

# REFLECTIONS



EMILY STERN, GRADE 12

2012


VOL 41 ISSUE 1





ANYA KATZ

GRADE 11



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**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.

This has been a year of growth for *Reflections*. The addition of a dedicated and enthusiastic group of new staff members energized our meetings and allowed for a broader diversity of views as we put together this magazine. *Reflections* will no doubt continue to expand and flourish under their direction. As always, we were incredibly lucky to work with our faculty advisers, Mr. Chu and Ms. Drezner, who were always supportive of our vision for this volume. The process of publishing this magazine would not be complete without the help of Berkeley Carroll's Director of Communications, Jodie Corngold, and the design talents of Bob Lane at Lane Studios, Inc. Finally, thank you to all who shared your work with us. Without you this magazine would not exist.

**SOPHIA WASHBURN**

*Editor in Chief*

Spring, 2012

# REFLECTIONS

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VOL 41 ISSUE 1

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**UNTITLED**

Plastic bottle. Hello. You have been created and are lucky for it. You will be here tomorrow and the next day and so on. I, on the other hand—  
my life is not so everlasting. One day I will die. But plastic bottle, friend, you will stay behind. And sure  
one day you will melt into earth, an awkward relationship with nature  
and the most unnatural of things, but I will not be there to see  
this re-earthing, I will have long since melted myself. Plastic bottle, it is probably  
lonely to be you.

Lonely plastic. Be lucky. You will not have the awkward tomorrow.





**DISNEYLAND**

There's this man—he's lived on our block  
As long as I can remember.  
He's gonna outlive us all. His wrinkles never change.  
All of his girlfriends died  
Sleeping in their houses.  
So now he just walks around the neighborhood  
Combing the same streets and sidewalks.

And every time I see him  
He's walking this black porky dog.  
"How's your dog today?" I say,  
As I grasp for my keys in my pocket.  
"Who, him?" he points accusingly to the mutt.  
"I don't know this dog.  
He ain't mine and I ain't his.  
Don't give a crap about him."

I think he had a crush on me once  
When I was much younger—back when I  
Had pastel ribbons in my pigtails.  
He kept raving about our trip to Disneyland.  
He clearly had it all planned out.  
"You and me—," he'd say,  
"We going to Disneyland someday."  
"How do you know so?" I'd say,  
And he'd never answer,  
Just mumble and bite his bottom lip.  
I guess that was my answer.







**THE WINTER'S SESTINA**

The old puppy drools wearily on the mother's quilt  
after spending the entire day guarding the house  
from predators as vicious as the mailman, as harmless  
as the squirrel which has kept its nuts for the winter  
buried between our tree's roots. Every few minutes,  
the dog glances through the window, seeing a flash

of light that could be his alpha male. But it was just the flash  
of a stranger's headlights, and his head falls back on the quilt.  
The grandfather clock ticks every second, which feels like a minute,  
and minutes feel like hours, which feel like days in this house.  
Finally father returns home from work, shaking the rain off his winter  
coat as he looks for his children, so naïve, so harmless

compared to those rats at work, who mistook him for harmless,  
but they learned. The dog trots to meet him, only to jump back when a flash  
and thunder whose force matches the grim tone of winter  
tilts the room. The dog wanders back to the quilt  
sprawled on the floor and warm from his body heat, unlike the house  
in the morning, which takes hours to warm up, and he would have frozen in a minute

in this frigid weather. The father looks at the hour and minute  
hands of his watch, determining it is past the harmless  
children's bedtime. He clops clumsily up the stairs of the old house,

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with every step remembering a flash  
of earlier that day, when he wanted to curl up in a quilt  
and hide from the world, from this cold winter.

The only thing worse than the cold winter  
weather to the puppy is loneliness, so he follows within minutes.  
Upon seeing his master leave he jumps from the quilt,  
wagging his tail eagerly, harmlessly.  
As they near the children's bedrooms, there are flashes  
of lights underneath their doorways, which illuminate the house

through their windows from outside. Father saw when he was walking into the house  
from work, but assumed they were on to defrost the windows from the winter  
snow. Upon hearing the creak of the stairs, the flashes  
go out, children thinking they are sneaky, but of course a minute  
too late. What they find scandalous is harmless  
to their father, who sees much worse at work. The quilts

are pulled up to their harmless noses. Father shuts the windows to block  
out the winter breeze as he picks up another quilt to pile on. Within minutes they  
snore harmless breaths, and father awakes from flashes of slumber to a tilting house.





*JANE*

Squeaking leather couch  
Whining voices demand milk  
A Friday night lost

Playlist of sad songs  
To keep my eyes from shutting  
It's 12 an hour

Tapestry on wall  
So I guess you went somewhere  
Making you cultured

Oh my god I say  
Don't say that it's a bad word  
But her dad says 'jeez'

*Jane*, italicized  
You spread peanut butter nice  
But that's about it







## THE PERFECT DETERIORATION

A scoop of quinoa complemented by a slice of lettuce seemed sufficient; the elation of yet another tough victory greeted her. Lael's hungry eyes turned towards our mother, who recently had fallen victim to the malice of Demon. One wonders which is worse: to be collaterally damaged, like mother, or possessed, like Lael? But I disregard these burdens and deliberations and welcome the lightness of innocence. I focused on the TV that happened to be playing a program with gorgeous but grotesquely thin women. I should have noticed my sister struggling with her hateful glances; I should have acknowledged her masochistic emulation; but why bother myself with more than I can grapple?

But then the seldom-heard voice sounded: "Mom, I'm going to meet with a few friends tonight. May I be excused? I am full."

In light of this victory, Demon summoned Lael to her den and the mirror. As expected, the omnipresent Lela materialized. That face was the epitome of ugliness; that body embodied the sin of gluttony; that butt seemed to bear the weight of excess. Tear-layered, blemished, Lela was engorged with a pensive melancholy.

Lael abhorred her, despised and hated with the entirety of her being this alien whom she servilely devoted her happiness to pleasing, who authoritatively pleaded, "Lael, why do we look like this?"

*But aren't you proud of me, Lela? Can't you exercise clemency just this once? I won the battle tonight. So you needn't be angry, you needn't hate me.*

Then, as if Lael invoked her, Ella materialized in front of the mirror. Ella, a stunning princess, an archetypal beauty. She superimposed Lela, which comforted Lael, and, gliding from the mirror, took a seat next to Lael and placed a consoling arm around her neck. "You're so close, Lael! I see how much progress you're

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making and I am proud. Yet, you're not there, Lael. Just another ten pounds and I'll take residence in you. You will advertise this body."

"Just another ten pounds," Lael whispered, overjoyed. "Just one less size, and I won't have to live like this anymore."

False hope. This was a regular occurrence, like an infallible being.

