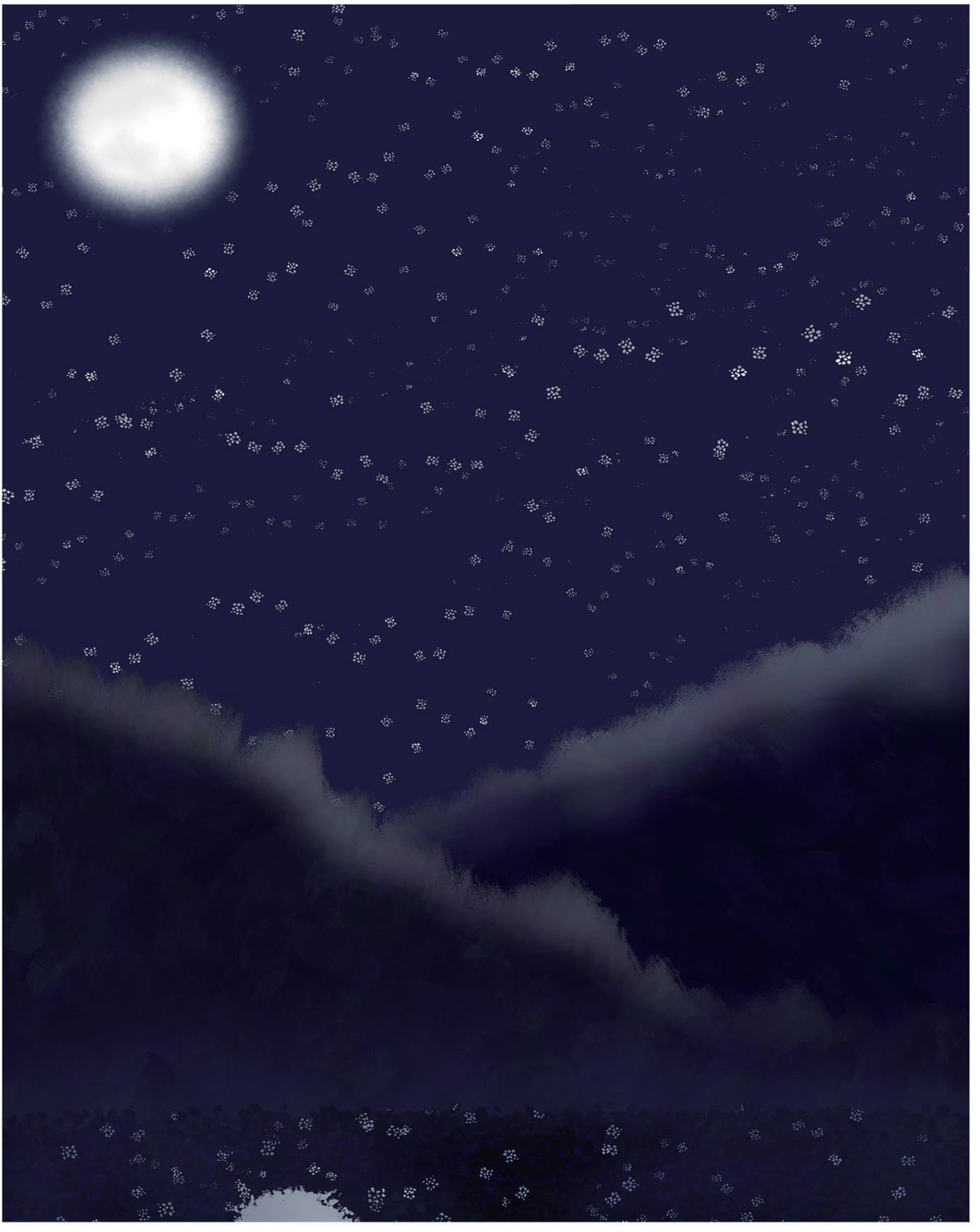
The Bellarmine Review

The Literary Magazine of Fairfield College Preparatory School

Volume 83 Spring 2023



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Volume 83 · Spring 2023



The Literary Magazine of Fairfield College Preparatory School

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The Bellarmine Review

Volume 83 · Spring 2023

The Bellarmine Review is the literary magazine of Fairfield College Preparatory School. Our mission is to celebrate our students’ creativity by providing a venue for their words, their artwork, and their lived truth. +AMDG+

Colophon

The text of this issue of *The Bellarmine Review* is set in Garamond, except Ryan Oshinskie’s “Pluviophile,” portions of which are set in Times New Roman, and Christopher Cope’s “Excerpts From the Diary of John Kohler,” which is set in Rock Salt, Times New Roman, and Courier New. The typeface for the cover is Source Sans Variable.

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Foreword

I was a sophomore when I first heard of it, this text that you open now. It was the winter of 2021, when Mr. Chesbro came on the loudspeaker, announcing the Writing Royale, an annual short-story contest offering publication in *The Bellarmine Review* to five finalists with the best stories. On hearing, a shudder of sorts ran through my body, as writing just that year had become an activity that I gravitated towards. Immediately, I was taken in by the words, the "Writing Royale," musing in my heart of hearts over what I could write about, what I could communicate to others on the page.

Yet, as the prospect of competition loomed close, the idea of facing others in what was only a new love, I quickly became as a terrified child, revolting against the pursuit of writing in deed—believing I could never win, so distrusting myself, for I thought it took greatness even to be considered a writer at this place. But it came weeks later, as I sat in a classroom at midday; the speaker sounded from above, causing me to pause for a moment with my peers in my seat. The voice again returned, this time listing the names of the finalists. They seemed to ring through the silent air, then, to play as music to the ears. And, in my naivety, in my presumptuous fifteen-year-old state, I promised I would never run away again—that my name, like those of the five that year, would ring through silence—play as glorious music to all ears.

So it came around, the next year, one which I swore would be my rise, would become the time of my own greatness. And, I figured it was: that year, my junior year, I won it all, believing myself to be, the second my name was announced over the speaker, great, the most deserving of respect and glory—honor in its fullest form. By the time it came around to read my story to others, offered to the finalists of the contest, I believed myself to be in another existence.

It was a night in April—the Arts & Ideas night—where I

read my story to a crowd. Yet, from the moment I started, with people of many that I knew not, I felt neither greatness nor glory. No, as I delivered my story, professing my words, I was not some hero, but just a student in high school, telling his tale to the crowd—a mere boy, revealing to others the narrative that I had painstakingly crafted in a search for greatness. And when they all stood, applauding, a tear formed in my eye, revealing to myself that I had been a fool all along—that the prize was not greatness, that not even publication in the *Review* was for prosperity or respect—a legacy in Fairfield Prep's long history. Rather, I realized that this collection of works is meant for an idea even greater: the exploration of the student, as they pass their years among the long list of alumni.

Yes, *The Bellarmine Review*, these competitions—they explore, even calling the reader to take moments out of their own lives, just to share it with the writers who spent so many hours crafting their work. Of course, there is a level of honor to be respected, of praise for creativity and excellence, yet to value not what exists inside the student, their passions, their lives as explored on the page—this would be a shame. In forming this literary magazine, I can safely say we have done just this in the 2023 edition of *The Bellarmine Review*.

Through all of these collected student works, new and old, this task of exploration has been at the forefront. During this year, readers encounter the mainstaples, such as essays, poems, and stories. With the "Writing Royale," we see again a new batch of works, each unique in content and structure. We see personal essays, too, a parting gift from each of our seniors heading off to college. As for new additions, we see certain poems with a specific theme: No Place for Hate, stemming from Prep's Community Day—all of which are provided by students in Mrs. Lombardi's and Ms. Penn's English classes. We see the "Nature Essays," assigned by Mrs. Callahan to her AP English students. Lastly, readers even come across a new short-story competition: "The Bad Hemingway Contest," created by Prep's English Department chair, Mr. Denby. Through these, students were asked to look inward—to explore their individuality as they

went on stylistic adventures, diving into the natural world, social justice initiatives, Ernest Hemingway's classics, and their own imaginations.

The numerous additions and works in mind, I am so glad to say that the contributors this year have not only explored their creativity, but have crafted artworks in the process. And, to honor these fine young men, I want to dedicate this *Review* to them—they who dared, not only to write stories in a literal sense, but to share their lives with readers in written word. Yes, I want to dedicate this work to those who felt a fire in their soul, a magnetism towards telling their stories of love, of hope, of sorrow—daring in their efforts to express themselves freely to all of the Prep community.

So too would I like to give a special thanks to the numerous faculty members who were involved in the creation of the *Review,* particularly Mr. Hoover, who has not only become a mentor to me, but a role model and inspiration in my last year at Prep. Additionally, I thank, from the bottom of my heart, Tim Wong and the many contributing artists, so instrumental in the work showcased, James Callaghan, a fellow leader in the Creative Writing Club, and Tiankai Huang, the layout designer for this year's edition of *The Bellarmine Review.*

. . . . . .

Finally, in my last address to Fairfield Prep on the page, I entreat you, reader, no matter who or where you are, sitting in the back of a classroom or in the safety of your bed at home, to peruse this work—this collection of voices, those great and small, scattered throughout the school, each with a different tale, a unique story to call their own. And, if not for your love of language, or for an appreciation of a great story in itself, read this text to explore the lives of your classmates, as they reveal them to you on the page.

Jack Miller '23
Editor-in-Chief



Poetry

My Ceiling, My Brother

James Callaghan ’25

The darkness surrounds me like an ocean
Enveloping me; crashing and screaming.
The screams are silent and hidden,
Chugging through my head like a train; steaming.
My eyes, studying, look to the ceiling.
The same familiar sight, each bad night
At one time, it was sure unappealing,
Blank, shy, a sign the thoughts had won the fight.
Now it seems too common ever to fear.
The dark night hollers, bringing me comfort,
A cold sensation tells me it draws near.
The long nights made my ceiling my brother,
Never have I been closer to one thing.
Come on darkness, let’s see what you will bring!

Hate Has No Place

Drew Cesaratto ’24 and Alsir Elsheikh ’24

We create and change as a whole
with us not listening to someone in control.

We do what we please with no one to judge us.

Shattering inside with each piece of our heart containing
Pieces of memories that we have confined deep inside.

I want to break down and cry over the pain that’s burning inside.

Within the walls of Prep, there is no place for hate,
For the way we act determines our fate.

Hate translates the fate that we so desperately need to create.

Hate truly has no place,
for the morals of Prep
Will shape but not change our fate.

Community

Farrell Nivrose ’24

The community we have here is special.

Bonds unique to us alone,
A brotherhood that runs deep through our history,
And an environment full of unique individuals.

Hundreds of people from different backgrounds–
Different cultures
Different lifestyles
Different worldviews

But we still have a long way to go.

Our community isn’t perfect,
But our community is resilient.

Our community isn’t idyllic,
But our community is committed.

