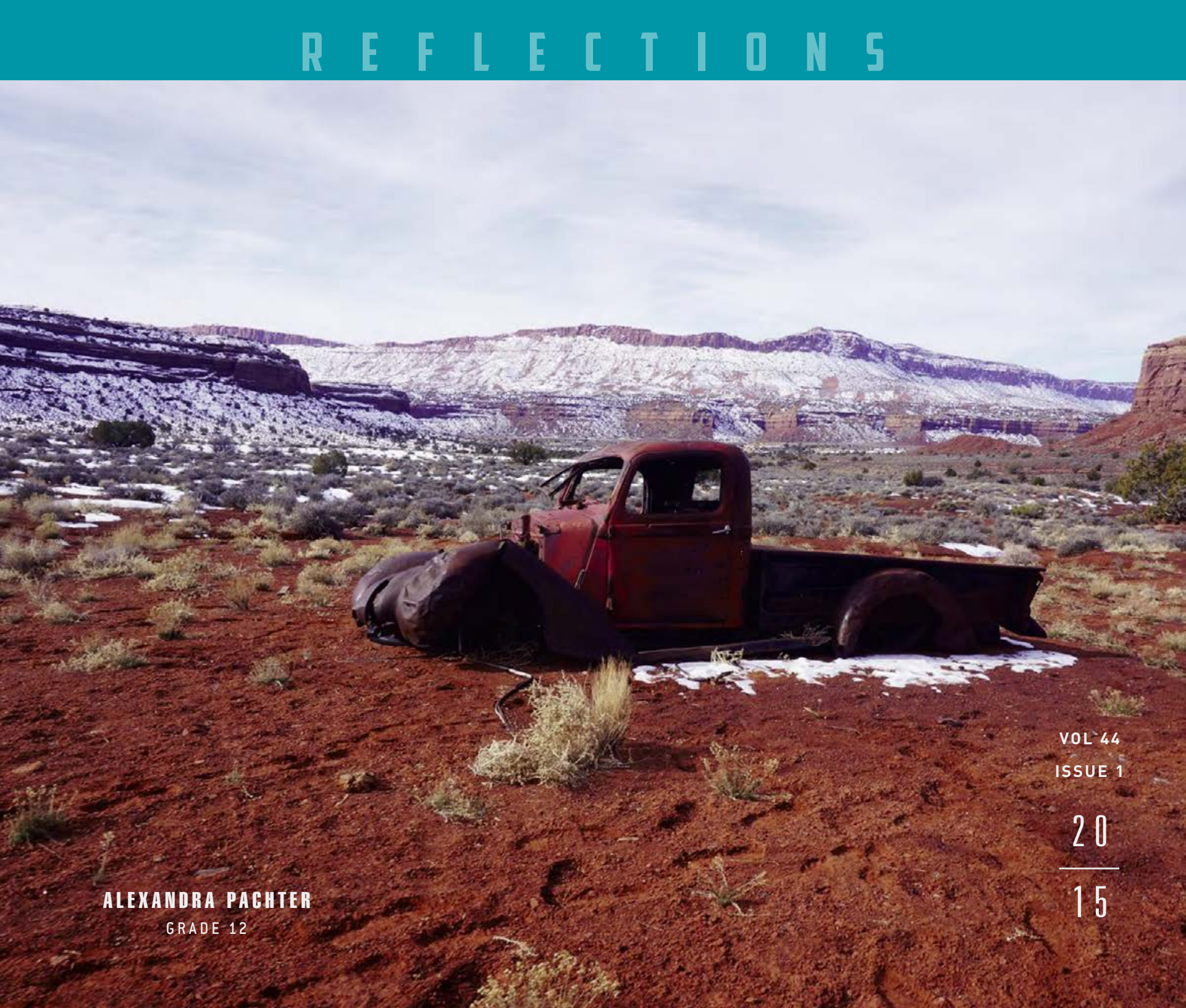


# REFLECTIONS



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15

ALEXANDRA PACHTER  
GRADE 12



SOPHIE HAYSEN

GRADE 12



**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 year, *Reflections* flourished with the help of a dedicated staff and its constantly supportive, wonderful faculty advisors Mr. Chu and Ms. Drezner. In addition, this publication could not have been completed without the support of Linda Adams, Berkeley Carroll's Director of Communications, and Bob Lane of Studio Lane. Of course, *Reflections* would not exist without the many submissions that fill its pages, and we are thankful for the incredibly diverse and talented students who created them. For another year, the student body's creativity and dedication have been the driving force of this publication, and I am extremely proud of the magazine's showcase of Berkeley Carroll's artistic spirit.

**Emma Newbery**  
*Editor-In-Chief*  
Spring 2015

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## POETRY

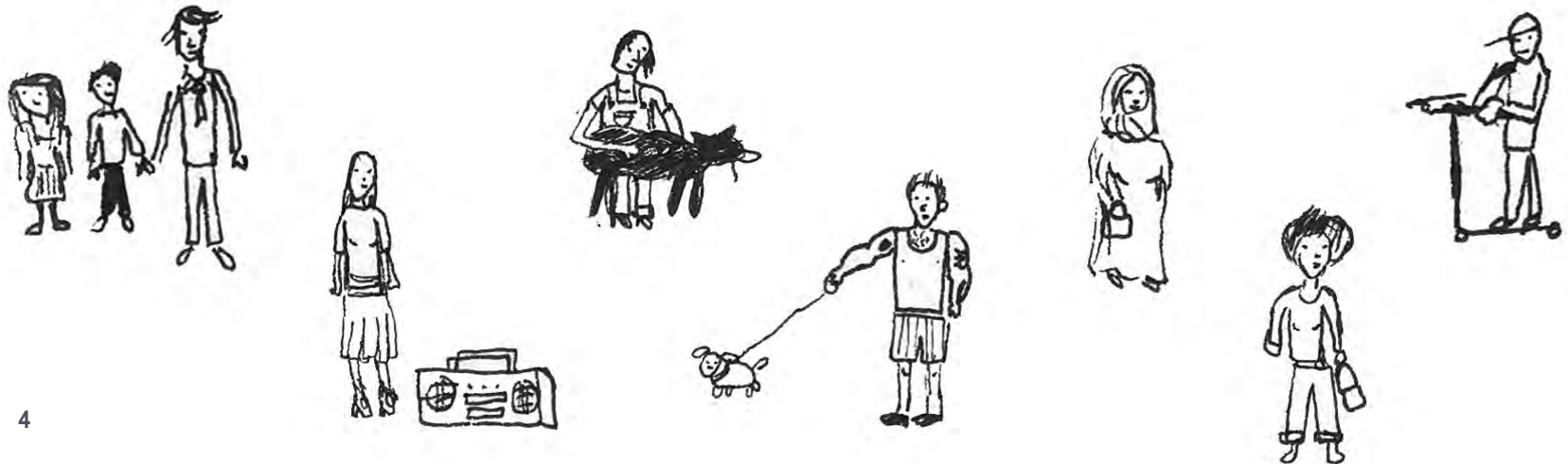
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**ANA INCIARDI**  
GRADE 12







## Journey to New Jersey

balls of wet Wonder Bread  
fall to the speckled plastic ground  
my eyes closed tight, (eyes closed tight/I pray my car...)  
praying my car will rock me to dreaming  
'Beauty' is sprawled out modeling potential  
on a crumbling stand, stretching her height  
unaffected she continues to stroke her  
penny sized thigh  
unaware  
faux fur, fallen lashes, crusted snot, no dinner  
No Mother





## Golf

The human body is a precious thing, and once, when I was eight or nine, I hit a body with a golf club. It was very hot and sticky out when it happened. I hurt my dad.

We were just driving around. Or did I specifically ask to go there? I'm not sure. I mean, we were at the country house a lot and there wasn't much to do. I must've been in the third grade? Fourth grade? Definitely not fifth grade.

We were up there every weekend. I wouldn't have had homework on the weekends in elementary school, so I always had a lot of free time on my hands.

I went through this phase of loving the golfing range. I remember discovering it and being absolutely thrilled with myself. Driving by it one morning, finally finding something good to do up there. They had mini golf too. I loved that place, that depressing, awful place. There was so much junk food there. Was it next to an antique store? I remember seeing horses in a field nearby a couple times. It was just down the road from the juvenile correctional facility.

By this point, I was drinking Coca-Cola, exercising that privilege a lot. Pepsi was good too. Dr. Pepper. Mr. Pibb when I could find it. I really loved Mr. Pibb. It had this amazing taste that wasn't Coca-Cola but also wasn't Dr. Pepper. I find it kind of gross now—sometimes.

For some reason, you could only really get Mr. Pibb in the Midwest. That actually still might be the case. I mean, you can find it in New York, too, but it's really common out there. When we would go to Missouri, I would always order it on the plane. As I write about Pibb, I begin to get upset because I associate it with the time before recognizing things in my life like academic failure and worry.

My older brother was very nice to me at the golfing range. He never told me I was doing anything wrong. He never corrected my posture or my swing. This is odd because, growing up, he would make me cry a lot, yelling at me for being a little kid, Oliver being a teenager on the way out to college. I remember him once,

at night, in high school, telling a girl he was trying to get with (on the phone) that he felt bad for making me cry sometimes when our parents were out. Upon hearing this, I was devastated. Because he was being honest.

