



REFLECTIONS is the annual magazine of literature and art of The Berkeley Carroll Upper School. Students meet weekly to discuss the magazine's high standards, the soliciting of submissions, and their own writing in progress. In February, the editors chair small groups who read and critique anonymous submissions. After the preliminary critiques, the editors choose and edit the final selections and lay out the magazine. The striking artwork and writing in this magazine were all crafted by Berkeley Carroll Upper School students, occasionally to fulfill class assignments but always from the engines of their own creativity.

Reflections had a wonderful year, helped by a small, dedicated staff alongside our tireless and wonderfully supportive faculty advisors Mr. Chu and Ms. Drezner. This publication could also not have been completed without the support of Jodie Corngold, Berkeley Carroll's Director of Communications, and Bob Lane of Studio Lane. Reflections would, of course, not exist without everyone who sent in their work; we had submissions from a diverse and incredibly talented student body. A industrious and creative spirit is once more the driving power behind this literary magazine and astonishes us each year.

Olivia Cucinotta and Thomas Cooper Lippert Editors

Spring 2014

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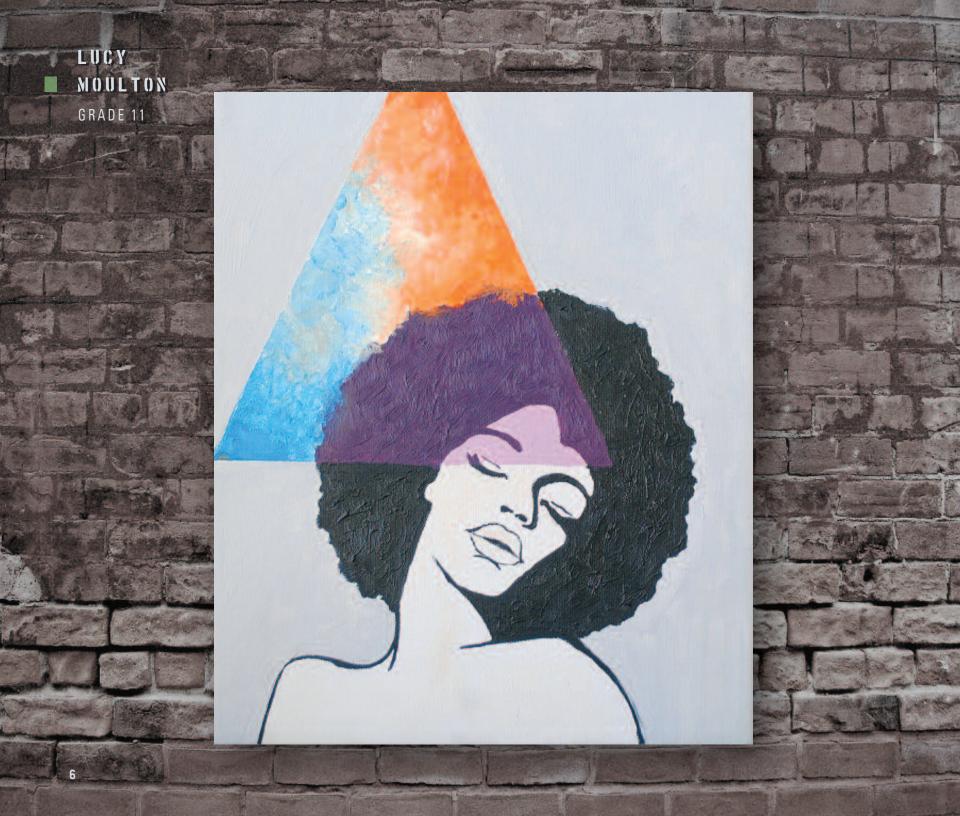
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## KAREN

GRADE 12

#### Sororal

after Catullus 101

The monotone of a subway door closing echoes past the fibrous walls of the train car before rising through the pavement grating and into the city's black air.

I hear the cacophonic reverberation of those sliding doors reminding me of a roaring horn whose pilot pilfered her elfin frame.

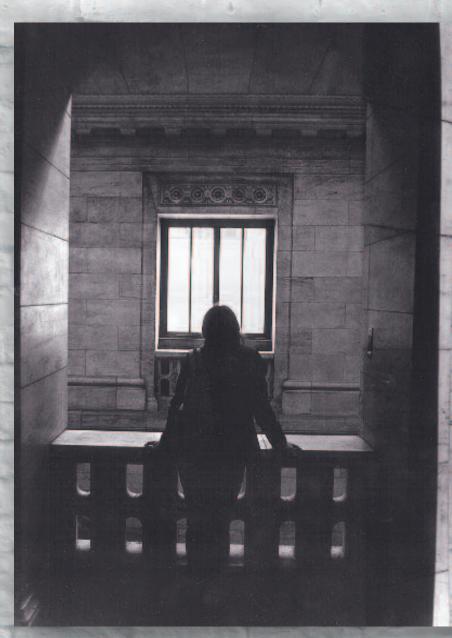
I shrug, but sink into subterranean madness, where the people flash by like Monroe platinum.

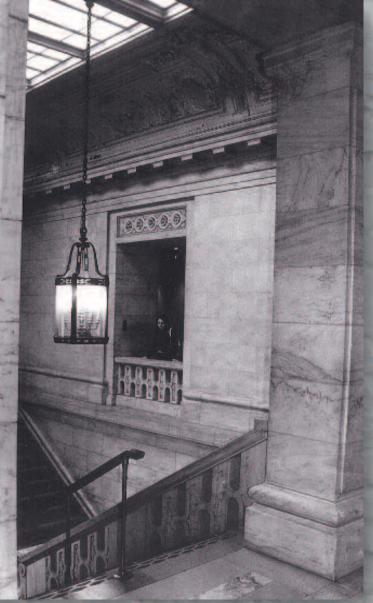
Through this Odyssean march, to this weeping senex of an edifice, my sister's spirit shepherds me to the beaches of Normandy, where the mourner's soul, like the fire-maker's liver, is devoured by beaks of razored bullets.

Boot-prints in the snow faintly mirror a procession to Duffy's home and the ticking of the pallbearer's golden pocketwatch stops. He picks up the ashwood coffin.

My solitary rose has withered into a blackened thought, as her tender sororal throat screams gently at me: "Forever, Sister, Hail and Farewell."

## JULIA PIKE





## NATASHA STRUGATZ

GRADE 10

### [My] Room With A View

Williamsburg, Manhattan, and Brooklyn twinkle in the distance of the cluster of buildings See a hawk—quite rare

Windows that are twice the size of me and open and close in the wind

Fire engines' shrill sirens woke me up out of sleep

The sun bleached photos in the corner and the phone that no one calls anymore

The cords of phones and computers tangled on the floor under the many many stacks of coloring books and board games

The memories from my childhood tucked away

The bulletin board watches over dreams with families and friends and memories

Patches of purple surrounded by white and more white

Three purple paper lanterns hang from the ceiling and soften the light

When I open and close my eyes my clock is the first thing I see

My friends always say, "You have such a nice view."



## CALEB GORDON

GRADE 12

### **Hayuf-Jew**

My parents, my little brother, and I are at our cousins' house in Long Island for a family function. I'm lounging around the living room and talking with a few of the family members there: Grandpa George, Rita, Uncle Howard, Aunt Sarah, the other Aunt Sarah and her parents, Martin and Elly. Then, almost out of nowhere, Aunt Sarah's mother Elly asks me whether or not I consider myself Jewish.

"I'm half Jewish," I say, less assuredly than I had expected to.

"You can't be hayuf Jewish," Elly explains, unamused. "That's like saying you're hayuf male or hayuf female. You either are or aren't."

It isn't the first time my "Jewishness" has been questioned. My old friend Zack used to jokingly call me a "halfbreed," which suggests something impure or degenerate. In addition, to this day neither of my parents considers me Jewish. My dad, for example, often calls my little brother his "Jewish son"—all in good, nonsensical fun of course—as much because my brother has my dad's old hair as because he shares his sense of humor. I tend to be a little more reserved.

When I was little, I never considered myself Jewish. I had never really thought about it. I considered myself half Colombian and half *Russian* (as my dad's grandparents had come to the United States fleeing pogroms in Russia in the early 1900s). My parents didn't want to raise me religiously, so I never went to Hebrew school or had a Bar Mitzvah.

I'm not exactly sure what sparked the shift ... the urge to self-identify that comes with adolescence? Some triggered internal defense against mounting suggestions that I don't totally belong to the group? Or could it be something as simple as the emphasis on Jewish history during sophomore year education? From the *Holocaust and Human Behavior* class first semester, to our English unit on *The Merchant of Venice*, to our *Modern Middle East* unit on the Israel-Palestine conflict—after writing essay after essay on anti-Semitism, I guess I came to identify more with my Jewish

heritage. I came to consider myself half Jewish instead of half Russian.

But that brought me into a predicament.

"Are you Jewish?" two Hasidic Jews ask me on Rosh Hashanah.