Our community isn’t flawless,
But our community is dedicated.

Dedicated to rebuking any form of discrimination,
Committed to doing good,
And resilient to any setbacks.

To be a community means to cooperate,
To coexist,
To empathize and understand one another.
Bigotry
Hatred
Discrimination

These are antithetical to everything our community is about.

Inclusion of Light

Anderson Jara ’24

There’s a blinding light . . .
It shines through all; as bright as the sun
No one can stop it,
Just themself.
Foolish to hate; better to watch and love
This light is different though,
It needs support,
Needs a community, someone who can help and understand—
Allow it to shine brighter.
It illuminates in solitude, till someone sees.
Giving it his hand, wanting to be bright as him,
Together they shined through walls,
Became evident they were stronger,
Even though they were different.
Many came to be part of this,
Everyone is different in their own ways.
United through bonds, they shined.
Shining so bright, everyone was able to see them.
Individually, they were average, together they became strong.
Didn’t matter what type of light they were,
They were a Family . . .

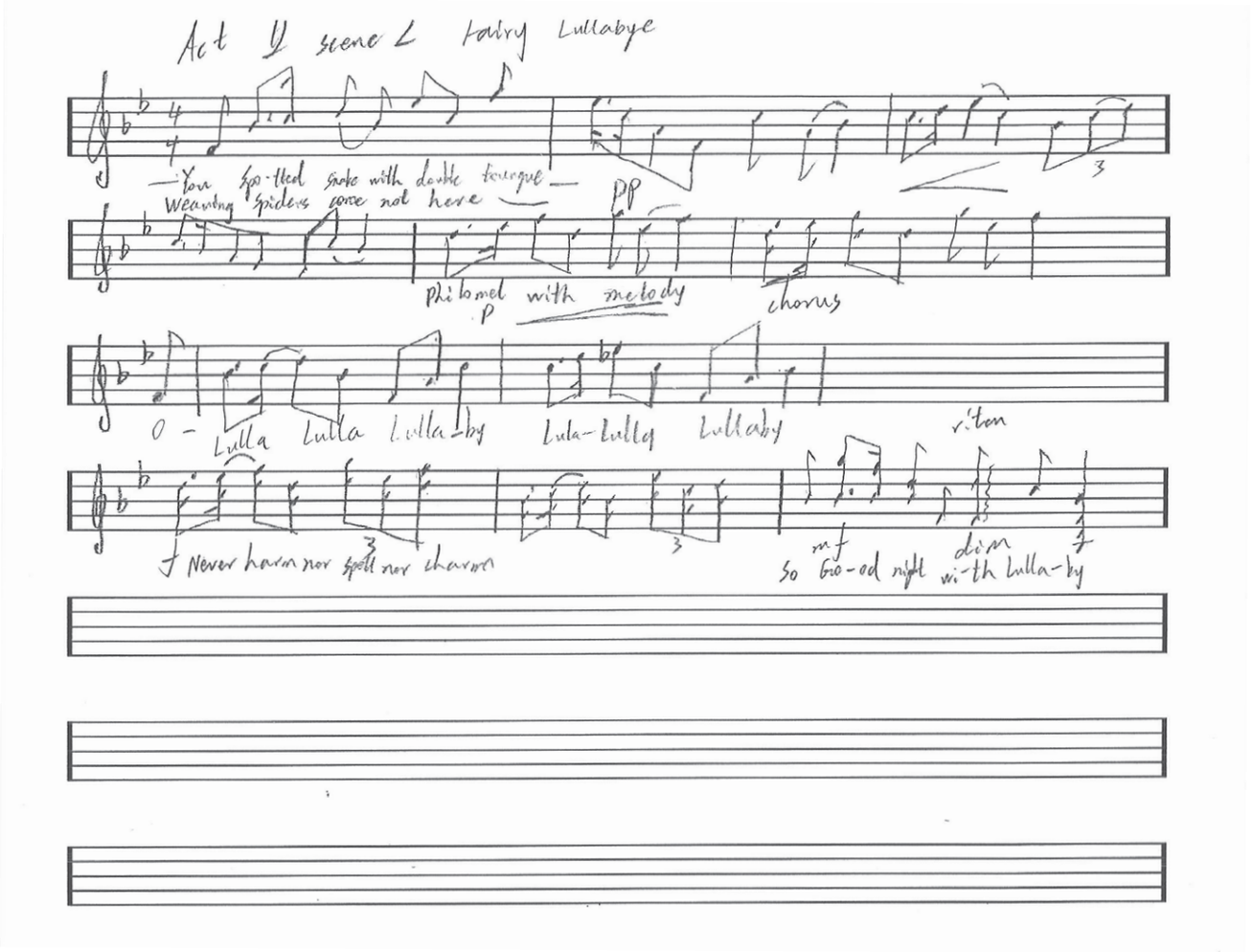


Journey
Daniel Guzman ’25

Silence

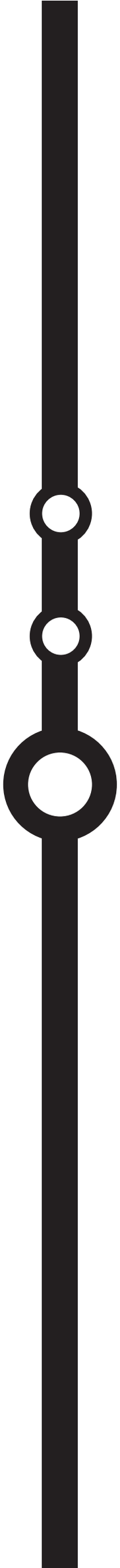
Nicholas Yepes ’24

Silence
That’s what we were taught
Speak when spoken to
Do what you are told.
But in a generation filled
With racism and discrimination,
A generation where the language
I speak and the way God made me look
Can determine where I work,
What I’m allowed to do,
How far I’m allowed to dream,
How much I’m allowed to succeed.
We can’t hear this or touch this truth,
Yet it holds so much power.
It costs us the way we live,
It costs us our lives—
Silence



Act 2, scene 2: Fairy Lullabye

Chengyi Shen '23



Personal Essays

Nostos Algos

Ethan Andujar ’23

I am not here. I am not there. I breathe and inhale the fresh summer air and feel the warmth and welcoming embrace of sunlight. I look over at my friends sitting beside me. We’re on a hill sitting on the bright green grass. Everything seems dreamlike, the joyful smiles on my friends’ faces, the beautiful butterflies flying, and the sunlight that grazes our skin so gently. It smells good too, and I begin to sink deeper and deeper into this dream.

I exhale. I am not there, but I seem to be here. My current scene all comes to me quickly in an overwhelming matter. I realize that I am sitting down at a desk in a classroom. I dreadfully look down to see a test sitting right there in front of me. I was just there, I thought. Now I’m here, but I am not really here. I was home just a couple of moments ago.

Nostalgia is an interesting place. It completely consumes me. With its pleasant pastel colors, its forgiving habit to forget unpleasant memories, and its ability to comfort. Many times I have been completely immersed in it, especially during times of discomfort and stress. I look back and lie to myself about how much better things were.

This is where the unfortunate side of Nostalgia comes through sadly. Nostalgia is a liar, but it’s a really good one. It blurs out certain moments in time that I would rather just forget. It is pleasant to my idealistic mind. It always makes moments brighter, happier, and seemingly more simple. Its power is not exclusive to me. It is used in advertisements, music, and even political campaigns. All deliberately designed to elicit Nostalgia’s warm feeling.

However, the biggest crime that Nostalgia commits is how it teases me. The power of Nostalgia allows me to

time travel, taking me directly to the many places and people I once called home. However, it only shows me it, teasing me, taunting me, and making fun of me. I can never truly be there again. I can't experience things over again. Never again can I experience the exact feelings that I fell in love with.

Dangerously, Nostalgia leaves me in limbo. I am not here; I am not there. I am not fully in the past or present. It's not bad to daydream, but doing it excessively, as I sometimes do, can cause one to float through life watching events pass by, like gazing out a car window full of past lovers and homes. I become very unhappy because I would rather be somewhere else instead of where I am right in the present.

I think Nostalgia comes from the same branch of feeling as love. Maybe they're the same feeling and that's why I'm so captivated by it. With Nostalgia I can fall in love whenever I want to. The same warmness and familiarity. Love, like Nostalgia, can be painful too; heartbreak and relationship hardships can be incredibly painful experiences. The difference is that Nostalgia is inherently painful; love is not. Love can be appreciated and felt in the present, unlike Nostalgia. My favorite definition of nostalgia is from Greek, *nostos* meaning "home" and *algos* meaning "pain." Together, they make a homesick meaning. A love for home, but never being able to go back.

I plan to make a new home in the future and many more when I go beyond college. I've learned that taking the present moment for what it is now is the most important thing to do more than anything else. I've begun to enjoy living more because of it. I plan to be wherever I am fully and not in the past. If things ever get tough, I'll have Nostalgia to transport me to an easier time, just for a moment.

I Know the Color of Death's Eyes

Matthew Mancini '23

I know the color of Death's eyes.

They are bright yellow, accompanied by white fangs that extrude from each side of a drooling mouth. Black and tan spots sprawl across a long body as a white underbelly of a tail coils around itself. The beast leans back, shifting its weight to its rear two feet, and leaps out at me—

"Mattie, that's enough pretending," says my mother. "You do know it's not real, right, Sweetie?" She is right. It is not real. But I can never help myself.

My mother was born in Accra, Ghana. When she was just over two years old, she contracted malaria; the probability of death far outweighed any chance of life. Yet she survived due to a last-minute blood transfusion. Soon after, my mother moved to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

The youngest of five children, my mother's memories of her childhood years in West Africa are often corrected by her siblings. Yes, Maddie, Ina, and Minnie were her best friends. Yes, her dog's name was Bilbo Baggins. And, yes, an elephant did step on Nanny's car. But while these majestic memories fade from the minds of my uncles and aunts, there is still hope that these stories may live on. This hope, oddly enough, is found in a much more tangible form: art.

As my mother's family traveled across the expansive African continent, they were gifted hundreds of antique African artifacts. Yoruban wooden masks, Ashanti golden vases, and Akan drums beautifully rested within the walls and on the floors of my grandparents' old Connecticut home. However, the most captivating of them all hung over the family room couch: with its bright yellow eyes, a flat taxidermy of a leopard lay.

From a young age, I realized that these artifacts were much more than silent and still objects, tucked aside in corners and hung on walls for decoration. To me, each one carried with it its own story, its own narrative. For all that I knew, resting above my grandparent's couch, that flat taxidermy of a leopard was real. Its bright yellow eyes, white fangs, and black and tan spots were—indeed—real. More than that, it was leaping right out at me.

