THE BELLARMINE REVIEW

VOLUME 85 | SPRING 2025

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF FAIRFIELD COLLEGE PREPARATORY SCHOOL



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VOLUME 85 · SPRING 2025

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

This issue of *The Bellarmine Review* was designed and laid out in Canva. Headings are set in RoxboroughCF. Body text is set in Sorts Mill Goudy. Section title pages are set in League Spartan.

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Foreword

I often think about how fortunate I am that Mr. Hoover asked me to help reestablish the Creative Writing Club alongside Jack Miller '23. Without his mentorship, I doubt I would have continued channeling my creativity, editing *The Bellarmine Review,* or supporting the arts as fully as I've tried to over the years. What we've built is truly special, and it would have been impossible without the work of so many.

Thank you to all the judges of our competitions, and to the artists whose work has brought this magazine to life, especially Daniel Guzman '25 and Christopher Contreras '25 (see cover), who have contributed their art to the *Review* for three years. I'm also grateful to every student who submitted writing and artwork for this issue. Your courage to share your work keeps this magazine alive. Above all, I offer my deepest thanks to Mr. Hoover. Since his first year at Prep, he's poured himself into *The Bellarmine Review* and the arts community. His dedication over the past three years has shaped this publication and inspired countless students. On a personal note, his mentorship has changed me. He encouraged me to write more, try new things, and help others find their creative voice. Thanks to him, I've grown not only as a writer, but as a person.

This *Review* captures everything that makes Prep special. Built and edited by students, it stands as a hub of creativity—a place where young artists and writers are seen, heard, and celebrated. Without it, something essential would be missing. The freshman doodling in class might never become the artist whose work graces our cover. The quiet poet might remain unheard. The storyteller might keep his dreams locked in his mind instead of releasing them onto the page.

This magazine is not just a collection of art and writing—it's a record of where greatness begins. A love letter to the boy drafting lyrics in his room, to the dreamer imagining adventures in the quiet, to the future journalist, novelist, or muralist just beginning his journey. I'm honored to have been a part of *The Bellarmine Review* for four years, and even more grateful to have helped build this *Review* over the last three. I hope it continues to capture the magic within these halls for years to come—reminding us all of the beauty created every time a student puts pen to paper and dares to share his voice. ❑

James Callaghan '25
Editor-in-Chief

Poetry

The Wire Man | James Callaghan '25

My hands do toil for the light of the world,
Yet none is left for mine own eyes to see.
The wires of thy world are strung by me—
Wire upon wire—'tis no song to me.
A hollow echo of a life once promised,
Once I did harvest, my mind the gardener,
Now left untended, overgrown with sorrow,
A withered field that dreams no longer stir.
Now am I a sheep, made ready for slaughter,
Fattened by labor, yet empty of thought.
My work for thee doth not nourish the mind,
Its wonders and fancies are severed like wires.
Thy life is light, mine cast in shadow's mire—
I, the wire man, not one to admire.



The King of Splintered Crowns | Andrew Hsu '26

Laz waved and spoke, barely holding cards in his fingers,
Where prayers, swamped in whisky's rivers, modestly linger.
Sunglasses covering tired eyes won from night,
Lost to the brilliance of a baleful blight.

Coins clicked gently like rain on old splintered wood,
Every roll of the dice, casually marking where youthful ambition had once stood.
He sold his soul for just a taste of the sweet,
But that goodness remained, ever lost and discreet.

History ached with poverty's refrain
Born in the fire where luck forges the chain.
Fingers that bled from their struggle to rise,
Nightmares engraved in his unpaid goodbyes.

Lo, the moment lost behind a smoky veil,
Frugal indulgences worked to make grief seem frail.
Losses on which his triumphs depended,
Counting a ledger where sorrow ascended.

Unborn lives knotted like a cord,
The kid he never learned how to afford.
A lover who left when his words turned to blots,
Promises deformed by greed's bitter plots.

O Laz, who gambled for the sake of the thrill.
Swept by the waves where the gamblers spill.
A child whose potential never surpassing
A king without a crown, his regrets everlasting.

Years slipped like sparks from flame's final breath,
Truth wrested from silence that whispers of death.
Not all those who bet on gold or silver
Gain freedom where darkness and destiny deliver.

Sadness As a Gift | Jackson Salamino '28

Now that you've finally won:
All eyes are on you
Witnessing your rise
And how you've done it
But just a moment back
They didn't flinch
And you discern:
Whether the woe was a gift
and if you should fare

When you've won for once
You thrived in the shadows
When no one asked why
When no one stood beside you
But you nurtured the ember
and went without their ignition
So what they give now is dim
and doesn't light up the same
And you discern:
Whether the laxity was a gift
and if you should care

Now that you've finally won:
The silence which encapsulated you
Was the soil you sank into
In this, you rooted your strength
Not because you were meant to
But because you chose

So next time
When you've finally won
You can remember to take the sadness as a gift
and not care.