Like magic, an invisible eraser scrupulously sidled along her skin. One could see these vestiges attaching her to the physical world disappearing. As this beautiful girl and her beautiful soul ascended to oblivion, Ella became more solid and Lela became less so. Lael saw perfection; she felt she was approaching its precipice. Again, that invisible eraser embraced the edges of a nearly nonexistent body, shearing off that last layer of skin. Ella grew stronger; Lela was further concealed; Lael was plunged into numb ecstasy.

Ella exclaimed in her seductive, serpentine voice, "You're beginning to look like me! I can see myself breaking the boundaries of you. Just look in the mirror and see for yourself." Lael obeyed and saw the radiant image, with Lela vaguely tainting it, and inhabited by a deep-rooted determination to be rid of Lela totally and forever she urged the invisible eraser on once more.

Lael's poor physical body that had been abused for years could no longer contain its rage. It had been searching for nourishment, and burning with hunger, it went into an irrepressible frenzy to consume. Unfortunately, Lael's psyche could not effectively counter such corporeal anarchy, and it looked like the atmosphere had crushed her into a perfectly wrought diamond. She was consumed; she became her body's final supper. Despite the wilting of the flower that was my sister, Ella's figure hovered above her—prancing, complete, and beautiful.







**FOOLISH RELIGION**

I followed the wrong God home  
He promised me white light in the abyss  
That stars would be given my name  
And that angels would be sacrificed in my honor  
But all I got  
Was wine  
Spilled over my carpet  
And a Bible with a few missing pages

I just thought it would be OK  
If I ate the mangoes  
Whole and unpeeled for  
My own satisfaction

When I sat there  
Waiting to be found  
Amidst swollen storm clouds

He spoke nicely so  
I let the monster touch my  
Hair just to soothe me



**PATTERNS**

He will remember her  
tangled array of flowing

red hair and the floral  
patterns on what she

will call a dress and what others  
who do not know her

will call a statement. The rest  
will be seared away by the

long rays of sun that make the night  
of emotions, experience, and

hopes no more than impressions  
on his confused and blinded mind.

Most likely he will regret most  
not looking more closely at her face

when he sat down  
beside her on the train. For now

he will be left with only misconceptions  
and musings to what the girl with the

short floral dress, that showcased  
her legs so well, truly looked like. How

did her nose curve? Were her lips  
tender? And her eyes, what kind of eyes

could she have, the girl of the late, late  
night? What kind of eyes and dreams

and experiences and impressions  
about the boy sitting next to her

on that train could she have?  
And later, when she appears

in my dreams (and I switch to first person  
because I can no longer treat her

with the arm's length view, the narrator  
perched from above, observing all

and seeing nothing) and asks me where  
I went after she left, two stops

before my own, the lines of her face  
drawn with uncertainties and unanswered

questions, I will be able to do no more than weep  
for that night of the beautiful girl,

her hair such a soft, glowing  
red, as if to reassure me

she had no true face,  
and I had no regrets.



## FOR THE BIRDS

It's astonishing that the brain can have memories without making conscious requests to our cells. How the stimulus can travel down the axon of the synapse like a meteorite flying across the sky, sending the message to release the neurotransmitters from the vesicles across the gap to be caught and processed by the receptors. All to remember for a second. I was sitting in the kitchen with my grandparents and I watched my grandfather's face fall as my grandma asked me, for the third time, whether or not I'd had lunch yet.

My mother's mother began showing signs of dementia at eighty-one. She is sociable, maternal, and has been married for sixty-two years. Now, she cannot remember that my cousin moved back to New York from Florida, nor the day of the week. My grandfather's eyes welled with tears as she repeated herself and it became hard for me to comprehend how we can be so in touch with our emotions—so sure of what makes us feel sad or feel lost—yet so unaware of how our brains are actually working. I stared at her wispy blond hair wondering what exactly was happening under her skull.

"Epigenetics" is the study of the changes to our genetic information that occur throughout our lives. DNA methylation is an example of this—a process which adds material to and removes it from our DNA sequences, temporarily changing their expression and ultimately the function of the cell. The result looks like a normal coiled strand of DNA—base pairs linked in the middle and a spiral staircase formation—but with 'methyl groups' sitting on the outside of specific bases. It's sort of like the railing of a staircase around the holidays: laced artfully with holly clinging to certain places, which changes the appearance and, inevitably, the function. All of our cells do this naturally to produce the proteins and hormones they need to carry out daily processes, but the process also occurs in reaction to conditions we are exposed to throughout our lives. Age is a huge part of the cause. New research identifies



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Alzheimer's and dementia as the results of the alterations initiated by plaque build-ups associated with these diseases.

Later that night, I sat under the stars with my grandma and we talked about my mother's childhood. She told me stories of her children: the ones about my mom locked in the screened-in porch with the bat, my uncle breaking his leg putting on his pajamas, and their road-trips to the Grand Canyon. She was coherent and she was pleasant. Between stories she kept saying, "Would you look at that moon tonight?"

I did look at the moon each time and with the third mention of it I began to feel crazy. I didn't understand why she remembered the curtains in her old house on 86th Street but couldn't remember the syllables she had uttered moments before.

One of the most profound things to me is how rarely we question the biology in our world, how rarely we appreciate our ability to remember whether we took our vitamins, or how often we overlook the astonishing capacity of the synapses in our brains to perform tasks like boiling pasta water. I've become obsessed with filling the scientific gaps. I can't get over how much we don't know and how often we forget we don't know all of it.

In the brain, when the plaque material builds up it modifies the expression of proteins—the things that do our cells' work like unwinding the DNA helix or providing the energy to twitch our foot ever so slightly. When the fluid that would normally deteriorate this plaque runs dry, the deterioration becomes cyclic. Our synapses fail to generate the proper instructions. With this fluid material at low levels, the build-up threatens memory. But why her?

Their house isn't fun anymore. My grandfather, an Italian born in the twenties, has had to learn how to manage after a previously spoiled life of

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spaghetti and meatballs and socks laid out for him. They are still in love but I think he resents his life. Sitting in their kitchen, eating defrosted homemade apple pie, I see pictures of them from their 20s, 30s, 40s, and 50s plastered on every square inch of wall space surrounding the table. I think about how temporary everything is. There won't ever be a transcript of their conversations or dates, there won't ever be a record of their relationship's quirks, and now there won't ever be a person in his life who can ever comprehend every detail—the experience of selling the company, watching their son be diagnosed with MS, or the nights they spent in Venice, Paris, and Copenhagen. I know all of this is true for everyone, but I don't know how he accepts that.

My grandmother cries out an old Italian proverb as she maneuvers herself up from the kitchen chair. “Did I ever tell you what that means?” Yes, I think. *Getting old is for the birds*. I shake my head no and let her tell me again.