For years, my imagination offered itself as an avenue of expression—a world of creativity. Every time I visited my grandparents' old home, I added to this world of bliss; I helplessly ran from a roaring leopard as it chased me; I took a break and danced to the vibrant rhythm of Akan drums; I shared stories with a masked Yoruba Chieftain as we enjoyed a plate of fufu and jollof rice. And yet, as all things do, this world slowly faded. My grandparents moved out of their old home, and the art and artifacts fell into the hands of my mother and her siblings.

Now, the same leopard, Akan drums, and Yoruba masks are wrapped in plastic, tucked away under a tarp, and hidden in my basement. They are sealed off, neglected, tucked away in corners, resting on decaying cabinets.

But they are not silenced; their stories, their spirits, their lives (as I conceived them) live on.

And every night—when the moon reaches its highest position in the dark sky, when the house settles to a quiet—I press my head against my pillow, directing my ear towards the basement. I listen. Patiently. Then, I hear it. I hear the roar of a bright yellow-eyed leopard, the energetic rumblings of melodic Akan drums, and the ceremonial dances of exuberant, passionate people. I hear the memories, the legacy of my family, and West Africa. Singing. Dancing. Celebrating into the night.

Forever.

Things I Learned in The Chair

Ryan Riccio ’23

It’s blinding, really. The glare off the water from the early morning sun. I sit in my chair, staring out to sea. It can become boring, the monotony of it all. Waves roll in, waves roll out. I twirl my whistle; circling right, circling left. Then I see it. Out by the buoy, I spot a fin. I get on the radio to my fellow guards. “Is that a Charlie by the buoy?” Not allowed to say the word shark, leaving our patrons confused or panicked, we are trained to refer to the beady-eyed predators by this harmless nickname.

“Sure looks like one,” the lifeguard captain chirps on the radio. The other guards agree, and the order comes to call everyone out of the water. I take my whistle out of the endless cycle of twirling around my fingers. “Everyone out of the water!!” I shout loudly. But let’s pause.

…

How did I become a lifeguard, monitoring the ocean for Charlies? On one of those blustery winter nights, when summer feels like a lifetime away, I saw a lifeguard job posting in Misquamicut, where my family summers. The training was difficult: months of online courses, certifications, more laps than I could count, and a six-foot-four linebacker for a rescue training partner. I completed my training only to find that (due to COVID) there were no lifeguard tests in all of Connecticut. I researched where these courses were available and traveled three hours to the nearest test. What I learned was a resilience outside of my comfort zone. I am proud to say I am a Red Cross–certified ocean lifeguard.

Just like the process I took to become a lifeguard, my first days working as one were packed full of challenges. One Sunday, a nor’easter edging closer to Rhode Island turned the ocean into

a mess of huge waves and strong rip currents. Being a rookie lifeguard tasked with guarding an entire beach, I was nervous. I raised a yellow flag, signifying that swimmers could wade only up to their waists. Ignoring the yellow flag and the red Danger: Rip Current sign on the shoreline, beachgoers went into the ocean far beyond their waist and got violently pulled out by the numerous rip currents. Putting my nervousness aside, I got to work. Throughout the day, I saved people one by one (sometimes two at a time) and brought them back to safety. As my shift was ending, a woman stopped by my chair, threw me a water bottle, and praised me on a job well done, saying "You can't fix stupid, but I guess you can save it from drowning." What I learned that day is that even in less than optimal conditions, I can push aside the nerves and work.

…

Now back to the Charlie. Clearing the water affords me an unobstructed view of the fin, and I notice a detail I had missed. The fin wiggles back and forth, rather than cutting smoothly through the water. That tiny detail makes all the difference, and we determine that the fin belongs to a harmless sunfish, not a predatory shark.

Everything requires a more detailed look, even people. On the surface, I might appear to be a typical nerdy student, driven in my academic pursuits, singularly focused on achieving *summa cum laude* honors. But I am much more than what I do in the classroom. I am a table tennis player, a singer, a volunteer, a leader, a news producer, and even an ocean lifeguard captain.

I now know that I can rise to what seems like an insurmountable challenge. That I can put others' needs before my own. That I can save lives. That things are not always as they first appear.

All of this I learned while sitting in The Chair, a splintery red lifeguard chair, fighting boredom, twirling my whistle left and right.

Home Abroad

Brando Savi '23

Just outside of my school in Shanghai, there was an elderly woman standing across the street selling roasted chestnuts from a small food cart. Like every other day, she would smile and wave before greeting me with a simple, "Ni hao ma?"

"Wo hen hao! Xie xie, ni ne?" I would respond.

From there, we would figure out the snack's price using a combination of intuition, body language, and the little bit of Mandarin I had learned (and had resolved to keep learning). I always remember how she carried herself with an incredible balance of patience and kindness, while I fumbled my way through our interactions. Our negotiations, really more playful haggling, became impromptu language classes. Not surprisingly, my skills progressively improved and so did the depth and complexity of our discussions.

My de facto teacher's grace and kindness never wavered, ultimately inspiring confidence as well as curiosity in me. As someone who stood out in many obvious ways, it felt comforting to speak the same language as everyone else and to find someone who seemed genuinely interested in helping me do that. Embracing another country's linguistic and social culture, especially when you are a guest there, is a powerful respect you can show your host.

After relocating to Michigan, I lost a bit of my Chinese but further sharpened my English, which I had only ever spoken at home. Yet, almost as soon as we'd arrived, my family decided to move to Italy. My Italian, however, was lacking. But Turin—with its little piazzas, coffee shops, and tourist spots—was always bustling with people and excitement, and I wanted to be part of it. I spent the next three years not wanting to disappoint my

host country, not wanting to be a bad guest. In fact, I worked tirelessly, continuing to communicate and connect with locals —just like with the woman who sold chestnuts in Shanghai— to be the exact opposite. Eventually, I got to the point where I spoke Italian fluently. To this day, it is the language my father and I communicate in. It may seem obvious that someone with two Italian parents living in Italy should speak Italian. But learning that new language reminded me that we are all works in progress where the completion of one project begets an entirely new one. I've learned to not simply accept this cycle of opportunity for self-growth, but to also welcome it. In this case, my reward was twofold: establishing an important connection to my heritage and learning a beautiful language.

After moving to Connecticut, I remember explaining to kids in my hometown how the Italian cookie brand Pan di Stelle literally means "bread from the stars." An American counterpart in terms of being a universally recognized brand is Animal Crackers. It was then that another realization hit me: these two snacks perfectly capture the difference between the two languages. English's beauty is in its sleekness and its ability to get to the point. Italian packs in the words, ornamentations, free-flowing ideas, and references. Even when explaining the simplest of concepts, every syllable enriches the one before it.

Next fall, I'll move again—this time to college. I'm excited about this step because of what my journey so far has taught me. In China, I learned that patience, kindness, and empathy go a long way. Italy contributed another lesson: that working on oneself in response to curiosity is a beautiful and perpetual part of being human. America has inspired even deeper reflection and contemplation on the power and beauty that can be located in and between languages and cultures. As excited as I am to share these parts of myself with everyone I interact with over the next four years, I'm just as eager for what I'll learn. My time in diverse communities so far has taught me so much, and I believe college will only add to that richness.

605 Pounds on My Back

Tianhao Wu '23

As a self-described ordinary kid from a humble background, at least compared to most of my classmates in China, I found it difficult to make friends at the private elementary school I attended. My classmates were mostly children of successful businessmen and politicians, so I often found myself on a social island without opportunities to truly interact with them in between lessons or outside of school. Like Holden Caulfield, I grew more and more reclusive overtime, locking myself in an imaginary box, confined to a daily routine which I was hesitant to step out of.

Confinement is no place to thrive, and as I observed the self-erected walls around me, I wondered about how I would build the courage I would need to break through them. Nonetheless, I continued to doubt my own abilities, often discouraging myself before I could recognize what I was capable of.

At fifteen, things started to change: I registered for my first gym membership.

My first weightlifting year was a winding road through countless attempts; however, during this time, I saw nuggets of growth that would eventually help me breakthrough. I learned basic human anatomy, nutrition, and the science of building muscle and losing fat. I even began setting goals for myself during my workouts, such as completing 405-pound squats by my April birthday after only being able to do 315-pound squats at the end of the

previous year. But even then, I wasn't satisfied; I wanted more.

When the summer ended and school began, I moved back to the United States for my junior year. Overwhelmed by the academic intensity of junior year and the stress of living alone again, I had to learn to balance my responsibilities as a student with my new goals in weightlifting. There were, of course, countless times that I questioned my decision to pursue six hundred pounds. But I forced myself to keep pushing. As I learned later on, one's power lies in choice; you must choose to stay positive, have faith in yourself, laugh even after pain and hurt, and face the brutal reality ahead instead of running away. This is the mentality I had as I worked towards my six-hundred-pound goal.

By Christmas Eve, I was only forty pounds away from my goal.

Sometimes, though, life throws unexpected challenges; several students tested Covid positive and my dorm locked down. I lost more than ten pounds and my strength was depleted. When classes resumed, I could train at school. However, as soon as things were getting back on track, life played another trick on me: my training partner and best friend suffered a severe broken arm which caused him to drop out of school. With the weightlifting club being suspended soon after, I grew frustrated and depressed. Once again, my goal seemed unattainable.

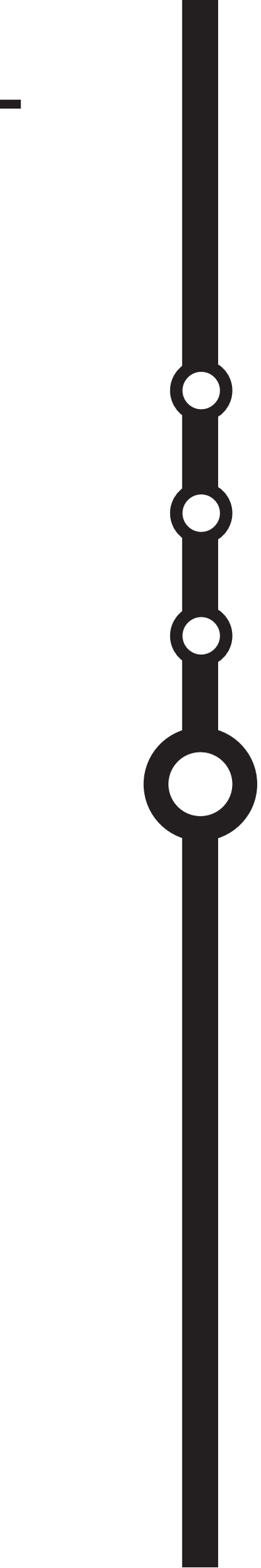
I asked myself, "Do I have the courage and determination to start all over again?" To me, there was only one answer: Yes. Just like the old saying goes, "When God closes a door, He opens a window." Luckily, my school was located on the campus of a university, and the gym was just across the street.