"I'm *half* Jewish," I say, violating the central dogma of nonreligious Jews to never say yes in this situation.

"Which half?" one of them asks. It's not the clichéd duo of ancients with a little kid in braids by their side; it's a pair of 18 or 19 year olds.

"My dad's side," I say.

"Oh...," one of the guys says. "That's ... really cool." And they walk away.

Voilà: religious Jews don't consider me Jewish. Family members don't consider me Jewish. Israel would not consider me Jewish. Hitler's Nuremberg laws (which defined anyone having three Jewish grandparents as Jewish) wouldn't even consider me a Jew!

Yet I consider myself Jewish. There's no absolute definition for what defines one's "Jewishness." Most commonly, you're considered Jewish if your mother is Jewish, and mine is not. And I'm obviously not *religiously* Jewish, in that I've never had a Bar Mitzvah, and I don't necessarily believe in any particular deity as it's described by a religious text. So, no: I can't be religiously half Jewish any more than I could be religiously half Christian or half agnostic.

But I quickly I find a loophole in Aunt Karen's reasoning. Take Catholicism, for example. My mother's family is Catholic, but I can't consider Judaism a religion in the same way I can Catholicism. Of course, Catholicism has fish Fridays and hot cross buns; it has the bread and the wine that symbolize the body and the blood of Christ; but this series of traditions isn't nearly as comprehensive as Jewish Kashrut. The vast majority of people who speak Italian (or even Spanish) are Catholic, but these languages are no longer as inherently connected with Catholicism as Hebrew is with Judaism. Since the end of the Crusades and the Reformation, the banner of Catholicism has fallen under the increasingly

powerful identifiers of nationality and ethnicity. But religious and cultural "Jewishness" continue inscrutably to interlock.

Thanks to the messy ambiguity that prevails today, I can be culturally and even genetically Jewish—and moreover, *half* Jewish. Just a few months after we had sent in a swab and the \$100 fee, *National Geographic* traced my father's mitochondrial DNA back to Israel. Due to two millennia of forced or encouraged religious and ethnic segregation, geneticists can trace the inheritance of various "Jewish" DNA sequences over the centuries. Of course, there's no genetic way to separate Jews and non-Jews, but there are certain portions of inherited junk DNA throughout Jewish families as there are in British families, Spanish families, and South African families, which accumulate over the centuries. In short, I can be genetically half Jewish.

And beyond that, can't I be a *cultural* Jew? Can't I cherish challah and chappy Chanukahs and share my dad's "stereotypically Jewish" (as he considers it) sense of humor? Just minutes ago I heard Aunt Sarah filling my dad in on some gossip about how her cousin's niece was having an open affair with the family dentist. "Welcome to Judaism!" my dad exclaimed with a vibrant gesticulation, and I and everyone else cracked up. Can't I take part in well-timed jokes that poke fun at Jews? Feel a cultural connection to my dad's family? Identify with the millennia of oppression, the centuries of persecution and Diaspora that culminated in the extermination of six million during the Holocaust? The common idea of absolutes surrounding Judaism always confuses me. "You either are, or you aren't." That mindset doesn't make sense to me, given that there's such a clear gradient.

It's probably a little silly, right? To care too much? I definitely feel like I belong in my family regardless. I relish the sitcom set that comes to life at family events and during holidays. Martin and Elly think I'm a great role model for their grandson Joey. I can strike up a conversation with anyone in the family about anything. So what difference does it make?

"When I was a little girl," Elly continues, "I saw *The Sound of Music,* and I became obsessed with nuns. I dressed like a nun, and I crawssed myself before going to bed, and my fathuh sat by, he didn't say anything..."

"Wow, that must have been hard for him," my mom says, just tuning into the conversation.

"... and every morning I went to the doors of the local church. But every morning the doors were closed. They didn't let me in, and finally I stopped wanting to be Christian. I knew I wanted to be a Jew."

I don't say anything.

"One day you'll make a choice," Elly promises, "and you'll decide what you wawnt to be." She smiles.

I disagree. Whether it's involved wasting my time arguing vehemently for the equality of races with a bunch of neo-Nazis on line, or making the occasional (and generally well-timed and appropriate—I promise!)

Holocaust joke, I've identified as half Jewish. That's what I "wawnt to be."

## WILL BELLAMY



## EMMA NEWBERY

GRADE 11

#### **Shompole Schoolhouse**

1

I knew before she even opened her mouth that we would hold hands. Her eyes widened as she tapped me hard, and I slipped

to grasp her skirt as my foot moved one moment later followed by the weight of my boot. Her feet were bare, clearly an advantage,

but she slipped in the dust of the schoolhouse and skidded, her hands searching for help, her lips dry riverbeds of sand as she rose to chase me again.

2

My name came from a place deep in her throat. Our hands formed nervous moisture immediately, but neither of us knew the other

well enough to laugh or let go. She liked my hat which fanned out in the back like a shield. I told her friends that my braids had roots

so when they yanked it pulled my skull, drops of water from the cistern showering their arms, drops of moisture snaking through the dust. 3
When we pulled our faces
from the car windows, our tongues swollen
and our teeth packed
with grit, we smiled because I had a five o'clock
shadow and all

our mouths had pathways of dirt winding through the lines where we had laughed.



## ZACH FISHER



# ANA CHÁVEZ GRADE 12

#### Rafa (excerpt)

Rafa likes wearing polo shirts and jeans. Sometimes he wishes he could just walk shirtless on the streets since he prefers to be shirtless.

Rafa drinks gallons of water every day since he gets dehydrated very quickly.

Rafa does not like vegetables. He loves chicken parmesan.

He is 5'11", 19 years old, from class 9 in Eisenhower Academy.

His pants crinkle because his legs are disproportionately longer than his upper torso.

Rafa has short, nappy black hair that he likes to cut because he does not want to have an Afro.

Rafa is half-Dominican and half-black/Puerto Rican.

He wears glasses and always has a towel to dry up his sweat.

He has many feminine qualities, like the way he flicks his hands every time he talks, that make people think he is gay, but he is not gay.

Rafa didn't know how to speak until he was four and when he learned how to speak it was mostly gibberish. He had to go through speech therapy to learn how to speak. He admits that he hates speaking and confrontation since he does not know how to express himself.

Rafa has perfect white teeth and a handsome smile. His teeth are big; "I know. My dentist always compliments my teeth," he says.

He is obsessed with Japanese culture. He is majoring in Japanese at Amherst. He loves anime, sudoku and Asian girls.

The first time I ever got a hickey was Rafa's first time giving a girl a hickey. We were both shocked because we didn't know how it happened. He took a picture of a red mark on my neck for me to see it. "It looks like a mosquito bite," I said. He said, "It's not going away."

When I went home my dad saw me with that. I was in the kitchen at one in the morning listening to my iPod when he entered and saw the exposed left part of my neck. "Lupe! *Que es esa chupon?*" I slid past him to get to my room but he followed me. He made me kneel on my knees with my hands up, next to my bed, for hours, while my sister quietly snickered under her covers.

## NIAMH MICKLEWHITE



## CALLIE GOODIN

GRADE 11

## Mary Wiggins, Attorney at Law

Mary Wiggins, attorney at law.

More specifically, prosecuting attorney at law. I have a degree in lawyer, have been a prosecutor for 20 years. Nobody has ever been acquitted while I am in the courtroom. My prosecution rate is 1,000,000%. I'm so good that I defy the laws of math. I'm THAT good.

I don't care what the defendant did, and I don't really care if they're guilty either. Maybe they killed some birds by means of intoxication, or stole a spaceship, or damaged someone's property (e.g., a dress) because they were too big to fit into it. Maybe they exterminated some cats, or went to a liberal arts school. It doesn't matter.

What's my fool-proof method, you may ask? Well, I am more than happy to tell you. Again, I don't really care if you committed manslaughter or jay-walked. You know what's truly condemnable, however? Lying under oath. Perjury. Disgusting. Repugnant. Inspires me to vomit.

It is not important whether or not the defendant committed the act at hand. But lying in the courtroom? Depending on the charges, that can get you at least a couple years in prison. That's the goal. I have to ensure they are charged guilty of SOMETHING. Might as well be that.

Here's how you do it. Defendants are usually nervous—palms sweating, voices cracking, teeth chattering, the works. You approach them seriously with a stern look on your face, then completely change. Bend over and rest your elbow on the stand in front of them. Rest your cheek in your hand and flash them a smile. Maybe twist your hair around your finger if it's long enough. Last week, I prosecuted Claudette the Regular Dudette for supposedly causing a public disturbance. Though she was slightly surly, one could see she was anxious about being in court. I tried to calm her down. As I leaned over, and put my face in front of hers, I started to chat.

"Hey, cutie," I said.

"Um... hi?"

"Hey, hot stuff, you're pretty gorgeous. You've got beautiful eyes; I hardly even noticed the scars on your face from the birds."

"Thanks?"

"Golly, gee, this embarrassing, but I've lost my phone number. Do you think I could borrow yours?"

