribs and

pulled me in, I was suffocating in the dark figure's existence. As the dark filled my vision, a terrible screaming music entered my ears stealing the last bit of control I had. I believed I was experiencing something worse than death. My mother was right, my friend was right, I even started to think he was right, I should not have come. As I came to this realization something inside me surged up and out through my eyes. With every fiery tear that dropped to the vibrant grass below, I felt it, them, leaving my body. With each painful tear, the music softened, my vision lightened, and the pressure around my chest released. I was unsure at the time what it was specifically, but I knew that it was something repulsive, old, and stubborn, but important.

The figure before me weakened as it watched me in this moment. The more I sobbed, the weaker it got. Simultaneously, the more I sobbed the stronger I stood. I did not even notice that the guide's supportive touch had left me. Next I heard a voice, the most elegant, earthly, supernatural voice I could never accurately describe. It told me, "You did well, your soul is strong. That is why you are here". These words echoed like a lullaby that left me in a deep sleep.

As I opened my eyes I felt disoriented. Not because I was back in my suite with the calm blue walls and soft, supportive sheets, but because for the first time in months, for the first time since I met him, my stomach

felt normal. I breathed a sigh of relief that my trip was over and I had made it safely to bed. As I sat with this feeling, I walked to the breakfast lounge where we were to meet for our morning discussion. The lounge was a small circular room with handwoven red carpet lined with mats for each of us to sit on. Apparently the calmness in my stomach let me oversleep, so I had to take the last seat next to a guy who looked completely out of place. He looked the exact opposite of a guy who would travel to the middle of a forest in Peru to take a psychedelic drug administered by indigenous Shamans just to 'find' himself. He wore a black Carhartt polo, khaki shorts, and gray vans. His hair was freshly cut, his face was cleanly shaved, and his build was strong and muscular. Amongst the crowd of people with long, unkempt hair, free flowing unmatched clothing, and meekly built bodies, it was no wonder this guy sat next to the only empty seat.

He smirked as I rushed to sit down next to him and he sarcastically whispered, "Rough night?". Not realizing why he said this I brushed it off, sat down, and replied "Hi I'm Sophia." to which he responded, "The name's Brian". The Shamans interrupted our conversation with song and dance, after which Aiyana spoke. Aiyana, a part of the Achua tribe has been leading Ayahuasca ceremonies for many years. Her deeply wrinkled skin and long gray hair could not mask the beauty of her soul as she spoke to us about our first

ceremony. She mentioned how mother Ayahuasca was pleased about our openness and that Aiyana had never seen the plant work through one of us so deeply the first night. As she pointed to me and asked me to share my experience, I started to understand Brian's initial comment. I hesitantly rose and began telling my story of my psychedelic experience of the night before. As I got to the part where the dark figure appeared everyone's faces grew fearful, their eyes widened, and I noticed Brian cover his mouth in shock. I knew that everyone has a different experience with the plant and that some are darker journeys than others, but their faces made me worried and I started speaking quieter and slower. Aiyana picked up on my tension and encouraged me to finish the story, after which I was relieved to sit back down.

My tension only grew however as more people shared their stories. An older woman with long lilac hair and a beautiful flowing green tunic spoke about her talk with the stars. She spent the night learning about where she had come from and speaking to her ancestors, it was full of peace and comfort. Another woman, this one seemed closer to my age who had brown speckled glasses and was very thin, spoke about how she had come to heal her Lyme's Disease. She told of beautiful light being creatures that gently massaged her entire body. She woke up this morning with more energy and less pain than she had felt since her diagnosis, something

she credited to the light beings. With this story I grew scared, why was my experience so traumatic? I had felt better this morning, but why couldn't the light beings have visited me? Why did I have to face the dark figure, suffocate, then painfully purge out of my mouth and eyes to get here? If this was my experience with the lighter dose, what would happen tonight with the full dose?

My thoughts consumed me as Brian stood up to speak. It turns out his experience was quite opposite of mine. After he drank the brew, he felt calm and his senses were heightened, yet that is all that occurred. He lay in the hammock gazing at the stars waiting for something to happen, but instead he drifted off to sleep. I couldn't tell if I was jealous of his experience or if I felt sorry that his night was wasted and that mother Ayahuasca did not connect with him. We sat close as the few others finished telling their stories. The integration ceremony closed with more song and dance that was drowned out by my impending fear of the night ahead of me.

As the Shamans were brewing the next batch of Ayahuasca and people were starting to meditate their intentions in preparation, I confided in Brian that I was scared about the next ceremony. He was easy to open up to I think because he was so different from everyone else and he too had a strange experience his first night. I told him how I wasn't sure if I could go through with the second ceremony, but he encouraged me to speak with Aiyana

before making up my mind.

Aiyana must have sensed the need to talk to her because she approached me soon after my conversation with Brian. I felt her same soft touch from the night before, which brought back all of the traumatic memories with it. Aiyana felt me tense up, but began to speak, "I know you are fearful child, but you must realise mother Ayahuasca is of the highest intelligence. She works through souls deeply only when they are on earth for a higher purpose. She only shows what the soul can handle and must handle to clear the blockages to your path. Your spirit is growing, your soul is expanding, freeing from past traumas. You must always respect her method and see through what she called you here for." With these words I gained confidence and walked with Aiyana to receive the first brew of the night.

Cautiously, I sipped the earthy liquid and anxiously awaited its effects. I laid on my mat and focused on my breath, deep inhales and long exhales. After what felt like twenty minutes of this, I started to notice my inhales swelling. Each breath was fuller, deeper, longer. It felt as if my ribs and lungs were expanding. I took another great breath, but this time it supported me off the ground, through the door of the hut, and up above the trees. I realized I was flying, but I had no fears of height or how I would get back down. My weightlessness carried me over vibrant green trees that smiled at me. I passed a glowing

waterfall humming my name. Even the dirt below was singing a peaceful tune. This trip was already much different than the night before.

The lack of thinking, of questioning, of self-doubt and anxiety allowed me to take all this in and just be. It reminded me of how I used to feel before I met him. I was open, weightless, and free. That was the word, free! With this notion, the trees reached their arms towards me and carried me back to my mat in the hut. This was a sign that I had learned what mother Ayahuasca had been trying to show me, without him I am free. I laid there the rest of the night, taking in my surroundings, feeling my expansive breath, and just being. I don't remember falling asleep or the exact moment my psychedelic experience ended, but I do remember opening my eyes with new, clear vision.

As I packed my bags in the morning, I pondered what this feeling of freedom meant to me. Mother Ayahuasca allowed me to realize there was something in my life that was blocking my light, suppressing my freedom. It was suffocating my soul and I needed this journey to break free from it. She allowed me to process the feelings and trauma of standing up and letting it go in order to return to my true self. In that moment of clarity I realized he no longer controlled me. My soul was free, my light had returned, and I would never allow him to affect me again. As I entered the airport, I blocked his number, purchased

a new plane ticket to a different destination, and reopened the door to freedom.

It has been three months since my experience in Peru and I feel more connected to myself and my purpose than ever. Brian and I had exchanged numbers before I left and he reached out to me a bit ago to see how I was integrating back into normal life. It turns out my notions of his uniqueness were correct, though he was interested in Ayahuasca, his journey was influenced by research rather than a deep calling for self realization like the rest of us. He is writing a book about the plant and its impacts on individuals. I documented my experience as part of his data for the book. I think that I would like to write my own book, not about the plant, but about strength, freedom, and power. I want to help other women break free from their abusers. Everytime I think about this, her voice enters my mind and lets me know that I am on the right path.

I Go Back to Clinton

by Elizabeth Elow

**Second Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award,
Fiction**

It is a cool, crisp, November morning, as you make your way down the sidewalk towards the village of Clinton. You pull your brown wool jacket tighter around you, feeling the chill in the air cascaded through your body. Bells ring in the distance, from the old historical church down the street, informing you it is 10 o'clock. You gaze up at the sky, taking in the brilliant, baby blue vast and noting that not a single cloud lingers. Two morning doves fly over you, both landing in a bare tree, a few feet away from the sidewalk. Their morning song fills your ears, uplifting your current grim mood. You stifle a yawn, anticipating the warm, hot cup of coffee waiting for you at the local coffee shop, only a few blocks away. The crunch of browning leaves echoes in the wind, with each step you take, bringing you closer to your destination.

You take in each historic colonial home as you pass by, taking note how instinctively different they are. Some are painted white with classic black shutters and others deep burgundy with white trim, each reflecting the charm and character of their current owner. Suddenly your attention is drawn to the sound of jingling of a metal dog tag. You look down to see a black miniature Scottie,

in a bright red sweater coming towards you. It sniffs at the grass, taking in the smells of dog's past. You smile and say, "Good morning" to the owner. The older gentleman smiles and replies in a gentle voice, "Good morning" then returns his attention back to his dog. You come to the end of the street and wait for the light to change so you can cross the street. Cars and trucks, wizz by, all but a blur in the time it takes for the light to change. You cross the street onto the sidewalk of West Park Row.