So, every day, I snuck into the gym through the backdoor. One month before the deadline of my goal I did it: I stood up, with 605 pounds on my back, on February 14, 2022, at four o'clock in the afternoon at Fairfield University. Despite gaining sixty pounds of body weight, enduring countless misunderstandings from my family and friends, sacrificing leisure time while maintaining good grades, studying for AP and SAT tests, and learning to play the guitar, I accomplished the impossible goal. Oh, and I started a weightlifting club with six new friends.

My journey helped me recognize my ability to persevere and the importance of a positive attitude. Now I know I can accomplish anything.



Atlas
Tim Wong '23



Nature Essays



American Dream
Matthew Mancini ’23

An Orange Icarus

Luis Brea ’23



Junior’s motives were unclear, but his action was bold for a cat. He jumped out the window—the second-floor window. After surveying the scene, my family developed a timeline: Junior began clawing through the window’s screen until he had the space to jump. Thereafter, Junior leapt, leaving behind a crater of mangled mesh and scraps of his fur. We spent an entire day searching the neighborhood. Finally, we found Junior behind our shed, just about fifteen yards from his makeshift metal-mesh tarmac.

When we wrapped him in a blanket, I noticed a stoic look on his face. This confused me. You have to remember, Junior is a domestic cat; the yard surrounding my suburban Connecticut was his personal jungle that night. Our neighborhood has a rampant raccoon issue. There are running deer. Above this scene stand towering trees, whose nightly creaking suggest that they are due to fall over any minute. Junior should have returned from this scene shivering, terrified. However, he returned to us stoic.

And what about that supposed fall? After a visit to the vet, he showed no injuries. Thus, it can only stand to reason that Junior did not fall— he flew. This orange-furred, four-legged feline took up Icarus’s challenge. Upon realizing his fur was even less aerodynamic than wax wings, Junior returned to the ground with the grace of an Alvin Ailey ballerina. He landed without a scratch. This may explain his stoic look: he had reached cat enlightenment, his curiosity satiated.

I believe Junior had grown tired of the conventional world. The regimented feeding times and comforts of napping on the couch were no longer enough for him. All the while, the sunset Junior woke up to every morning suggested a magnificent world beyond his restrictive glass window. Junior considered himself a prisoner; he saw glass windows and his Halloween costume the same way humans see metal bars and orange jackets.

My working theory has not received great reviews from my family, who are convinced that Junior's motives were nowhere near as poetic as I paint them. They quote hastily-googled blogs that claim that Persian cats are "not overly smart" but also "extremely adorable." They create alternate theories: he saw a bird and was determined to catch it, he was clumsy and fell, and so on. Above all else, though, they cite our other cat Moana as evidence. Moana was rescued from the very wild Junior had thrown himself into. However, when presented with the opportunity to play Bonnie to his Clyde, she refused. She had accepted her newfound domesticated life. Thus, my family contended, no reasonable cat would side with Junior's decision, making it inappropriate to idealize.

After some debate, my family decided to let Junior outside on the porch from time to time. Here, he rolls around in the sun and chases after birds he will never catch. Given that he has not tried running through the porch door, Junior seems to agree with this new arrangement. In his mind, he was guilty of escaping and must continue to endure the conventional life. That he views as fair. However, as we continue to wonder about his motives, we have given him the freedom to explore nature under controlled, minimum security. That our family views as generous.

Alongside an overjoyed Junior sits Moana. Her eyes remain fixed on the sky, looking for hawks. She lacks the luxury of enjoying nature's beauty because she was a victim of its dangers.

Junior longed to explore the world beyond. Moana knew this world all too well. In many ways, I see myself as Junior more often than I see myself as Moana. My idealistic outlook on life reflects that I have yet to endure any major trauma or danger. This is why Junior's decisiveness gives me pause. Honestly, I'm impressed—inspired, even—by his call to action. However, at the advice of my family and with Moana's example in mind, I know that idealism is healthy in moderation but dangerous in excess. After all, while cats land on four feet when jumping out a window, the same cannot be said for humans.



Caracal
Aidan Erive '25

The Reservoir

Christopher Capalbo ’23

There’s a reservoir near my house and those who live near it spend mornings, afternoons, and evenings at the reservoir, just as I do. The reservoir can be found on a back road to another back road. It has a gravel parking lot which fits a car and a half. In front of the lot is a fence which displays a danger sign, which is directly in front of a large drop where the dam is. But tucked away to the left is the entrance, like the entrance to Hogwarts in *Harry Potter*—you have to know where it is to enter. It is a slippery, muddy, uphill climb guarded by roots and low-hanging branches that will positively leave you with at least one scratch on your face. After nearly three meters of climbing, a large gravel path will be visible that is more walkable. You will then take a right and see your second danger sign, warning visitors that what they are doing is extremely illegal, and cameras will surely catch them committing the heinous crime of … walking.

After about ten more steps, will be the big rock, my personal favorite rock ever. The rock can be mounted as a very uncomfortable seat, leaned on, or anything else that a big rock can do. Finally, the reservoir will become visible after passing the rock. The muddy, foggy water with logs and lily pads and the biggest webs I have ever seen in my life; trees, so many trees, all so different, but blend together before your two eyes. Like a well organized military unit, the trees let you enter the reservoir, then they cut you off from behind and encircle

you. You will never feel smaller than you will feel right then.

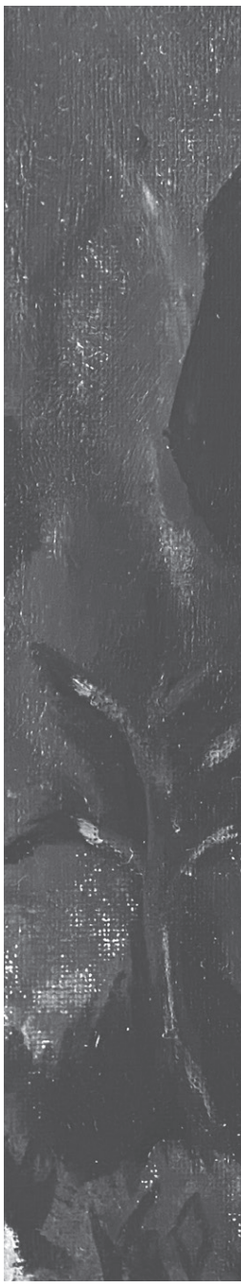
This reservoir has been there for me since childhood. Unfortunately, I cannot recall my first time visiting it. Before I could balance on a bike, I walked there, with no phone, no plans, no homework, no worries, just me and an imagination. I would walk to the reservoir and take the prehistoric walkway—that older folks would fish from—to magical places. Sometimes I was an undercover agent, or other times I was a sorcerer; it never really stayed the same, except for one thing. The funny thing about it is even though so many people knew of it, there was hardly ever a moment where two people were there at the same time.

Then I soon got a bike, and a phone, and friends, and plans, and homework. Looking back, it was not a lot, but it changed me. I looked around less, my senses tuned into my phone and the words of others instead of the world around me. I'd still go to the reservoir, but to get away. The magic dwindled away like the stars in the sky as night turns to day.

Now here I am. My name is Chris, I am seventeen, and I spend too much time on my phone, too much time on my plans, too much time on my homework, too much time on worrying about everything. My life is not hard—people have it harder, and I am being a prima donna—but in the little bubble of my life, these changes have affected my view on the world. Time has taken my focus away from me. My phone has ruined my patience. I can barely sit still without doing something. But I still go there, to the reservoir. I drive there now, except for the one jog I went on, but I am still drawn there. Truth be told, I don't go there to get away now, but instead I go there to do anything mischievous I have in mind. I won't go into detail.

Something draws me there, something there is very real.

A few months ago I figured it out. I was there with my girlfriend, and it was a perfect dusk sky, so I stared. Not at her, but everything that had surrounded me these past ten or so years. Everything was in view, every tree, every leaf, every log in the water, every lily pad, every web, every speck of mud in the water. The sounds entered my ear, filled my brain, and then went out the other ear like an electrical circuit. The constant cicada buzzing holds me captive, and reminds me that I am not alone; the frogs which blend into the fallen leaves making their silly "ribbit" sound remind me that I am a guest; the view of a colorfully dull diverse landscape which condenses all that nature has to offer. This was not able to be captured by a phone, nor a video. No artist alive or dead could possibly capture the details that entered my two eyes. But, nature is not meant to be captured, we couldn't do it if we tried, so we have no choice but to be present, and still, so that the magic doesn't slip away as time goes on. After all, the clock isn't getting any slower.





Duck on Pond
Kevin Orban ’25

Pluviophile

Ryan Oshinskie ’23

plu·vi·o·phile \ˈplü-vē-ə-ˌfi(ə)l\ *noun*
[*L pluvialis,* fr. *pluvia* rain, fr. fem. of *pluvius* rainy, fr. *pluere* to rain + *-phile*]
1a : one who loves rain **b :** one who finds joy and peace of mind during rainy days
2 *biology* **:** an organism that thrives in a rainy environment

I always loathed the rain. But it was never the dense rain that was bucketed down by thunderstorms and hurricanes that bothered me. I didn’t mind when the rain was so vehement that our glass-paned windows were at risk of shattering, when the tempestuous wind caused unearthly sideways rain, or when it seemed as though God was laying down waves of ballistic raindrops. It was the rain that was tolerable—just enough to keep everyone inside—that I abhorred. The rain that was in the neutral territory between cloudless, sunny skies and torrential downpours was my greatest foe. It layed a muting, monophonic, monochromatic, monotonous blanket of hoary gray over everything tangible. Our shingled roof dimmed with the sky. The rain blackened the already dark asphalt cul-de-sac. Oh, and that smell. The musky, muddy, mucky stench of the rain was the worst. It penetrated my nostrils and floated through my whole body, leaving an ugly taste in my mouth. The rain served as nature’s noise-canceller. The faint pitter-patter on our kitchen skylights echoed into vastness. The rain didn’t

so much impose a mindset of pessimism on me as much as it did the principles of nihilism. It was demotivating, rather than saddening. It dulled my mindset. The trees didn't frown, for frowning showed too much emotion and required too much effort. The tall pines were emotionless, existing in a state of perpetual insipidity. The apple trees drooped not with sadness but with exhaustion. The constant, sickening motion of the rain blurred my view of the world outside. Even indoors, protected by the elements and safe from all external harm, I felt dampened by the rain. It reigned over me. But I never understood why.

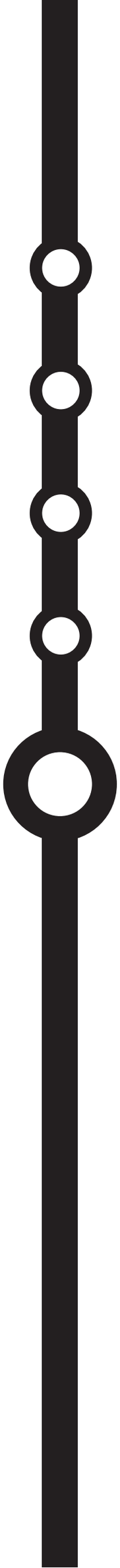
Occasionally, I stand in the calm rain, embracing its cold pings upon my skull. The pings ring throughout my body, echoing in vastness. The gray blanket still remains draped over me and all of which surrounds me. Our shingled roof and asphalt street are still an inky charcoal. The earthy odor is still the same. The pitter-patter: still the same, only now I hear it from outside the house. The tall pines are still emotionless. The apple trees: still exhausted. My vision is still blurry. All is the same. Still.