She giggled as she handed me her business card, her number listed at the bottom.

I grabbed a ruffle from the top of her dress, studying it intently. "Oh, excuse me, sugar, what's this dress made of?"

"It's a polyester-cotton blend, if I'm not mistaken."

"Really? Because to me it feels like it's made of girlfriend material."

Claudette the Regular Dudette began to blush, and I gave her a kiss on the cheek before arresting her. She lied. Her dress was not made of polyester and cotton, but of girlfriend material. Lying under oath is illegal, so I arrested her. That's another successful prosecution to add to my record.

## OLIVIA CUCINOTTA



## TOLUWANI ROBERTS

GRADE 9

## **Why People Love Disaster**

Metal horses slow down on the highway to inspect a Collisioned pair.

Animals with opposable thumbs watch the Orange and red sparks jump off a building. Media with their mini robots broadcast Pale skin and red blood.

People love disaster because They love having a story to tell. Because they, thank God, are not them.

We sit in our homes pitying the taken. That doesn't change anything.

But after all, the villain is always hotter Than the hero.



## CHARLIE TOMB

GRADE 12

### Killing a Cutthroat (excerpt)

I pulled her in easily. I grasped her body lightly; it fit nicely in my hand. So smooth and slippery. As with every trout I caught, I held her in the light for a few moments to behold her. My dirty, calloused fingers looked brutish, curled around her glistening body. She was green with light green spots, black spots, pink dots with blue halos, every cell on the surface of her tissue shimmering in the sunlight like the water whence she emerged. Her eyes were black holes. I was looking at the universe and she was looking back up to me, gasping in useless air.

She was well over a foot, a cutthroat, judging by the orange streaks under her gills.

Fil glanced over as he cast his fly. "It's suffering. Kill it," he said casually, looking back from his own fishing.

I spotted a good fist-sized rock and tried not to hesitate. I banged her head hard. She squirmed in my hand and I banged three more times, harder. Her body twitched, then went limp.

The life leaving her was a visible phenomenon; I could see the colors retreat and drain from her flesh, like a painting that had been left out in the rain. Her eyes went blank.

I wasn't sad, nor was I proud. I felt close to the mountains.

Just a few hours before, it had been swimming around, breathing the water that we drank. Now it was serving its rightful purpose in the food chain, and for once, so were we.

# THOMAS COOPER LIPPERT

GRADE 12

#### **Sacrament**

I saw a twisted leather jacket on the seat across from me and thought, Angel!

I wondered if it was news that the blackened floors outside the car would crumble to expose dead things awakened.

If the tin can rolling at my feet had been so recently filled with holy blood.

If the heightening whine of the train, the searing notes of metal, was in fact Alleluia, Alleluia.

## OLIVIA SALEH



## WILL BELLAMY

#### GRADE 11

#### Canción de la Firma

#### After Federico García Lorca

Nunca escribo mi firma perfectamente. Nunca puedo escribir las curvas en la "m" en la manera que yo busco, en la manera que yo quiero, en la manera que yo veo.

Lo escribo una y otra vez llenando una página blanca con tinta roja. Cada vez que yo lo escribo, miro mis nudillos y las arrugas por encima de mis articulaciones, los pliegues en mi palma. Yo los veo.

Están desapareciendo, están desapareciendo, todas las arrugas, empiezan a aplanar, desaparecen hasta no hay más, menos y menos, nada más, piel lisa, vacío.

Quemo la página, tiro la pluma, y saco una nueva página que es gruesa con manchas, y una pluma que es azul. Escribo mi firma, con una curva imperfecta en la "m" en la manera que yo soy.

## Song of My Signature

English translation by Mr. Chu

I've never written the perfect signature. I can never get the curves of the "m" the way I'm searching for, the way that I want, the way that I see.

I write it again and again, filling a blank page with red ink.

Every time I write it
I watch my knuckles, the wrinkles at the tops of my joints, the folds in my palm.

These I see.

They are disappearing, they are disappearing, all these wrinkles are starting to flatten, they disappear until there is nothing more, less and less, nothing left, smooth skin, a void.

I burn the page, throw away the pen, and take out a new page that is smeared with blotches, and a pen that is blue. I write my signature, with an imperfect "m," in the way that I am.



## EMMA RAIBLE

GRADE 10

#### Caste

Smoking a makeshift cigarette with the stench of the open sewer behind him—Attending a school in her matching plaid dress playing cricket—Tumbling through the broken streets full of rats—Marching home to play with friends in sandals, earrings too—All of them having *Maharashtrian poha* for dinner, Encapsulated by the blueness of connections.

Looking up at the same sky at the same time
From opposite sides of the city,
From the man sweltering in the innermost nook in the plastic factory
To the bride who looked pregnant on her wedding day wearing the big red dress,
Spoken spires fill the horizon,
Tired people in line waiting for wisdom.

Why must you be so strong, forceful,

To tear the deep roots from the colorful bliss of repetition, tradition,

The weakened system, the least efficient, the one lacking in much importance,

The most destructive, caste.

## Y A N A I F E L D M A N

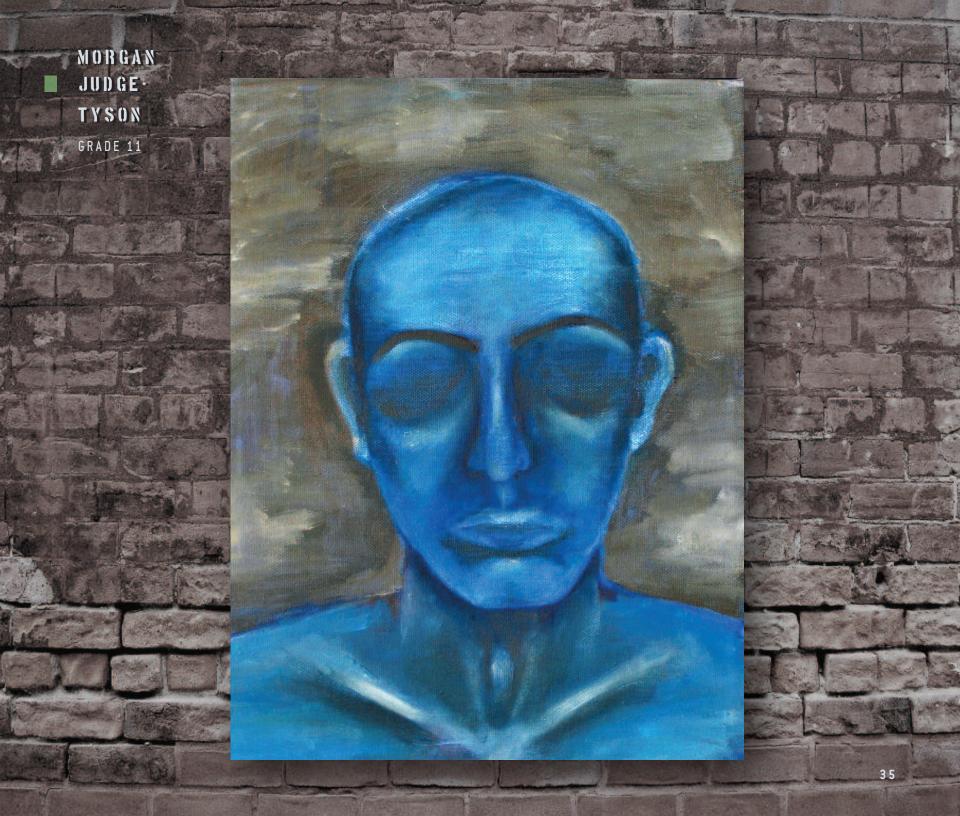
GRADE 12

#### **Rest in Peace Gustavo Dahan** (excerpt)

I prematurely picked at an ancient scab on the inside of my right elbow, and the blood indifferently splattered the newly steamed carpets and (as collateral damage) today's mail lying in a heap next to my front door. Imploring God, the demiurges, the precocious aliens that control the computer simulation that is our world to salvage my crossword puzzle, I spotted a notice in a journal that I am subscribed to: *Gus Dahan, writer, has passed away at age eighty-nine.* The caption occupied approximately three square inches of this journal's front page and yet it contained an unlimited capacity for evocation. An explosive surge of nostalgia—a sentiment little understood but overly explicated; a sentiment I elect to embargo—caused me to regress into a six-by-eight, dimly lit blue room, with feet crossed, toes huddled, and eyes parched. Dahan invented the home that I lived in from my tenth until my fourteenth year. He was as much the author of the stories I read as the demagogue of my budding curiosity for the physical and psychological universes.

I hadn't thought about Dahan or even his "districts" for decades, and yet today's notification teleported me across an entire lifetime, back into my dark blue room where the districts would activate a latent fluttering of the imagination.

Dahan authored exactly two lengthy collections of short stories. Each one contained 73,856 words, a number that still, years later, succeeds in evading my penchant for deciphering numerical and pictorial symbols in literature. It seems like an arbitrary authorial choice, and yet it is so precise that it necessitates years of acute planning and an exceptionally deliberate command of brevity in order to arrive at such a destination twice without risking incoherence. And excepting many thematic parallels, the collections are not explicitly correlated in any way but the districts.