Course | Joshua Salazar '26

I ride through the forest
Leaves flutter around me
Bugs buzz everywhere
And the sun barely shines.
You can't know what's coming
But that's the fun in it.
Every trip through the forest
Is another adventure.

My horse gallops strongly
We bounce over the roots
A rat scurries across
And some birds fly from
Tree to tree. Time seems to
Slow as my horse, in midair,

Neighs, and I look down at
The pattern of sunlight
That falls through the trees' leaves.

My horse lands and keeps running
The forest end's in sight.
A small glimpse of more light
Is now getting bigger.
Larger as we approach
And then we dash through it.
Now we are in the sun.
Next time, a different route.

A Sestina on Longing | Ryan Sheppard '26

I dream of your hands—how the air once learned your touch.
This room is louder without you; absence presses into the walls.
Even silence strains to echo the shape of your voice.
Night arrives and nothing yields to sleep.
Every shadow angles toward your name,
But even memory has learned that you are gone.

I barter with ghosts, but still—you are gone.
The bed still bruises in the shape of your touch.
Your coat still slouches where I last whispered your name.
Still, no breath answers in this locked room.
The wind climbs in but finds no sleep.
It moves like a thief, mimicking your voice.

The faucet drips in the cadence of your voice.
It's cruel—how everything here knows you're gone.
Even my bones have abandoned sleep.
My skin forgets the warmth of touch.
I light candles just to burn the memory into the room
and I carve the wax with the shape of your name.

Sometimes I wake and mouth your name
before the dream dissolves, taking your voice.
I want to throw your cup across the room—
How dare it stay when you are gone?
But I don't. I reach for the heat of your touch,
as if that fury could be softened by sleep.

Instead, I sink. The silence mocks sleep
and grips my throat. I trace your name
into frost on windows, remembering your touch—
the way your silence says more than voice.
But now even that has gone.
And even the walls forget they are a room.

Once, sunlight lived inside this room.
Now even light looks tired of sleep.
I wear your hoodie to pretend you're not gone,
but the sleeves don't know your name.
I leave the radio on for the echo of your voice—
a cruel surrogate for touch.

Still, I whisper your name to the room,
trade sleep for the echo of your voice,
and grieve how the world forgets your touch.



We Were Younger | Quinn Lombardo '26
Winner of the 2025 Poetry Contest

The porch light buzzed,
As damp grass brushed,
The air hung heavy and still,
With a quiet kind of thrill.

There wasn't a plan,
Just a pack and a van,
The night was young,
But we were younger.

Cologne was sprayed,
Rules were disobeyed,
Life 360 was turned off,
As we laughed and coughed.

The smell of summer filled the air,
With friends who'd always be there,
We laughed at nothing,
Until it felt like something.

Shoes scattered on the lawn,
As the sky began to yawn,
The night slipped past,
But we held on fast.

The speakers thumped low,
Windows down, driving slow,
The night was young,
But we were younger.

Essays

A Brief History of Plato Club | Thomas Adams '25

What was the best conversation you've ever had at your lunch table? Think about what your friends were talking about—or perhaps arguing about. Who brought up the topic of conversation? How did the ideas shift and change over the lunch period?

Despite how overlooked the lunch period may be, I believe it is an integral part of an education. We are forced to share our ideas and thoughts as we eat together. I think this is how students genuinely learn to debate and grapple with ideas very different from their own. If I could draw a parallel to a formal academic practice, I'd say that lunch periods are like Socratic seminars.

I think most people have an unjustly negative view of Socratic seminars. Maybe it is the pressure of getting a good grade or a lack of engagement in the text, but for some reason most people dread walking into an English classroom to find the desks in a circle.

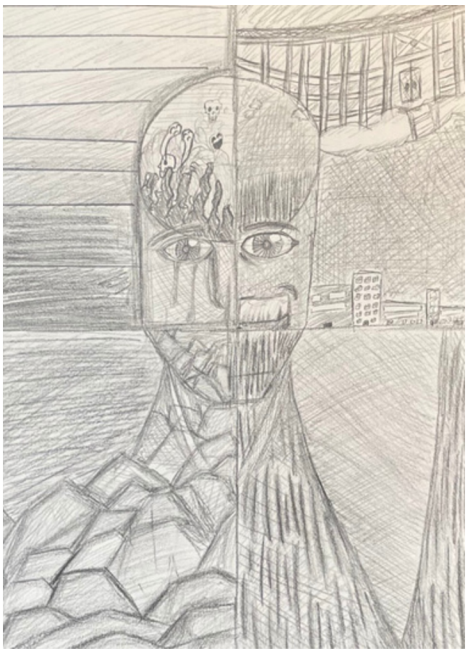
If you have internet access (or a five-minute conversation with Dr. Altieri) you'll quickly learn who Socrates was—a Greek guy in Athens who asked a lot of questions and annoyed a lot of people. But truth be told, he wasn't that bad a guy. He wasn't pushing his own agenda; he was simply curious about a variety of things—justice, virtue, society, etc.—and genuinely wanted to understand these concepts through conversation. From that, we get Socratic seminars.