But, when I stand alone in the rain now, I feel serenity, not the urge to renounce life due to its dreariness. I feel able to think, freed from my boring hatred of the past. Tame, rainy days no longer cause my hypersensitivity to what's outside. Tame, rainy days bring the focus inside. Not indoors, though.

I think about the things I don't have the time to think about regularly. If God created the world, why would He allow evil's existence? Is ignorance really bliss? How can I make the most out of my short time on this pleasant planet? I don't know. I just know that the rain is

cold and my fingers are cold and I shouldn't have worn my blue canvas Vans outside because they're soaking wet and my socks are wet and my feet are itchy and I'm cold. And that rejecting introspection was foolish of me.

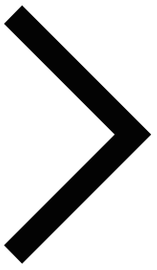
I'm a pluviophile. Not because I don't like people, but because the rain allows me to take some time for myself. To breathe. To introspect. To recognize that I haven't known the answers, don't know the answers, and probably won't know the answers. I don't know why evil exists in a world created by God. I don't know whether ignorance is truly bliss. I don't know how to enjoy my time alive the best I can. But I do know that I don't hate the rain anymore. I love it.



Bad Hemingway Stories

“Prep’s inaugural Hemingway Parody Competition, known as the Bad Hemingway Contest, pays mock homage to Ernest Hemingway by asking Prep’s junior English students to submit a ‘really good story in the manner of really bad Hemingway.’”

—— Mr. Denby



Acceptance and Realization in Death

Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

JaVere Cannonier '24

The blazing sun made the desert environment nearly intolerable to look at as its rays reflected off the sand. With each stride, Jack and Jim, two men, dug their feet into the scorching sand as they struggled through the burned land. Their water supplies were running low because they had been on the road for days. Although they were both seasoned desert travelers, this trip had been more difficult than anything they had ever attempted.

"How much longer do you anticipate it taking?" Jim wiped his sweaty brow.

Jack simply said, "I don't know."

"I'm not sure we'll make it in time, but we're almost there."

The two men were searching for a unique shrub that only flourished deep within the desert. It was rumored to have curative powers that could treat any disease. They were both driven to find the plant and return it to their town because they had both experienced the loss of loved ones to disease.

The obstacles they ran with on their journey were numerous. They encountered snakes that slithered out of the sands, sandstorms that nearly buried them alive, and even a group of wild canines who pursued them for miles. But Jack never wavered in his resolve or stoicism.

"Why do you insist on going on?" Jim stumbled to match Jack's speed. "We've been through everything, but we still haven't found the darn plant. Why not simply go home and backtrack?"

"Why," Jack answered, "the difficulties must be overcome if one wants to properly comprehend the nature of things. Even if we are unsuccessful in finding the plant, we will still have gained insight into our own nature and identities."

They passed a flock of vultures perched on a nearby rock as they continued to trek. Jack couldn't help but feel dread as the birds cast their beady eyes downward at the guys. "Those vultures are nature's scavengers. Only when death is imminent do they arrive."

"Don't talk like that," Jim responded, attempting to overcome his sense of dread. "We'll locate that plant and return home, I promise."

But as they proceeded, the surroundings started to alter. The sand turned red, and the smell of death filled the air. They discovered the plant right there in the middle of the desert. Its leaves were brittle and dried, and it was lifeless.

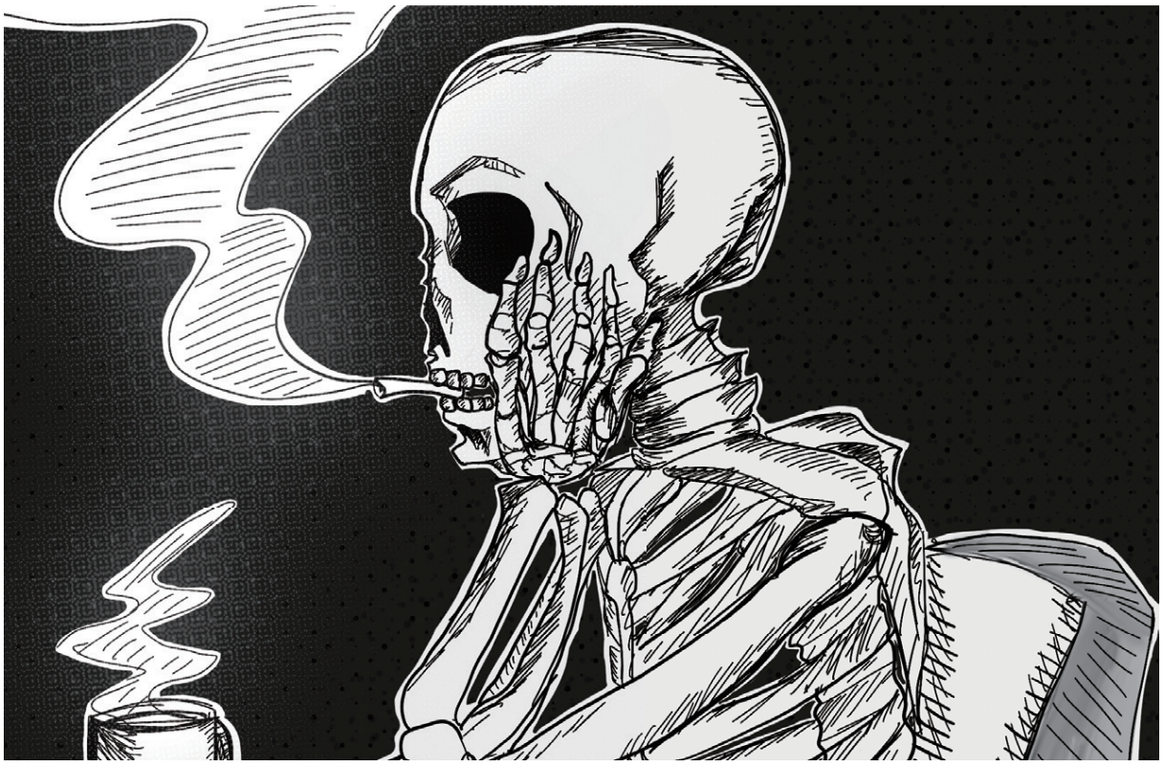
Jack became discouraged as he observed the plant. He hadn't recognized the pointlessness of their objective because he had been so preoccupied with the eventual result. Because the plant was dead, no one could ever be healed by it. He came to understand that nature should be revered and comprehended rather than domesticated or dominated. "It's finished," he murmured, gazing at the lifeless plant. "Our failure. We will never be able to return to our village with this plant, and our loved ones will never recover."

"But," Jim said, trying to take some comfort in their unsuccessful goal. "Isn't it something, though?"

"Yes, that's interesting," Jack replied, turning once more to face the vultures. "Although we tried

and failed, the experience taught us something about ourselves and nature. And that alone is a victory."

The vultures ascended into the air and circled above them as they turned to go. They served as a constant reminder that death existed and that nature is always in charge. But they also served as a reminder of hope.



Deadly Addictions
Daniel Guzman '25

The Way Home

Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

Kent Costikyan '24

It was very late and dark and the train was nearly empty. The young boy sat near the end of the train car, awake amongst the rest of his sleeping family. On his way into the city, he could see the buildings and cars and people in the streets, but on his way home there was nothing to look at except for the faint streetlights fashioned among the dark abyss like distant stars in the night sky and the headlights that he could see whirring by only every once in a while. Each time the train came to a stop he listened for the station name and checked his watch to see the time.

Each time the train came to a stop and he checked his watch to see the time he would mumble to himself however much longer he thought the ride would last.

"Eleven eleven, which means . . . when did she say we'd be home?"

He reached out to rustle his mother awake but stopped himself inches away from her shoulder as he instead reached for the window. Once again he checked for any light coming from outside but now they were far away enough from the city that nothing very interesting was likely to pass by. The only light there was came from the janky and jittery lights illuminating the faded purple of the train seats and the grayness of its walls, which seemed to barely stay up as they shook forcefully each time the train accelerated. By then it had gotten cold enough to feel the condensation on it and the boy began to trace shapes into the ice-cold dew on the glass.

With each stroke the window squealed and squeaked and with each note played by the glass instrument the boy shivered just as well. Just as the boy ran out of space on his transparent canvas

and with the final squeal of the glass his mother rustled awake.

"What . . . are you doing?"

"Nothing," the boy responded. Her eyes opened wide upon his canvas and stared for a minute before the boy interjected.

"When did you say we would be home?"

"Not for another half hour or forty five minutes or so."

"We'll be home late. It'll be another half-hour drive home from the station."

"I know."

"I have school in the morning."

"I know."

"Why did we go see a game on a Sunday?"

"You said you wanted to go as soon as possible and that's all we could get."

"Oh. Okay."

"Happy Birthday, Garri."

"Thanks, Mom."

"You know you have school in the morning."

"Yes. I know."

"We'll be home late."

"I know."

"You should try and get some sleep right now."

"Okay."

"Stop drawing on the window. It woke me up."

"Okay."

The young man's mother shut her eyes once again and covered as much as herself as she could with her beige cardigan. The man stared at her until her breathing once again became steady and he was sure that she was once again asleep. He turned to the window once more and again saw nothing but that dark abyss covered only by his artwork. He wiped away the rest of the condensation and took in a big breath and made himself a new canvas. He stared at it for a minute before he once again began to trace his finger over it. It didn't squeak as much as it had before.

Once his new canvas had been covered he stared at it for a minute. He could once again see through the miss into the abyss as the chugging of the train slowed and it pulled into the next station. Once more the boy checked his watch. As the train doors opened and closed with no one to step through them he decided to lay back and shut his eyes. For the next hour he sat laid back with his eyes closed waiting for the train to pull into his station. As the chugging slowed for the last time his mother tapped him on the shoulder. As the train doors opened and the man and his mother and the rest of his family stepped out and the doors closed behind them his mother tapped him on the shoulder.

"How did you sleep?"

"Good."

"Will you be able to wake up for school in the morning?

"Yes. I'll be fine."

"Okay."

As the man and his mother and the rest of his family gathered into their car he could hear the train chugging away in the distance and before he entered he stopped and looked around at the streetlights and stars in the night sky then climbed into the back of the car and sat in silence until they had reached their home. Without saying a word he entered the house with his family and entered his room and laid down for the night. His mother slowly entered his room with a fresh cup of coffee in her hands.