In its obituary, *The Monthly Review of Literary Developments* blasphemously omitted these two works, their word counts, and the paramount contributions they have made to the world's collective capacity for imagination. I leafed to page thirty-four where the notice was located, and four years of scandalous midnight reading propelled my heart to beat faster, my lungs to contract fiercer, and my brain to pulse with the potent inundation of memory. There was his black-and-white portrait next to a caption that read, "Gustavo Dahan, author of *The Mirrors of Quanta and Longitudinal Studies*, died August twelfth, 1983, in Hudson Valley, New York. Father of nine boys and two girls, Dahan wrote stories for his children's amusement. Finally capitulating to his fourth son's entreaty that he publish them, Dahan quickly amassed a small but considerably loyal group of adult and young readers. His books have earned modest acclaim." Unsatisfying and cursory, yet what can I expect from any publication, let alone this minimally read one?

In an effort to dispel the torment that arises from the inability to recall or relive an intense yet fleeting sentimental experience from the distant past, I have confined myself to an isolated dark room where I will attempt to invoke memories anciently woven into the re-re-re-edited nineteenth volume of my identity.

"Peso," from *Longitudinal Studies*, is one such story that has attached itself to my being. A man and woman, strangers, the former short and stocky, the latter tall and thin, arrive in a deserted promenade. The place is barren and yet admits a sense of security and optimism. The promenade extends infinitely in all directions; there is no horizon and nothing to obstruct their blank gazes. Only one tile is granted the privilege of having something substantive within its equivocal dimensions: a decrepit jack-in-the-box, feeble and singular. The two strangers, an odd pair, agree to examine it more closely. The woman winds it up and the Jack hesitantly inches out and requests a penny for his services, whatever those may be.

The man reaches into his pockets, miraculously finds a penny, and flips it into the box. The Jack respectfully thanks the man and tells him that he may alter one thing about his appearance. The man asks to be tall and thinner, and the Jack's bouncing head nods in approval. The man instantaneously grows to over six feet tall while the woman, more curious than indignant, shrinks to four feet and seven inches. Upon finding a penny herself, the woman flips a penny into the box, only to be told that she may alter one aspect of her present circumstances. She asks to be tall again, and as expected the man's size is reduced. As he diminishes to less than three feet, the woman prepares herself to be lifted once more, yet nothing changes. See, relatively she is tall; at four feet, seven inches, she is taller than anything in the infinity of the promenade — the height of this universe.

They explained to the Jack that they did not have any more pennies to give up but would very much like to return to their natural state of being. As the sensible and compassionate Jack that he was, the Jack said he'd accept any other method of payment, be it of monetary value or of fleshly necessity. After an eternity of excruciating payments the man only now existed as an ugly brown stomach and liver, while the woman still had a pulsating pink heart and one lung. Only a silky transparent phantom of their former epidermal and skeletal tissue shrouded these organs. The story "ends" with a fleshy description of a now less indistinct Jack, grown to the abominable size of five square tiles, still amiable and loving, ready to receive the two phantoms into his home as a mother might tenderly welcome her toddler home from school. There is no true end to this story, but rather the reader assumes the disappearance of the man and woman and the advent of two other strangers to the same promenade.