Gift shops line the street, filled with art from local artists, knickknacks and mementos for the tourists that are visiting Hamilton College. Each shop displays the brightly colored painted bricks and tastefully decorated storefront windows. You window shop as you pass by, noticing all the beautifully displayed merchandise. You greet one of the shop's owners in passing, as they unlock the creaky, old door to their shop. With a hard push the door opens, and they step inside, flip the CLOSED sign to OPEN, ready for their customers. You turn with a start at the shrill sound of laughter coming from a bench on the sidewalk. Two older ladies in their Patagonia puffer vests, laugh at a comment that one of them must have made. Their bright eyes brim with joy, each enjoying each other's company. Their yippie dogs, playing with each other and occasionally begging for a morsel of blueberry muffin from one of the ladies. You smile at them and continue on your

way towards Utica Coffee. A young man in a navy sweatshirt jogs towards you, the sound of his music coming from his earbud's drifts in the distance as he passes by. Metallica?, you think to yourself, trying to guess the music. You are quickly distracted from your thoughts, when the smell of freshly ground coffee hits your nose, letting you know that you are close. With a sharp turn around the corner, you come face to face with the door of your destination.

You enter the coffee shop, the bell above the door signaling to everyone of your arrival. Indie folk music fills your ears, along with the faint chatter of those seated inside. You wait in line, standing behind a group of Hamilton College students. Their bright royal blue sweatshirts, giving them away. You hear them talk about the frat party down the street last night. One of the girls giggles at something one of the guys said. You drown out their chatter, and stare at the chalkboard above you, already knowing what you want, but need a distraction. The white chalk words stare back at you, overwhelming your eyes with the swirly letters and prices. "Next!", you hear someone shout out, snapping you out of your thoughts. You look up and it's finally your turn. The blond barista smiles at you, patiently waiting for your order,

"What can I get you today?" she chirps with a bright smile.

"Mocha Chai Latte, with almond milk, please." you reply, returning her cheerful

smile.

"Sure, thing!" she says, you pay and then she starts to make your order.

You step to the side, allowing the older sweet looking couple from behind you to place their order. You smile at them. The older woman, with her grey short hair and blue rimmed glasses, smiles back at you and nods a thank you. You gaze around the small coffee shop, taking in the people. Young and old. Alone or in groups. Laughing out loud at a joke or having an intense conversation.

The sound of the coffee grinder, in the background snaps your attention back to focus. The barista calls out your name and hands you your piping hot coffee cup. You make your way out the crowded coffee shop and cross the street to the small park across from the shops. You find a bench in front of the village's fountain and take a seat. The sound of water, trickling and splashing into the pool below of a statue of a young little girl, catches your attention. As you study the statue, you notice her hand is outstretched towards the sky, allowing a small iron bird to perch on her finger. Her face showing the excitement she feels. You smile, this fountain has been here as long as you can remember. It has always been a place to sit and relax, while letting time slip by. You take a sip of your coffee, closing your eyes and relishing in the warmth it fills you with. Slow opening your eyes, you take a deep breath and absorb all that is around you. A young family playing

with their dog. A mother pushing the stroller, while her toddler giggles and babbles away. A couple out for their morning stroll, having not a care in the world. You secretly wish to yourself that life around Clinton will never change, hoping that memories such as these never fade. You make a silent promise that if you ever leave or times change, that you will go back to Clinton and remember this day.

A Black Cat, A Near-Death Experience, and the Snarkiest Sun Known to Man!

by Isabella Hudziak

I never believed in superstition until a black cat fell in my lap on Friday the 13th. You see, I have always been aware of these superstitions, such as “don’t break a mirror, or you will invoke 7 years of terrible luck!” But, these superstitions never truly resonated with me. I imagine my attitude was similar to a flick of my hair, turning up my nose, and impudently saying: “That’s obviously fake!” But, alas, my ignorance decided to blow up in my face in the cutest way possible: a black kitten.

The air conditioner spat cold streams of air towards my bare legs, contrasting with the heated computer whirring in my lap. I can recall leaning against the brown faux-leather couch, sinking between two cushions, with little care in the world. My bracelet kept knocking into the black Dell as I pulled up a compilation video of Kingdom Hearts theme songs. To my right sat Gabby, wild curls tied back into a ponytail, and shoulders bared by her black floral romper. Excitement was palpable in the air as the clock dwindled towards 3 o’clock and the German Festival drew closer. For the entire week, the German Festival homepage had been pulled up on my front Safari tab in both

a reminder and a way to raise my spirits.

We had a full hour's worth of activities planned: eating German french-fries, eating hamburgers, and then polishing it off with German desserts. Not truly exciting to most, but to the Hudziak family, who have attended this festival for five years, it was always a treat. I attempted to lean my head against the couch, but instead, laid on a very sturdy dog. Remi snorted in what I can only guess was surprise, then resumed his nap. As music floated throughout the living room, we were vibrating with excitement.

The doorbell sounded off, and Remi barked. The small dog hopped off the top of the couch, to the cushions, then finally his small paws hit the carpeted floor. I slid the warm laptop off my lap, shuddering slightly when the cold air hit the once-warmed skin. Gabby was always quicker than me, sliding off the armrest and twisting the door locks. She tugged the doorknob once, but the door did not budge. Remi, ever the impatient shih-tzu, barked and scratched the wood of the door. Gabby twisted the lock in the opposite direction, tugged again, twisted it back, and tugged the final time. The door opened with a creak and a familiar man stepped through the opening. My father entered the house with a greeting: "Hi, girls." He worked summer school for as long as I can remember. I like to joke that the reason he's bald is partially due to his job as a high-school history teacher.

I noticed that his blue-plaid shirt matched mine in that moment. I stood in front of the couch as he placed his briefcase and Walmart-bag-turned-lunchbox on the ground.

"How was your day?"

By asking this question, I really meant: *'hey, dad, when are we leaving because I want some sweet, sweet Bavarian cuisine.'* He turned, worn sneakers making a small squeak on the green tiles in front of the door, and responded just as he pushed the glass outer-door open.

"Good."

Gabby and I shared a look of mild confusion. According to previous experience, our father only brings his briefcase, an empty iced-tea cup, some coffees for us, and his "lunchbox." The glass door creaked open, and instead of possibly some papers or more drinks, there was a white cardboard box. The box was immediately familiar - we had seen the same exact one a year ago in October when we brought our cat, Blair, home from the humane society.

"Meow?"

I needed to remind myself to close my mouth, otherwise dust or bugs could fly in. I pushed my glasses up, and in the midst of my sister squawking in confusion, I said - verbatim, I am sure -

"What?!"

My father set the box down gently. He kneeled on the beige carpet, and slowly un-

hooked the cardboard handles to create an opening. My feet moved on their own accord, unbelieving eyes staring down at a small, scruffy black kitten. I immediately noticed her bright green eyes, and the way her head seemed too big for her little body. My ears finally caught up with the fact that my dad was explaining the sudden appearance of the cat.

“Her name is Sapphire. I went to the Humane Society a few days ago to look at the kittens, and went back to put in for another one, but that one was gone. She was smaller than the others and friendly.”

I bent closer to the box, where the newly appointed Sapphire hoisted herself out of her cardboard prison and plopped on the floor. She curiously bounded across the floor.

“Wow,” I thought. “*This is the cutest, and ugliest, cat I have ever seen!*” My jumbled thoughts of excitement were interrupted by my father standing back up and declaring,

“I’m leaving for Glenn’s Falls now. I have some speakers I sold.”

The euphoric thoughts of “*yay, a new cat!*” were suddenly replaced with terror. Our father was leaving his two teenage daughters, both filled to the brim with panic, to watch a kitten, and also keep her out of the clutches of a curious shih-tzu and a skittish older cat? Gabby seemed to share the sentiment.

“You’re leaving us?!” She squawked incredulously.

I looked to see her on the ground, bare

legs pressed against the carpet, her hands gently touching the scruffy-looking kitten. Remi lurked behind her for a mere moment, then he decided it was time to sniff. His sturdy body waddled across the floor, much larger than the tiny kitten, and he sniffed her with his pushed-in black nose. He sniffed, snorted, sniffed, and sniffed some more. The small kitten eyed him, wiggling across the carpet as he followed too-closely behind. Across the room, tension brewed thickly as Blair seemed to pause.

The older feline, more than twice the size of the kitten, padded curiously over. Vaguely, I could hear my sister and father talking as the front door shut. My father had plopped a cat in our inexperienced and anxious laps with a metaphorical pat on the head, basically saying: “Here you go, kiddies, don’t die in the next four hours I’m gone!” Blair’s wide eyes fixated on the scrappy kitten, and as if the world moved in slow motion, the small puffball bared her teeth and hissed.

I could not move from the floor where I sat. I merely watched everything unfold as my sister’s nerves decided it was time to go haywire. The kitten was moving everywhere, Remi was hot on her trail, and Blair stared her down in some type of dominance match. The chaos echoed the fast beating of my heart and the dumbfounded feeling I possessed.