In truth, I really didn't know what I was doing. I would just hit those golf balls and sometimes they looked like they were going very far into the field, but not in a professional way that you would see on television. Nothing like that.

One afternoon, my father was trying to correct my posture, my swing. He was in back of me and I swung the club backwards for good form and I just hit him in the head. The side of the head. I could've killed him? Well, that's what he said. He was on the ground quick, yelling bad words. He retired to the top of one of the picnic tables there, holding an ice pack that one of the guys at the range must've given him, next to his head.

Fortunately, there was no blood. I stood there, sometimes watching him on the table. Mom was on her way. What did we have for dinner that night? We joke about all this now, but I could've killed him. I stood there. I would just hit those golf balls and sometimes they looked like they were going very far into the field.







● LORELLE SANG  
GRADE 10





## How to Doubt Your Imagination

voracious\_reader23 lived a click away; she rested just on the other side of the screen. Witty, creative, and amiable, as online dating went, she was the anomaly. He awaited every message, hoping the lack of human interaction wouldn't stop her from keeping contact with him. Sometimes she sent him poems. Good ones. He printed them out on the good paper and folded them into his wallet, so that voracious\_reader23 would be with him all day. At work, at the gym, at dinner with his mother and her new boyfriend. On rainy days (or days where he spent hours under the fluorescent lighting of his office), he made her voice come alive in his mind. Sometimes it was lofty, airy even. Other days, she sounded down to earth, a little more authentic. Raw. And then one day she sent him her phone number, so he called her, anxiously awaiting the dulcet tones of her voice. The beeps of the keypad. The dial tone. And then—a deep voice. “Is this Elijah?” He didn't respond. “This is voracious\_reader23.” All Elijah could hear was this strange man's voice and, in the moment, he thought that maybe his beloved voracious\_reader23 had been kidnapped by some predator. “Hello?” The stranger's voice was still there. Elijah immediately hung up the phone, deleted his OkCupid account, and opened up his wallet. He unfolded one of his favorite poems from voracious\_reader23. He typed it into Google, expecting plagiarism.

It was real.

## Beautiful Terror

The moon stared at me,  
His teeth bared, his eyes bloodshot,  
The stars dancing menacingly around him  
Like his evil angels,  
Their beauty making them even more  
Terrifying.  
He slowly approached me,  
I was an ant in his shadow.  
I tried to run but my feet were stuck.  
I tried to call for help, but I couldn't get any  
Sound out.  
I was just standing there, in fear, enveloped in  
His shadow.  
There was nothing I could do  
So I just stood there and waited  
Until everything was gone.







## Gold

My father's favorite story to tell is of the trajectory of one rotten apple on a warm day in 1964. When my father was growing up in Princeton, New Jersey, his neighbor had an apple tree that spilled over the fence and into the next yard. In the muggy spring, the apples would begin to soften and fall from the trees, landing with quiet *thunks* on the grass.

We are sitting at the dinner table, and my father is eating rice, wilting salad, and hot sauce out of his customary white bowl, holding it close to him and bending his neck down, his wedding ring softly clinking the rim. He looks into the mixture as he continues, and from the side we can see his eyes growing wide, which is how they always get when he tells this story.

*No one remembers how it started, but the shot heard 'round the world that day across the wide lawns of Princeton happened in the throes of a neighborhood apple fight.* The boy next door, Jamie Thomas, was reaching down for another apple to chuck over the fence. As Jamie's legs straightened and he began to stretch up from his crouched position, he squinted as the sun hit his eyes. (My father said the sun was above him exactly, but that's probably incorrect.) My father was holding a particularly rotten apple, some of it probably already mushed deep under his fingernails. As Jamie straightened fully, an overripe apple came sailing toward him straight from my father's small hand, and exploded onto the crown of his head. (Here my father throws his hands backward and widens his eyes, mimicking Jamie's upturned face. Sometimes we laugh.) I imagine Jamie "Applesauce-Forehead" Thomas's mouth opening slightly in shock, eyes squelching shut and filled with apple, a rotten halo around his golden head.

In the night sometimes I can hear my father softly playing music in the living room, or tapping his fingers on the arms of the desk chair—arms not fully

on the chair correctly, so they bounce back against his fingers, rattling. He doesn't have a favorite room in our house (I've asked him), but he spends most of his time in the living room. From the hallway, in between the books that used to belong to his aunt, and the Civil War-era newspapers that used to belong to somebody, you can't see whether anyone is in the living room, even when the door's open, but even with the door shut I can tell when he's there.

When my mom's at choir rehearsal and my sister is with a friend, we have dinner with occasional eye contact, or sometimes if we get on the topic of it, he'll jog back to the living room and we'll leave our plates on the table so he can show me a video of a live recording of a band he likes. A couple of weeks ago, it was Morphine, which I liked, and before that he found an old video of this band he was in when he met my mother ("Spontaneous Combustion Presents: LIQUID CHEESE"), which he forgot they filmed but is now on YouTube because the lead singer isn't alive anymore. He didn't know about the death until the first time he saw the video, and a few months later he got back together with some people to play a memorial concert. He's played the cassette of the band (The Triple Forbidden Taboo) a couple of times, and we both smile, but I don't really like it all that much.

My mom says he's changed over the years, because now he can't fall asleep without the TV on and comes home late and goes to the living room right after we eat—or sometimes even during if we're making fun of someone or he can't follow the conversation. His mouth gives up first, and then he pushes back from the table, the legs of the chair getting caught in the carpet. He turns, and the floor creaks as he turns the corner from one dark hallway to the next. I see it in all of our eyes that we feel bad, but there doesn't ever seem to be a right time to explain a joke again.

In the car on the way back from the beach in New Jersey, we are so focused on the silence that we miss the signs for the turnpike. Technically, it was my job to look for the turn, but I was busy coming up with safe topics in my head: The Beatles, the book he's reading about murder, the strange



waitress at the pizza place. If I launch the wrong topic at him, it will just falter in its flight and then plunge to its death in between the knobs of the car stereo. I've seen it happen with my mother. Family car rides usually involve tentative harmonies or vocal percussion as his only contributions.

On their first date he went prancing down the aisles of a bistro, a loaf of bread making lazy circles in his hand, and made my mother laugh so hard that she nearly lay down in the aisle, and I remember we used to play "spin" when we were much younger and just out of the shower in these hooded towels, and he would pick my sister and me up and spin, the little hoods coming off and our wet hair slapping his cheeks. Now we lie on the couch and he saves me the easy clues in the Saturday puzzle or other times he and my sister have rubber band fights.

Sometimes I think about Jamie "Applesauce-Forehead" Thomas, and I wonder if he walks through life now with a crippling lack of confidence from his run-in with an overripe apple fifty years ago. I posed this question to my father, and, not realizing it was a joke, he got very serious and looked at me, right into my eyes:

"No, I don't think so."

My father's eyes are flecked with gold.