#### LAUREN HOWE

GRADE 12



## LUCY BEERS SHENK

GRADE 11

#### **Jeans**

And that was it.

```
One of the more painful memories of my grandfather was when I was about 10 or 12

and he bought me a new pair of jeans

because I was going to ride at the barn with his wife,

Betty Ann (The Evil Woman, we now call her).

And he told me I looked sexy,

not in a bad way

but I knew it wasn't good

and my mother wasn't there

and I couldn't tell my dad

so I told my aunt.

She just scoffed,

Jesus Christ, and rolled her eyes—

Don't worry, it's fine,

she said,
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#### SOPHIE HAYSSEN

GRADE 11

#### **Classical Jack and the Tarantulas**

Classical Jack wears the roars of promised engines on his feet. His official title bequeathed on him by hordes of lepid lunatics is the jingle jangle mongrel, for whom even tarantulas weep beaches composed of their most finely ground sweet tears. This Tuesday he arrived on the back of a white elephant with rabies in his eyes. The firecrackers blazed beige flame and with a barbecued zing the battle commenced between Jack and a strawberry colored Persian monkey named Claudette. As the whisperers raged on full to bursting with puny secrets the temperature of space blazed to oblivion. And in one moment the always classical Captain Jack slipped from his throne into a pool of existence, surrendering to an ill-fated liaison. The tarantulas never wept as hard as that day when for a final time Jack cried, "Good morning."



## THOMAS COOPER LIPPERT

GRADE 12

#### **Scryer's End**

Everyone felt bad that they had burned the virgin alive. Especially now that nothing had really changed. There had been a few days of rejoicing, days when everyone had brought out their secret reserves of food and set their tables outside. And the smell of food had wafted through the air and filled everyone's noses, and they had all almost forgotten what a good cooked meal tasted like, how mouthwatering lamb seasoned with herbs and soaked in marinade could be. From simple relief that now everything would go back to normal everyone had rejoiced, relaxed.

But then everyone had looked in their pantries and found them empty still, then looked in their secret pantries and found those now empty too. People began to mutter, kick the dirt roads, scuff their boots, and start to say that there hadn't been no reason to sacrifice that girl.

Verlyn felt worst of all. After all, it had been *his* dreams that they'd all acted on. The spirit had visited his dreams. Had told him why everything was happening and had given him the solution. It didn't help the spirit hadn't returned since that night. The spirit had been a frequent visitor, almost a regular, in Verlyn's dreams before. Now: radio silence.

Rona stood at the sink rewashing dishes. Last night Verlyn had asked what they were having for dinner, more to lighten the mood than anything, and Rona had broke down into tears. He made sure to keep his mouth shut tonight. They had brought their table outside longer than anyone else did, used up more of their supply of food than anyone else. It'd been their insistence that Verlyn was right, that the crops would soon start growing strong again, that all these bad times were winding down and soon everything would be back to normal. Now, though, they had a meal every other night and Rona was sleeping in the guest room.

The night of the burning Verlyn and Rona had made love. Passionate, stupid, loud love, on full stomachs of meat and vegetables and sweets they had used almost all of their sugar on.

There was a tapping on the door and Verlyn was thrust back to the present. A sharp tapping, like the pecking of a bird. He got up from his chair and walked to the

door. He peered out into the sunken dark of the night. The porch light glowed on above him with a dull shine. On the steps there lay rocks, little pebbles someone had thrown. One had smeared black across the grey of his stoop. The black of charcoal.

Verlyn found himself shaken awake the next morning. Rona leaned over him with wide scrutinizing eyes, like an owl.

"Well?" she asked.

Verlyn blinked, then struggled to wake up, to be alert. His bedroom was still stuffy with grey light.

"Were you visited last night?" Rona demanded, her voice harsher now with age. Verlyn shook his head. She narrowed her eyes to slits, examining him up and down. "Well then, what did you dream about then, if not that?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" she repeated, incredulous. As if he was being audacious, or had just said something very racy, "How do you dream of nothing?"

"I closed my eyes and now I'm awake again."

Rona left without another word. He wouldn't see her until that night. It was too early to go yet, but Verlyn knew he had to show up early, to prove he was doing more than his fair share, to prove he was just as remorseful as the rest, that he was just as desperate and motivated for all this to end. He got up and looked in the mirror at his worn out face that had somehow sloughed off almost all its old beauty, then washed it.

Almost everyone was well underway when Verlyn finally arrived. The men spent their days now driving around from field to field checking to see if anything had grown. Yet nothing had, and they would throw their hands in the air in frustration and fear and talk to each other about how these were the same fields their grandfathers had sown and harvested and these were the same trusted plows they had tilled the earth with for years and years, so why now? Why now would nothing grow? And then in futility, in an attempt to do *something*, they would all drag their plows to the end of the field to start again. All the horses had long been eaten and so the men had to push and pull the plows across the field to try and churn up whatever good soil might be lurking

underneath the dry hard stuff that would not grow anything. It was work that left their backs aching and their clothes dirty.

Only a few said good morning to Verlyn. The rest looked up and watched him for a while, then went back to muttering to each other and scuffing their boots and kicking the dirt.

"You were awfully quiet today, Verlyn," Maurice said to him as the sun began to go down, "I seem to remember a week ago when you couldn't do nothing but talk. Talk about how rich our field would be soon, how this blight'n'famine'd over by now."

Verlyn made sure all day that he had never stopped working, and when Maurice stood over him with his shadow cast over Verlyn, he made sure he kept his shoulder to the plow pushing.

"I guess I was."

Maurice stood placid above Verlyn. "My son was telling me the other night how Maggie Simmons was a real sweet girl."

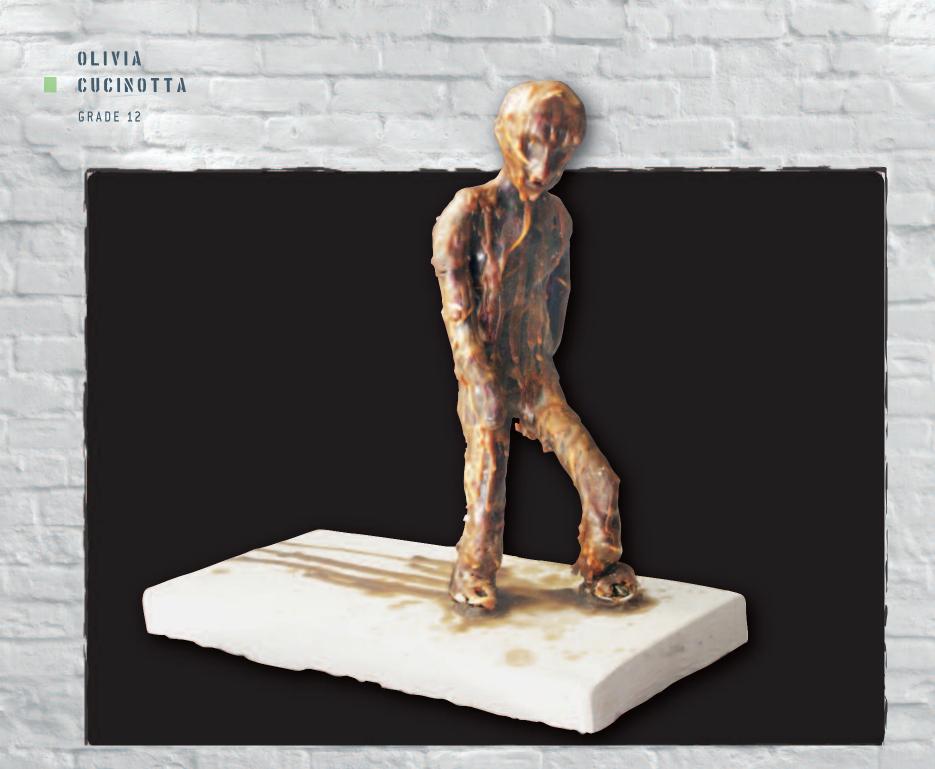
"I don't recall you or your son making such a big fuss when we were all deciding about what to do."

Maurice's face went ugly. He gave Verlyn a look, then went back to work. Verlyn felt the stares too when he finally stood up and stretched at the end of the day. He got in his car and when he had driven out of sight he drove faster.

The lights in the house were all off when he got out of the car. Inside he stumbled around in the dark before finding the switch, but nothing happened when he flipped it. Swearing, he moved farther into the dark. He thought he knew his house better than he seemed to then; all of the furniture felt foreign to him as he bumped into it. Even his eyes seemed to fail to adjust to the gloom. When he found the breaker and had flipped the switches one by one, the lights in the house finally sputtered on.

Verlyn walked back to the kitchen, where he seemed to spend all of his time these days, in the light. He felt like he was walking through a pall, like everything in his house was covered in a thin layer of ash.

He waited in the kitchen drinking a glass of water until he was sure Rona was not coming home. She would be staying the night at Jennifer's again, he guessed, and



either she would come home tomorrow night or maybe he would have to go get her, but only after things had calmed down around town. He left his glass by the sink and went downstairs into the study. Before it had been Verlyn's study it had been Rona's painting room, but when she had never used it Verlyn had moved his desk in and thrown a sheet over the half-finished canvases.

He went there now. He lifted one of the sheets and underneath it was Verlyn's box of food. His box. He knew Rona had one of her own somewhere, but he hadn't found it yet. He took out a half loaf of stale bread and bit into it. The dough was tough and brittle and Verlyn stood hunched over the box chewing each bite for minutes until it was soft enough again to swallow.

When he had eaten the rest of the loaf, Verlyn straightened up again and hid the box underneath the sheets. He went back upstairs and saw lights in the driveway. A car was there, idling. He couldn't make out whose it was, or who was sitting in the front seat. He knew they were watching him right now. Had probably just perked a little bit as he came back into view through the kitchen windows.

Whoever it was wasn't trying to be discreet. Verlyn had thought he had heard a car drive away the other night, but then they had tried to be stealthy. This was out in the open. He wondered if they were as hungry as he was. Maybe this was their way of not thinking about how empty their stomachs were for a while, to come glare at him for a while.

With control, with measured paces to a measured rhythm, Verlyn turned off the lights in the kitchen and found his way back to his bedroom. An hour later, when he heard the sound of gravel as the car drove off he exhaled with relief.

That night he dreamt about flames.

Verlyn pulled his car into the drive of the field an hour earlier than he had the day before, but still he found everyone waiting for him ready to go. They were all standing in a circle by the field, and when he slammed the door of his car they either looked up at him or down at their boots.

He walked over to the group without too much haste, and when he got to them all they made a space for him, a large gap in the circle to allow him in.

"Good morning, gentlemen," he said. A few murmured things back, but whatever they said was lost in the air or in their collars.

"Good morning, Verlyn," Jacob said, "how are you today?"

"I can't complain, glad to see we're all here. The sooner we get started, the better."

"Actually Verlyn," Robert said frowning, "I think we got a good handle on things here. Why don't you go home."

"You've been seeming a little under the weather," George told him.

"Yeah, why don't you go sleep it off?" Glenn muttered, and immediately there was a wave of disapproval from the rest of the group, a soft murmur of be quiet and shut your mouth.

Verlyn looked around the circle, dismayed. He had been on the town council with Robert for four years. George and him had winterized their homes only two summers ago. He had told Robert first about the spirit; it'd been Robert who cried—not because of what the spirit had said—but because he was so sorry Verlyn had to be the one to bring such sad news, but the famine had to be over and Robert would stand true to his friend. The town had been starving. They had all been behind him, had sat around talking how best to broach the subject to the Simmonses, had talked about how best to do it—that gasoline would be too awful—and had gathered kindling and wood in the forests instead. Now this.

"I guess you're right," Verlyn said with a quiver of indignation, "I guess I haven't been myself of late."

The men nodded, and the gap in the circle opened again to see him out. Everyone's eyes followed him to his car. They didn't even wait for the rumble of his engine before they began to mutter again. Verlyn drove out. He didn't even bother to speed up when he got on the main roads again.