We relocated the kitten to my sister’s

room. The easiest way to describe the bedroom would be this: pale blue walls, old gray carpet, and mounds of clothing piles messily scattered. Her dresser and bookshelves alike were filled with clutter, old photos laying helplessly on top of knick-knacks galore. It was already an anxiety-inducing state but throwing a puffball of energy into the mix felt like a cruel joke.

I closed the door quickly to keep Sapphire from sneaking between my legs and wreaking havoc. I had forgone the planned outfit for a slouchy red hoodie and black shorts, deciding that if my moods were going wack, my clothing state might as well be comforting. My dreams of going to the German Festival were crushed -- at least for that Friday. But, of course to the hyperactive and emotional brain of a sixteen-year-old, this was the end of the world! So I sat on the purple Aladdin blanket we laid for the cat to, I suppose, *exist* on as my sister sat on her bed.

"So," I started. "Dad gave us a cat. He's driving to Glenn's Falls. What do we do now?"

Gabby gave me a look that I have come to despise. It's the doe-eyed sheen in her blue-green irises, the look of "*I-might-cry-and-also-hyperventilate-have-fun-being-levelheaded-Isa!*" I despise that look because, as one might know, I am not meant to be the levelheaded one.

"I don't know."

That simple phrase truly captures the reality of the situation. So, obviously, we

took to Twitter to share pictures of our new kitten. "Meet Sapphire, guys!" We captioned some horribly taken pictures of her, realizing that she is truly not photogenic, and also the date: Friday the 13th. I mentioned this to Gabby, who paused her emotional breakdown to ask, "Really?" and check her own Twitter feed. Sometimes the smallest of things can lead to reprieve, but it did not last long. The panic-mode was back as we realized how late it was becoming and how hungry we felt.

"I only have a fifty dollar bill. We can't give a delivery guy a fifty."

Gabby flexed the green bill in my direction. I absentmindedly laid on my stomach, poking the kitten with an unsharpened pencil. I met her eyes.

"I could go to Stewart's, break the fifty, and get us some drinks." I suggested.

Was this an attempt to leave the entire situation? Yes. Was it a little cruel to leave my sister, on the verge of tears, in her room with the sole reason for her panic? A little bit. Did I feel bad? A teensy bit. Next thing I knew, I shut the door to her room with a fifty dollar bill in my hand, pulling my blue converse on and exiting the house.

The sweltering heat birthed complete and utter regret in my whole being. The sun seemed to mock me, taunting: "*Have fun walking in the heat, sweaty!*" I squinted menacingly at the cruel mass of light, cursing it into oblivion. My phone was being held in my sweaty palm, for I had mistaken the pockets

of my black shorts for being useful, forgetting that I bought clothing from the women's section. As I turned down Haven Street, blue converse scraping against the hot asphalt, I had an iron grip on the fifty-dollar-bill. I instantly regretted my choice of being the one to leave once my feet touched the sidewalk.

The street couldn't be truly called busy, but I can distinctly recall the trail of silver and red vehicles zipping past me. I felt as if, had I been in a movie and my hair not in a too-tight bun, my hair would have flown. I powered on, step after aching step, eyeing the street too often to be considered "ay-oh-kay."

Finally, my moment of fear had come to life: crossing the street. Standing on the dip of the sidewalk, I kept shifting my weight from my toes to my heels in anticipation. Would I make it? Is this the day Isabella Hudziak ceases existence, short life ruined by a red Sedan-driver drinking out of a McDonald's cup? Luckily, the traffic (or what little there had been) seemed to be a lull, so I channeled my former gym-classes and jogged across the street. With sweat sticking underneath my hoodie, I pushed open the doors to Stewart's and reveled in the AC blasting. I wiped my forehead, mouth pulling into a grimace when I realized how bad I was sweating. Gross.

I marched up to the counter, the blonde cashier looking at me not unkindly, and slapped (read: gently put down) the crumpled fifty. "Do you have any tens?" She

picked up the bill, inspected it, and rifled through the cash register. I suddenly became aware of how thirsty the trek had made me, and in not my best moment, eyed the drink coolers longingly. I shifted my attention back to the cashier as she handed me three tens and four fives. I thanked her and decided it was time to rejuvenate with some sweet, sweet beverage.

I took my time choosing, pretending to be deep in thought when I really just did not want to leave the safe haven of Stewart's. Who knows what I could be returning to? My sister, on her knees, in tears as the small black kitten cackled in delight, a fire burning what used to be my home? My imagination must have been running wild from thirst and exhaustion. I plucked a lemonade and the purple açai-blueberry drink Gabby likes and took a place in line. It was then I realized, making eye contact with the cashier yet again, that I could have just bought the drinks and exchanged bills in one fell swoop.

"*You fool,*" My mind had whispered. "*You wanted more time away. Why be smart when you can just waste time here, in the cool gas station, instead of having to be in the dumpster-fire that is your sister's room?*" The deepest thoughts of my mind decided that instead of supplying useful information, it was time to roast me.

"Thanks." I tried for a smile when the blonde cashier bagged my drinks, only to see she was busying herself with her job and

not smiling back at the sweaty teenager with a horrible hairdo. I decided it was time to depart from my beloved gas station. I could almost feel the sun smirking at me, taunting me: *“Look who’s back, ready for more sweat and regret?”* Somehow, I doubt the sun really wastes time insulting people (or is personified for that matter), but those lines rhymed, so I digress.

Crossing the road a second time proved worse than the first. You see, I shoved the money into my too-small pockets along with my phone in the other. I held the bag of drinks in my hand, pressing it to hold the bills in place. I did not, however, have a hand securing my phone. So, when I tried to jog across the street, my phone decided to fly out of my pocket.

In horror, I paused. My heart raced and I suddenly flashed back to the man with the McDonald’s cup and wondered once more if this is how I die. A voice whispered harshly in my head so quickly I could not give it a persona: *“Oh, you thought you were safe? No, you clumsy girl! You shall feel the true horror of standing in the middle of the road because of your cur-sed cell phone!”* It almost felt like one of those anti-cell phone commercials that complain about those ‘kids nowadays with their fangled devices and hatred for talking!’ I bent down, picked up my phone, and instead of finishing the job - I turned around and went back to where I started. It was my version of a walk of shame. Lips pressed

together in a grimace, I put my phone into the shopping bag, and re-took my position. I watched as cars zoomed by, sure my face showed my discomfort and embarrassment. I cursed my shorts and the fact that I also bought my hoodie from the women’s section.

When the final car rolled past, a blue one with quite a few bumper stickers, I walked across the street with speed. I did not want to take chances in jogging in case my phone decided it was time for a second near-death experience. When I finally reached the sidewalk, I looked up at the sky and sighed in relief. Today just seemed like a day of poor luck - which, as a Hudziak, was not entirely uncommon; but this seemed a little ridiculous.

The walk home was rather peaceful. I mozied down the suburban streets, taking my sweet, sweet time. When I finally returned and twisted the doorknob, the AC felt like a godsend. I pushed my shoes off and bounded down the hall. At the end sat Remi, laying with his head on his paws. Blair was, strangely, nowhere to be seen. I opened the door to Gabby’s room, bracing myself for the storm I had been trying to avoid. I could just picture it: the room flooded with tears, the small kitten *“mm-rrrow”*ing innocently from her perch on the bed. Is that the scene I was faced with?

No, actually.

Gabby was sitting on the floor with a knotted string, pulling it in a zig-zag forma-

tion as the small kitty jumped at it. It was, actually, adorable. I plopped on the floor, pushing the plastic bag towards my sister. She looked at me, eyes less of a “*you-be-trayed-me-you-jerk!*” look, and more of a “*my-meter-for-emotionalness-has-run-out-and-now-I-am-dead-inside*” stare.

“So, I was thinking.” Gabby started. Her voice had a rough quality to it, still high-pitched in her distinct tone, but the words were a little hoarse. I imagine it came from the influx of tears and tenseness of her vocal chords as a result. I immediately responded with a snarky, “Don’t hurt yourself!” It came out much less snarky than I intended, the walk tuckering my unathletic body out. It was more of a flat, dull statement that I will forever be disappointed by.

“She doesn’t look like a Sapphire to me. I mean, her eyes are green!”

She had a point. I poked the black kitten on the belly as she rolled over. Her green eyes fixated upon me, pupils adorably large, and meowed curiously. She truly was a chaty baby, loud mewls sharp as if to say: “*Pay attention to me, loser!*” So, obviously, I did. I scooped her scrappy little body up and cradled it in my arms.

She was a warm little thing, just fitting across my chest. I sat down on the bed with care, leaning against Gabby’s pillow. My chin pressed to my chest in the most unflattering way as I glanced down at the skinny cat in my arms. Those big green eyes were slowly

shutting, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by her utter beauty. Then I realized that she was asleep, snoring quietly, and that I was trapped. You know the general consensus that when an animal lays on you, you can’t move because it would be cruel and the worst thing ever? Yeah, it was one of those times.