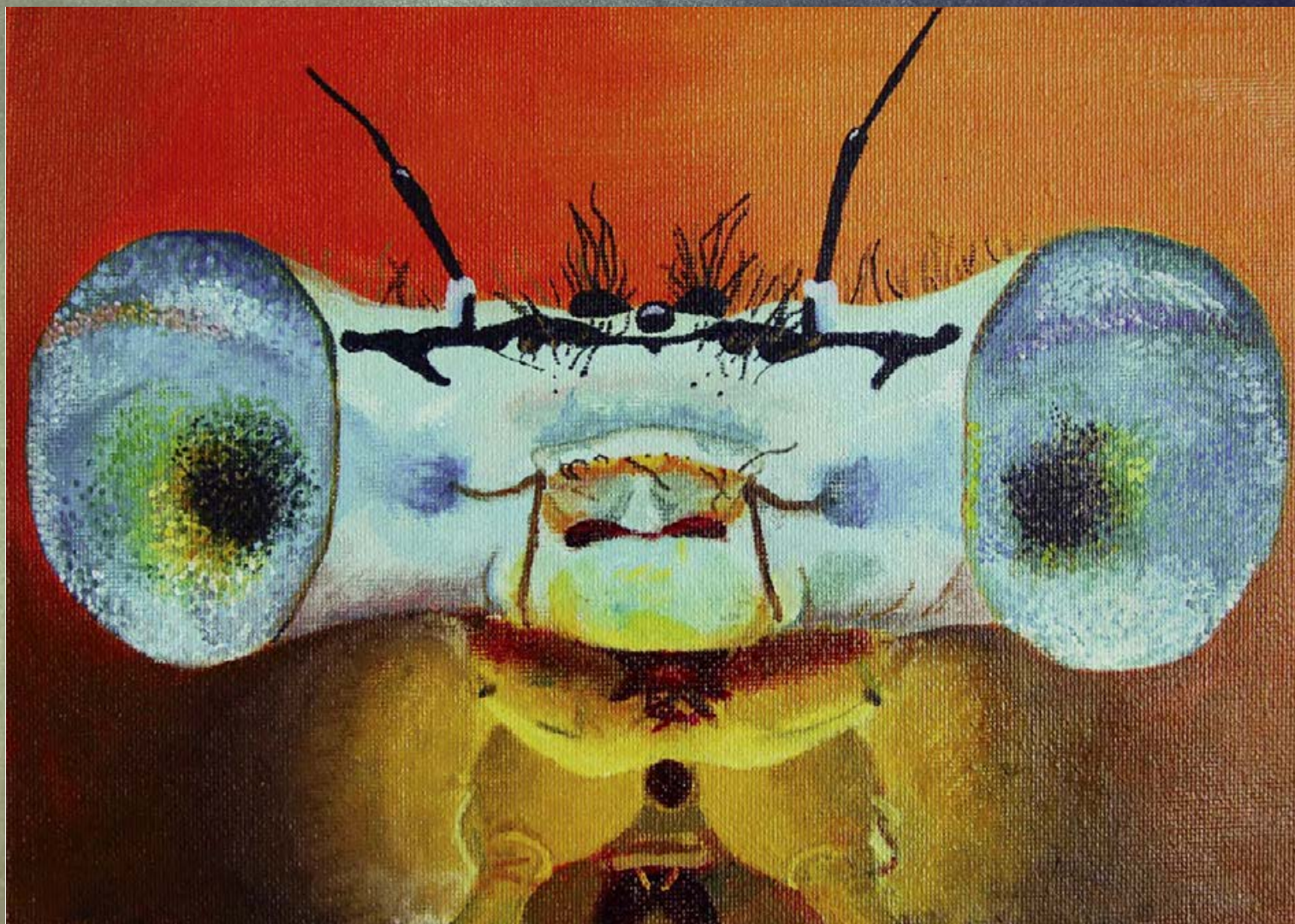
## Silent

On the tiled ground, she walked.  
As the sky began to sleep,  
Its eyes closed, its light drowned  
Into the darkness of its macrocosm  
Until vans and jeeps discovered eyes  
From which radiant light shined—  
Some white, others with a tint of yellow paired  
With rare lime green  
In vast cone-like projections—  
Some traversed, others ostracized  
On the city street,  
And on the tiled ground  
It drew a painting  
Where color intertwined.

Then specks of snow  
Waltzed their Royal dance  
And mingled with the painting,  
Creating a whimsical tone.  
Whistles of the breeze  
Composed nostalgic novels  
Depicted by naked trees,

And the windows  
Cornered by Royals  
Portrayed passing  
As figures stood  
Still and breathed—  
Relishing the painting  
From another angle  
Oblivious to the fact that  
She and they are also in  
Its painting of  
To be.





## Fish'n' Wish

Whenever I'm in contact with a big potential customer I take their fish for a quick trot and we discuss pay rates. I ask how they've heard of the business. Usually it's from the blog. We've got a great blog going that's been pretty useful to advertise the business. The staff page's got great shots of me or Tom taking people's pets for trots in last years TankRollers™, with some wicked close-ups of me talking probably some baloney to a goldfish. Last week the IT guy installed a wicked bluish-magenta theme with some cutesy pixelated animations of gold stars and pulsing smiley faces, which I could tell Phil was elated about. For the whole week at the end of each day, he'd say: Great work people, great work. Which didn't last long, since the theme glitched out just yesterday. The theme's now got little animations of dogs humping each other all over it.

And so this morning Phil says: Work.

Today I meet with a woman named Judith. I ask how she's heard of the business. She says from the blog. Judith lives off the north end of the city where the housing complexes get huger and the streets get dirtier. Phil tells me that it's on the edge of my territory, but if I want to keep my promise and start making real money I'm going to have to be adventurous. Judith introduces herself as Judi and says that her guppy Dave needs extra-extra-special treatment when being taken out. She says I need to sing him soft hymns every fifteen minutes or he'll have a major anxiety attack and die. Judith's an able-bodied woman in a blue dress, and while I pretend to take notes I walk a bit slower than her so I can take a look at her butt. But then I think of Violet and Cormac. I love them more than the world. Even Cormac with those little stubs, enjoying the world sans arms. Even Violet and her terribly degrading job.

I speed up so she doesn't get the wrong idea.

Judith asks me how I'll care for Dave. I say with love and patience, like one of my own. We discuss pay rates. I ask how fifteen per trot sounds. She says twelve. I say how about thirteen and a half.





Just when she's about to say OK a car comes around the corner.

"Target acquired, fish in sight! Fire at will, comrades!"

"Break it! Break it all!"

Two hefty-sized sticks come flying our way from the backseat of a brown Subaru. One just misses Dave's glass TankRoller™ and the other hits me right in the stomach.

"Dave!" Judith says. She drops to the floor and begins to sing "How Great Thou Art" while cradling and stroking Dave's bowl. I bend over in pain.

Just super. The kids from the dirty school on the east side of the city've been at it again, now with sticks instead of crumpled up paper. Who told them that this was OK? Who gave them the thumbs up? Unruly. Just plain disrespectful. The kids laugh and the Subaru speeds away as I try to tell them the importance of parental supervision.

Judith gives me a look.

"My Jesus," she says, wiping off her butt. "These are dangerous streets. Is Dave going to be safe with you? Can you get protective casing for the TankRoller™?"

I look at her like: How am I supposed to get the money for a protective casing?

She looks at me like: How am I supposed to know if Dave is safe with you if you don't have money for a protective casing and thus Dave doesn't have a protective casing, resulting in Dave trotting dangerous streets sans protection?

We look at each other. She says sorry but that just won't cut it. Great business you got but that just

won't cut it.

Whelp, that's it. We shake hands. I lead her hand toward the tip jar strapped to my fanny pack. Just in case. But she turns around and walks away.

Damn kids. Damn prices. I hate that. I hate myself. I hate it all. I think of fleeing the city without possessions to live off the land. I think of becoming an international pin collector, or setting myself on fire outside City Hall.

But instead I go home.

When I open the door Cormac runs up and affectionately rams his head into my chest. He's the only one home. He tells me that his armpits have been sweating like sprinklers, so I get a towel and wipe them off. Looks like Cormac's reaching that period. He's growing up. Soon enough there'll be little red mountains erupting on his face. Soon enough he'll question his identity, and like girls. Or guys, if that's what he's into. And I'll never have to have the masturbation talk with Cormac since it's just plain impossible. What a great kid. Growing up.

Violet and I try to work hard to make sure Cormac gets his education and never has to leave the house. It's a dangerous world out there, unruly teenagers abound. They just released a new household HoloSmart™ for not too bad of a price, but we're willing to sacrifice for our boy anyway, to make sure he doesn't have to face the mean world. The thing's proven to be a super teacher. It can teach pre-algebra and explore the themes of *The Giver* no problem. We actually got the jumbo-pack installed, meaning that we've got a bunch set up in different rooms: one in



● MAYA LITTLEJOHN  
GRADE 12



the living room, one in Cormac's room, and one in the bathroom. He can even bonk his nose against the touch screen to answer questions for exercises, which I can tell makes him happy.

I ask him how the day was. He says so-so and then spells *analyze* for me. What a kid.

Dinner time. Cormac bites the stove's knob and cocks his head until the burner's lit. I put some water over it and head out to the deck to shuck the corn.

I'm onto the fourth ear when Violet walks in.

"I'm drunk," she says.

How am I supposed to respond to that? Wow, Violet, thanks a ton for being drunk? Thanks a ton for being drunk when we have a kid to care for, to feed?

She asks if I'm pissed and starts crying.

"Let's get you into bed," I say while patting her on the back, and when I lay her down and take off her shoes she passes out like that.

I can feel the big bad temper building up, but the tortellini's almost ready in the kitchen, so instead of getting all huffy puffy I go into the closet and do my Anger Breathing exercises. When the pulse is back to normal, I slip into her bag and check out the list from today.

**Bo Roth** (8:30AM–9:00AM): \$60

**Jack Tartt** (9:45AM–10:05AM): \$40

**Mark Blunders** (10:30AM–11:10AM): \$80

**Dick O'Connor** (3:00PM–3:30PM): \$60

I underline in my mental to-do list: Get poor Violet out of her job. I want her out. I just want us to be cheerful and happy, out of the present situation. But how? How where when? No way out for people like us, Dad'd always said.

She sleeps like a child, the comforter tucked up

tight to her neck. I'm having deep cravings to crawl in bed next to her. Not do it or anything, just lie there like exhausted puppies. Maybe have her wake up and talk to me. We could lie there wrapped up, noses and foreheads touching, and talk about how great it is to have each other, to feel love for one another. I could tell her how proud I am of her for scoring big with my parents those many years back. She could tell me how good of a father I am. How I'm goofy but also stern when needed.

Cormac snaps me out of it as he yells from the kitchen that the pot's overflowing.

We have a most excellent two-person dinner of corn and tortellini.

After Cormac hits the sack and the dishes are done, I call up the school's superintendent to see what I can do about the stick-throwers.

"Mmmyellow," he says.

I explain to him the situation. He says that he can get back to me maybe later, but most likely there's really nothing he can do. They aren't in charge of the kids when they're out of school. Maybe you can encourage them to go on a Wilderness Program that'll steer them back in the right direction? Maybe a Teen Group that'll help them with Team Building Activities and Bonding? A Book Club would maybe be the best option?

I tell him that I'm not going to send kids I don't know to a Wilderness Program. He says well sir maybe the problem is that I don't have the initiative to do what's best. Maybe the problem is not the kids throwing sticks, but my own inability to take action. Maybe the problem is me.



I hang up when he starts giving me numbers to various Programs.

I sigh and head to the bedroom, where I crawl in next to Violet.

At the buttcrack of dawn I take the bus over to our office. I ring the doorbell and hear Tom breathing loudly through the microphone and saying Fish'n'Wish office who is it even though he knows exactly who it is, the cheeky turd.