Late afternoon found Verlyn in the hills, on the hiking trails long since abandoned to nature. He spent his day searching for Rona. He went first to the Simmons'. He didn't know why, but he had felt it was the right thing to do. There had been men there too. When they spotted him or his car or either they'd sat up

from their lawn chairs, had called into the house. And so Verlyn had kept on driving. He'd gone to Rona's friend Jennifer's house as well to look for her there, too, but he hadn't dared to knock, hadn't even gotten out of his car.

In despair, in anguish, in desperation, he had tried the hiking trails. Him and Rona had used to walk them when they were still dating. They would bring a blanket on cool days and a glass of wine on warm days and would walk up to the clearing in the trees that looked out onto the town down below. They'd talk about what street they'd like to live on, or whether they'd buy a little bit of land so they could have a garden in the back. He'd thought, maybe, she'd have remembered those walks too, would have been here too looking down at the town and he'd find her and his search would be over.

She wasn't on the trail. No one was. No one remembered the trails anymore. They had been maintained by the community, and when the community had gone on with their lives, had decided that trudging up to clear brush for a trail no one ever used was not worth it, and the trail had surrendered itself to nature again.

Verlyn sat on the old birch stump. He wanted to find Rona. He was afraid that mutterings had turned to words and words to actions and that Rona wasn't safe or she had been captured and was now in danger.

He sat on the stump trying to figure out what to do. He listened to the birds chirp, and, somewhere nearby, a rivulet trickle. He felt the days press down on him all at once, and his hunger crying from within sapping away any strength from anything he might do. He felt his lids closing, struggled in surges to stop it, but soon he felt himself falling asleep.

The cold woke him up. His heart was racing fast, and his breath was making tiny little clouds in front of him. He felt exhilarated. Cold but exhilarated. He got off the stump. His butt was cold and damp, but that didn't matter. He looked down at the town and for the first time saw the cloud of smoke pitched against the dimming sky, the flames sprouting from somewhere down below him.

Verlyn ran back down to his car. He needed to get down, to stop it. He sped

#### JULIA LISI

GRADE 12



all the way back into town, honking his horn, a wild look on his aging face, his hair, now graying, frantic across his head.

He followed the smoke, drove street to street trying to get closer to the fire. He didn't see anyone in their houses. Most of the lights were turned off, he didn't spot anyone on the road. He felt like he was driving through some place abandoned, but he couldn't stop or slow down.

Then, with dread, he turned onto Scryer's End and realized where the fire originated. When he pulled around the corner he saw the town watching his house burn through the night. From behind, their figures were drawn out against the light of the flames. When they saw his car, saw who it was when he had got out, they let Verlyn through, pulled him up to the middle.

"Listen! Listen!" Verlyn said, trying to shout over the chant of the fire. He found Robert at the front. Verlyn grabbed his coat and shook him. "Robert, you have to listen to me. We can put this fire out, the spirit. The spirit's come back, the spirit's told me—"

"Verlyn, lower your voice," Robert said with a level tone. "We don't need the spirit anymore."

"Listen to me, Robert," Verlyn yelled.

"Verlyn, we've come to our own decision. We know what we have to do."

"Where's Rona?" Verlyn asked, ignoring Robert. Robert didn't matter, not right now. Rona mattered right now, he needed to find her. He scanned the faces lit up in the light of the fire. But he didn't see her broad forehead, didn't see the reproachful look she always seemed to give him these days. If he could just find her he could let her know it was all right now, that they didn't have to feel guilty anymore, that it was just in the hills. The answer was just in the hills by the—

"Verlyn," Robert had grabbed his arm, "you must go too."

"Too? What are you saying where do I have to go, I have to find Rona—"

"Rona's gone ahead, Verlyn, she's waiting for you." Verlyn felt the hand on his arm tighten and felt which way it was pulling him, towards the heat and the light illuminating the world in pale shades.

"Robert, you can't mean to, you haven't already," Verlyn began, but Robert

gave him a pained, resolved grimace.

"This is what we have to do, Verlyn, you must understand that. We have to put things right again, we must even the scores. Then things'll get back to how they were."

Oh God, he thinks he's right. That he's talking rationally, Verlyn thought to himself. He thinks this is the only logical answer. Is this how we all sound? Is this how he sounded to her?

Verlyn gave the crowd one last glance, but after a moment looked farther out into the dark where somewhere the hills begin and the trail begins but he is too far away. It doesn't look like he'll ever get back there again, not with the darkness so total, not with the fire so bright. This is how the story ends, as it began, and soon they'll bring out all their secret boxes of food they have kept hidden to themselves until even those are out and then another fire will be lit and another and another until there is no one to light a fire and then the ash will nurture the earth and the soil will grow again, and that's an answer too, I guess, in the end, Verlyn thought as smoke curled up towards the sky like a ribbon.





#### JULIA Lisi

GRADE 12

#### Melody

Well, there goes the poison in my veins—
I guess we'll never meet again.
And as trains pass on the other track,
I realize that my mind is conjuring
scenarios that will never happen
set to soundtracks of the high school marching band.
Architecture can only stand when supported,
so I feel a little unsturdy.
Blue-white clouds sing their melody of sunshine and rain.
Tears fall to the whistling of a tea kettle.
Where do colors go in a world of black and white,
With magic removed and pain to take its place?
But pain is temporary and colors remain,
To place upon the world a beautiful stain.

#### KAREN EBENEZER

GRADE 12



#### OLIVIA CUCINOTTA

GRADE 12

#### Zero

after Brian Doyle

Consider nothing. That's just the trouble: nothing is a paradox. The concept cannot satisfy both grammar and its definition. Nothing is the subject, but to be a complete sentence it requires a verb. And as soon as you attach it to a verb, the phrase becomes an oxymoron. Even the start of the simple sentence, "Nothing is" is a contradiction.

So rather than define it, picture it. Begin with a small space, a room, perhaps. Imagine one thing, gone. The pen resting on the bedside table, the cactus on the windowsill, gone; the tipped over orange bottle, its contents all gone. Then the room itself, the building, the street, city, planet, solar system, universe taken out of existence until all that's left is the mind imagining all this nothingness. But the mind is something. Another contradiction.

So pivot again. Think mathematics. Everyone thinks the Mayans invented zero (perhaps they, with their predictions and calendars, are seen as more existential than other early peoples), but they did not. Not really; rather, they invented the place holder. They invented the zero in 109 but not o existing independently. Nothing outside the context of something was inconceivable, I suppose.

The Greeks thought about zero, but did not write it down; rather they lost themselves in the philosophical implications of the thing.

Then it wasn't until 650 AD that Brahmagupta, an Indian astronomer, was the first to argue that when there is one, and one is taken away, zero is left. More importantly, he thought that zero plus one equals one. Brahmagupta pulled something out of nothing. The phenomenon of zero to one is often forgotten in the litany of counting: zero, one, two, three and so on, but simply zero, one, is nonbeing, being on a small scale, every day. One, zero is existing to not. It seems achievable, like all it takes is one more moment, one more step.

So much striving in this system. Almost every institution we have created in our history seeks to dodge this issue of zero with the temptation of infinity. Infinite life, in heaven, in hell, in rebirth. Infinite beings with no beginning, with no end, dictating all this something, banishing nothing as a heretical fantasy, calling your mind limited for holding a small desire for nothingness. But zero is constantly at a state of poised readiness in our lives: balancing on a razor blade between a theoretical asymptote in the human mind and an all consuming truth, so absolute that once in it we will not even be able to consider it.

There is a moment before you fall asleep, a moment when you are sure you will not wake up, where zero will not feel like a comforting certainty but a suffocating mass, bulging into you at odd angles. But there is nothing to be done. And yet you wake up in spite of yourself. Your existence beats on. The sunrise is turning the grey outside a blue-speckled pink, your father walks across the hall into the kitchen, and for a moment you know he is there until his footsteps fade away and he is gone for a moment until his voice rises from the kitchen asking your mother if she remembered to buy coffee.



#### REBECCA ENNIS

GRADE 12

### Getting the Mail and Taking Out the Trash

In my family, I get the mail. My parents have never assigned me this job, and I have never struck a public claim to it. However, I have a mailbox key and my mom does not, which I think says a lot about who should be picking up the mail. The miniature key for our box is nothing remarkable, just one of the three tarnished keys on my black rubber scrunchie that I use as a key ring. I pick up the mail as soon as I get home from school. After I let myself in through the heavy green glass-panelled security door in the lobby, I whip the key ring out of my wallet, where it bounces into my palm like a bungee cord. In the pale lobby, the rows of metal mailboxes are meant to gleam but more often don't. The mail is always rolled up and squashed in to fit, even on the days when there are no magazines or college viewbooks.

I think the reason I started to get the mail is because I am always hoping that there is some mail for me. Whether it is *Seventeen*, which I wait impatiently all month to get, or a notice that I have outstanding fees at the local library and that reminds me, yes, books that you have already read but not yet returned *still* get fined if they are late. I don't care if a letter is addressed to Rebecca Ennis or R. Tennis, or Ennis Morgan R., I will open it and claim it as mine. Sometimes, I mistakenly open my father's mail because we have the same initials, and if there is some obscure rendering of my name, it means it belongs to me.

I usually sort through the mail in the elevator up to our apartment. We live on the first level off the ground, but the dim and eerie yellow lighting in the stairwells and the feeling I get of being trapped always prompts me to take the elevator. The handful of seconds I spend inside the elevator is usually enough for me to pick out my own mail, size up the Urban Outfitters and Lands' End catalogs, and decide if I want to read about Bloomberg in the newest issue of *New York* magazine. By the time I lock the apartment door