“You’ve got a point. D’you like the ‘S’ name, though?”

I could not see Gabby from my current predicament, what with a small kitten immobilizing me solely through morals, but I agreed. It took a moment, but suddenly we started listing ‘S’ names that could work for the newest member of our family.

“Sara?” No. “Sammy?” No. “Skechers?” Does this look like a shoe factory? No. “Sugar?” What is she, a Southern grandma? No! “Sofia?”

There was a pause, then I spoke: “... Like Sofia the First?” Am I proud to admit my brain instantly went to a Disney Princess show? Not quite. However, I feel it becomes less embarrassing once I mention that the only reason I have seen it is because my father wanted to see it. So, if you’re going to shame me, you need to shame him first.

I could hear Gabby go “hmmmm,” each ‘m’ having a varying level of loudness. She does that sometimes when she’s thinking. I lifted my neck as far as I could without shifting my torso and caught a glimpse of my sister scrolling on her phone. I wondered what for, and to my surprise, she answered. Who

knew those moments of *I thought a thought and, uh-oh, said it aloud! were real?*

“Since it’s Friday the 13th, people are posting pics of black cats.” I watched as her scrolling stopped and I can only explain her expression as a light-bulb turning on. She looked at me, or I assume it was at me and not the resident house-ghost that likes to steal keys and socks, and smiled. “How about Safiya?”

This time, my reference was much more age-appropriate and less lame. “Like Safiya Nygaard, the YouTuber?” Gabby nodded enthusiastically. I figured that sealed the deal. Just like that, our small black kitten had been dubbed Safiya (I feel it is pertinent to mention, however, that we rarely refer to her as such; a fond nickname we choose to use often is “chonky,” due to the fact that she is quite chubby nowadays).

As Safiya laid on my chest, paws flexing in her slumber and small chest pumping up and down, Gabby’s stomach growled. Or, perhaps, it had been mine. All I know is this: Gabby pulled out her phone and dialed Pizza Hut, which happens to be a good 15 minutes from our house. My stomach felt like an empty hole, craving sustenance that diet lemonade could not quench. A strong hunger for food that I wanted at that moment, most likely five-something in the afternoon.

The rest of the afternoon passed in a strange blur. The pizza arrived, all safe and sound, and we decided to watch Fullmetal

Alchemist on Gabby’s laptop. However, as we were shoveling pizza into our mouths, the computer screen glitched and we were left showless as we ate our silent, greasy dinner. Safiya laid unbothered on the floor, napping. She had a much busier day than we did, I imagine. As she napped, the sun went down, and Gabby turned to shut off her lights. As her hand swiped the light switch, the bulb decided to peace-out and she had to change the bulb. After all that drama and emotional pain, the front door finally opened, and our father had returned from Glenn’s Falls.

Our father entered the room, in all his bald glory, and asked a simple question: “So, girls, how was it?”

Oh, how was it, dad? Leaving us with a kitten we did not expect to show up, on Friday the 13th? You are aware that as Hudziaks, we are more susceptible to bad luck than most families? You see the dead stare Gabby is giving you? It’s because she burned herself out having multiple breakdowns at once. Do you see me, all sweaty, with eyes much older than when you left? I nearly died crossing the street after deciding, quite selfishly I do admit, to escape the situation you caused? How do you think it is, my dad? Peachy-keen? Good? Is that the answer you crave? Well, do I have news for you! A rude awakening, if you will! Oh, yeah, you’re gonna get it!

...

“It was fine. How was the ride to Glenn’s Falls?”

Snapshots

By Isabella Hudziak

First Place, Joseph E. Vogel Award, Fiction

Two brides stood at the altar, one in a blush pink gown and the other in a cream dress. Tears stained both of their faces, matching smiles in place. Their hands intertwined as the priest talked and the spectators watched the union of Helena Drake and her fiancée Jenny Perrin. As both women said, “I do,” they shared a gentle kiss as camera shutters went off. They joined hands, and the wives embarked down the aisle hand-in-hand, wedding rings for all to see.

The flat-bottomed spoon

The calm breeze outside contrasted with the utter chaos happening within the Japanese restaurant. Tightening her sleek black jacket around her torso, Helena wondered why her brother thought having a family dinner at a hibachi grill was the best idea on a Friday night. The walls of the neat establishment reflected numerous conversations as the cashier up front attempted to find adequate seating for a party of seven.

“Follow me this way, please.” The waitress stepped out from the ‘showroom.’ Helena gently maneuvered her way in, careful

to avoid stepping on her sister-in-law’s toes. Brown eyes flit across the room in curiosity and a smidge of dread. Each U-shaped station, equipped with an open cooking space and an area for the chef to perform culinary magic, was completely filled to the brim with hungry customers. The waitress gestured to a half-filled seating arrangement with just enough seats for the group of seven.

Being polite (read: slow), Helena was the last one standing. The only seat available was next to a woman with taut curls dip-dyed bright pink edges. Helena pulled out her high seat, setting her cross-body purse on the back so that the pouch was right between the chair and her back. Truthfully, this move seemed a little paranoid, but when you have three siblings, it comes naturally.

The waitress set bowls of mushroom broth and house salads for each person. Helena immediately slid the soup bowl towards herself, the scent mouth-watering. After a long day of work, any food was welcome. Fingers wrapped around the flat-bottomed spoon as Helena sipped the broth.

“Your nails are really cool.”

A pointer finger entered Helena’s vision in the vague direction of her right hand. Her nails were an amalgamation of a late night of babysitting, nail polish out in view

of small children, and the puppy-dog eyes of a mischievously adorable niece with clumsy five-year-old hands. Each nail had a different color, some topped with marker stains and two even chipped.

Turning her attention back to the beautiful woman -- the pink dip-dye was merely scratching the surface of her beauty -- Helena cracked a smile. The woman's eyes reflected kindly in the dim lighting, bringing depth to the dark pools of brown. Now, this observation would be much more poetic if Helena hadn't flunked her high school poetry class, but some things don't come naturally.

Such as small talk.

"Thanks. Babysitting is rough. Your hair is pretty cool. Why'd you pick pink?"

The woman laughed. Helena felt her heart flutter in either anticipation, nerves, or hunger. Sometimes being hungry does that to you. It wasn't the most remarkable of laughs, just short puffs of air and a crooked smile, but when a pretty girl laughs, you take notice! Leaning her elbows on the table, Helena couldn't help but lean half an inch to the right.

"Pink is my favorite color. Also, I may have lost a bet with my roommate."

Before the pleasantries could continue much longer, other-worldly powers decided it was time for the chef to make his grand entrance. The man took his station, and Helena was warped into a world of entertaining fires, broccoli-and-sake mouth catch competitions, and decadent smelling foods. Conversation enraptured Helena's familial party of seven and all thoughts of the beautiful woman were paused.

When all the food had been inhaled and Helena felt glad that she wore a loose sweater, each party stood for departure. Once her purse slid across her shoulder and Helena stood to leave, she pulled her blond hair into a ponytail. She followed her family out the door, when thoughts of the pretty woman entered her sometimes-admittedly-ditzy-brain.

But, alas, the beauty in pink had gone.

Tabasco sauce

"I swear, Matt, this is the last time I am going grocery shopping for you!" Mumbling on the other end sounded from Helena's cellphone. She groaned, "I know you're busy! What about me? I headed in early at 6 to bake an extra batch of muffins!" Another groan, then a sigh. "Fine, fine. We promised to never speak of that! I'll get your groceries."

At least the grocery store was relatively empty mid-afternoon on a Saturday. Helena wondered if this was her punishment for being a kind sister and also living a few streets away from her younger brother. She closed the trunk of her Altima after making sure her reusable shopping bags were present and locked the car. After stuffing her keys into her purse, she reached into her hoodie pocket and slid out the list of groceries. Most of it consisted of regular person things- bread, milk, eggs, lettuce- but then there were some oddities.

Such as Tabasco Sauce.

A grimace pulled on Helena's face. Gross. She was never one for spice. Distantly, a memory of accidentally mistaking hot sauce for ketchup (it was one of those moments) resurfaced and her body involuntarily shuddered. We're putting a cap on that.

Hoisting a store basket on the crook of her elbow, Helena made a beeline for the simple things. She swung by the bread aisle and chose some standard white bread, wormed her way in between a few elderly folks to open the milk fridge, and made sure her carton of eggs were completely intact.

Finally, it came down to getting the Tabasco Sauce. Helena's sneakers scuffed against the floor as her body moved towards

the dreaded aisle. If Matt wasn't her favorite (or only) brother, she may have left the thing off the list and added an innocent shrug to say, "I forgot!" But, no, 'honesty is the best policy' and being reliable was hammered in her head from Girl Scouts.

After spotting the forsaken item, Helena zeroed in on a bottle to grab. As her hand reached out to grab the bottle, her fingers brushed against someone else's. This hand was neatly manicured with peach nails and a metallic ring on the thumb. Brown eyes jumped up to see the customer and Helena off-handedly wondered if she had bad luck or this was intended to be her first grocery-store brawl. Which is a little ridiculous considering there were other bottles of Tabasco Sauce.