On the second floor's where we're stationed. Nothing's all too bad in the office. Except when Jane orders Indian. That's when it really starts to stink. We've got AC for everyone and cubicles for whomever Phil grants them to. Sadly I don't have a cubicle at all, only a chair and an old desk near the water cooler.

When I sit down I spot Tom sitting at his cubicle crossing his arms, craning his neck to look at me, smiling toothless with his morning coffee steaming between his arms. He says that Phil wants to see me in his cubicle ASAP.

So I go into Phil's cubicle. Phil says g'morning and tells me to take a gander at this season's stats. We're in the worst customer decline in months. The new Virtu-Trot™ has been kidnapping our customers like crazy, promising the entire experience of a hearty trot from the comfort of a pet's own stationary tank.

"The hell is this?" says Phil. "Do people not value the true experience of the outdoors anymore? Do people not realize that these poor fish need fresh air? Where are our people's common values?"

I shrug.

"If the decline gets any worse, staff members are

going to start being let go in flocks." He gives me a steely look. I know all too well that I'm not one of his best players.

"Get this, boy-o: we're a business." He takes out a map of my territory. "A big one at that, and businesses are forever and ever expanding. Since our business is forever and ever expanding, you've got to forever and ever expand too. Not literally, of course, ha. We've got to expand your territory if you want to stick around, is what I'm saying here."

He hands me a new pair of keys for a new customer. He says I have to expand even past Judith's. By the way, how was Judith, he asks. I say Dave's a great guppy, but Judith was not happy with our prices. I don't tell him about the kids from the school.

"Christ," he says.

Tom pops his head up from his cubicle and looks down at my new map.

"Ha! Your territory's now got the old guy in the wheelchair who farts a lot with the fish that always looks dead. I remember having that guy. We call him Old Man Craig. Do you remember when I had Old Man Craig, Phil?"

Phil looks up at him. "Like hell I do. You did great with him." They bump fists. Phil says I can learn great skills from this guy right here, like proper price negotiation. Tom looks at me with his mug in his hand like: Yeah.

On the bus to my territory I think about me. Am I satisfied with my current occupation and situation?

*(Continued on page 55)*



● COURTNEY GABEL  
GRADE 10



## Prism

I am usually afraid  
to write what is true,  
to make the past  
shiny in  
that way,

to give it a gloss it doesn't  
deserve, because it  
was just the time  
we all went  
fishing.

But try as I do to ground it,  
keep it, I still re-  
member it as  
though through a  
prism

glittering out on the rocks like  
a dream I once had.  
We used the new  
flies that time,  
threaded

jumpers my uncle had sewn. We  
waited and watched and  
kept by the rocks,  
low and crouched,  
slipping.

We caught a bass. Well, our uncle  
caught a bass, we ate.  
Through the bend in  
my glass, I  
see it.







## Lena Vernacular *(excerpt)*

### SAFE *(adj)*:

1. Used in a sentence like “That’s so safe” or “She’s so safe” as a means of expressing an overall feeling of being supported, comforted or relieved.
2. A female camp counselor with big boobs who hugs you in the bathroom stall while you sob to her about how homesick you are.
3. When you walk into the cafeteria and you are scanning, scanning, scanning, and see your best friend’s hand pop up in the back right corner.
4. John did just as badly on his science ACT section.
5. The party will just be people from Berkeley Carroll.
6. “In a course of a lifetime what does it matter?”— applying this quote to every physics quiz you take.

### ITALICIZED *(adj)*:

1. As if written eloquently by a novelist. The world notices her walk into the room and perform trivial tasks like taking out a binder, or sharpening a pencil, or putting her hair behind her ears. A spotlight shines on the way she opens her umbrella and how the sun sleeps on her shoulders.
2. A person can specifically be italicized to another person. For example, in *The Great Gatsby*, Daisy is italicized to Gatsby. *Daisy*. He *watches* her.
3. Lovers are often italicized to each other because of the details. The freckle on the neck. The one leg out of the comforter.
4. A person can be beautiful or hot or sexy without being italicized. Fake italicized people receive a lot of attention for their physicalities but aren’t the real deal.
5. There are italicized objects and concepts in this world like *space*, *sundresses*, *braided hair*, *figurines on windowsills*, *a teenaged girls room*, *typewriters*, *thunderstorms*, *film photographs*, *clocks*, *polka dots*, *eyelashes*, *poems*, *cursive*, *records*, *sad songs*, *overalls*, *ponytails*, *picture frames*, and *handwritten letters*.



### **LEGS CARRY** (*interj*):

1. A motivational expression, a phrase that often lands you with a good story, fresh experience, or lesson. You come up with this one on a sweaty August afternoon when, sprawled out under the ceiling fan, your best friend Maggie gets a text from a boy with a smirky grin and Justin Bieber haircut. He wants to “chill.” Maggie sits up and you sit up. The ceiling fan makes her baby hairs dance around her face. Suddenly, a decision must be made. The crappy teen books and rom-coms all say, Go! You can see she has the right kind of smile, the right kind of squealy “I’m not sure.” You tell her to let her *Legs Carry*. 2. *Legs Carry* forces the disconnect of the mind and body—i.e., Move before you talk yourself out of it. Get showered. Get on the train. 3. *Legs Carry* is not applicable to self-proclaimed daredevils, those who “honestly don’t care.” It’s for Overthinkers, Worriers and The Self-Conscious who find themselves stuck in a suffocating analysis. 4. Tell yourself *Legs Carry* and let your body end up at 10,000 feet in Leadville, Colorado, rationing out quinoa with 46 strangers. 5. Tell yourself *Legs Carry* when your anxiety comes back and your mom suggests you see Fara, the therapist with gold eyeliner on 13th Street. *Legs Carry* takes you back to her couch, that same leather you hated in first grade. 6. You auditioned for this year’s play because you felt your legs outside the bulletin board of the Performance Space and they carried you. 7. You will meet your future husband, skydive, and audition for *SNL* all because you tell yourself *Legs Carry*.

### **GETTING IT** (*v*):

1. The act of understanding Lena Vernacular. 2. Your sister pulls her knees into her chest on your sticky roof as she talks about her future. 3. Your dad pretends to swerve into you on his bike. 4. Your best friends stand in the kitchen in messy buns and no bras, ranting about their nights and laughing about the Eggo waffle that just popped up out of the toaster, completely burnt.





## Granddaddy *(excerpt)*

He sits, hunched over, his thin hands and arms covered in purple veins and wood stainer. He picks up the dusty white bottle, meets the cloth to the top, and flips them over together until enough smelly fluid has soaked the rag. Sometimes the rag drips onto his pants. He is often found knee deep in saltwater, dealing with the red boat motor.

He came to my other grandfather's funeral. They drove all the way from D.C. to Columbus, Ohio. I stumbled at the sight of them in the synagogue parking lot.

He doesn't fly. My parents say he has a "thing" with planes, especially over bodies of water. I always found that curious because he is so European sometimes. So he takes the train everywhere, always coming into Penn Station or Grand Central. He drinks Coke out of the can and plays solitaire on his briefcase. "Stinkpot," he mumbles when the cards don't work out right.

"You know," he always says, "I helped you when you were being potty-trained. You said, 'Granddaddy, I have to go!!', and I picked you up and ran up the stairs to the bathroom, pulled down your pants, and sat you on the toilet."

My grandfather is a lawyer, a storyteller, a great spaghetti-and-meatballs maker. He puts butter on everything, he drinks whole milk, and he makes clam chowder so creamy it makes me sick to smell it. We eat it out of mugs.

The milkshakes are the best: vanilla ice cream, a dash of milk, and Hershey's chocolate syrup in a blender.