**MOTORCYCLE MASK**

Fingers wrap around my mouth  
As the straps of the mask slip around my ears

A pregnant mother holding her breath in the bustling traffic  
I adjust the filter

A letter of promise with each muffled breath  
I will take care of your daughter

Finally just a face in the crowd  
My fall into their breathing street is softened  
The harsh jaw gone leaving only lightened eyes

A kiss on the cheek  
A shield from the dust



## ANOTHER WORLD, ANOTHER TOOTH

After three weeks of living in Vietnam I still hadn't gotten used to the sweltering heat that constantly surrounded me. The sweat and dirt that had gathered on my skin had begun to feel permanent. The stickiness that I felt when I was forced to make physical contact with my surroundings made me cringe. Even the cold shower couldn't wash away the filth; the dead bugs and clumps of hair floating on the bathroom floor reminded me that it would be a long time before I was clean.

I wandered the Center, waiting for dinner to begin. I could feel the wet hair on the top of my head start to frizz. I began to pat it down but stopped myself, remembering the dirt that had accumulated on my hands in the past few minutes. As I walked toward the dining room I saw a boy, about half my size, slap a five-year-old girl. Her face showed no emotion—a child's natural instinct to cry was gone. The boy raised his hand again, and I watched his palm make contact with her rosy cheek. As he began to lift his hand a third time, he mumbled something to her in Vietnamese. I ran toward them, catching his hand in midair. (Only later did I find out that the boy, who looked to be eight or nine years old, was actually fifteen.) I examined the girl's face before bringing her close to me and lifting her up well above the boy's head. Our sticky bodies pressed together, neither of us willing to pull away. I felt her miniature fingers press into the back of my neck, but other than that she kept her lips tightly pressed together and her eyes stared straight ahead. She was lost in another world, one that I didn't know.

Her features remained tense even after I carried her to a chair and pulled her to my lap. I cradled her small body in my arms, allowing the dirt that had been covering her to rub off on me. I slowly rocked her back and forth, trying to recall a single Vietnamese word that would be appropriate for the situation.

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When my mind remained blank I decided to sing. I opened my mouth and heard my off-pitch voice fill the air as I began to sing the lyrics of “A Few of My Favorite Things” from *The Sound of Music*. I gently sang into her ear, feeling responsible for the small person that sat very still in my lap. I didn't know how to tell her that she didn't deserve to be hit, that no child does. I couldn't communicate how brave I thought she was. So I continued to sing, repeating the chorus while clinging to her, trying to make her feel safe.

When I finished singing I lifted her head off of my shoulder and stared into her eyes, looking for a sign of reassurance to let me know me that she had received the message. I expected a tear or another blank stare or maybe even a little impatience. But instead she smiled. Her thick lips curled upward, bringing her cheekbones so high that they almost touched her eyelashes. I noticed the gap between her two front teeth and saw that she had another tooth that looked loose; maybe it would fall out within a few days.



**64 PACK**

In kindergarten everyone had a favorite color, but I never did. I loved too many. How can someone choose just one?

I am selfish. Greedy. Thirsty. A water-starved monster.

I want. I just want—everything. I want forever. I want never to remember. Never to look back.

I love pain, sweet tears, and salty smiles. I love screams and laughs. I love everything too much. I love colors—every stinking one—I love them all. The thick Bananamania sunny day and the Forest Green rainy day.

I am assured that with age comes understanding, a wiser sense of everything. Acceptance. But that won't be me. I wish it could be me—so much, I wish this Aquamarine-flavored wish as I lie in the colorless dark. And as I fall asleep, I feel it melting on my tongue and it is big, sour and blue. So I lie to myself so I can taste Cotton Candy instead.

But I know that I will never change. I don't want a peaceful, blissful and sweet end. I don't want the rainbow of Crayolas to meld and wash away, to become clear, waxy, and colorless. I don't want it to be summed up in pretty, ready-to-eat Whipped Cream, packaged with adages and lies. I never want things to change.

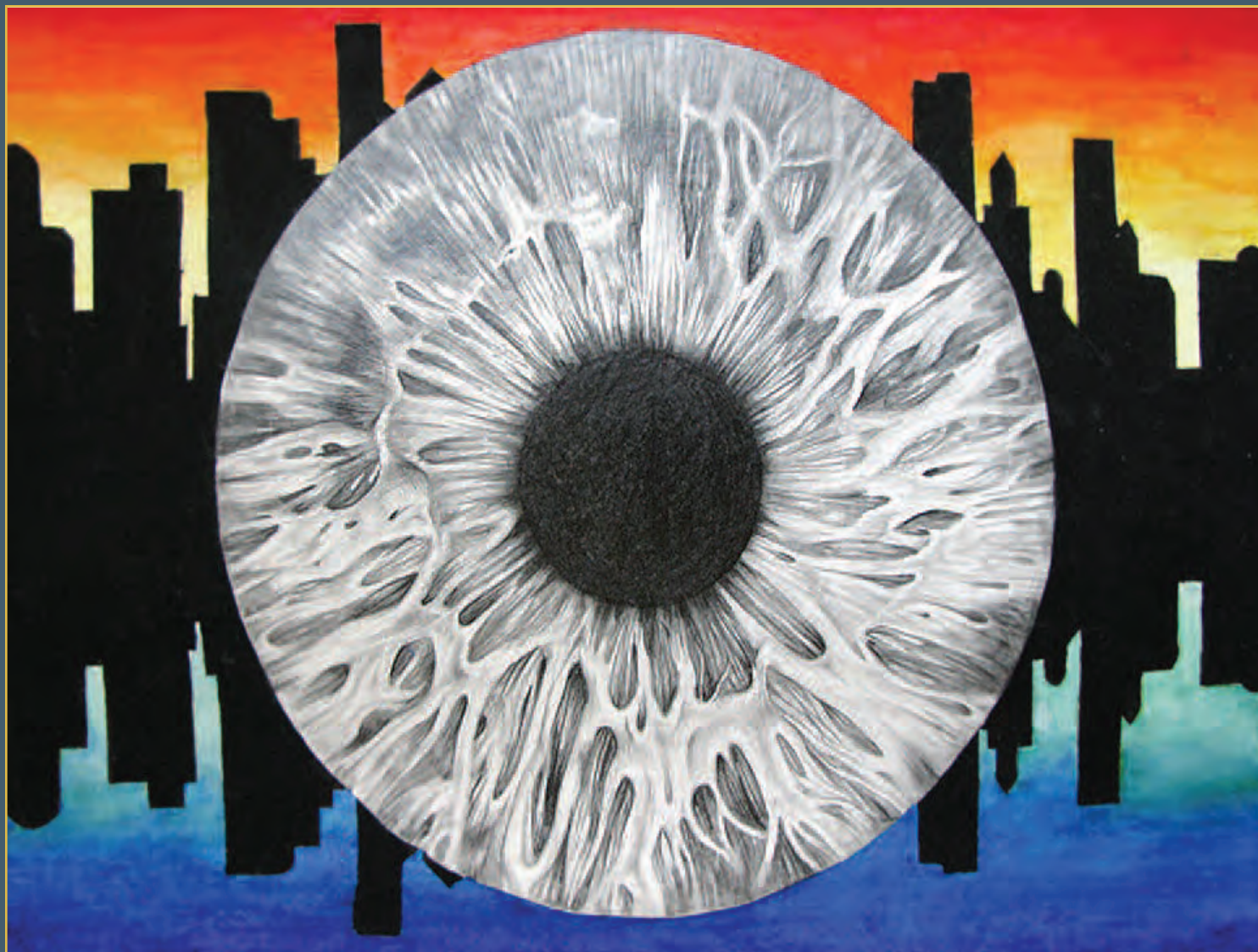
I really do love everything—except that one thing that I know will come creeping back, nightmarish, like chilling Timberwolf crouching in the shadows ahead. I don't want the reminder that everything I love—everything—will stop. That I will just, simply, stop.