"I see you decided to go more uniform this time. I liked the mismatching ones."

Helena would recognize that hair anywhere. It was still pink on the edges, but it had faded from intense hot pink to a pastel floral hue. It was also pinned up in a ponytail, showing the crooked smile on the woman's face. She was wearing a fashionable black dress with white stripes and mint green checkered vans.

And she was beautiful.

"Oh! You're the woman from the

restaurant! Hi, I'm Helena. I don't think I ever told you my name."

Helena went in for the handshake, feeling a little awkward but hey, pretty girl alert! Luckily, the beauty seemed amused and shook her hand. Even her hands were soft despite trying to steal gross Tabasco Sauce from Helena.

"Call me Jenny. Or you could just call me later?"

Helena's mouth opened in shock. Oh, she's bold! Pretty and bold! Jenny somehow pulled out a pen.

"I don't have your number. But I'd like to. Call you later, I mean. And call you Jenny, because I'm guessing that's your name."

When Helena entered her brother's home an hour later, she had a dopey smile on her face and a number written on her hand. She handed Matt his groceries and crashed on his couch.

"Um, Lena, you forgot the Tabasco Sauce."

Fingerless knitted gloves

Texting had become a daily thing. Helena had learned interesting facts about Jenny:

she's a middle-school art teacher, lives with her best friend Kairi in an apartment, and really likes the winter. Snowflakes blew into New York State and the temperature decided reaching the 'teens was all well and good.

Currently, the snowfall had reached a lull. Helena parked the car and switched off the radio. Her phone buzzed with a message: *Be there in a few!* A smile pulled on Chapstick-coated lips. The air had turned quite frosty and nipped at your skin, hence the multitude of layers Helena dressed in. She was buzzing with excitement for their date.

Ice skating was not something the Drake family usually did. When you have a family full of clumsy individuals, anything that requires balance could be tossed out the window. However, when your girlfriend of six months asks to go ice skating for a date, it's a little hard to say no. Also taking into account the date they went on to the horror festival that scared Jenny almost to the point of tears, Helena felt it was her turn for embarrassment.

A knock on her window caused her to jump. Through the frosty glass, Jenny's frost-bitten cheeks appeared in a smile. Her bright pink earmuffs were hard to miss, considering they also matched her peacoat. Gosh, what an adorable woman.

Helena opened the door once Jenny vacated the 'hit-zone,' and the two women interlocked hands. Jenny giggled at the sight of Helena's gloves.

"Babe, it's freezing, and you decide to wear fingerless gloves?"

"Fashion over function, Jenny! Not all of us are as effortlessly beautiful as you!"

"Flatterer. It's no wonder I love you."

Conversation flowed easily. The couple entered the rink and borrowed some skates. Helena tied hers as tight as the instructions said and wobbled towards the ice. It was relatively empty, save for a family of four and a few teenagers lollygagging near the edges.

Jenny already had her skates on and the look of adventure in her eyes. She grabbed Helena's hand and her body flooded with warmth. Well, as warm as she could be, until Helena slipped under thirty seconds on the ice. She fell down with an 'oomph!' as Jenny snorted.

"I'll hold onto you. Do you need help up?"

Helena flushed red with embarrassment, but it was worth the joy on Jenny's face. She fumbled sitting up and shakily

stood, practically attaching herself to Jenny's arm. She gave a sheepish grin. "Did I forget to mention that I've only been skating once in my life and broke my pinky?"

Jenny responded by wrapping an arm around Helena's waist and winking. "Like I said," She pressed a kiss to Helena's forehead. "I've gotcha, clumsy."

The humiliation of almost face-planting onto the ice several times was greatly outweighed by the comfort of Jenny's kisses and the feeling of their fingers intertwined.

Ceramic pig sculpture

After dating for almost two years, Helena felt she knew Jenny well. After all, asking the art teacher to move in was a big step, but a tight bond had formed between the two women. And in hindsight, she had known this was coming when she had seen the clutter that was Jenny's previous apartment.

"Honey, how much stuff do you have?"

"Most of it is for my classroom. Some of the kids gave me their art before leaving for the high school and I couldn't just leave it in my room for the summer!"

A sigh both fond and exasperated escaped Helena's lips. She peered down at the

box sitting in their living room, one of three each labeled with Jenny's purple gel-pen. Helena plopped down next to the first box as she glanced at her girlfriend.

"We could put them in the closet for now. Or do you want to use some to decorate the living room?"

Jenny perked up from where she was currently moving the loveseat in the corner of the room. They had signed a lease for a comfortable apartment space that was a manageable amount of time from both their jobs.

Asking Jenny to move in had been stressful. Helena had nearly caused her blond waves to go grey with the amount of worry she placed on a simple few words. Jenny's previous roommate, Kairi, had gotten married a few months back and moved out according to the lease's end date. Helena's sister had told her of a new apartment opening up downtown and really, Helena wanted to spend as much time with Jenny as she could.

Really, all it took was going to the movies to see a new chick-flick, and blurting out: "Want to live together?" Which Jenny took in stride and said, "Yes." Obviously, they talked about it before it was all set-in motion over the following weeks, but that moment was completely life changing.

Helena reached into the box beside her and pulled out a ceramic pig. It was clearly molded with clay, but it was charming. The baker stood up and padded towards the stand next to the door. The gradient bowl sat centered for the keys, a shoe basket next to it. Helena placed the ceramic pig next to the door and felt her throat close up with emotion as she scanned the living room with her eyes.

The living room was a mess of furniture, cardboard boxes, and a paint-speckled Jenny from moving her art supplies to the main closet. It was completely new and hectic, but it was something special.

It was home.

Heart-shaped cookie-cutter & recipe

Jenny Perrin was not prone to panic. Fear, yes, especially when it came to jump scares in horror films. But she was generally a person of 'go-with-the-flow' and 'hope-for-the-best.' But this was something truly important that she wanted to go perfectly.

She wanted to propose to Helena.

The couple had been dating for over three years and living together for one. It was always nice to wake up with Helena nestled

between her arms, press a kiss to her hair and revel in her warmth, but one thing would make it a million times better.

Being her wife.

This is why Jenny had been sneakily talking to Helena's family to figure out the best course of action to ask her beautiful baker to become her wife. Matt said to do something romantic and lowkey, while Sonia said to make sure it had to do with flowers, and sweet little Becca said to have "lots and lots of candy!"

It was a sudden call from her mother that inspired her true plan. She had been sketching the carnations she had bought from the valentine's day sale at her middle school and talking to her mother about her intentions. Which is when her mother launched into the tale of Grandma CeCe distracting her so that Jenny's dad could arrange the living room into a cozy romantic dinner to 'pop the question.' Jenny almost dropped her pencil.

"Ma, do you have Grandma C's cookie recipe?"

Jenny lit a cedarwood scented candle in the living room. She had pulled out her girlfriend's favorite movie and laid out a spread of pasta on their coffee table. She had

the coffee machine running, planning to use the caramel creamer and top it with pumpkin foam spray. For dessert, Jenny had baked her grandma's cookies in heart shapes and carefully iced them to spell out a special message.

"Honey, I'm home!"

Helena entered the living room and set down her jacket. Her eyebrows rose in surprise. "Ooh, did I do something special? You even made my favorite pasta." The blond plopped down beside Jenny and kissed her on the lips. She looked absolutely stunning in her college sweatshirt and ripped jeans, even if her braid had come loose and messy. She was always beautiful.

"I just figured we could have a romantic night in since we both have the night off."

After a filling dinner, steaming fall-themed coffees, and a viewing of Godzilla, Jenny stood up and declared, "Time for dessert! I baked you something." This piqued Helena's interest. She was a paid baker who went to culinary school and very appreciative of desserts. She offered to help, but Jenny poked her on the forehead and shook her head.

"It's a surprise! Sit still. Stay cozy and cute."

Jenny disappeared into the kitchen and carefully pulled the cookies out of the cupboard where she had packaged them to dry, with a little help from her mother earlier that day. She pulled out a cookie pan and carefully laid out the heart shaped sweets to spell out her message. She inhaled, exhaled, almost had a heart attack, then repeated the process twice before she felt ready. This was it. The ring she had picked out sat in her pocket.

Carefully holding the cookie tray out of Helena's view, Jenny re-entered the room. She placed the cookies down on the coffee table and bent down on one knee. Helena, who had been looking at her phone, looked up and promptly dropped her cellphone into her lap. Her mouth opened and she covered it with her hands.

"Helena, I absolutely adore you. Waking up to you is the best feeling in the world. I love the way you smile at me when I say something stupid. I love the way you do crazy things with me even when it's out of your comfort zone. I love that when we have issues, you always want to communicate and fix it. I love the way you make me want to be a better person. You're everything to me, and I know this is already forever, but the romantic in me wants it to be official. I want to be able to show you off and say, 'look at my

beautiful wife.' I want everyone to look at you or me and know how much we care about each other. This is super sappy and I'm kinda crying now, but will you marry me?"