"Are you going to sleep?"

"Yes," the man responded.

"Goodnight. I love you."

"Goodnight."

He stayed in the bed with his eyes closed until the rustling of his family had quieted down and then got out of bed and stood staring out the window adjacent. After researching the landscape for a minute the man pulled his art supplies out from under his bed to record what lay before him.

The Ship on the Sea

Bad Hemingway Contest Winner

Alexander Drienik '24

In the dawn of night the sea turned black and the ship stood tall, shrouded in shadow as it left for sea. On the stern where he stood staring out at the sea behind him it was calm, the water quietly reflecting the night sky above. It was a great big ship, gray and industrious. Built for rough seas, it had tall flanks and strong steel doors, curved at the edges and sharp to close. It plowed through the water, but it settled just the same; well behind it the wake calmed and disappeared.

A man came through the door, walking out towards the stern of the boat. Light shot out as it opened, flying out to sea, and then stopped, cut by the sharp close of the door. "Mind if I join you out here?" he asked, holding his hat at his side.

"Sure," replied the other.

"Care for a drink?"

"Sure," he said, taking the bottle.

He gave the bottle back and stared out to sea. With night the stars had come out. They shone, cutting through the clear sky as the ship left the cities behind.

"Why here?"

"For the peace."

"Bit of a lonely place."

"That's why."

"You won't head back in?"

"Until they have us."

The other man turned, his back resting against the guardrail. The smoke was rising from the stacks atop the ship, streaming back towards them and then passing,

leaving a trail far behind the ship as it continued on.

"Excited?"

"I guess," replied the man, his gaze lifting for a moment but returning back to the sea.

"You should be," the other told him. "It's not often that such meaning is given to our lives. The envy of generations, we'll be."

"That's what they told me."

"Rightly so, then. Do you believe it?"

"I suppose."

"You suppose or you do?"

"I do."

"There isn't much to suppose in life. It's best to be a man of action, I always say." The smokestacks let loose a volley of steam, darkening the sky and obscuring the stars. Its pallid scent lay suspended in the air, and then was swept away by a breeze.

"What are you doing out here?"

"I saw you standing out here alone. Just wanted to check in."

"I'm not sick."

"It's a different kind. Some can't take it."

"I can."

"Everyone can. It's the mindset that does it."

"You're right."

"I know I am. Just don't think about it too hard."

"I won't."

"It'll get you if you do. I've seen it before."

"You have?"

"Yes. Experience is irreplaceable, but advice is what saves. Saved me, might save you. No one knows."

Another man appeared, opening a door and heading away from them. The man leaning against the railing was illuminated for a moment, tinted by the green light that came through the door.

"Schmidt."

"Yes?"

"Nothing, I just noticed your last name."

"I do what I have to do. Same as everyone else, yourself included."

"I understand."

"It's not easy to."

"I'll try."

"Good. That's the only way out."

They stood there standing in silence; Schmidt lit a cigarette. The smoke mixed with the steam until it was a heavy cloud that hung above them, suspended as the ship moved ahead into the open seas. The ocean began to strengthen and spray reached up, but the ship moved stubbornly ahead, undisturbed in its motion. Then it was the wind that picked up, and the looming cloud above them was swept away, flitting off across the ocean. The whistle sounded and Schmidt seemed to know it before it started. With fluidity of motion he straightened and tossed the cigarette overboard.

"You should be heading in, too," he said.

"I know," replied the other, slowly turning to face forward.

"We're the future," Schmidt said. "Progressors of the human race. Be proud of that."

"I will."

Schmidt walked off but the man stayed where he was. He heard music and voices inside slowly fading away until they only remained in his head, and then the silence was oppressive and the rumble of the engine shook through the floor into his legs. He turned back one last time and then headed off.



Act 5: Final Dance

Chengyi Shen ’23



Writing Royale

The Writing Royale is Fairfield Prep's annual creative writing contest, open to short stories of no more than fifteen hundred words. This year's contest collected more than a dozen submissions representing members of all four classes at Prep. Stories were submitted anonymously and read by a panel of English faculty, who nominated a list of five finalists; these were forwarded to this year's guest judge, Dr. Christopher Dowd, who selected the winning entry.



Chris Dowd is a Professor and Chair of the English Department at the University of New Haven. He received his B.A. in English from Fairfield University, his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Emerson College, and his M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Connecticut. He is the author of *The Construction of Irish Identity in American Literature* and *The Irish and the Origins of American Popular Culture.* His creative writing has appeared in several print and online journals.

Congratulations to this year's winner, Ben Lester, and all the finalists. After reading all the stories, Dr. Dowd offered the following words of praise for each student's work:

James Callaghan's "The One That Scampered Away" is a story about memory, legacy, and absence left by an inexplicable theft. The author takes one moment in time and stretches it into a highly charged story of introspection and speculation. It is a deeply atmospheric story. As the narrator tries to make meaning from this moment in time, readers are invited to contemplate the impermanence of landmarks in relation to the permanence of memory. The author succeeds in dramatizing the interior conflict of the moment in a very visual manner.

Christopher Cope's "Excerpts from the Diary of John Kohler" offers an unsettling view into the mind of a disturbed young man. The fragmented journal highlights a descent into self-destruction and delusion. The author has crafted a character prone to introspection and capable of self-awareness, but not ready to recognize or halt his own patterns of destructive behavior. The story presents an excellent character portrait that slides, as readers start to recognize, towards an inevitable and tragic end. The author demonstrates real aptitude for making such a character very sympathetic.

Alex Salazar's "The Locksmith's Chance" is a story in which the tension of the action is embodied in the task the main character must perform. The small and complicated manipulation of the antique lock is fraught with difficulty, and his tools are fragile. This story builds suspense and rests it all upon the locksmith's success and skill. The author shows skill at pacing and balancing description with action.

Tim Wong's "Too Fast; Too Close" reaches back to memories of childhood and forward to thoughts of possibility, all framed in a decisive and potentially destructive moment. The discordance of the memories of the river from childhood and its current appearance are striking and jar the reader along with the protagonist out of the moment. The prose is wonderfully disorienting, capturing the feeling of the character. The author crafts deeply engaging descriptive sentences and uses memory to build a character very effectively.

. . . . . .

Winner: Ben Lester, "Heartstrings"

The death of Antonio's wife and his grief over her loss frame this story. What is remarkable is the way that the author builds the absence of the wife layer by layer. There is the lack of sound, where once there was music. There is the emptiness of the mansion. There is the disconnect between Antonio and the public who adored his wife. There is the building sense of purposelessness. Antonio's anguish and his need for solace are palpable, and his quiet acceptance of relief when it comes is moving. The author's exploration of grief and absence are remarkably mature and developed.

The One That Scampered Away

Writing Royale Runner-up

James Callaghan ’25

The freezing rain hit my arms like BB pellets while I pedaled my bike closer and closer to my home. The houses I passed slowly became one in my peripheral vision as I focused entirely on the road ahead. I was less than a mile away now, but the distance couldn’t feel further; with each push, I felt my breath grow heavier, but I suddenly halted. As I stood still, the raindrops slid off the hood of my jacket and created a small puddle on my back. My hands involuntarily slipped into my sleeves and my arms crossed; my bike fell to the ground creating a soft beating sound as rain pummeled it. The glacial sensation that had been taking over my body slowly left as I became enthralled with the monument before me. In all the years I have lived here the fountain had never caught my eye more than it was then. It was no taller than six feet and the water rarely, if ever, trickled out of the top. It was adorned with overgrown grass and wild mushrooms that were encapsulated in stone for the world to see. However, one thing was missing from the old cascade; the three usual stone bunnies were suddenly down to two. Throughout the town, or at least throughout those who have lived here for a while, the figure before me was known as the bunny fountain. My mom used to tell me how when she was a kid living here the bunnies were a huge problem. Kids would steal them constantly; no one, of course, ever was caught. Eventually, the bunnies were bolted into the statue and it all ended abruptly. For years I would look at the fountain and think of that very story; even more, I would make these stories up that, somewhere in the town, people still had them lying about their houses, decorated in a cabinet like precious China. To this day I thought of the story my mom told me when I passed it, but the mythical feeling of the statue

faded, and it became just another thing floating around among the myriad stories, memories, and thoughts in my head. The missing stone bunny opened the floodgates of my imagination once again. Who was brave enough to steal the bunny? More importantly, what did they do with it? That bunny had been there for my whole life or at least I thought it had been. Through the sweet, young summers I spent at the park in which the statue stayed. The birthday parties in the house next to the park, which was scattered with confetti and forgotten pieces of cake sitting on any platform that would hold them. The late-night walks after being stuck in a basement with my buddies. I never noticed it, but I knew it was there, just as I knew it wasn't there now. It was there for years and gone in the blink of an eye; it bothered me that it just disappeared. I wondered if whoever took it chose the middle of the night to commit the crime. My mind, however, imagined a young kid stealing it in the middle of the day, the sun bright, and cars whizzing by, yet somehow managing to not get caught. As the rain grew heavier and heavier, my mind slowly let go of the topic and started focusing on the freezing, cold limbs hanging onto my body. I got back on my bike and allowed the stories to pass back into my mind. As I miserably pedaled home, the bunny scampered further and further from my imagination back to the pond that it was most likely at the bottom of. By next week, it will be replaced; yes, it will never be the bunny that had been there for years, but it will be replaced. A rough copy of the prior which is missing the mold and other signs of age will take its place; it will be rushed to be bolted in its place to keep the Facebook moms and passionate civilians just out of reach, but it will suffice. I reached my house, and the days went on as normal. Yet again, I stopped noticing the bunnies, both the two that had been there for years and the copy of the one that scampered away from the overgrown grass and wild mushrooms of its unnaturally solid home. They all became foggy memories in my overflowed mind accompanied by all the other thousands which arrived there first.



The One That Scampered Away
Christopher Contreras ’25

Excerpts From the Diary of John Kohler

Writing Royale Runner-up

Christopher Cope '23

June 20th Thursday 11:30 PM

To be honest I didn't like her. She was an insecure . . . horrible person. I liked her at first because she liked me, nothing more. One of my character flaws is obsession with affirmation you know? I gotta get it... gotta absorb it. I'm a great judge of character but occasionally beauty masks the interior of a person. What can you do?

July 11th Friday 7:00 PM

I'm never going to lunch with my co-workers again. Yea I feel sorry for myself. Of course I do. I WANT to be pitied. They couldn't amount to anything, they live their days in the twilight zone. Stacking boxes, loading money into the cash registers repeating the same [redacted] everyday. How do they do it with such a blank look? No emotion, no sympathy, empathy for others ... for me. I'm a romantic! I LIVE I need to LIVE. They lack something I have that they lack. I'm sure of it. They lack love, they have no love in their lives. I'm

sure of it.