behind me and drop the unwanted mail (*i.e.*, not mine) on my mom's childhood piano, I have a pretty good sense not only of what I received but also of the mail my sister didn't receive, the bills and exhortations from mayoral candidates, and the mail sent to my grandmother.

My grandmother doesn't usually get sent much mail, mostly a few insurance promotions or generic alerts that she is eligible for a new credit card. These items are not only few but rare; a month or two might pass before another envelope is addressed to her.

Since I get the mail, I alone know the difference between what gets stuffed in our mailbox downstairs and the mail that makes it onto the piano. I know it is a crime to tamper with other people's mail, but if I see something that doesn't belong in the pile, I trash it. Well, I actually throw it into the bag of recycling hanging next to the front door of the apartment, perfectly placed for discreet disposals. Either way, the intent is the same. And either way, whether I throw out the mail or don't, some of it never gets to its intended recipient.

Anything that looks important, which is about 98% of the mail, never gets thrown away. I put it on the piano because, who knows, maybe my mom really is interested in being a test subject for new medications. But I do know that my grandmother is no longer interested in promotions, insurance, or the Victoria's Secret catalogs that she always loved ordering from. She cannot be interested in any of it, and I know this, so I throw it out. No one knows, and no one needs to be consulted about my decisions. Sometimes I feel guilty that I am choosing to get rid of her mail without asking anyone else. Sometimes I feel proud that no one else has to become involved in the numbing, systematic destruction of her paper trail. But either way, the fact that she won't care what happens to her mail makes me the saddest of all. Because after all, who doesn't want to get mail?

#### ZACH FISHMAN

GRADE 9



#### OLIVIA SALEH

GRADE 12

#### When It's Quiet

The house reeked of old book pages and ginger ale, but it didn't bother me much. Pop-Pop kept three heavy-duty black garbage bags in his guest room. Tearing the bottoms of each bag were the small arms and legs of plastic dolls, the silver cookie cutters, and the pink stethoscopes that I played with during every visit, so Pop-Pop made sure to cover the holes with his hand as he brought them downstairs. He always said that the guest room belonged to my grandma and that she left it for me. I knew that Dad and Pop-Pop bought me all of those toys with the money they kept wrapped in rubber bands, but it felt like they came from Grandma's pockets, the pockets sewn into all of those dresses she wore. It felt like she left me the bedroom and all that was in it, like the white comforter set with millions of tiny pale roses that made my eyes cross when I looked at them for too long. I traced my nails around each petal. I pretended that each flower I outlined was put into a woven basket. When I finished, the bouquet was resting on its side, waiting to be sent to Heaven.

I heard Pop-Pop call my name from downstairs and remembered that I couldn't bring Grandma back to life. I counted to five on one hand. Thumb, pointer finger, middle finger, ring finger, pinkie. It had been five months since Pop-Pop had taken me to see *Rugrats in Paris* at the Alpine Theater. I remembered how we had sat in the middle of the aisle and I had watched the dust stir like fruit flies in the tunnel of light above our heads. Pop-Pop had said how much Grandma would have loved me. He always found quiet moments to tell me that. He'd tell me when I was finishing my spoonful of peanut butter or when I sat on his recliner or when he drove us slowly through Bay Ridge. I was excited for him to tell me again.

Before heading downstairs, I tiptoed into the bedroom my dad and uncle had shared for years. Their beds had a geometric pattern. The figures made me think of large math textbooks, which made me think of how dad

said he was great at math in high school, which made me feel like I was intruding. As I started to leave, I took one last look at dad's framed high school graduation picture. His hair was full and combed to his right side, his smile was crooked like mine, and his eyes were looking at something past my shoulder. I imagined it was something big. I backed away when I started to believe he was still young.

Old Blue Eyes was singing Grandma's favorite song, "You Will Be My Music." The living room shook just like Pop-Pop's rounded shoulders, his arthritic hand cupping his forehead. I pretended the banister's wooden legs were trees as I clung to them and watched. Pop-Pop began to raise his hand as the voice on the record got louder. It looked like vegetables were trying to sprout from his knuckles, making it hard for him to form a fist. He didn't want to hit anyone though; he just wanted to be stronger.

Then the song ended.

The place under his eyes looked shiny as he found my hiding spot. He smiled and asked for vanilla ice cream, which meant he wanted a tight hug and a kiss on his cheek that smelled like shaving cream. I followed him to the bottom of the stairs and he ejected his Frank Sinatra tape, saying that Heaven will never be the same. He used two remotes to turn on *Hey Arnold* and the colors began to buzz. Pop-Pop shuffled to the kitchen and I stopped thinking for a moment. He returned and laid out paper bowls filled with crackers, pretzels and goldfish on the glass table. There was a can of ginger ale that sat on top of a thin napkin. I lifted the can and the napkin stuck. When I pulled it off, there was a big ring that looked like the first letter of my first name: O. I wanted to tell Pop-Pop that Grandma was trying to talk to us by sending me this message, but I couldn't. He was in the kitchen, talking in Arabic to someone he loved less than Grandma. It was quiet the rest of the day, but Pop-Pop didn't tell me how much Grandma would've loved me. I wondered who I'd miss when I was his age.

#### DEANDRA

FORDE

GRADE 11



#### MATTEO HEILBRUN

GRADE 12

#### **Undigging**

I lay the shovel on the grass next to the stump and lean over it with my chin out and my arms folded behind my back, which I know is a way to look at a thing that shows you're thinking hard about it. I circle the stump and try to find a spot where I can stick my wedge. This is a big one, and I know it's gonna take a lot of cranking to undig, so I decide I might need Sam's help. Besides, I don't wanna hurt myself and then miss the chance to go out shooting tomorrow with Dad, 'cause heaven knows he won't wait up for me or anybody. So I call out to Sam for help on the stump. I call once, wait a few seconds, then call again. But he won't come. It's no use, I know, because he just hasn't been the same since the lake took Mary. But who the hell has, really? It doesn't mean there won't be no more stumps to undig.

Down at the dock Sam's fishing. He's got his feet in the water and the whiskey jug by his side. His line isn't out more than a yard or so, and I tell him he isn't gonna catch too many fish with his feet disturbing the water like that.

"Didn't Dad put you to work on something?" he asks me.

"Matter of fact, he did," I tell him. I look up to house to see if Dad is on the porch, then I take a swig of Sam's whiskey jug 'cause I know it's forbade.

"Put that down," Sam says without turning his head. I put down the jug and let the liquid kill all the way down my throat. It's not too cold and not too hot, and to tell you the truth I don't know how Sam spends his whole day drinking it.

"Would you help me undig that stump up by the house?" I ask.

"Why?"

"'Cause it needs undigging."

"Why?"

"Damnit, Sam, I don't know," I say, raising my arms in the air and letting them hit back down against my sides. "It needs undigging 'cause it don't look good, sitting there all useless."

"Useless?"

"Yup. The tree died and we cut it down, right? 'Cause it could fall and damage the house. Now we gotta undig the stump."

"Stumps don't fall though," he says.

I still taste the whiskey in my mouth, so I hock up a loogie and spit it into the water. The loogie bobs back and forth and slowly spreads out until it's nothing. I turn back to Sam.

"Hey, Sam," I say.

He keeps sitting there on the sandpapery dock, his back arched cat-like and his shoulders hunched over. His rod ticks as he reels in the line. I look out across the lake and see some of the houses on the other side, with their docks that you can't see from here, but I know from our boat rides when we get closer that their docks look just like ours. Some of them even have those floating trampolines a few yards back. We just have the water slide.

All the way over to the right is Flag Island, with the flagpole coming up through the trees and the flag flapping with the wind.

"Sam."

I get the feeling he hasn't been listening to me and it makes me even more mad.

"Sam!"

"What?"

"I'm starting to actually get worried about you."

I want to tell him why I'm worried, about how he ain't been the same since the lake took Mary, but I don't think I can say too much or else he'll just get angry. He always gets angry when we talk about anything more than everyday stuff. Finally, he swivels his hips and turns to face me while still seated on the edge.

"It ain't a younger brother's job to worry about his older brother," he says. "So why don't you just run along and Dad'll fix the stump later."

"But Dad told me it was my job to undig the stump."

Sam grabs his whiskey jug and takes a swallow, his head going all the way back. He holds that position for a second, and as his Adam's apple bobs up and down a shard of sunlight catches on the whiskey jug and shines right in my eye. I look down quick and my eyes water and hurt. I don't want Sam to think that I'm crying, so I wipe them fast. I hear his jug clink back down onto the dock, and when I look up again, he's back facing the lake. I don't think he noticed.

"If you can't do your job, just get somebody else to do it," Sam says.

I know it's no use, so I start to walk back up the house, figuring I'll ask
Melissa for help.

"That's what I've been trying to do," I say as I go.

Back at the stump, I think about where I can stick my wedge. Problem is, it's so round and wide and my wedge is just a piece of old rusty metal that can't even go that deep in the ground. My shovel sits all pathetic and goodfor-nothing next to the stump, because I know it won't come in handy until I've figured out what to do with the wedge. I'm supposed to find a way to get the wedge jammed into the stump, and then use the shovel to hit the wedge until the wood cracks.

I look back at the stump. It's got nice rings, and you can tell it was a good tree while it was alive. The middle few rings are darker than the outside, and they make the stump look like the eye of the earth. Or better yet, it looks sort of how I'd think an arm looks like if you cut the hand and wrist off. The middle dark rings are the bone and the light outer rings are the flesh. The bark is the skin. It makes me think that it's sort of like our land lost a limb that we now have to cure up before it gets infected.

I sit down in the grass, and it feels cool or wet or both. I let myself fall back so that I'm lying on the grass facing the sky. I close my eyes and the sunlight makes little shapes on the back of my eyelids, which reminds me of

#### ZACH FISHER

GRADE 12