Half-way through Jenny's speech, Helena had burst into tears. She stood and rounded the table, capturing her girlfriend into a tight hug. She sniffled and practically yelled, "YES!" Jenny gave a watery giggle and squeezed her fiancée tight. She slid the engagement finger on Helena's shaking left hand and the two shared a messy yet loving kiss.

Helena laughed, "I knew you wouldn't let me watch Godzilla unless it was special. You hate those movies." Jenny couldn't help but join her in her laughter. "I hate Godzilla, but I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

Pride

by Anabella Rossi

For something that dictates so much of my life, I cannot seem to remember who exactly informed me about writing. By now, it happened around seven or more years ago, and though my memory slowly seems to be getting better, it still is not good enough to remember what specifically was the direct influence, especially since there is conflicting outside influence on the matter. At that point in my life, I had already read the entire Harry Potter series over seven times, and my newest obsession was the Percy Jackson and the Olympians series. If there was a profession that involved reading the same books over and over again, I would have already been a professional. My obsession with reading, along with my habit of pulling out five-hundred page books in the middle of class and reading them, set up my reputation for school as a “smart kid”, something I took in stride. Despite this, I was still stupid enough to have never considered writing my own works until I was told about the concept.

My memory tells me that Katherine and Renee, two of my sixth-grade friends, were the ones who told me about writing. I remember sitting in the school cafeteria, probably eating a hotdog and drinking apple juice like every other child in the room. The

smell of bleach and grease lingered despite the attempts to keep the room clean. I’m sure my fingers were sticky, either from the food I was eating or a previous class where we used glue sticks, because children don’t wash their hands before they eat unless they are reminded. Over the din of the cafeteria and occasional screaming children, I listened to Katherine and Renee tell Taylor about their new “fanfictions”.

Pride was my deadly sin when I was twelve. I hated being in the dark. It became a darker part of myself that I grew to despise, like an ugly snake rearing its head at any opportunity to prove myself. The snake called Pride coiled around me tighter as I admitted I did not know what fanfiction was, risking my “reputation” as the smart student. Back then, any small thing could make or break you in the middle school world.

“It’s like your own personal story based on your favorite book or movie or TV show,” Renee and Katherine explained, but only after a few minutes of teasing me and being shocked that I did not know what they were talking about. “You get to control what happens and who does what. And you don’t need to make up the characters or the setting because it already exists. You should try it, you’re smart, you’ll pick it up quickly!”

According to my memory, this was my

introduction to personal writing, and what influenced me to start. My mother, on the other hand, insists that it was her. She claims that she had told me about writing years before, when she saw how much I loved Harry Potter and Percy Jackson. She claims she was the one who said it first, because *obviously* she had introduced me to the idea and *obviously* I had already tried writing before Katherine and Renee told me about it and *obviously* my mother was responsible for my introduction to the thing that gives me a will to live. Obviously.

(Mom, if you're reading this, I can explain.)

Regardless of who introduced me to writing, (Katherine and Renee) or who insists they are correct (Gina), this was the moment I began to write. There was something so enticing about being able to take my favorite characters and put them in a world that I controlled. Who wouldn't want to see Harry Potter if he was in Slytherin, or if all of the characters were the opposite gender, or if Percy Jackson had a new quest with new monsters to battle and people to save? Who wouldn't want to see more content of the thing they loved so much? Who wouldn't want to be the person creating content to their heart's... content.

We'll work on that sentence.

The point is, this was where I flourished. Writing became the new reading, writing became the new watching movies, writing became the new studying and paying attention in school and talking to friends because it was a world that I could control one hundred percent. This was where my focus went: I started writing fantastical stories where my friends and I were on magical quests, slaying dragons and defeating dark lords. We were falling in love with fictional characters who loved us back and making friends with people who didn't exist. We loved reading about these characters, so naturally, we would be best friends in my stories because I could write whatever I wanted. We were normal human children who were too young to drive but at the same time we were omnipotent gods who controlled the fate of a world that would bend to our every will. We were writers, and we were damn terrible at it.

No one is good at something when they try it for the first time. Writing especially is extraordinarily difficult to get correctly. At twelve, I did not have the same understanding of the written— or spoken— language that I do now. As we grow, we learn so much more about interaction and how moments in time play out. Academic writing helps. It provides a sense of how sentences should be structured, and what order information should be presented, whether it is scientific or mathematical or psychological or literary.

The study of how language works is taught to us over the course of many years, and with each grade we pass we are exposed to new levels of writing. Even if you have never attempted writing in a non-academic format, it will still be better than if you had tried at twelve years old, because of how much writing and language you have been exposed to over your lifetime. (Also, because twelve year olds tend to write how they talk, and have you ever spoken to a twelve year old? 0/10, would not recommend.)

You can imagine how god-awful my first attempts at writing were. Harry Potter had never looked so bad. In theory, there was nothing wrong with the content. My first works had a plot, the characters had a personality, and my friends told me it was very good. This was a lie. It was not very good. I started writing in 2012, but I only started getting good at writing in 2017 (right after I had my heart broken). My 2012 plots were shitty and full of holes, the characters were terribly annoying and typical Mary-Sues, and my friends only told me it was very good because to them it was very good. They, along with myself, had no concept of what “good writing” entailed, because we were twelve and didn’t even know what constituted a proper sentence yet. But that didn’t matter. None of it did. Pride was my best friend, telling me constantly how fantastic at writing I was. I believed it. I thought I could publish my

works right then and there, and they would be made into movies, regardless of the fact that they were fanfictions, and I was basically stealing a plot and characters. Pride no longer looked at my education as it’s only target, but gave special attention to how I received compliments about my writing. It watched as my face lit up when someone said they liked what I had written, and tightened around my chest, pushing me to do better, to make better stories and become the best writer around. Of course, this was at the expense of me telling my friends how their works “could be better”. This insistence in my brain that I was “the best” put a strain on my relationships with my friends, though they were too kind to ever tell me I was being an asshole. So I worked harder and harder, despite the fact that I probably should have been devoting my time to being a better friend.

My fanfiction increasingly became better. My oldest, first works were deleted long ago. The oldest of anything I’ve written that is still uploaded is from 2014, when I was thirteen, and is available for reading. (I do not recommend it for anyone. It’s the definition of cringey and terrible.) However, looking back through my works, there was an obvious point where I disregarded all of my works in progress (the cringey stuff) and started from scratch. I had come to the realization that my style of writing had changed, and that there was no point in beating a dead horse any

longer. Writing new chapters for works I had started over two years previous was not helpful for anyone. If anything, it made the older chapters look much worse than they were. I had hit the point where my level of education and life experiences had changed my writing.

For comparison purposes, I have two direct quotes below. The first is a quote from a story I wrote in 2014, and the second from a quote from my second draft of the same story, written in 2016.

“[He] stared at the girl who lived here. She noticed and blushed. He walked up to her and said out loud “This is the most amazing house I have ever seen.” She blushed again. He chuckled and took her hand. She dragged him to the couch. They sat there, but let their hands go.” (2014)

Versus:

“Sure, English was hard because of her dyslexia, but she valued her education almost as much as her mother did. She enjoyed gaining new knowledge, learning about things that previously confused her. But, she had gotten used to the private tutor she had. She liked things that were consistent. Things that were permanent. Plus, she didn’t have to deal with annoying pricks when working with a tutor. But there she was, in the backseat of [her manager’s] car, struggling to not make

a negative comment about the whole ordeal.”
(2016)

Obviously, there is a considerable difference in how I approached writing. Notice how the first quote includes a mix of past and present tense, with the main focus on character actions. Comparatively, the second quote includes background knowledge for the characters, internal dialogue, actions, and a consistent verb tense. Actions became a thing of the past, something that was used only to enhance a scene, not to determine how it played out. My use of dialogue no longer carried the plot. It was a change in how I saw the world, as well as wrote fanfiction and other works. It was a change that came from experiences in my life. For example, in 2016, I started to push myself in school. My education became harder as I began to take AP and honors classes, and in 2017 I experienced both young love and heartbreak. I used my boyfriend at the time as an outlet to write about love, and abandoned the works after we broke up. I used the information I was learning in school to influence what happened in the plot. My surroundings became my inspiration. It was a sense of pride I felt when I was able to successfully include information I had recently learned in a bit of my writing. It felt like my education finally meant something, like there was a point to waking up at the crack of dawn and spending five days a week in a building full of teenage

angst and teachers who never knew what they were talking about.