August 12th Sunday 9:00 PM

I saw some [redacted] on the street today. Blue shorts with a Hawaiian shirt. Morbidly obese. Never worked out a day in his life. Smiling and laughing at his phone in the hot August sun. I'm fat but not that fat. There is a difference between low metabolism and low impulse control. That animal certainly has the latter. He doesn't seem careful. He's going to die early.

September 25th Wednesday 12:00 PM

I left the store early today. I'm at home so I'll write an entry now. A Tall tattooed muscle filled freak entered the store at around 10AM in the morning. I didn't sleep well the night before. Nobody was at the register in fact nobody was in the store aside from me and this man. The manager was taking out trash outside. There are no chairs at the cash register so I stand. It's hard on my legs. I've asked for chairs before but the manager wants the cashier to look proactive. I flex my legs back and forth to get the cramps to subside. The man comes up to the cash register

and asks for two packs of orange American spirit. Only women buy American spirit. I let out a small chuckle because it was funny. At least I thought it was funny... That this huge guy is buying American spirit cigarettes. I explained it to him. He wasn't too amused and called the manager.

September 25th Wednesday 1:00 pm
I was fired from my job. The manager found a better alternative. I usually don't have outbursts like that.

November 4th Sunday 10:00 pm
I saw her again today. She looks better. Her face cleared up. I really shouldn't have left her. Unfortunately, I wasn't invited back to thanksgiving this year. I should have brought her to the gathering, kept her. What a prize. Showing up to thanksgiving with her... my family would be surprised to say the least.
I got a turkey for myself yesterday. I'm probably not going to cook it. But the guy cashiering looked dumbfounded as I was checking out a 15 pound Turkey. He fistbumped me.
"Big turnout?"

I responded: "That's if they all show up."
Lying is insincere. I hate insincere people. I should probably stop lying.

December 15th Wednesday 1:00 am
Eating a lot more. Drinking a lot more Can't control myself. I can never control myself. I just act without thinking. Acting without a thought.

January 1st Monday 3:00 am
I cried hard after I exited the womb. Very very hard. I shouldn't have. The lights you see as you come out of the womb some could call artificial but I don't know... the lights seem heavenly to me. Pretty silly that I cried during that time. The best time of my life. Caressed and rocked slowly in my mothers arms blinded by white light. I was purely human, as close to divinity as I would ever be... free from sin. [redacted]man... I don't really cry anymore. Matter of perspective I guess.

. . . . . .

Houston Police Department
Crime Scene Investigation Report

John Kohler Jr at 10:23 pm on January 2nd 2023 drove a beat up Red Honda Civic to Sarah Coleman's, his ex-girlfriend's, house on 37 Knights Road. Heavily intoxicated, Kohler stopped the Honda in a crooked fashion on the lawn. Kohler beeped the car twice and then exited his car with a handgun visible. Sarah's father, Samual Coleman, noticed the Red Honda on the lawn and Kohler's handgun. The door cam footage shows Coleman opening the door with a shotgun in hand with Mr. Coleman immediately telling Kohler to drop the gun. Kohler did not comply, responded with a mumble, and fired a single shot, hitting and breaking the second floor window. Coleman immediately fired his shotgun at Kohler, killing him instantly. The scribblings shown are the remains of Kohler's diary found in a trash can next to his apartment.

The Locksmith's Chance

Writing Royale Runner-up

Alex Salazar '25

A locksmith sat alone at his shop's counter, picking a padlock. He was practicing on this lock in particular because it was a new design.

In his work, he accidentally snapped his pick in half. "Was that my last one?" he asked himself. The thought of having to buy a new set was unpleasant. The locksmith searched his drawers until he found a replacement pick.

A breeze wafted in through the open windows of his shop and touched the locks that lined his shop's walls on hooks, making them swing back and forth. This caused a chime of sorts to resound throughout the entire building. This chime was quite loud. So loud that the locksmith's neighbors had complained to the landlord about the noise. After that, he only opened the windows when he was sure his neighbors were out.

There was no one to complain about the noise today. The shop was totally empty, which lowered the poor locksmith's spirits.

Every lock that hung on a hook was unlocked. From bike locks to chest locks, padlocks to door locks, all were unlocked without a key in sight. A few ancient locks stood out in particular. They were made of copper and shone in the sun rays that passed through the windows. They dimmed briefly as a man walked by the window nearest to them before returning to their original brilliance after he passed.

The man entered the shop. "Good morning," the locksmith said, excited to have a customer.

The just-entered man grunted, nodded his head, and started scanning the rows of locks. His eyes moved to the ancient copper locks, and the man stopped. "Have you picked all these locks?"

"Pretty much."

"Even these?" The man pointed to the ancient locks.

"Yes," the smith said. This was true, though the locksmith had spent many weeks and broken many lockpicks trying to learn how to open those locks. He could proudly say that they were the most advanced ones he knew how to unlock.

The man turned around and walked to the doorway. The locksmith was sad to see him go. The man seemed to sense this, because he looked back at the locksmith and said, "Don't worry. I'll be back."

The locksmith did not have to wait long. In less than a quarter of an hour, the man came back in a car, and an archeologist was with him. The locksmith went to the entrance to meet them.

"My associate tells me that you have some very old locks and that you have the skill to pick them. Is that correct?" The archeologist raised his brow inquiringly.

"Yes," the locksmith said. "Here they are." He pointed to them on the wall.

"May I examine them?" the archeologist asked.

"Of course," the locksmith said.

The posh archeologist removed the first ancient lock from the wall and took out a magnifying glass. He looked closely at the lock and wrote something down in a notebook. Then the archeologist put the lock back on the wall and repeated the process for all four of the ancient locks on the wall.

Upon finishing the examination, the archaeologist turned to the locksmith and asked, "Would you be willing to give us a demonstration of picking one of these locks, mister…?"

"Elsher. Yes, I'll show you now." Elsher the locksmith walked over to his work desk and collected a three-notched pick. The locksmith took the first lock off its hook and picked it very carefully. He wanted to make a good impression on these potential customers. The posh archeologist smiled when the lock clicked open. "Mr. Elsher, I have a job for you."

"A job?" Elsher was caught off-guard.

"Yes. We need a lock picked. One like these locks."

The posh archeologist explained the job to Elsher. The locksmith would have to pick an old lock to open a door at an

archeological excavation site. The archeologist mentioned the significance of the dig for historical study, the importance of the artifacts they were excavating, and so on. He said that if Elsher could not pick the lock quickly (the excavation deadline was soon), the archeology team's alternate plan was to blow up the door with a controlled detonation. It would be safe, but could potentially damage the artifacts inside the room. "Because this is on such short notice and is so specialized," he concluded, "if you can pick the lock, we'll pay you ten times the normal commission."

The locksmith's eyes widened in surprise. This could be his big break! With that much money, he would not have to worry about the price of breaking his lockpicks or buying equipment. He would be able to run his lockpicking business without fear of going bankrupt.

Needless to say, Elsher agreed to do the job.

At the excavation site, Elsher approached the door in question. Adorned with detailed metal etchings, it looked more like a tombstone than a door. Elsher examined the lock and concluded that if he hit each pin inside the lock correctly, it would click and open. Elsher set to work with his three-pronged pick. He heard one click, and then a second click, and then a third click. But the lock didn't open. Elsher moved his pick around and heard a fourth click, but the lock stayed closed. "It must be a five-pin variant," he said. He moved his pick to where he thought a fifth pin should be and heard a scraping sound. Elsher ignored it and moved to click the pin. He put pressure on it and . . . *snap*. His pick snapped in half and fell out of the lock.

"What's wrong?" the archeologist asked. He saw the destroyed lockpick. "Is the lock too difficult for you?"

"No," said Elsher. "I can make a new pick. One that will be able to unlock this door without any damage."

"We're running out of time," the archeologist said. "How long will that take?"

"I know how the internal mechanics of the lock work now, so I can have it made by tomorrow morning."

The archeologist agreed but stipulated that if the locksmith

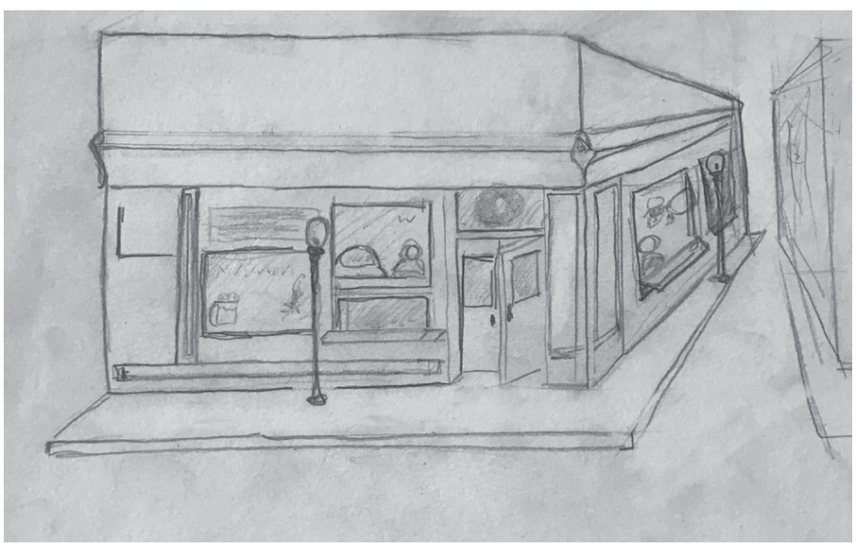
was not back by noon, they would have to move forward with their alternate plan.

Elsher went back to his workshop and began building the new pick. It was slow going. He turned the lights on in his workshop before he was even a quarter done with the project. But eventually, he machined a new lockpick and held up the creation in the early sunlight. The light glistened over its many edges and revealed the silhouette of a large, double-sided pick with five notches.

It was already sunrise. Elsher did not bother going to bed; instead, he returned to the excavation site. The archeologist was up already, examining some heirloom or another. Elsher showed his new creation to the archeologist. "This matches the general design of the lock's mechanics, so it should be able to unlock your door."

Elsher the locksmith put the pick in the lock. He activated the first click without much trouble. Then the second, third, and fourth. Right afterward, he heard the same suspicious scraping that he had heard right before his pick broke when he first tried picking this lock. Elsher stopped, afraid to continue. The locksmith breathed in deeply and closed his eyes. He could not see inside the lock anyway. He heard the squeak of his pick as he moved it over to the last pin and pressed.

Click.



Phillies
Micah Bory '23

Too Fast; Too Close

Writing Royale Runner-up

Tim Wong ’23

“I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape.”
— Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*

The Smith Street Bridge, much like me, is extremely ordinary. Faded aquamarine paint reveals a rusted metal interior. It stands about forty-five feet above the Brightstone River, bridging across two plains of forest. Strangely enough, nobody ever thought to question why it was called the Smith Street Bridge despite being a mile from town.