how the sunlight that shined off Sam's whiskey jug blinded me a few minutes ago. And that makes me wonder about why things happen the way they do. Why did the sunlight have to hit the jug just right so that it hit my eye? Because it hurt and it didn't do me or anybody any good. I mean there was no reason for it. And then I start thinking about Mary again. Why did she have to fall off the canoe that day, and why did her head have to hit that rock? There's a lot of places to fall in the lake and a lot of rocks, but why did Mary have to fall on the one place where that one big rock was? And if Mom died when I was too young to remember, so I didn't get sad, then why did Mary have to die when I was old enough to get sad? Because me being sad doesn't help anybody. And if I was young enough to not be sad when Mom died, why did Sam have to be old enough to be sad when she died, so that he was sad when Mom died and also when Mary died? Because Sam being sad twice and me just once doesn't help anybody either.

But then I tell myself again that it's no use thinking about Mary too much. It won't bring her back, and plus there's business to take care of. The stump. It's my job to undig it, and when Dad comes down from the attic I'll have him see the stump undug, lying next to a big hole in the ground, with its white wormy roots all uncovered and dusty with earth, and the little yellow hairs that stick out of the ends of the white wormy roots all wirey. He'll see the undug stump and he'll say, "Good job, son," and he'll show me the work he's done in the attic, and we'll compare the work we've both done, like men do. And then tomorrow he'll take me shooting.

I walk up to the house and see Melissa on the porch. She's sitting on the swinging chair reading a magazine. There's a mug of tea steaming on the table.

"Melissa?" I say.

"Yeah?" She's still wearing her white evening dress with the spiderwebby part on the bottom and at the sleeves. Her hair's up in a ponytail, which I know means she hasn't combed it yet, and by this time of day she probably won't.

"Dad told me to clear out the stump but it's too big to do by myself."

"What stump?"

"You know the one that's just down to the right of the house over there?"

"Oh, yeah."

"And why's everybody forgetting the stump all of a sudden?" I say. "We cut that tree down just a few weeks ago and it was our best tree."

"What, are you ranking trees now?" Melissa says. She flips a page and cocks her head to the side as she picks up the magazine and opens up a centerfold.

"No."

Melissa puts the magazine down on the table and slurps some tea. She's always slurping loud or chewing loud. I really don't like that. Most things I don't mind, but I hate people who make a lot of noise with food. Dad told me once that I sounded like a pig when I was chewing with my mouth open, and I've never done it since. But he's never said anything to Melissa when she does it. I guess it's because she's pretty. She hardly combs her hair but she's real pretty, I have to say. She has a really pretty face. And you forgive people when they're pretty. Sam says that pretty girls often make noise when they eat, and that Dad married Melissa because she's pretty, not because she doesn't chew loud. He also says that Dad married Melissa because her name starts with M, like Mary.

"Hey, Melissa?" I ask.

"Yeah."

"Would you help me undig the stump?"

"Not now," she says, still not looking up. "I'm reading."

"But Dad told me to undig it."

"So get Sam to help you."

"Sam's fishing," I say.

"Have you asked him?"

I look around the porch and down to the lake. I see Sam sitting on the dock still, and that makes me just a little bit more mad than the more mad I already was.

"Why does nobody do anything anymore!" I say with my voice raised. Melissa

finally looks up at me from her magazine.

"It's Saturday," she says.

I sit down on the chair next to where she's sitting. I hold my head in my hands.

"That's not what I mean," I say. "Sam just sits there all day fishing and doesn't get up. Is he just thinking about Mary?"

I look up at Melissa and she keeps looking at me.

"Not just," she says. "You gotta give him time to think it out."

"But can't he think it out while doing other things?"

Melissa makes a sort of face where her eyebrows raise and her mouth pinches. It's a face that grownups make when they look at a kid who they think doesn't know anything, cause he's a kid. I wanna tell her that I do know things even though I'm just a kid, but I'm pretty sure that'll just make it worse.

"Sometimes thoughts are so strong that all you can do is sit and think them," she says. "For a while."

"Well, I want a while to end," I say. I look off the porch down to the lake, then to the sides where the grass meets the forest.

"A while is a long time when your sister passes," she says.

"But Mary was my sister too," I say. Melissa gives me that look again like I'm just a kid.

"Why don't you just ask your father for help?" she asks.

"Because Dad said it was my job. He has other work to do," I say.

"He won't be mad if you just ask him for help."

I swallow. "Fine," I say. I stand up and start towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she asks.

"To ask Dad."

"Your father went out shooting."

"He did?" I say, and my mouth hangs open. "He said we'd go tomorrow!"

"Well, he went today," Melissa says. "Keep your voice down."

I feel heat around my face like when you take a sip of whiskey. He promised we'd go tomorrow.

I run down the steps of the porch as fast I can. "Careful," I hear Melissa call out behind me.

I jam the wedge into the side of the stump, but it doesn't stick. It just falls to the side and thunks onto the grass. I grab it and jam it again and this time it sticks, but I can feel that it's loose. I pick up the shovel from the moist grass next to the stump and smack it against the wedge, and the wedge shifts an inch, then falls back into the grass. I pick up the wedge again, wind my arm back, and jam the wedge into the stump as hard as I can. A chip of bark flies off the side of the stump, and the wedge drops to the ground again.

I feel tears start to bud in my eyes as I pick up the shovel. Then the hot honey tears start to fall, leaving tracks on my cheeks. I wipe my face with my sleeves and swing the shovel behind my head and bang it against the stump so that it makes a little slit in the perfect rings. I raise the shovel above my head once more and hit it against the stump again, this time with the flat end. I hit it against the stump again and again and wood chips fly everywhere, and I think to myself: that's not the way to undig it. And I hit the shovel against the stump until my arm is heavy but I keep hitting even though I know that's not gonna undig it, and I want to scream blood red until I'm raw but I just hit and hit, and thinking: that's not the way, that's not the way.





#### OLIVIA CUCINOTTA

GRADE 12

#### **Paddling Out Again**

I don't like the beach, but I love the ocean. My grandmother, a devout Catholic and avid horoscope reader, always said it was because it was because I'm a Pisces, but I think it's because of my father.

My dad's a surfer, and has been since he was a teenager. In the seventies he rode a thick, yellow longboard with a hood ornament glued onto the front. When it was too cold to go to the beach he and his brother would drive to the biggest hill they could find in Pennsauken, New Jersey, and race down the road on skateboards.

I've only seen pictures, but when I'm surfing with him, I can't help but imagine that seventeen year old boy. Now, at forty five, when my Dad's paddling for a wave he wrinkles his forehead in concentration and pulls, hard, against the water. He presses his chin against the board and gives one more paddle. Then he rests his hands flat on the board and waits just an instant. I don't think it's hesitation, although I can't be sure. I think it's him waiting for the perfect moment to hop, lightly, to his feet, just as I imagine he did when he was seventeen. Once he's up I watch the thought and worry melt from his face. He laughs and whoops and when the wave ends, instead of sitting back down, he jumps off the board and back into the ocean.

I love watching people paddle. We surf the same beach most summer mornings, and I recognize surfers. There are two short, stocky men who ride short, stocky boards. They have tight curls, speak only loud Portuguese, and beat the water frantically as they paddle, last minute, into waves. Once they're up they zip up and down the face, the fins of their board slashing the water. After, they always high five.

Then there's a man I've taken to calling Edgar Allan Poe for his dark hair and moustache, high cheekbones, and inability to take pleasure in anything. He hunches over on a board twice as long as him (although nowhere near as skinny) too far out to catch anything. When a wave comes

he paddles furiously forward, but never quite fast enough to get on. As it passes him by he sits up, sights, and swings his board around back to what is practically open ocean. He bobs up and down in the water, stoic and straight-faced, waiting for the next wave, which he will not catch. It's been two years.

There's only one woman I see on a regular basis. She has dark skin and black hair that she pulls into a long ponytail. She rides a light blue longboard and seems to slide into each wave she paddles for with an effortless grace. She hops onto her feet and takes a tentative step forward, then another and another till she has her toes just at the tip of the board and her body leaning back to balance her out. She stays there for just a second before taking two or three quick steps backward. She always quits the wave just a moment before it ends, slipping over the top and paddling back out past the break.

My favorite time, though, is when it's just me and my father. How he'll swing around to start paddling for a wave and then yell, "It's yours, you take it!" to me instead.

I get down and start to paddle. My dad always says I paddle like a swimmer, not a surfer. I feel the wave match my speed and pick me up. I jump and shift my weight onto my right foot, pushing myself and my board down the wave, then push backwards, sliding down the bottom of the wave to give myself the momentum to shoot up and cut back. Somewhere my dad is whooping at me again. The moment I hear him I lose my balance, and for a moment I'm underwater, keeping my body limp, allowing myself to be whorled around by the ocean until the wave is over and I pull myself up back onto my board and paddle out again.

# YANAI FELDMAN GRADE 12

#### JULIA PIKE

GRADE 11

#### **Keeping the Sky**

after "Before a Cashier's Window in a Department Store" by James Wright

1

No number of trees, no distance can hide the truth from the little girl.

She sees it on the faces of the grownups, her mother's drawn eyebrows, and the triumphant grin of the other woman as she listens to the barking radio.

They don't speak Russian anymore, she and her mother.

The language of the enemy.

The sky is like steel.

What is there to do? She gathers.

Small brown nuts

and bitter green leaves. Boil

and some of the sharpness

can be poured out with the brown water.

Skip around the meadow, and you can eat.

3 And back in the ash-soaked city, her father skirts back and forth, over the wall. Why him? Why may he cross? Because each night on some ragged stage, his small mortal body creates a thin waterfall of joy, and he splashes across the audience what small happiness he can. Got to keep the morale up, the stream glitters on.

But out on a tepid field, golden boys are being extinguished over the evil they fight for, and gas seeps through the showers. The sky is turning black.

And it is hard for my grandmother to tell me these things, because somewhere, she is still that little girl, and she remembers the dead sky.

#### XINYI



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