I was probably around fourteen (2015) when I started writing original works. They were also terrible, and I never wrote more than five pages before abandoning the work and starting something else. My writing had not improved much by this point, despite two years having passed since I started. Yes, I was beginning to understand the formatting of sentences and how to make a plot interesting. Some of the ideas I had were very promising, but most were influenced by my favorite books at the time and my favorite characters in those books, meaning there was too much copyrighted material to ever be published. After my ex-boyfriend left, after he cheated, after he broke my heart— if you can even call it that— there was a change in how I looked at my writing. I started writing works whose purpose was to be published, not to sit as a draft forever in a Google Drive and never be touched again, as 90% of my works are. Perhaps it was because I wanted to prove myself worthy. Perhaps I wished to show my potential. Perhaps I was bored with wasting my time on five pages of work before abandoning it over and over again. Perhaps I was finally ready to explore the depths of my mind. Whatever the reason, I pushed myself to the limit and started working on something that I finally wanted to finish. It was around this time that I finally admitted to myself that I

wanted to be a writer.

It must have been around this point— when I started working on my own books and figured out who I wanted to be— that I realized how much my relationship with Pride was hurting those around me. Likely, it was not me who realized, but my friends who told me, for it was around this time that Katherine, Renee, and Taylor started speaking up for themselves, telling me that I was being rude and hurting their feelings. This realization came as a shock to me. My intention had never been to be a bad friend, but I had been so absorbed in myself that I never realized what I had been doing to the people I put my trust in.

It was an internal change. I began to hold my tongue when they showed me their works, telling them all of the positives and never any negatives unless they explicitly asked for advice. I only gave them suggestions, never confidently stating what should be fixed because it “wasn’t working”. In turn, I began to show them my works, and instead of expecting to hear how good I was at writing, I outright asked them to berate my works and help me become better. I began to understand what my friends expected of me, and not only did my relationships with them grow stronger because of it, but so did my writing and how I approached the concept of an “original work”.

The idea for my first work appeared when I was about sixteen, almost seventeen. I wanted to see how creative I could get. So many stories had been told before. Even now, it's hard to conjure an original idea, when so many concepts have become repetitive and overused. How often can the love triangle trope be used before it is considered copying a previous work? Eventually, the idea becomes boring, old, dull. I wanted to break that mold. I was likely in a science-fiction mood when the concept of this series arose in my brain. We will call this work "TFS", short for its title (The First Singularity). The idea, in its most basic form, is a young woman in the future, who works hard to support herself and her dog. She seemingly has no friends, so all of her attention goes to her dog, the last remaining piece of her family. However, the dog is kidnapped by three unknown life-forms for unknown reasons, and the woman is forced to follow them into the vast void of space to recover him. Along the way she collects the grumpy human captain of the ship she stole (because normal people don't own military-grade spaceships), and various alien life forms to help her on her journey. This idea seemed so ridiculous, so random, that I went full force and wrote over fifty pages of content before shelving TFS sometime in 2018. I still adore the concept and continue to jot ideas down then the occasional thought arises. I've grown attached to the characters, alien and human alike, and plan on return-

ing to TFS once I find the time and willpower. The plot stretches onward, bringing the characters into a galactic war and producing a family she thought to be dead, while also introducing a mentor that teaches the woman how to change reality with her mind (which relates back to the title). It is a complicated idea that stemmed from a stupid thought: how devoted are people to their dogs? The answer may surprise you (but if you have a dog, it won't. People are very devoted to their dogs.)

It must have been directly after my energy for writing TFS tanked that I started to refer to myself as "a writer". I had already started my first permanent part time job (i.e. one that wasn't a summer camp), and when my older coworkers asked what I wanted to do for a living, I was starting to say "a writer". How embarrassing it was to look an adult in the eye and tell them-- at seventeen years of age-- that I wanted to be a writer, knowing fully well that they would smile and nod, pretending that it was a good choice for a career. This was one of the first times that I could not be prideful in my work. Pride became something that I put on the backshelf instead of presenting before me; the adults around me did not understand why I would choose a profession for myself that would likely end in failure. The end result of these conversations always were awkward and ended with the person escaping the room quicker than they

had come in. Despite this, I took it as a personal challenge to prove myself. I announced the idea out loud more, and it started to stick. People began to introduce me as “a writer”, and some of my coworkers began to ask how progress was coming on my works, whichever one I was currently working on. Pride returned, a different Pride than I was used to, but more of one that I could work side by side with. It was no longer a Pride that caused people to stop talking to me, or a Pride that choked me to silence or instigated arguments when I would not admit that I was wrong. It was a new Pride that pushed me to do better, pushed me to admit when I was wrong and find solutions to the obstacles in front of me instead of convincing me to quit before I could get hurt. It was a new Pride that brought me to my current work in progress.

I took a writing break after I dropped TFS, specifically a break with original works. It’s hard to put down a pen after dedicating such a large amount of time to something. It’s hard to close a document after staring at it for days on end, developing more and more content to create. It felt as if I was abandoning a child, but it was a necessary abandonment. School picked up and I started to get back into my normal life. Everything was falling into place again, and I started reading a lot, almost as much as I did before I started writing. I found my favorite book (*Six of*

Crows by Leigh Bardugo) and many books I did not like (*A Curse So Dark and Lonely by Brigid Kemmerer*). A lot of these books became influential for my next series, specifically the books that took place in a world similar to that of *The Hobbit* (J.R.R. Tolkien) or the *Throne of Glass* series (Sarah J. Maas). The appeal in these worlds was the potential: everything and anything could be created from my mind. I could create any type of magic I wanted, or create a government that I designed, or hell— even a new calendar for the world to revolve around. Reality could be what I wanted. The potential was there, all it needed was a plot.

It came from an even more ridiculous place than the first book. Katherine, Renee, Taylor, and I were sitting down during a free period my senior year of highschool. It must have been around January of 2019. We were under the main stairway of the building, seated on benches and against a brick wall that supported the staircase above. Our conversations never made sense. Anyone who walked by and caught a glimpse of what we were talking about always left the area with a confused look on their face. Often, a teacher we knew would stop by and ask “what on Earth are you talking about?” Our response was always the same: nervous laughter to hide the uncomfortable or unusual topic that had arisen in our conversation. The teacher always left with more questions than when

they arrived.

“Listen, listen,” Katherine said over our laughter. “We all know that Taylor would be a fair maiden who falls in love with a handsome, rich vampire in a fantasy world—”

“Hey!” Taylor exclaimed, cheeks red as we laughed harder.

“He has to have long, flowing hair or it won’t work out,” I added helpfully. Taylor hit me.

“She dreams about it so often it has to be her past life.” Renee shook her head.

Katherine continued, “— but what would the rest of us be in a fantasy world?”

“Anabella would probably be some noblewoman who reads books and does science experiments against her parents’ will!” Taylor laughed. I nodded. She was right.

“Katherine would totally be a bard!”

“I’d be a small wizard baby.” Renee said. We all stared at her. She was serious.

“Like, a wizard that looks like a baby?” I asked, already nervous for the answer.

“No. Just a permanent wizard baby. All powerful, of course.”

I blinked. “Of course.”

“Anabella should write this as a book,” Katherine said, changing the topic to something other than wizard babies.

Taylor clapped her hands together. “You definitely should! That would be so fun!”

“Write a book about this?” I mused. “I don’t know how I’ll include a wizard baby, but I’ll do my best.”

In the end, the wizard baby did not make the cut. Neither did Katherine’s bard, but neither Renee or Katherine was as invested in the idea as Taylor was. Without her dedication to reading more of what I wrote, I doubt there would even be more than ten pages of this story to read or talk about. As she pushed me to write more, the idea expanded. I incorporated Taylor’s vampire addiction and my love for strong female characters into one large ball of concept, before spitting it out on a page when I should have been studying for my upcoming AP exams. Sharing the original document with her was the best decision I ever made. She would check frequently, leaving cute comments and helpful corrections in the notes that spurred my *Pride* in this work and myself. After she

finished reading the short sections I had written, she would text me with an all-caps message that simply read “WRITE MORE”. And I did. I spent most of my free time writing out anything and everything I could think of. In between classes, right before bed, or any time we were on computers during class, I was writing. I vividly remember my literature teacher looking me dead in the eye and asking what I was writing when I should have been doing my class work.

I told him honestly, “I’m writing about Taylor and her imaginary vampire boyfriend.”

Her look of betrayal lives rent free in my mind, right next to his look of absolute *I wish I didn’t ask*. He never asked what I was writing about again.

During this twelve month period of intense writing, I expanded the book into a series. I am still unsure as to how many books I want, but I have at least five semi-planned out in my brain. I took an undetermined amount of time off from writing fanfiction, and all of my energy went to writing this book. I refuse to name it. This is the most effort I’ve ever put into a work. I have named all of my previous works, but there is always a stopping point after I name the work. I seem to give it a name, and abandon it. It is as if I am cursed. TFS was a great example. Once I figured out the name of the book, I

stopped having the energy to write it. But I refuse to let this curse get the better of me. I have refused to name this book, and have resorted to referring to it as “the book”, despite the fact that I’m over 200 pages in, with exactly 91,539 words of content written. At this point, there’s no backing out. This is my legacy, even if it’s shit, even if no one likes what I have created, this is what I will leave behind. A world of my own design. (A world that is basically a self-insert story of me and my best friend in the past with magic. I try to ignore that.)