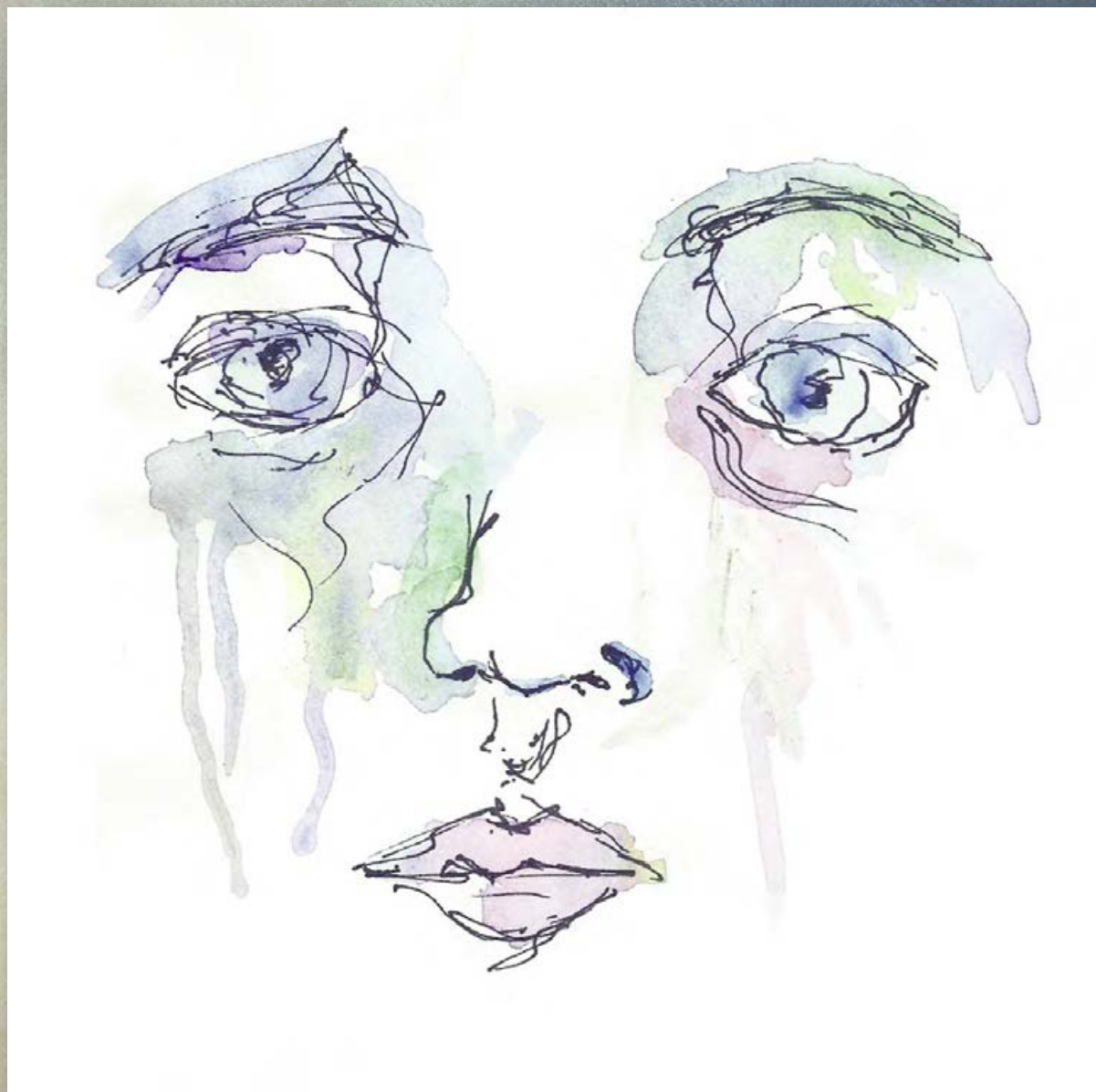


## Inner Peace *(excerpt)*

Every summer, beginning while I was in the womb, my family has vacationed on Long Island. We've never rented the same vacation house for more than two years, and as a result my home in Long Island does not consist of wood and stone but of sand and water. On sunny mornings my father would joke rhetorically, "What do you want to do today?" There was no discussion—we were going to the beach.

With its loud, sunburnt families in Tommy Bahama recliners under colorful beach umbrellas stretching as far as the eye could see, Atlantic Beach is the New York City of beaches—great if you want to feel like you're in a happening place, terrible if you want to read. I sit peacefully with my toes buried in the sand, engaged in the adventures of Frodo Baggins, every now and again looking up as the seagulls squawk overhead. Sitting in the broiling summer sun, soon my head begins to pound and sticky sweat beads drip into my eyes, making reading one more word a hardship with but one solution. I jump up from my seat, sprint toward the beckoning deep blue ocean, and plunge into the glistening waves. The noise from the beach collapses to nothingness as the cool salty water rushes over my ears and face. My head bobs out of the water beyond where the waves crash, and as I sweep the hair off my face I gaze out to the infinite horizon where two blues meet, reveling in the tranquility of the primordial ocean.

● **MIRANDA CORNELL**  
GRADE 12





## Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Brother

I

Incomplete ears listening  
to Twinkle Twinkle Little  
Star.

II

A dollhouse given  
to a little girl as an  
acknowledgment of  
her existence.

III

Staying with  
grandma and grandpa  
while the midsummer baby  
appears.

IV

Learning to crawl,  
a rainbow bear,  
time out.

V

Chubby fingers with pinhead  
nails dropping the felt football  
from the stroller.

VI

Toddling along the brick barriers—  
teeth colliding with cement.  
Emergency Room.  
Cherry red from one mouth,  
iron red from the other.

VII

Blue couch.  
Broken arm. Emergency room.  
Again.

VIII

The seed of America's Favorite  
Pastime  
planted at the age of six  
by my father.

IX

Lover of chocolate milk.  
Avid hater of broccoli.

X

Red cast on a sandy beach.  
But, where *is* California?

XI

The only voice I want  
to hear at 8:00 p.m. on a  
December Tuesday  
in the Emergency Room.  
This time, it's me.

XII

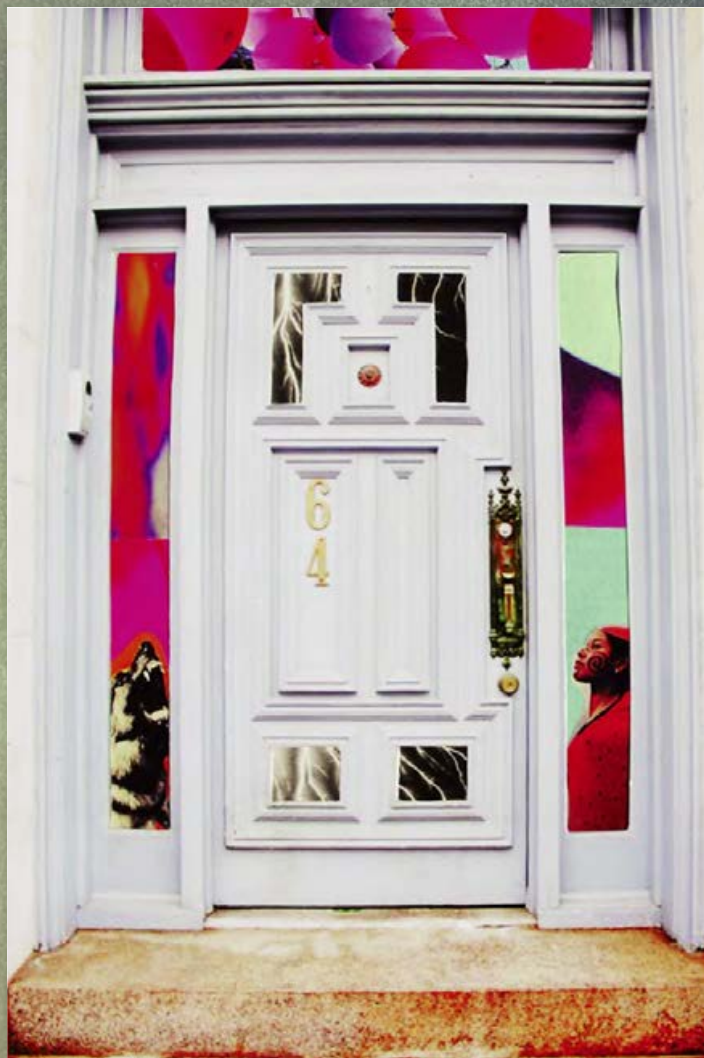
Coming up on  
high school and five foot five.  
What the hell?

XIII

My best friend.







## Hands

The last twenty years of their lives are a New York love story. They first met in college, up north in a town with one bus stop and one pizza place. He moved south to the city in 1987, but she would be at college for two more years, years punctuated by grimy Peter Pan bus weekend visits for her and a series of ambitious, cleanliness-averse roommates for him. In 1989, she graduated and moved to New York. They cycled through apartments. In the first, they discovered, to their mutual horror, that water bugs can, in fact, fly. In the second, there was something wrong with the pipes in the building, so Chinese food leftovers dumped down the neighbors' garbage disposals would sometimes emerge from the drain as they showered, Kung Pao chicken mixing with soap suds at their feet. In the third, on Fourth Avenue in Brooklyn, crack vials littered the streets and crunched underfoot; there were so many, in fact, that one of their friends made a necklace out of them, which he would proudly display at parties.

Slowly, they stumbled into comfort with the city, with each other. They sat together on the linoleum of the laundry room floor, picking loose change out of the dryer at 7:00 a.m. because at the party they'd thrown the night before, one of their friends had poured spare change into the dryer and they'd all danced to the beats it made. She laughed out the window at three in the morning as he stood outside in his pajamas shaking the tree in front of the apartment in a vain attempt to shoo away the mockingbird that had been singing car alarm tones for four hours. They perched side-by-side on orange subway seats on the way to work, quiet in the twenty minutes of *New York Times* reading they'd allotted for themselves.

They became adults in that New York, found jobs at schools and publishing houses, got married, adopted a cat, bought a house. They spun



together a life with the fibers of the city, weaving in Sunday morning trips to the bagel store and commutes in the gray-air New York winters.

I know there were bad parts—two-pound flying water bugs can only be romanticized in the past tense—and I know there were nights when she was too afraid to go out by herself, and when he stole toilet paper from the bathroom at his office buildings because they didn't have enough money to buy it. And there are also things I will never know.

When I look at them, at my parents, I wonder how much of who they are today—my father's quick talking, the way he's always stopping to look at the basketball games at West 4th street or Little League practices in the park, my mother's black turtlenecks and the edge in her humor, the one I've inherited—is a reflection of the city, the place where they became who they are. I wonder how much of the decades they've spent here has refracted onto me.

I'm my own sponge, too, absorbing the city. When I was two, my dad would take me to Coney Island on Mondays, when he didn't work. I would absorb the German that he spoke to me, but I'd also drink in the choppy Brighton Beach Russian, the Spanish spoken by mothers carrying little girls with swim floaties on their arms, the *"eff you!"*s shouted by pink-tanned men and their ponytailed girlfriends.