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So I run. To the subway. To the store. To school. I talk fast, and I laugh too loud. To try and forget that I will never be fast enough or special enough to have everything. I outstretch my arms and hope that maybe I can fit it all in. It doesn't fit. It's slippery, so it falls and shatters into fuzzy, little, colorless pieces.

I stay up until my eyes sting and my body is numb and filled with visions of meaningless screens and new shoes beating heavy concrete. I stay up until everything is Tangerine: thick, nauseating, and sweet.

Thirsty like Scarlett I know that I will always be greedy. Calm like Granny Smith Apple—I know that it never will be an option. Stupid like Jazzberry Jam, I lie to myself anyway.



## THE DUMP YOU CAN SEE FROM THE MOON

A steel vein, pumping the cold, hollow cells above  
bubbling filth, polluted with forgotten memories,  
crossing into the Island of Staten. The  
distinct canvases caked with a raccoon's masked  
eyes, thick with butterfly lashes, and hidden beneath  
frozen faces of man-made sunshine. A dim pulse beats,  
growing into a silent reminder that this is still "the jungle."  
However, this jungle has an entity of its own, not  
integrated with the usual hustle of money and faceless shapes.  
Jingling car keys and breathing trees construct the  
karaoke of this so-called dump.

Let your spirit slip into my "stereotypical" body; see the  
monsters that bloom into stalkers of the  
night. *Jersey Shore* does no justice to the souls  
of the orange people. A population, whose spines stand  
proud, reside among the trees, the shadows of  
quiet suburban living. Lie with us as we  
roll in mounds of rumors and misconceptions.

Stranded in our own exclusive bubble, your armor  
tough and worn, bear your battle wounds.

Understanding why our tongues lash out to whip your  
vacant subconscious is to be one of us.

We warn you that we are not mindless skanks, writing  
x's and o's at the ends of our affectionate texts. Once  
you find yourself among the herd of  
zebra-print stilettos, you'll find the secret of our strut.



**UNTITLED**

Underneath  
the  
blackened  
willow tree from which the world falls,  
we watch and whisper

about the  
rain  
that will  
give us the illusion of falling  
into the grim fog

till a light  
will  
break the  
fog, and the illusion of falling  
will crack in half.



**RIP OR XXX**

Smoking is bad. Anyone born in the past 50 years knows this. Health class tells us this, relatives dying tells us this, hell, even the highly ambiguous Surgeon General tells us this. “Smoking Kills,” it says on the packet. Or at least it did; now there are images of deformed babies and bodies that look like a hurricane has ravaged them. Smokers are ostracized in New York, with civil rights curiously not factoring in when they are banned from igniting their death cylinders in parks, plazas, and boardwalks.

Am I a bad person, then, if I have a soft spot for smokers? I feel bad for the men and women sitting in glass cages in the corners of restaurants, like animals, or office building employees who look like they are going to contract pneumonia when they light up a cigarette in the middle of winter. When writing my *Thank You For Smoking* essay in Ms. Perry’s satire course last year, I couldn’t help thinking how *cool* Nick Naylor was, even when he was deceiving the American population into buying tobacco products. And those women that smoked with him after he slept with them—sexy. Half of *Basic Instinct* was Sharon Stone acting as lust personified, and half of that lust came from the fact that she smoked through half the movie. Dating back to 8th grade, typing “s” into my Google will reveal that “Smoking Porn” has been searched before. I said that I have a soft spot for smokers. Forget that: it’s a hard-on.

Perhaps the tobacco industry has already tricked me or placed a chip in my head that aligns me with them. I shouldn’t like something this bad so much. Both of my parents have told me it is stupid and explained to me why, many of my teachers have told me it is stupid and proven why, most of my friends have told me it is stupid and some have displayed to me why. The problem is that I do not think it is stupid to smoke. Is it dangerous? Yes. But, to paraphrase a soothing NPR host discussing the death of Sammy Davis, Jr. (who died of throat cancer), “He preferred to live a shorter life and to enjoy it than to live

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until he was 100 and not have fun.” Or maybe the problem is that smoking has never been associated with anything bad in my life, and recently, has in fact been associated with only good things. True, my grandfather almost died from the habit, but he didn’t, and that happened 15 years before I was born, so nothing about that story is vivid for me. But I did get an “A” on my aforementioned *Thank You For Smoking* essay and I did spend two weeks in France (king of the smoking countries) this summer with two interesting and fun Australians who smoked and I did laugh my butt off with my aunt’s family and friends, all smokers, in Spain, and Obama smokes and he got elected president and my favorite musicians smoke and Christopher Hitchens smoked and so do movie directors. Do you see what I mean? Small piece of unhealthy advice: If you want to smoke, go for it.

And that’s what I tried to do in the summer of 2010. I really did. The problem, though, is that to smoke, you have to look good doing it, because that’s really all it’s about. Addiction comes later and saying that you smoke because the tax on cigarettes goes to children’s playgrounds in New York State is feeble. I quickly understood this when I realized that I wasn’t impressing anyone by sneaking cigarettes on my fire escape, awkwardly transitioning between the more manly, construction worker-like thumb and index finger hold and the more feminine yet also more *chic* vice grip between my index and middle fingers. The fact that I had to remind myself that I was *craving* a cigarette didn’t help either, and so, three months into my smoking career, I called it quits. It wasn’t difficult. I had none of the shortness of breath or early stages of lung cancer that I was looking for, and that was the problem. *Why hadn’t I gotten addicted?*

Forbidden Fruit Theory, at least in my head, is the belief that something is only desirable because said thing is not permitted to the person who desires it.



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Perhaps that is why I have always liked smoking. Perhaps the fact that I realized it is so easy to pretend to be 18, even with braces, is what caused me to stop. I was able to get what I wanted with ease, and the game was no longer fun anymore. It was like the Bible, except that there were no consequences for what I did, which made it worse. Perhaps the difficulty of spraying the house with lavender soap and washing my hands obsessively so that my mom wouldn't find out outweighed the pleasure I took out of smoking.