The basic idea of “the book” is that a young woman is invited to help a pair of vampires, a Count and Countess, plan their wedding. While she is there, she learns that the Count is having an affair with his maid, and that the Countess plans on killing the maid to make a statement. Worried for her new friend, the woman and the maid escape, upon realizing that the maid is descendant of a powerful magical bloodline that could control light, and that the Countess was the vampire that all but made them extinct. To keep themselves alive, they go on a quest to find an ancient relic and destroy the Countess once and for all with the maid’s newfound light-magic-powers.

When described like this, it really does sound like a Dungeons and Dragons plotline, which makes me cringe just a bit, because

I'm just proving I'm a nerd. Of course, there are elements of romance, where the Count must decide if he wants to marry the Countess for power or be with the maid for true love. Friendship occurs along the way, as the woman's best friend joins them and helps the two adventurers on their quest. He becomes a good friend to the maid and a source of annoyance for the woman. There is an element of self discovery as well, as the maid's past mistakes come back to haunt her, and the woman's seemingly emotionless personality is explained with a dark past. (Cue spooky music.)

In all honesty, I have worked very hard to produce the content I have created. I was very lucky to have found my passion so early in life. There are so many who struggle to understand what their purpose is, and there are some who never find theirs. My purpose is to write. I worked my ass off to get to the point I am in my writing. I worked my ass off to be able to understand how a scene works or how dialogue is developed or how to incorporate a setting into a moment in the text. There was something so powerful about being able to sit down and pour the contents of my mind onto a page and not worry about anyone seeing it in the way it is presented inside my head. Being able to take the ball of never-ending string that sits in my brain and weave it into a coherent sweater that brings smiles to people's faces is all that I have ever wanted. It

is so hard to take a little bit of yourself every day and put it into a public space, but I've learned that it is the only way that humans can truly understand each other. If we cannot communicate our thoughts, what are we even doing here? Why do I write and write if I will never show it to anyone but myself? Why do I put so much effort into something that I will not share for the world to see? I know I have the talent and the drive to publish a book. I have the ability and the willpower to publish a series. I am smart and capable and I know my purpose in life. (Don't mind me, just manifesting the future I want more than anything in the world over here.)

My future is something that has always scared me. I worry about money, something that many artists struggle to find in their creative years. I worry about keeping consistent content if (when) I do get published. I worry about deadlines, something I've never faced in terms of my fiction writing. However, there are many things I look forward to. I look forward to publishing my first book, becoming wildly successful and being able to support myself off of this book. I look forward to finishing my first series, seeing the pictures people post of the tears they shed when they finish the last book. I look forward to publishing three series, one based in the past, present, and future. I look forward to a life of being able to do what I love and sharing my work with others. I remind myself every day

that, with enough hardwork and dedication, I can achieve my dreams. I remind myself that to create the fictional worlds I want, I need to face reality, and put the time in that I need to so I can succeed. I remind myself that this is what I want to do, and I put almost all of my time and energy into keeping myself focused on my goals.

Many people use movies or TV shows or books to escape reality. I do as well. But I mainly use my imagination. I use the words on a page— both digital and physical— as my primary way to escape the world around me. If I am in the zone, I can easily write ten pages in a day. If I'm not, one sentence could be a struggle. But when I'm not writing, I'm planning. I'm scheming, I'm researching, I'm bouncing ideas off of Taylor or my sister or my parents or even my professors if I know them enough to trust that they won't be annoyed with me. In the notes app in my phone, I have— for just this single work in progress, I may add— seven notes pages that are unbelievably long, all name things such as "Outline," "Book," "Other Ideas," "Other Other Ideas,"... you get the picture.

My brain is constantly switched "On", only half paying attention to conversations with my politically-angry grandparents because I'm figuring out dialogue for a scene, or missing my mouth when I eat because I'm using my other hand to type in the name of

an ancient god for research purposes, Mom, quit bothering me (Mom I love you don't be mad). My brain is never in one place at a time, always multitasking, always finding new ways to keep me focused on the task at hand: write a book. I'm grateful for this. I'm half convinced I have some mild form of ADHD, because if a current work in progress fades from my interest, I scrap it and move on, proven by the thirty-plus documents in my drive that will never be touched again. It's a miracle I'm still writing this book, that it's almost been two years and I'm still convinced that I am going to finish and publish it. Whoever is looking out for me, I am eternally grateful, and please do not stop doing what you are doing. I'm running out of fresh ideas for books.

This is the source of my Pride. And, truly, what's not to be proud of? This is where I excel, where I flourish, because there are no rules when you make your own world. Reality can be what I want it to be. When you are pulling thoughts from your own brain, no one can tell you it is incorrect. This absolute creative freedom is why I worked so hard through school, why I dedicated my life to writing and improving my abilities. I know I will publish a book one day, because I know I will never be able to rest after death if I have not completed this goal (yes, I'm nineteen years old and already thinking about my inevitable demise, sue me).

Without the introduction to writing that I was given, I doubt I would ever have found writing to be as enjoyable as I did. I doubt I would even be an English major. I probably would have made my parents proud and gone into physics or astronomy like they wanted me to but never said to my face (Kidding). Despite that, I chose this life for a reason. I chose to do what I wanted because I know I can be successful. I believe in myself, I am proud of the work I have put in, and I am proud of myself. And perhaps Pride is my deadly sin for this aspect of my life, but for once, I have found the darkness that accompanies it to be refreshing.

2021 Contributors Biographies

Kaitlyn Egan is a junior physical therapy major from New Hampshire. She is an admissions ambassador and involved in the Health Science Student Society, Utica College Dance Company, Alpha Lambda Delta National Honor Society, and the Innovation team for the school of Health Professions and Education. Though she loves science, writing has always been a passion for her and she thoroughly enjoyed getting to freely create this piece for her creative writing course.

As a current sophomore pursuing a Bachelor Degree of Science, **Elizabeth Elow** also enjoys writing short stories and poems in her free time. She has compiled several compositions influenced by the local community and her hometown, Clinton, NY. You will find these quite enjoyable and creative in form.

Rebekah Hedeem is a junior majoring in Communication and Media.

Gabriella Hudziak exists.

Isabella Hudziak is a first-year English Education major with a minor in Journalism. She is a contributor to *The Tangerine*. She won the 2021 Joseph E. Vogel Award for Fiction. She is very excited!!!

Dr. Jeff Miller is Chair and Associate Professor of Communication and Media and director of FILM@UC. His photography has regularly appeared in the Ampersand since 2015 and four of his photographs were published in last year's edition. This year's photographs offer glimpses of nature intended to

symbolize three words in the Pali language: punabbhava, sota, and trilakshana:

1. Punabbhava -- as with the Buddhist concept of punabbhava, life is forever “becoming again.”
2. Sota -- “sota,” means “ear” in Pali and I was struck by how this fallen tree with its ear-like fungus appeared to be listening to us tramping past on dry leaves.
3. Trilakshana -- The three marks of existence for the Buddhist are annica (impermanence), dukkha (suffering), and anatta (non-self).

Megan Nolan is pursuing her B.A. in English and Adolescence Education. Her future plans are to teach high school English, where she hopes to extend her love for reading and writing to her students. This is Megan’s first time sharing her written work and she is excited to share it with Ampersand and its readers.

Kyle Riecker studied for two years at Pratt at Munson-Williams Proctor School of Art, and in 2013 discovered a passion for creating digital collage, heavily influenced by Dr. Steve Specht’s collage work. Riecker creates transformative art from images collected online, with a focus on sci-fi and surrealism, as well as politically-motivated pieces. Riecker is currently pursuing a degree in Public Relations and expects to graduate in May 2021. For more work by Kyle Riecker visit <https://www.facebook.com/EndoftheInternetKR/>.

Danae Rivera is a senior English major and creative writing minor.

Anabella Rossi is an English major with a double minor Creative Writing and Theatre.

She spends her time reading, taking hikes, meditating, and researching ancient gods for writing purposes.

Emmalyn Ylaya is a Senior from Adirondack majoring in Liberal Studies. She has participated in Ampersand since freshman year. Her hobbies are shopping, watching movies, and listening to music. Besides Ampersand, she is involved so much at UC such as Active Minds (Public Relations Officer), Art Club (Secretary), Math Club (Webmaster), The Tangerine, Women In A New Direction (W.I.N.D), Cybersecurity Club, Accounting Society, Literature Society (President), Young Americans for Liberty, Her Campus, Psychological Society (Secretary), Psychology-Child Life Society (Secretary), Billiards Club (Webmaster), Nutrition Club, UCTV (Video Production Aide), Student Government Association (Senior Class Treasurer), UC Programming Board, American Cancer Society On-campus, CCRT Student Advisory Board, DEI Collaborative, National Society of Leadership and Success. She has given so many positive contributions to UC. She will be graduating in May and plans to become a student advisor.

Ampersand

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K. Egan

E. Elow

R. Hedeem

G. Hudziak

I. Hudziak

Dr. Leising

Dr. Miller

M. Nolan

K. Riecker

D. Rivera

A. Rossi

E. Ylaya