The soles of my shoes squeak as they rub against the wet rails. I gaze out into a vast wilderness. Billions of leaves disguising twisted and gnarly branches on the hundreds of trees. A breeze gently blows in my face, the air damp with the mist from the river. I pause for a moment, as if I were about to hear someone say “wait” or “stop.” But no such voice is heard. Somewhere there are children playing. There are people laughing. There are parties, but



Too Fast; Too Close
Tim Wong ’23

I do not hear them as my feet leave the ground for the last time.

Why did I do this?

I'm trapped. That's what I am. I am trapped. Not literally. I'm not in a bear trap or something like that. I'm more . . . stuck. Maybe that's a better word for it. I am stuck in a perpetual cycle of hope and disappointment. Stuck in a series of love and heartbreak. Stuck in a loop of misery. Stuck with my head down. Stuck being the person whose most exciting feature is his distinct lack of excitement. Stuck being the punchline. Stuck in failing relationships. Stuck with mounting debt that seems to be closing in. Stuck drowning in a sea of worries, with no way out.

I should close my eyes. I am still staring outward. Or downward I guess. I see the river below.

The Brightstone River was a staple of my childhood. My boy scout troop would hike along the banks listening to long-forgotten lectures about geology and erosion. My friends and I would come to play here often. We played Marco Polo. We tried to grab the occasional small fish that would wiggle by our feet. We would swim from side to side. Those days, those people, felt like my whole world, and to a certain extent they were. Small specks of light in the dark. We lived, unencumbered by the crushing weight of reality. Enjoying, loving, feeling everything.

It doesn't matter now. It's just me. Only me.

As I accelerate towards the river, I can't feel anything. I can't feel a thing anymore. Haven't for a long time. It doesn't matter. It never did. My eyes, still locked on the river, see nothing but black. A gently flowing black abyss. Not the clear stream that had defined my youth.

As if my eyes had suddenly just told the rest of

my body what was happening. I recognize that I am too fast and too close to the ground. I feel a sharp shock run through my body. I feel a rush of wind brush against my face. I feel my stomach drop as the ground grows closer, as if something is trying to shoot my soul back up through my legs.

Oh God.

That *it*. That stupid, indescribable *it*. It has caused me more misery than any lost opportunity or person. *It* made me think that I could be more. That I was better than I thought. That I could persevere. *It* returns. *It* brings warmth throughout my body, battling the cold, misty, air. *It* tells me that I might make it. *It* convinces me to close my eyes and breathe.

I briefly imagine being atop the bridge once more. I take a step back, then another, and another, until I reach my car. I drive back into town with a childlike wonder, filled with relief at the sight of every person I pass. A renewed sense of purpose fills my heart as I enter my tiny apartment and laugh with gleet. I go on dates, I get a job, I listen to music, I eat pizza, I take baths, I watch TV, I enjoy the moment of unwinding when I get home and take off my shoes. I live.

The fantasy allows me to crack a smile. A tear of joy forms in my eye. For the first time in a long time, I can see clearly. I tighten my body as I brace for impact.

Just when I expect everything to go black, it all goes white. I will never be too close and too fast ever again.

Heartstrings

Writing Royale Winner

Ben Lester '25

Antonio was by the door when he heard the news. It was the young carabiniere who informed him so reluctantly, as if put off by the whole thing. "Your wife has just been killed," he said. "A drunken man hit her car, and we figure she died on impact."

Antonio, visibly distraught, gave a weak sigh.

"I'm sure this is hard for you. I say we've lost a real talent this evening."

Antonio wanted to break down, then and there. Still, all he did was nod, in spite of such meaningless small talk.

"I'll leave you alone, sir. Good night."

The carabiniere's words rang true: Antonio was left alone. He would live in solitude for the better half of two years.

His wife, Julia, had been a renowned harpist, famous throughout Italy. Admired for her irreverence, Julia's artistry lent itself to critical acclaim. And yet, in spite of her talent, Antonio loved Julia for *Julia*. She was the light of his life, as is the case with most lovers. Unfortunately, her death sent Antonio into a spiral.

After her passing, the widower condemned music in his home, stowing away his Jules's harp for good. Frankly, the grief of her death was simply too much to bear.

None of his efforts to move on were very effective. Antonio, in all his anguish, found he couldn't stand his home, despite its lavish appeal. Not even a mansion could distract from Julia; thus, he decided to sell the place. It was quickly put on the market, along with all of Julia's valuables. Business soon found its way, as patrons ran to Antonio, eager to own the house of a celebrity.

"What a beautiful residence!" exclaimed the prospective buyers.

The group, dressed in all-black tuxedos, resembled a

flock of penguins. Such an observation, albeit childish, tickled Antonio. It made the process of negotiating less painful.

"Yes, it's quite nice," Antonio mumbled.

"Well, we'll certainly be back soon," replied the group. "How about this Thursday?"

"I'll be here," the widower sighed.

"Marvelous, just marvelous!"

And with that, Antonio was left alone, as he always was. Eventually, though, the doorbell rang.

Much to his dismay, Antonio walked to the door, so as to greet the unexpected visitor. There, he found a man in tattered clothes, adorning a weathered cap. He couldn't help but stare, in spite of his manners. He was enchanted by the man's teeth, particularly his gold incisors. The stranger's mouth seemed to glow, illuminating a smile which lit up the room. The poor man's presence was peculiar, but it was most certainly a comfort.

"Might I look around?" the pauper asked.

Truth be told, Antonio pitied the man. He looked earnest, in spite of his meager appearance.

"I don't see why not," Antonio answered.

The man went off on his own. Thinking nothing of it, Antonio went upstairs, eager to fulfill other obligations. (In keeping with his daily routine, he had set aside time to feel sorry for himself.) Needless to say, the house was kept quiet, and all was calm. Gradually, an hour passed.

Miraculously, the man flocked to Julia's harp, concealed in Antonio's ballroom. There he sat, chuckling like mad. Ultimately, the pauper centered himself, as his body grew ever still. With a smile, he began to pluck the instrument, pouring his soul into its brittle strings.

In time, Antonio could hear music, realizing it came from the forbidden hall. He expected to be angry. In fact, he imagined he'd be furious. That room was merely a reminder, which tortured him with the thought of a wasted death. And yet, in spite of it all, Antonio couldn't help but weep.

Slowly, he made his way towards the beautiful music. Approaching the pauper, he recognized his tune. It was Bach's "Air on the G String"—one of Julia's favorites. As if put under a spell, Antonio sat before the poor man, rocking back and forth like a child. All the while, tears ran down his face, as if he'd never cried before.

Suddenly, a voice cried out, complementing the harp's luscious melody.

"Antonio, hear me, for I have loved you," it wailed.

"Julia?" Antonio wondered.

"I am in your song, as I have never left."

"Jules!" Antonio exclaimed, as he ran to embrace the harp. "I beg of you," Antonio implored of the pauper. "Do not leave my sight. Let me speak to my wife once more."

The pauper merely smiled. However, he would play for days, with Antonio by his side like a loyal pup.

Alas, Thursday came, and true to their word, the prospective buyers returned. They rang the doorbell a few times, but of course, it was no use. Antonio didn't intend to go anywhere, nor did his maestro. Yet, in his carelessness, Antonio had forgotten to lock his door. Thus, the buyers, believing they were welcome company, barged in. Initially, the group called Antonio by name, but to no avail. Realizing their efforts were futile, these tuxedoed penguins began to look around. At first, their searches were fruitless, as they lost themselves within the mansion's many twists and turns. Eventually, by some stroke of luck, they found what they were after. Beckoned by a gorgeous melody, they soon made their way to the ballroom.

Undoubtedly, they were appalled upon entering, as they found Antonio prostrate toward his harp, as if he were a monk worshiping an idol. Even still, the patrons attempted to converse.

"Antonio? Are you well?" they asked.

Though Antonio could hear them, his love for Julia now meant more than their services. He kept quiet.

"Has he lost it?" one of them inquired.

"I just don't know," another admitted. "It certainly seems that way; although, you never can tell."

"Enough!" wailed a portly gentleman, who seemed to take charge of this comedic operation. "I won't stand for such unprofessionalism! Oh, someone, do something!"

In light of this plea, one of the more muscular patrons stepped forward. He resembled a boulder, and his presence instilled fear among even the strongest men. Putting his hands on Julia's harp, he tried ripping it from Antonio's grasp, only to push the pauper to the ground.

Enraged, Antonio proceeded to wrestle with the man, as if sworn to protect his instrument. However, such a brawl quickly grew out of hand. Antonio tussled and tugged, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't set his harp free. Nevertheless, his grip remained firm, as if he were a seasoned bullfighter, yearning for victory. In the end, his dedication proved lethal.

As the boulder-like man relinquished his grip, Antonio was sent flying. It wasn't long before he collided with the wall, hitting his head. In an instant, the ballroom became quiet.

Laying on the ground, Antonio glanced at his ceiling. After a while, he came to realize that he didn't feel anything. He didn't hurt in any places, nor did his body show a single bruise. He was completely painless. Remarkably, he felt better than he'd ever felt before. Still, something was the matter.

Antonio, upon taking a look around, realized that the penguins had fled. The ballroom, aside from the harp, was left entirely empty, as an otherworldly silence filled the air.

"Antonio," a voice called from behind him. It was Julia, grinning from ear to ear. It seems she had a friend with her, too. Standing by her side was a pauper, whose tattered clothes, loose cap and gold teeth were all too familiar.

"Julia!" Antonio shouted, filled with a sudden rush of euphoria. The couple ran into each other's arms, as tears flooded their eyes. The pauper looked affectionately at Antonio, giving him a boyish wink.

As his joy subsided, however, reality began to set in. Observing his surroundings, Antonio panicked, as he came to realize his fate.

"I'm dead, aren't I?" Antonio asked.

"Yes," Julia replied, meeting her husband's eye. "I'm so very sorry."

"You," Antonio continued, pointing at the mysterious gentleman. "Are you God?"

The pauper merely shrugged, giving Antonio one of his casual smiles.

"I guess it doesn't really matter, now, does it?" Antonio sighed. Turning to Julia, he went on: "I'm sure my life can continue now, since I've finally found you." The two embraced once more, taking refuge in each other's touch.

"Might I show you to the door?" the pauper asked.

"Most certainly," the couple insisted. Looking back on Julia's harp, however, Antonio realized it had broken into two. Walking over to the relic, he began to frown. "Julia, I didn't mean to cause such damage," Antonio pleaded. "Do not fret, for this harp broke in the name of love," Julia explained. "Glance at its strings. They are full of the heart which we now possess, and are no longer brittle like they once were. As long as our love is alive, this harp's music shall never die." Taking Antonio by the hand, Julia walked towards the pauper. Thus, the couple surveyed their ballroom once more, before stepping into the great unknown.

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