But most likely it is that I'm just not a natural smoker. Most likely it is that I struggle to light and hold the cigarette, especially with my right hand. Most likely it is that I cannot comment nonchalantly about how Camels are so much stronger than American Spirits because I don't know. Most likely it is that I am self-conscious when I smoke and self-conscious smokers are not smokers, not for real. Most likely I should not try to smoke again. Most likely, I will. Hopefully I'll look good when I do.







## CONCERNS

“Have you ever heard of the red-backed spider? One bite can kill a full grown human in three minutes. Isn’t that crazy?”

“There’s some other type of spider that causes paralysis that looks so much like death people have actually been buried alive. How freaky would it be to be buried alive? What would you even do?”

When I was seven, while on vacation, I was bitten by a spider on the back of my hand. I woke up in the middle of the night, my hand burning, and ran downstairs to find my parents. In my panic, I couldn’t distinguish their bedroom door from a broom closet and, unable to find them, sat down in the living room, cried and cradled my now doubly large hand until my parents heard me and came out into the living room.

At several points in my life, I have experienced moments of getting separated from my friends in a crowd. That moment is followed by another moment of blinding anxiety: *I’m-never-going-to-be-able-to-find-my-way-back-and-my-friends-are-gone-and-I’m-never-going-to-get-out-of-here-and-I’m-going-to-die-and-there-are-too-many-strangers-and-I-just-want-to-go-home*. It is something akin to being a stranded toddler looking for its mother in a mall. What always strikes me about that feeling is the sense of abandonment. Finding myself suddenly alone in a room packed with strangers floods me with hurt and panic. When someone I know appears to pull me back to wherever my friends are, the relief instantly dispels all previous fear. In reality, I know that after being separated for all of fifteen seconds my friends did not all decide to get out and leave my fate in the hands of God. I also know that at some point I will in fact find my way out of the building. But for the fifteen seconds I’m left alone, all logic disappears.

I am not good in high-stress situations. If left to my own devices, I will panic, hyperventilate, and if no one comes to help me, cry a little. Public speaking tends to exacerbate these tendencies. Whenever I think about having to deliver a speech, my



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heart starts racing and my face flushes and I want to hide under some blankets. I know I really have nothing to be scared of: I can write a good speech and I'm a decent speaker so I know that I won't embarrass myself too badly. What is actually frightening is the thought of having to stand in front of a group of people staring at nothing but me and tell them something about myself. For someone who finds it invasive to be asked her top college choice, this is about as nerve-wracking as it gets. I know, of course, that I get to choose what I say so there is really no good reason for being scared of revealing anything. I can tell myself this as much as I want but I still regard standing behind a podium the same way one might regard standing in front of a firing squad.

These fears may not make any logical sense but they still worry me. Not with a sense of impending doom but when situation-appropriate. I never find myself in a stalled elevator worrying about giving a speech, I worry about the elevator cable snapping and my plummeting to my death. This may seem like an extreme reaction, but a lot of the things I'm scared of make very little sense. For instance, it is unlikely that I will ever be attacked by a shark, but I am still terrified of that happening. While it is true that death by shark attack is not likely, it makes more sense to me to be afraid of that than to be afraid of death, or at least what worries me about dying.

One of my biggest fears regarding death is rooted in the knowledge that if I were to die today, Berkeley Carroll would have a memorial service. There would be pictures and probably a *Blotter* article, and the thought of that, more than almost anything else, terrifies me. This is not an irrational fear in my eyes because I know it to be true. It is, however, a pretty stupid one. In this scenario, I am dead. I would be unaware of the unflattering photos. I would not hear the speeches by friends and teachers or the music chosen to play at

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my funeral. I tell myself this, but it does not help. Somehow, even posthumously, I am embarrassed by the theatrics.

I attempt to offset this fear by telling myself that I could stipulate somewhere that in the event of my death I most definitely do not want any fanfare of this sort. For a few seconds after this revelation, I am relieved. Then an anxious gnawing starts: DO I want them to pretend I never existed? If remembrance isn't being shoved down everyone's throats, won't they all forget? Again, I know this is dumb. Anyone I care at all about would remember me and the people I don't care about would forget one way or the other. I can't seem to win with this one. My options, in my mind, seem to be being ignored and abandoned, or awkwardly forcing everyone to think about me. In this scenario, I am still dead either way and therefore not cognizant of anything happening but it still weighs on my mind. It may be stupid to worry about a memorial that will, hopefully, never happen, or to think that just because I can't immediately find my friends they've all left me or to be scared of saying a few words in front of people, but I can't help these things.

**SHE WALKS CLOSER**

The cars don't honk; the flashing crossing signs blink at no one. The previous night's litter hasn't been picked up, nor has it blown away. Stores haven't opened. The early morning is one of the few times, as a New Yorker, living in a city with towering buildings, that I actually look up. I otherwise wouldn't know the colors of the rooftops, or whether lions perch there or the bricks of one building match those of the building next over. When the city is moving at full speed and the streets are populated you never actually see the people you pass by. It's like when you're in a train car and parallel to your train is another train and for a brief moment both trains are moving at the same speed and you stare at someone—but, before you are satisfied, her train slips down and she's gone.

But early morning, when you cross someone, it's just you and her. You study her shape walking down the blocks. As she walks closer, her image becomes clearer and more and more revealed so that in the moment she is within feet of you, you actually can look at who she is. You see her body arched forward as she walks, and the smeared makeup and glitter around her eyes and her arms wrapped around herself as she comes to terms with the fact that the night didn't end the way she'd hoped.







**WHALE**

Starved and beached

A dozen empty seagulls east and suffer

The sun, the sand, and its flesh

Holding

Melting

Into its depth

Into its breath

Carrion, starvation, moved washed beached and waved

Few maggots in

Few maggots out

A whale



## HEARTBEATS

The doctor's office always made me nervous. Everything was so sterile and new that my very presence seemed to sully the place. I glanced around at the medical devices hung up on walls and pushed into corners, impressed with their apparent complexity.

I had always held a sort of reverence for the medical profession. It was, in my mind, elite, noble and a little bit scary. I pictured doctors as sleek, intelligent young men and women who strode around hospitals curing diseases and performing surgery while never losing their cool. I clung to these images of the medical profession, despite the fact that every doctor I encountered was nothing like I imagined they should be.

My pediatrician was named Edna Pitlack and whenever I looked at her I couldn't help but be reminded of a tarantula in a white doctor's coat. Her hair was black and cut to her shoulders and frizzed to greater and greater degrees the further down it went. Her glasses magnified her eyes so much that it wasn't hard to imagine that they were actually eight little ones instead of two big ones.