In my sixth grade French anecdotal, my teacher called me a "closeted linguist." Today, I wonder whether that was the way my brain was wired or whether it was my Coney Island ears, still trained a decade later.

But I'm not just a passive figure in this story, soaking in New York without passing judgment. Because in many ways, mine is a love story like my parents'. I'm in love with the city in a way that I've never been in love with a person. I'm in love with the way the city smells on winter nights, like cement and Christmas trees lining the sidewalks and deli coffee steam, in love with Grand Army Plaza in the rain, in love with the young, pudgy couple I saw late one night at the West 4th Street stop, whose voices rasped across the tile like prayers.

But there was a time, years ago, when the city was broken in my head. I got older, with long legs and blonde hair, and I fell out of love for a time. I went home from a sleepover one Sunday morning and was followed from train car to train car by a man in all black whose hollow eyes reflected back every time I'd ever felt unsafe on these streets.

I came back from Vermont, where everything was quiet and the nights were sparkling, not orange, and nobody hissed at me in the night and the city felt like choking. 34th Street felt like spawning upstream. And everything about me didn't feel like me, then, for a host of reasons. Was disliking the city the worst? Maybe—what's worse than a home that no longer feels like a home?

I got past it. It took me a summer to remember how to not feel like I was squeezing in on myself when I rode the subway. I started to remember every story the train has ever told inside my head, of one and a half hours of reading and bustle on the way back from my internship, feeling smug that I'd gotten a seat on the A, of lazy one-stop journeys home from school on the F. And I began to write new stories, of late nights on the Q, making sure everyone was okay, of afternoon trips on the 1 to dinners where everyone sang. By September the train felt like moving again.

So mine is not a perfect love.

I feel about New York City the way I feel about my own hands—I hate the nail beds, the ends of my fingers, which are tattered from picking, hate how I sometimes feel like they're giant pendulums on the ends of my arms, but I love the way they look when the nails are painted silver, or when they're tapping a table one finger at a time. I love them because they let me hold a pen, a cup of tea, a paintbrush, a person.





## Untitled

I free myself and climb a tree  
to feel connected  
to everything that is  
or was. The significance  
of every minuscule happening, a pivot  
of our entire species.

The birds glide and drop, chasing,  
free. The chase dominates their being. All is present.

I feel every branch for miles, I see the buds  
ready for spring, and I feel their need to explode  
into the world and say, "I am here," and

though I sometimes feel the need to fall into myself  
I am no longer afraid of the wonders,  
for they are unlimited.



● **ALEXANDRA PACHTER**  
GRADE 12



## The Long and Painful Road From Detroit to Long Island *(excerpt)*

Finally I said, “I realize you never told me much about your family. I mean, you know all about mine, but we never really talked about your family.”

“What do you want to know?” he responded, laughing.

“I don’t know... I have time.”

He began by telling me about his sister, Karen. He described her with an odd sort of admiration and compassion; it sounded almost like someone he was flirting with. She seemed like a woman who commanded respect. He was eloquent as he portrayed her as a strong, independent woman, who ran her own computer consulting headhunting firm. I had no idea what a headhunting firm was, but it sounded impressive. I also discovered that she had a boyfriend.

“She wears the pants in the relationship,” he said.

Next he described his brother, Marc, a law student but the baby of the family. Marc tended to be the “goodie goodie,” protective of their mother, and that didn’t sound like a good thing. It was tough for him to admit it, but he also mentioned that his brother was kinda funny. Neither of Gary’s siblings were anywhere close to even considering having kids, and they probably couldn’t relate to the fact that I already had a son. Gary was no different. I was his first serious girlfriend.

Next he spoke about his dad, Eugene, and finally, he got to his mother, Mrs. Ross. When he talked about her his voice grew a bit harsher. He described her as a person with good intentions, who could sometimes give the wrong impression and come across as mean. But he assured me that she would be fine with me and that I had nothing to worry about.

I really didn’t know what to make of his description of his family. Mrs. Ross and Karen sounded a bit intimidating, Eugene and Marc like they would be a bit more approachable. He also mentioned that in his family there was a certain path one was expected to follow. Gary was to go to medical school and, after becoming a doctor, marry a Jewish girl (preferably from Long Island), live on Long island, and raise the next generation of Jewish Long Islanders. Divorce was not an option. One thing I was certain of: they didn’t sound anything like my family.







## Public Arena

### **SATURDAYS**

When you were in the womb, your mother said you would kick and kick and kick, so by the time you came out, you were ready for the field. On cloudless Saturday mornings she would dress you in your droopy uniform, too big for your bony shoulders to fill and too long for your 6-year-old legs. She would lace your cleats around your thin feet twice; she worried that you'd trip over the loops. During games you ran around the field helpless. Big boys would come and shoulder you into the ground. But that was always okay. When it was over, the parents would come with their squishy sprinkled donuts.

### **TUESDAYS AND THURSDAYS**

You scream and cry so that your parents don't drive you back there. And then you're there. Puffy eyed and grouchy, you watch the heat waves on the field that only show up when you're delirious and staring at one spot for too long.

At every practice you're the kid no one wants to pass to. You linger around the balls and wait for someone to notice you standing alone. When your coach assigns you a partner, you pretend not to notice your teammate's reluctant grunt. Why can't you ever find the right part of your foot to hit the ball? You tell yourself that in a few years you'll figure it out. You tell yourself that in a few years, this will be your field.

### **MONDAYS, WEDNESDAYS, AND FRIDAYS**

You walk down the road to practice, your cleats clicking against the cement pavement while little boys hang like monkeys off a police car, pointing through the half-open window at devices surrounding a sweaty officer. While cops on motorcycles drive down the field, your yellow bus is being ransacked.

High school soccer girls pick pebbles off the turf in case they fall on one and damage their knees. Old bandages and bottle caps find homes beneath the Astroturf. Sprinkled across the field are the prehistoric chicken bones. The

girls tape the skeletal remains of the nets back onto the sagging goal posts. The field lines are repainted. The girls scream at strangers to get off their pitch.

Cheap firecrackers pop.

Elbows come at heads. Balls take their time to reach their maximum height, and turn back, picking up velocity, slowly, until they reach a face. The face, stunned by the impact, remains frozen.

## **TUESDAYS AND THURSDAYS**

Orange strands of clouds slowly weave across the sky and fade into reds and purples. Homeless men line the gates, cradling their liquor bottles while they sleep.

The first thing you do is tie your bags together so that they can't be stolen. While you make your warmup run around the field, men ask if they *can run with* you, tell you *you look good*, tell you *you should run faster*. You keep running.

Rounding the third corner of the field, you think about all the untied laces, all the couples who taught their kids how to pass a ball, all the girls who surprise-tackled their friends. Astroturf accumulates in your shoes like memories.

A family asks if you've seen this girl.

You play until you can't see; you confuse your white ball with the full moon. The shadows on the black turf shift like ships and your feet glide along the field as if you're running on water. You ask your coach what time it is. You warn him that you're going to go blind. He says, if you can play with your eyes closed, if you can play when you can't see, you will be able to play under any circumstance.

You are the only players left.

The orange streetlights line the arena.

The cops come with flashlights to tell you the park is closed. You shake the turf out of your shoes before you leave.

## SUNDAYS

Sometimes ageless Hispanic girls with long ponytails will play pickup games in tight jean shorts, but everyone is there to be a part of the Mexican League Tournament. Their jerseys will be professional league knockoffs. They will call themselves Real Madrid and Chinantla. They won't play with an age limit; mothers will play against daughters, 24-year-olds will knock you over. Your knees will bleed. Your head will ring.

*"Es un juego de contacto,"* they'll say.

If someone's hurt, you will keep going. The mechanics in your bones will have been programmed to move you through the game. You won't think about waiting until the exact moment her legs are open just enough for you to slip the ball through. All you'll know is, you have to get the ball *there*, that *spot* on the field—a tiny one-dimensional position hanging static in a three-dimensional world—and the ball will get there, and you won't even feel your left foot hit the ball as it comes across your body.

You will pick your head up when the timer on the ref's watch goes off. The ball will be played down the field. You'll watch time skip the ground and spin off through the goalie's gloves and into your net. Your face will numb. Something heavy will try to sneak up your throat but it'll settle at the dip of your collarbone.

On the sidelines, little sisters and brothers will cup their hands and hit the floor making hills of turf. They'll insert little sticks and pieces of garbage on top like flags. You'll watch these tiny landscapes collapse as small Spanish mothers squash them with their swollen feet as they push baby carriages, the ones without babies weighed down with hot tamales, beans, corn, hot sauce containers, red Gatorades, and Doritos chips.





## Fish' n' Wish *(cont'd)*

Heck no. I wanted to be a professional skydiver. I wanted to soar through clouds with super cool goggles and suits. But I've got a beautiful boy that's able to have a fairly good education and clothes on his back. For Violet and me, no matter how degrading our jobs may be, dignity's not our first priority. I tell Violet that I'm dying to skedaddle out of the situation if we can, and she always says well what else do you expect me to do? Find other work? Quit the job that's got more money on the hour than yours? It could always be worse, she says, and I say well it could always be better.