I climbed up onto the examination table, the sterile wax paper covering it crinkling treacherously every time I moved. Then, I saw her. She walked in and smiled. She approached me, brandishing her stethoscope, and began the check-up. She always checked me heart first. "Most important part of your body!" she would say.

Her stethoscope crept to the left side of my chest and pressed into my skin. She put the earpieces in and listened, counting my heartbeats against the ticking of her watch.

She listened to my heart and looked at the second hand of her watch for a while. Eventually she emerged from her trance and looked at me, her two (or possibly eight) eyes meeting my own. "Your heart is whispering," she said.

Whispering?

She turned to my father. "Olivia has heart murmurs, or an irregular heart beat. It's not serious, but she should see a specialist."



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Whispers and murmurs. I didn't know what sounds everyone else's hearts were making. But mine whispered. I liked that.

A week later, I was sitting on another examination table covered in more crinkly wax paper. The specialist rubbed something gooey and blue all over my chest and used a small machine to smear it around. An ultrasound, he called it.

A blurry, black and white picture appeared on the screen: a pulsing mass a little larger than my fist. It was my heart, the doctor said. He told me his, my dad's, my mom's and most people's hearts beat *ba bum, ba bum, ba bum*. But mine was different. He swirled the ultrasound machine around my chest and told me my heart didn't sound quite like that. It went *ba bum, ba bum, ba bum, ba ba ba ba ba* instead.

I was thrilled. Everyone else, their hearts thumped the same, predictable thud. But not me. Mine whispered songs and murmured secrets.

\* \* \*

My heart had long sense quieted down. It thudded monotonously against my ribcage like everyone else's, but unlike everyone else I wasn't in the cafeteria eating lunch. I was locked in the bathroom, leaning against the wall, my hand pressed to my neck.

When I was ten, the heart doctor taught me how to feel my pulse. He told me there are two places. One on your wrist in the divot between the radius bone and the thumb, and one in your neck. I have long sense discovered many other places to find a pulse, but it's never quite as strong.

The carotid artery runs through the neck, providing vital oxygen to the brain. It's one of the body's largest arteries, and that's where the pulse is strongest.

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So now leaning against the wall my fingers found that spot underneath my jawbone and next to my esophagus and I could feel each contraction of my heart. The harder down I pressed the stronger I could feel each wave of blood being pushed up to my head. I added more and more pressure, pressing so hard that I was almost constricting my airflow but that didn't matter. My pulse hadn't whispered in years, but just feeling the steady beat made me feel better.

Then, something happened to distract me from my heartbeat. Someone walked in. Alone. Girls always go to the bathroom together and spend five minutes passive-aggressively fighting for the best spot in front of the mirror. A ritual I never quite understood. But no, she was alone. I heard the rhythmic thud of her shoes and the sound of the water rushing out of the tap. I heard her cry. I should have gone and talked to her, listened to her. But I didn't. I couldn't. I was five feet away from her. Separated by the wall of the bathroom stall covered in chipping green paint. She was trapped out there with her tears and the tapping of her feet and I was trapped in here with my pulse.



**BAD HABIT**

He fumbles around looking for the lighter, patting his pockets, feeling for its shape. He retrieves it out of his back pocket, letting the cigarette rest in between his two large fingers. He takes that first drag, letting the smoke swirl through his lungs until he's satisfied, then blows out the stream, relaxing. He takes a second drag, pulling harder than the first time, but still not letting it crumble. I wait a few seconds, push the big red button that allows me to open the door, and walk outside. When he sees me he puts his hands behind his back, carefully drops the cigarette, and steps on it, squishing it, giving it up to the concrete. I consider telling him that I'm not an idiot, that the potent smell doesn't leave his hands and clothes and hair for hours and that I know. But I decide to give him a kiss on his whiskery cheek and ask where we're going to dinner tonight.

We talk about how he should quit, how it's terrible for his already depleting health, and how I don't want him to die. Lung cancer is terminal. He lowers his eyes and says he knows but he just can't. We talk about how there are so many chemicals and I always forget he's never smoked anything except American Spirits, the blue pack. The same pack that my best friend smokes. I tell him that he's not safe. But this makes me a hypocrite, following in the same path as him and letting my stress go the same way. I quit before it got bad. He didn't.

He smoked before I was born, quit, and then when I was 10 he started again. Was it me? Did I subconsciously turn him to this? Or was it mom, or work, or his girlfriend, or the drinking? Was he unhappy, or was he just bored? Did he want to die? Did he want to feel like he was finally "living" again? Did he mean for this to turn into him spending all his money and not leaving enough for me? I will never know because we don't talk about anything during our weekly dinners. We sit at opposite ends of the table at a loss for what to say.



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I can smell his cigarettes. His morning cigarette, his after-lunch cigarette, his walk-home cigarette, his waiting-for-me cigarette, the cigarette he'll have after dinner, and the cigarette he'll have on his way home.

I see the way he casually takes out his cigarette and knows that the other smokers standing around him will give him a head nod, a look that says, "Hey, you're a smoker too, you must be pretty cool then, I'm glad you smoke," and then they'll strike up a conversation, aiding his habit.

He's the guy my friends will go up to when they see him smoking, ask him if they can bum one, and most likely he'll say yes, because he's a nice guy.

I see the packs of cigarettes in his trash can, the butts of the cigarettes smashed into the circular ashtray that sits on his desk. The ash that acts as a buffer around them, making them all stand up in different directions, some still holding their shape, others crushed beneath the crowd. The pack that has made a lasting dent in his jeans, a comfortable space where it will be easily accessible to the sociable world. The pack that will gain him, and everyone else, more friends.

There's the conversation cigarette, the drunken cigarette, the stress cigarette, the bored cigarette, the craving cigarette, the coffee cigarette, the tasty cigarette, the angry cigarette, the confused cigarette, the guilty cigarette, and most commonly the cool cigarette. I gave in to all these cigarettes and more.

The teenage mind has an uncanny relationship to cigarettes. They think they will "solve the problem" for just 10 minutes. And they do. Until you see yourself gasping for breath when you walk up two flights of stairs, coughing like an old man with emphysema, craving one so badly that your head hurts and you snap at everyone. Until you don't know why you even smoke anymore, because the buzz is gone and your coolness has faded. Until you realize that you're 48 and can't

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quit. When you've tried to quit too many times to count and after two days you revert to your habit again and lose your capacity for restraint.

I fumble around, looking through my bag for a lighter, trying to catch a glimpse of its bright blue color. I retrieve it out of my back pocket, letting the cigarette rest between my two small fingers. I take that first drag, letting the smoke swirl through my lungs until I'm satisfied, then blow out the steam, relaxing. The motion seems too familiar as I replay it over and over. I throw the cigarette down, stomp on it, and twist my foot back and forth until it no longer looks like what it used to be.