Old Man Craig's housing complex is brown and old. I look around to see if any of the kids are around. Looks clear as day. Right now, staring at it, I'm starting to realize that the sun's kind of like a keyhole. I wonder if anybody's tried to fly into the sun, just in case it's some kind of portal. Like a portal to somewhere else. A portal to new colorful lands. I would do it, as long as they pay me. Maybe at some point, when the spaceship gets close enough, it stops getting super hot and gets real nice, a real comfortable temperature, like in Hawaii.

The same brown Subaru from my trot with Judith and Dave creeps around the corner. It's the school kids. I duck into the complex's foyer.

Do I take matters into my own hands and burst

forth from the foyer to confront the kids as a grand hero propelled by my own propensity for justice? Do I steer the poor kiddies back onto the right track, encourage them to pursue Wilderness Programs in which they learn team-building skills that will change their lives for the better? Do I have the ability to take action?

No, I don't. I slip into the building's elevator like a mouse.

Tom was right: Old Man Craig's apartment truly does smell like a whole bundle of farts. In the tank in the living room is a small goldfish that really does look dead. Doesn't seem like anybody's home. After some taps on the glass it jumps awake, staring at me with blue eyes.

I pick up the TankRoller™ and unlock it. I scoop the fish up with just enough water, then pour it into the the glass globe. The leash is easy enough to clip onto the middle, and soon enough we're out the door, the goldfish still looking pretty dead.

But then I think. The kids from the school'll be around. I'm not willing to sacrifice some half-dead fish for my job. I'm not going to give some hooligans the pleasure of trying to break TankRollers™ with sticks.

So instead of taking the little guy out onto the street, I take him for a trot around the complex's

courtyard for a good five minutes. He doesn't move around. Just kind of floats there, halfway from belly-up. Then I take him back to the farty apartment. I'm pouring the morbid fellow back into his tank when Old Man Craig rolls himself into the living room.

"You effing kidding me?" he says, letting out a toot in his wheelchair.

"Huh?" I say.

"You didn't think that I'd be here? You didn't think I knew? You didn't think I heard you leave five minutes ago, you cotton-headed dingus? You take my poor Jeeves out for five measly minutes and then come back? I'm paying you twisted twerps twelve bucks for a five-minute trot?"

"Sorry, sir, but I—"

"No," he says, throwing up his hands and tooting again. "Get the eff out with your effing fanny pack."

So I get the eff out with my effing fanny pack.

Negative implications for this: A lot. Maybe a million. I think about what Phil will say to me tomorrow. I think about how Tom will respond to what Phil will say to me tomorrow. What a sucky world. What a case of unfair things going from bad to worse.

The brown Subaru pulls up next to me. A blonde kid, the driver, asks where the fishies at. I give him the finger. They drive away chuckling.

The best idea at the moment would be to go back to the office and resign before anything gets messy, to say farewell happily with smiles

from everyone, including Tom, even if it's that cheeky one he always does where his teeth don't show. Tina from the front desk will probably be the only one remotely upset since I won't slip her quarters anymore to get me Gatorades at the deli. I consider lighting myself on fire outside City Hall again.

But instead I go home. Again.

On the boathouse's old dock, years and years ago, Dad always used to tell me that, in this nasty world, you'll always find two types of people, and that's pretty much it. You've got your doers, he'd say, and your thinkers. The thinkers sit there and think, while the doers go out and, you know. Do. One time he asked: Which one do you identify with. And I said: Doer. And he said: Maybe, son, but in reality, when it comes down to it, I think you're much more of a doodooer. We looked at each other in silence, then laughed from deep inside our bellies. He patted me on the back and said: Just kidding, you're a full-fledged doer.

At the moment though, sitting here on the deck drinking saturated Crystal Light, soon-to-be jobless, I'm feeling pretty much like a doodooer. The night sky's all gross with the city's light, and I haven't even started dinner.

Cormac comes out. I ask him how the day was. He says super. I say that's super to hear. He spells super for me. Cormac's definitely a doer. Cormac's definitely the kind of kid to see opportunity and go: Wow, great, I'll do it. He asks if we can order





Chinese, and I say sure, why not.

Thirty minutes later there's a knock on the door, and I run over with the money plus tip for the delivery man.

But it's Violet.

"Hi there," she says. She gives me a handshake. And a nod. Huh. Not the usual Violet entrance. I can smell the martinis on her, but she looks happy, so I let it go.

We sit together for dinner on the couch in front of the TV. Little drops of water clink against the roof, meaning it's begun to rain. On the TV plays some cartoon in which a nice family of mice are sitting in their hole, eating cheese, until a large cat sticks his paw into the hole and sucks one of them out of it.

"Violet?" I say.

"Yes?" she says.

"I was thinking."

"Yeah?"

"If you spend most days doing what your job, you know, requires you to do, why can't you do it with me?"

She stops chewing her General Tso's and looks at me. Her eyes start searching around the room for something to look at.

"Mmm."

"Sorry."

"Not tonight, I'm tired."

I say OK and we start watching TV again. Violet eats two more pieces of General Tso's, then says OK time for bed and scuttles off.

Violet usually gobbles up the General. After a few minutes, I tell Cormac to hold down the fort while I go into the bedroom and check out her list from today.

**Bo Roth** (8:30AM–9:00AM): \$60

**Jack Tartt** (9:45AM–10:05AM): \$40

**Mark Blunders** (10:30AM–11:10AM): \$80

**Tom Nicholson** (12:00PM–6:00PM): \$280

Six hours? I try not to get jealous when checking out Violet's lists. It's only business. No emotion. But seriously, with him? With that guy? And a discount too?

Cormac's asleep in front of the TV when I go back to the living room, so I carry him to his bed. I turn the HoloSmart™ to Nightlight Mode and sleep on the couch.

At the Fish'n'Wish office the next morning Tom's sitting there at his cubicle with his morning coffee. Do I take action?

Kind of.

"Why are you buying six hours worth of naked-on-naked therapy sessions with my wife?"

"What?" He jumps up and spills some of his morning joe. "Hey, it's her job. It's what she does. This isn't business-related."

"Yes it is."

"No it's not."

"Yes it is."

"Mmmno it's not."

"Yes it is."

"Phil wants to see you in his office ASAP."





I give him my angriest look like: Next time, you freaking poop.

Phil's sitting in his cubicle with his hands in a steeple.

He turns to me and says, "Listen here, boy-o. As you've probably assumed, you being aware of the situation you caused, we have a situation. Old Man Craig called. The best word that I could come up with to describe his tone was: Miffed. What's this about a five-minute trot? Was this a joke? Perhaps? An April Fool's joke? Probably not, since April's not for a while. Plus we don't celebrate April Fool's, it not being too professional. And we are a professional business. But anyway boy-o what I'm saying here is: Do we want customers that are miffed? Is that what you want for the business, boy-o? Miffed customers? Do I need to go over the employee handbook once again with you, in which it basically explicitly says that we do not miff our customers?"

"No, sir."

I don't tell him about the school kids.

"That's right. Tom hasn't had any miffed customers all season. Use him as your model. Use him as your guide. Your spiritual and mental pilot. I'm giving you a last chance, since hiring is a real pain in the tush. Take these keys and get to it. I'm counting on you for no more of these miffed customers, boy-o."

"Thank you thank you thank you," I say.

Before I pack up and leave for my territory, I see that Tom's out. I scan the office. Nobody's looking.

Being of semi-sound mind, I quickly go on his computer and search Gross Stuff. On the second page is a comprehensive diagram of a disease-ridden penis, and I put it as his background. Then I place a couple tacks on his chair. And spit in his coffee. And spill some more of his coffee for good measure.

Then I head out for my last chance.

I try to do my Anger Breathing Exercises on the bus over to my territory, to no avail. Outside the temperature is lukewarm and the air is yucky. The sky's like a blank blue sheet that airplanes write on. I have a sudden desire to go back to Phil's cubicle and go: Hi there, sit down for a moment, I need to tell you everything. So you'll understand what being me is like. I'm German-Irish, five feet eleven inches, and was raised in Trenton, New Jersey, the only child of a crossing guard and his third wife. I take up space and like to be liked. My butt gets itchy when I'm nervous. I haven't flossed in years. Once when I was ten years old, my dad caught a mouse in our bathroom, then took it outside and threw it as hard as he could into the night. In sixth grade I got rejected by Jenny Till, her reasoning being that she didn't want to be tied down. On Christmas Eve in eighth grade, after taking a long shower, I opened my chats while naked in my room to find that Jim Stevens had sent me a link in which an old man makes himself into a human BBQ by strapping steak all around his body, and Mom walked in, her mouth dropping to form a wicked round O, right at

**JULIA PIKE**  
GRADE 12









the moment where the guy's naked in a kiddie pool marinating steak and rubbing it on himself.

I'm twenty-nine, Phil, and will turn thirty in a month and four days. I am not a boy-o. I think skydiving is awesome. I've never left the Northeast. I am not a brainless toy.

Don't worry Phil, I'm getting off the bus now, I'm obeying you, I'm not coming to your cubicle, I'm doing what you want. This one's going to be good, Phil, here I am, arriving at the house, a wicked nice brownstone, a brownstone with one of those signs that say No Flyers No Ads No Menus, except get this, Phil, it's hand-written this time, and has a smiley face under it with two eyes that look like the number eleven.