**OASIS****1.**

Watch the black cactus  
scour the dunes for liquid life.  
Xylem, phloem, and bundle  
sheaths engaged in prayer.  
Tales of the now gaunt and ghostly cactus  
complacent and zaftig are biblical miracles.  
Jesactus the Cactus turns the desert  
ridges to sugar, splits the sands,  
bringing forth the power of water.

**2.**

Welcome to paradise. If blood makes you uncomfortable  
I'd leave. There are vats of lime juice to the right, to mask the smell.  
They are poured once an hour, on the hour... now? It's 12:27.

God took Nyquil. Well, I gave it to him. Playing dirty  
is still a way of playing. Pass me your bayonet so I can gouge out your eyes.  
Tell me I'm handsome and real and there.  
Love me for a while, here in the snow, in this bloody, sandy hell.  
This is not a dream; this is not training.  
Do not be afraid  
of Death and his scythe:  
he was troubled once too.







**ATRAPADA EN MIS RECUERDOS/TRAPPED IN MY MEMORIES**

Atrapada en mis recuerdos

Entre nosotros hay un latido de corazón,  
hay un toquecito.

Entre nosotros hay ruinas  
y un mar de recuerdos.

Entre nosotros hay un error. Lo siento.  
Era tonta, pero no nos importaría.

Entre nosotros hay un millón de millas.  
Estás volando por el cielo

mientras sufro en esta tierra. No es justo,  
no puede ser la verdad.

Pero no estás aquí, sólo dejas  
tu cuerpo y tu esencia

y nuestros recuerdos. Pero no dejas dolor,  
lo fabrico. El dolor es mío.

Solo puedo esperar—  
esperar que el diablo me lleve

lejos de aquí,  
y lejos de ti.

Between us there is a heartbeat,  
there is a caress.

Between us there are ruins  
and a sea of memories.

Between us there is a mistake. I'm sorry.  
I was stupid, though it wouldn't matter.

Between us there are a million miles.  
You are flying toward the sky

while I suffer on this earth. It isn't fair;  
it can't be the truth.

But you aren't here, you only leave  
your body and your essence

and our memories. You don't leave pain,  
I make it. The pain is mine.

I can only wait—  
wait for the devil to take me

far from here,  
and far from you.

**MEMORIES**

Old memories splashed  
Across the stained white walls, and  
Colorful words of

Another language  
Cover the blankness  
Of the boxed Cangas.

There is nothing but  
That beautiful language of  
Love to ignite my

Longing. I see the  
Dulcet words flow smoothly  
Like a river which

Leads back to the drip  
Through the cracks of the ceiling.  
That constant dripping,

Holding meter to  
My heartbeat as I see change  
Happ'ning all around.

The animals are  
Hung up like always, yet they  
Don't seem to twinkle

Like they used to in  
The olden days. No, there's just  
A laminated

Bunny looking out  
Onto the class with a blank  
Stare: a memory.







**MAYHEM IN ROOM 402**

*Ain't it just like the night to play tricks when you're trying to be so quiet?  
We sit here stranded, though we're all doing our best to deny it  
And Louise holds a handful of rain, tempting you to defy it.  
Lights flicker in the opposite loft  
In this room the heat pipes just cough  
The country music station plays soft  
But there's nothing, really nothing to turn off.  
Just Louise and her lover so entwined  
And these visions of Johanna that conquer my mind.*

He recited the words with fervor. Pride really. He loved the words. Loved them as much as he loved anything. They were a part of him. And in reciting these words to the class, he was opening himself up and allowing his classmates to inspect his very guts. But he was full of confidence. They soon would love it too, he knew. Although *they* had probably all picked Dickinson and Frost for their recitations. Maybe Whitman. *He* had chosen Bob Dylan lyrics, which were just as poetic as any so-called poem. And he was going to enlighten them. They would be riveted. Their minds would be blown, just as his was when Joey had blasted “Like a Rolling Stone” in his parents’ living room for the first time.

And it was working. He could see it in their faces, as he stood in front of the blackboard and recited. They were frozen in their desks, awed. Their jaws slack. He finished the last line and let it hang, reveling in the silence that he had cast on his classmates like a spell.

However, Mrs. Adams would have none of it. She glared at him from behind her desk. Mrs. Adams, middle-aged, was not cool. She thought the Beatles were the devil reincarnated, and that hippies “should all get a job.” She probably was going to vote for Nixon. Oh, the way she glared at him, eyes full of hate.

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“And by whom was that poem written, Mr. Levine?” she asked. He looked her right in the eye and said, with a smile on his face:

“Why those are the lyrics to “Visions of Johanna,” by the genius rock and roll poet, Bob Dylan!” He said this in the most boastful and glorious way he possibly could. He was gloating, and she was powerless. He had brought rock and roll to the classroom. Anarchy would follow.

This made her furious. She stood up from her desk and howled, “Bob Dylan is not a poet! He is a filthy, drug-addicted hippie. And I will not sit here and watch as you...”

But the rest was drowned out, because now the whole class was on its feet, cheering “Teddy, Teddy, Teddy.” And Teddy stood in front of the blackboard, marveling at the mayhem he had caused. Mrs. Adams tried to silence the class, but they would not be silenced now. Her shouts of imminent punishment were starting to sound more like pleas for cooperation. She waved her arms in vain and clapped her hands rhythmically, and realizing that there were no other options, she pushed a stack of textbooks on her desk to the floor, revealing a metal panel with a small red button in the middle. She pushed down on it, definitively. A siren rang and red lights flashed as a SWAT team kicked down the door to room 402, their automatic weapons pointed every which way. Terror filled the eyes of the other students, but Teddy was not afraid, because a guitar had materialized in his hands, a white Fender Stratocaster. And he proceeded to play it, gloriously, his fingers moving rapidly up and down the neck. Beams of light and golden flames began to radiate from him and his guitar. Multicolored flowers flew through the air. The SWAT team and their guns, no match for Teddy and his guitar, were thrown back into the hallway by the power of rock and roll.

Mrs. Adams screamed in defeat as the soldiers scattered. She pounded on the red button furiously, calling for reinforcements. The windows crashed

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inward, glass flying everywhere. The room flashed momentarily with the brightest white light, revealing a giant yellow submarine floating just outside the window, four men sitting on top of it. The Beatles. The whole class stared in disbelief. Without standing up, John Lennon called out to Teddy in his calm and lazy voice, "Come with us Teddy. We've been waiting for you," and Teddy jumped from the window of room 402 and landed on the submarine. He sat down right next to John as they sailed away into the sun. "How does it feel to be one of the beautiful people?" John asked him with a smile.

"Levine. Teddy Levine."