The house inside smells like vanilla and pomegranate. Nobody gave me any background info on this one, but I assume it's a long-time customer. On a chair in the front hallway is one of those cutesy uncomfortable-looking pillows with stitching that says: Insanity is hereditary, you get it from your children. I straighten up my shirt. I will tell this long-time customer how important his or her undying loyalty is to our company. I will tell her how great of a decision she made in sticking with reality and the great outdoors, instead of the new Virtu-Trot™. I will offer up a coupon.

I'm rounding the corner into the living room when I see Alice.

Alice Elkin.

Alice Elkin was the top cheerleader in our middle school class. Whenever there was a pep

rally she'd be up in front, flipping and dancing in a cute blue skirt. One time during Dodgeball I accidentally punched her smack in the boob. She started crying. I told her that those things aren't like even boobs yet. She cried some more, so the principal gave me detention, which wasn't that bad, but then I had to apologize, which was tough.

"Oh my!" she says, giggling while picking up a cat. "Never seen you here before! I remember you, your name again is?"

I say my name and tell her that her undying loyalty matters a lot to our company. She giggles and waves off the coupon-offer.

We chat about school until I mention that I never finished senior year, and then she introduces me to Zeke, her red crowntail betta fish.

"He's beautiful," I say.

"He doesn't get out much," she says, patting his TankRoller™. "Hopefully you can take him out for a nice long trot?"

I say of course I can.

I say nice to see you and take Zeke outside.

Things aren't so bad. Zeke swims around happily in his glass ball, enjoying the outdoors. I start to realize that my trots are kind of nice, as long as I have the right shoes on. And as long as the weather's nice. Just me, my legs, and brain, hanging out. A squirrel runs up a tree and begins to nosh on a nut. Trees rustle. An old woman passes me and sends a smile my way, saying hello. I say hello how are you. She says good how are you.

Right as I turn around to face the woman to say

super thanks for asking, the brown Subaru comes rushing into view.

“Assume your positions!” the driver says. They hop out of the car and duck behind their car doors.

“Fire at will, comrades! Screw parental supervision!”

“Break it! Break it all!”

Each kid pops up from behind their car door and chucks not sticks, but rocks. I hit the deck and cover my head with my hands. I hear two rocks hit the sidewalk. Another one hits me right in the butt. I let out a yelp. For a hot second it seems like there’s only three, but soon the air gets cracked open with the sound of shattering glass, just one more rock, and water soaks under my shirt.

Zeke is flopping on the hot pavement.

I stand up, breathing like a bull, and wipe my shirt off to the sound of the chuckling kids. Kids. Stupid kids. Stupid no-good dirty stuck-up toilet-kissing monkey-slapping ruin-everything kids. Being of not-so-sound mind, I pick up Zeke and chuck him back at the brown Subaru. I try to say: Is this what you want? but the throw muffles my voice and I end up saying: Is this what you what?

The slimy red fish slaps the hood of the Subaru and hits the pavement. They laugh as it flops.

Then I pick up a rock and hurl it at them.

Time gets funky, lazy-like. Dinner tonight will be: Thai. Breakfast tomorrow will be: Golden Grahams without milk. I swear I hear someone in slow motion saying: Nooooooooooooooooooooo.

The smooth rock hits the driver, blonde and

tall, smack in the face with a loud thump. Or more like a crack.

He falls like a toppled tree.

Oh god oh god oh god.

The kids in the brown Subaru all look shocked, then speed off down the avenue, leaving the blonde kid lying in the middle of the street. All I hear now’s Alice Elkin’s fish still flopping up and down, dying, and a woman’s faint gasp in the post-car silence.

Oh god oh god oh god.

I move faster than I’ve ever moved, without thinking and without listening to my head as I leave Zeke behind and scoop the boy up and run. I run and run and run. People look at me in shock. They tell me to stop. I run faster. The blonde kid moans. Blood sprinkles out of his forehead. Some gets onto my fanny pack. But I don’t mind. No money in it anyway.

I run past the parks and the outdoor cafés. I run past the cemetery and the museums. I run past City Hall and the bounds of my territory, telling the air to get out the way, to let me go. Suddenly I need to pee. I run faster and faster and faster.

I say hi to Violet as I run past her into the house. I set the blonde kid down onto the couch and tell Violet to get me some paper towels and the Neosporin from the cabinet in the kitchen. My fanny pack’s soggy with blood. Violet says why not band-aids and I say Jesus H. Christ Violet we only have the small ones and she begins to cry. Cormac runs in from his room and sees it all and starts







yelling. The blonde kid continues to moan and twitch, his blood staining the couch all over. I hear everything but my mind feels empty. Nothing but doing. I tell Violet to go like right now and she wails, spinning in her flower dress and blue socks to run into the kitchen. The Holosmart™ is freaking out, reciting over and over again that four plus three equals Jonas from *The Giver*. Cormac starts banging his head into my ribcage. The blonde kid snorts and thick blood comes out of his nose in a shiny bubble and pops.

Violet gets me the Neosporin and paper towels, and I squeeze the whole bottle between the blonde kid's eyes and smack paper towels down. Cormac breathes heavily. I don't think of the negative implications of all this.

The bleeding stops after a half hour of swirling Neosporin. We run out of paper towels after a while, so Violet gets printer paper. The blonde kid's stopped moaning. Little bits of dried blood cake his face. We sit there, listening to his silence.

Violet walks over and kneels down beside him. She puts her hand on his neck to measure pulse. Out of nowhere the blonde kid lazily moves his head sideways and lays his cheek onto Violet's small hand.

Wow.

I start thinking about the positive implications of this. I think about what it means for us. I think about a new family, in which the blonde kid is ours. I think about a new world, in which we are a quartet, sans fishes and naked psychotherapy and

brown Subarus. We could all live together, enjoying time, the four of us, Cormac now with a brother that he could play with, with a brother to be there with him practically twenty-four-seven.

Days pass, it seems, as we nurse our blonde boy back to healthiness.

I can see it all.

We could start anew, find a new home with new appliances and acquire righteous new jobs, spending time together on our many off-days. We could go on vacations in which nobody has to sit in the back seat alone. We could find time to read the same books on a proper porch during clear days in the summertime, the sun bright and the air sweet with the smell of freshly mown grass, and our newly adopted dog could go on long hikes with us, embrace the idea of a weekly bath, and run through sprinklers with the fervor of a gazelle. The beloved pup could greet friends with a tail that wags at frequencies in the ionosphere, protect us from intruders with the growl of a bear, and, once it'd finally have to die, we would all know together that, having lived a beautiful life, the pooch would go down into its grave fulfilled under a sad but nice moon, watching us from up above as we collectively grieve, hand in hand, as a family.

And just then someone knocks at the door.

Next week in court I tell the truth. A sea-animal activist sits in on my trial and commends me for my contribution to the cause, not knowing that I'd chucked Zeke and killed him. The judge asks me

why I didn't simply get the license plate of the kids' car and report them, or, say, encourage them to pursue Wilderness Programs instead of injuring and kidnapping one of them. I tell him that the anger took over me, that I needed to do something and wasn't thinking. He sighs and says he can totally identify. He too had a thinking-before-doing problem when he was a young lad. He tells me that the toughest task is finding the balance between thinking and doing, a middle ground where you think before you do, but also don't think so much that you don't do anything at all.

He gives me ten years with parole as opposed to twenty without.

And so now I know true gloom. Now I know the feeling of dirty gray jail suits that hang too low and make me chafe in bad places. Now I know the smell of men showering together without good soap. Violet writes occasionally, with updates on Cormac. She says that she's sold the Holosmart™ and sent Cormac to public school. I write in my letter back: Be brave. The blonde kid writes and says thanks, I guess, for helping me get better. Does Phil write? Of course not. Does Tom? Thankfully not. Alice Elkin writes me and says that I must pay for a new red crowntail betta, Zeke now being dead. In her letter she calls me a twat. I befriend an ex-serial killer from the cell over named Carlos, who names me his slave and makes me run to

commissary on a regular basis to get him Twix bars. I have a raging desire to smell a fresh pillow. I have a recurring dream in which I live in the Middle Ages and know exactly how to cure the bubonic plague, except nobody listens. During my second month here, I give myself a stick-and-poke tattoo on the chest using a pen stolen from a guard and a needle borrowed from an LA kingpin whose name is Dwayne but who insists on being called *El Tigre*. The tattoo is a minimalist design of a stick figure with no arms.

This is how I live. This is what's real to me now. Do I complain? Of course not. When Carlos tells me to get down to commissary, I do it. I even send Alice some of the money that Violet says we have left, much of which comes from Tom's six-hour nude therapy sessions. Every day during Outdoors Time, I stare at the sun in the courtyard and imagine Violet and Cormac staring at the same sun. I try not to think about Tom or Phil. I try not to think about Alice Elkin, or Old Man Craig, or Judith, or Dave the guppy, or Jeeves the goldfish, or Zeke the red crowntail betta, and only think of family, good food, and wicked skydiving. I think of my own colorful propellor plane, powerful and pretty, which I would jump out of every weekend from huge heights. And there in the air, every Saturday and Sunday, I would emerge out of the clouds as a stronger, more cooler being, like a big eagle, a true champ.







**FELIX PILKINGTON**

GRADE 12

the  
**BerkeleyCarroll**  
School

181 Lincoln Place  
Brooklyn, NY 11217  
[www.berkeleycarroll.org](http://www.berkeleycarroll.org)



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