Ms. Adams' voice reverberated off the walls like a basketball bouncing in an empty gym. Only Teddy seemed to acknowledge her calls. He stood up from his desk and made his way up to the blackboard. Feeling eyes on his back, he turned to face the class. He realized in that moment just how empty his hands were, so he decided to let them hang by his thighs, holding onto the sides of his corduroy pants, as if this were the only way to keep them from acting on their own accord. He also realized how utterly bored, no, tortured the students seemed. They were absolutely suffering, sitting in their desks, yawning, fidgeting. They had already sat through at least ten recitations. Teddy knew it would be difficult to make an impact. Still, he was confident. It had all been envisioned. He would be a hero. The Che Guevara of room 402. His heart pounded with expectation.

"This is 'Visions of Johanna'," he said, rather pretentiously, he would think looking back. "It's by Bob Dylan."

He recited the lyrics slowly, and well, he thought, with great care. When he finished, he stood in silence, and the class was silent too. He held his chin slightly higher, feeling a smile about to curl from his lips. But then he realized that this was not awed silence from the class but the silence of boredom. The students were leaning on their elbows at their desks, their eyes starting to fail them as they closed

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helplessly. They yawned too. They looked like lions, captured in the wild and brought to captivity, who had long ago forgotten how to hunt. They were caged. Had he done this? The last thing he wanted was to be a zookeeper. There were plenty of those already.

He looked over at Ms. Adams. She had a smile on her face. Not a smile of joy but what Teddy thought to be a victorious smile. He did not like this. But of course she was smiling; any help from a student to further cage and tame the lions was of great help to her.

"Oh my God!" he thought. "I'm on her side." This was unfolding into a tragedy.

"That was very nice, Mr. Levine," she said. And he hated her in that moment, more than ever before.

"Thank you," he replied.

"You may take a seat now."

"Okay," he tried to say, but it only came out as a barely audible and hoarse whisper. He made his way back to his desk. Half-hearted applause followed from the lions. He sat down with a thud. He was disappointed by the turn of events. But he didn't really mind. In truth, he had already decided upon the fantastic story to tell his friends at lunch. And whether or not this story aligned with the truth was not important.

He looked out the windows to his left, past the sports fields and into the two-story world where he lived, full of driveways, garages, and parked cars. All ways in which to accommodate stopping, slowing down, or ceasing motion altogether. He looked over to his right and saw Katie Fletcher, or Fisher, or something. She was very attractive. Although she was shorter than him, he couldn't help but feel as if she was someone much, much bigger than him, like a



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Greek god painted out of proportion with its surroundings. When he decided that her head was satisfactorily turned in the other direction, he picked a booger from his nose, with surgeon-like precision and experience, and moved his finger in a circular motion on the underside of his desk until it had lost all moisture.

The underside of his desk, now this was a truly fantastic place. A place he had never actually laid eyes on. He had just grown familiar with it, using his sense of touch. He thought of it as his kingdom, where his patrolling hands were the moderators, the keepers of order. He would feel the curious contours of the iron bars along the edges of his kingdom. No matter how many times he felt them, he never truly grasped how they were structured. They were so mysterious and cold. And they felt gigantic, every curve and bend so drastically magnified, the mountainous region. The vast flat slab of wood in his kingdom was splintery, with rolling hills of random bumps, flecked with boogers and the occasional piece of chewed gum. The lowlands. What a strange world his kingdom was. He knew that if he ever actually looked at it, the mystery would be gone and his kingdom would only be an underside of a desk. So he preferred to live in the wondrous realm of the unknown and unseen.





**FIVE WAYS TO ISOLATE YOURSELF**

Sit on the ledge and pretend  
That the raindrops rolling down the window  
Are your own tears

Choose  
To watch someone in silence  
Or listen to the faded blur

Find there aren't any skeletons  
In the closet,  
Just pounds and pounds of flesh

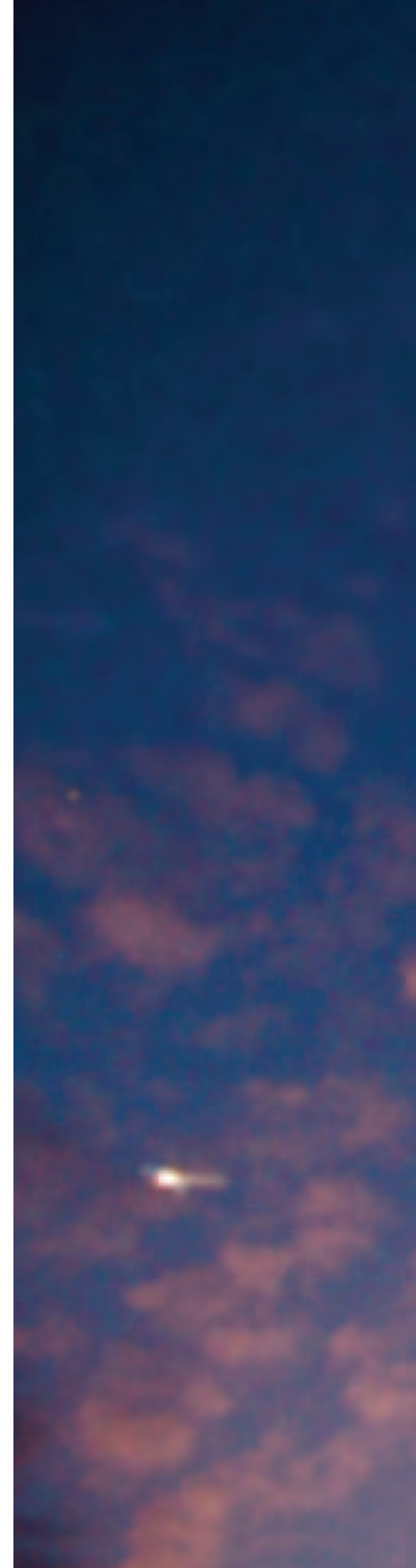
Condense yourself  
To a turpentine mess  
And settle on the wall

Exhale the gust of relief  
That was pumped into your lungs  
When you were born



**15 HAIKU**

How are they going to find that falling star in this gigantic mess?  
Why do we choose to whisper in the presence of ghosts who can't hear us?  
Trees always seem like they have something to say; I just hope it's not rude.  
I could love any man that carries his woes like change in his pocket.  
Contrary to popular belief graveyards are really quite restless.  
Applesauce is infinitely more interesting than rice pudding.  
Geese arrive with the frigid summer air—unwanted, unexpected.  
I'm sure that the villain's mother had a hot dinner waiting for him.  
Tears that lose their meaning before reaching the tips of your eyelashes.  
The ground is cruel and unfamiliar. My feet seem to disagree.  
Elbows. The corners of tables. A muddy boot. Ring ring ring. Hello.  
The earth and wind play tug-o-war with clouds. Clearly the trees won this game.  
Coy rainbows winking and flirting with me from way up on the molding.  
You spit and snarl at me, toss your fists and feet at me, but don't worry,  
I'll still curl up by your feet, hold back the tears, love you a little more.





FRANCESCA LONGO

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