Plato, student of Socrates, wrote down many dialogues of such seminars. The Plato Club reads these dialogues, and we try to make heads and tails of what they're about. As of the time of writing this article, we are studying Plato's *Meno*.

Three faculty members attend the meetings: Dr. Altieri '95, Rev. Coffey, and Mr. Denby. My good friend Ben Lester '25 is now club president, and he directs the course of the meetings. I remember when Jack Miller '23 ran the meetings. We struggled to get past Book I of Plato's *Republic*. We attempted short, examined readings, but were quickly overwhelmed by the sheer quantity and density of the text. So now we are reading shorter dialogues, and having Socratic seminars during the meetings.

Why do I like this club so much? For me, the Plato Club is all about intellectual freedom. There is no pressure to learn, no grade to maintain nor a rubric to complete. It is only reading, talking, and coming to a shared conclusion on a certain question. This is what learning should be about—the simple appetite for knowledge, like the students who cram in line at the SLC. The truth is, by simply learning for learning's sake, we seem to develop so many other useful, practical skills. At Plato Club, I learned ways to organize my thinking, to be concise with my arguments, as well as Greek vocabulary. As Mr. Cashman has emphasized, I have found myself learning how to think, not being told what to think, through simple practice at the Plato Club.

So after fighting my way through the SLC lines, I sit down with my peers to argue and talk. We share our ideas and thoughts, but this time it's more coherent. Not highfalutin, but clear. I'd honestly say that's what makes the conversations so much better. They are more meaningful and direct and therefore we are getting more out of our time together. ◻



Big World, Little Fish | Dante Agnello '25

As the fish hung suspended in the clear plastic bag, its movements were small and irregular, dictated by the faint breeze that rolled in from the shore. Its gills pulsated lightly, as though still sampling water that no longer existed around it, while its fins fanned out in restless, barely perceptible flutters. The air was heavy with warmth, tinted by the salt of the ocean, the tang of seaweed drying on the sand, and the distant laughter from the crowds along the shore.

In the last hours of the day, the translucent plastic caught glints of the sun's warming rays, which filtered through in little pulses, casting a faint shimmer over the fish's body as if it were some sort of glass wind chime. Above, people strolled along the boardwalk, their footsteps echoing softly on the worn, gray wood that had absorbed the summers of decades past. Below, others trekked along the low-tide sand bars, their voices rising and falling like the tide itself, lifting in laughter and dropping in whispered exchanges as they roamed the soft earth exposed by the sea's retreat.

The fish hung in that peculiar in-between, that pocket of time and space where the air turns cooler as the sun sinks but hasn't yet let go of the day's heat. It was neither fully day nor night, and just like the fish, the entire beach seemed caught in a moment of quiet suspension. Some people passing by glanced at the dangling bag with a faint, brief curiosity, but their eyes soon slid back to their friends or their phones or the scenery, caught up in their own steady, unhurried rhythms. No one paused long enough to wonder why a fish, so completely out of place in this strange air-filled prison, would be hanging there at all.

Children's laughter rang out occasionally, mingling with the cries of the seagulls circling overhead, swooping low to scan the sand for remnants of snacks dropped or discarded by the day's crowds. Further down the beach, a runner jogged past, her headphones sealing her off from the ambient noises as she moved in sync with her own breath and pulse, her dirty blonde ponytail swinging with each stride. She left behind a faint scent of sunscreen and sweat, a reminder of the day's heat even as evening stretched further across

the sand.

The fish in the bag was still and silent, its body suspended as though it were a thing preserved—neither alive nor dead, neither here nor gone. From certain angles, it seemed like an odd kind of art piece, a surreal installation placed just so against the backdrop of sand, sea, and sunset. The more you looked, the more the fish took on an unintended meaning, like an invitation to think about what it meant to be out of place, out of element. A fish in the air, on a warm summer night, caught between the earth and water, between the above and below, yet no one stopped long enough to consider its plight. It was trapped, yet free in its own way, floating above the sand, untouched by any of the people who hurried, as if it didn't exist at all.

The waves behind it came and went in their steady, indifferent rhythm, breathing in and out in slow, relentless rolls, as though the ocean itself were living, a backdrop to this silent, small story playing out in front of it. The sky, too, was changing, slipping from the bright blue of day into the dusky violet of the evening, a color that seemed to blur the horizon and melt into the distant shadows of the ocean.

Soon, the tide would return, consuming the sand, erasing the footprints, washing away the remnants of the day. The beach would empty, the boardwalk would fall silent, and only the fish would remain but also vanish in its own way—lost to the dark or perhaps remembered only as a curious detail in someone's fleeting memory of that night.

But for now, it stayed there, swaying gently in the plastic bag as it watched the world go by, forever stuck and unchanged. Sitting between earth and sea, between air and water, it was unknown by the bustling world around it. The voices of the beach drifted on the breeze, and the ocean breathing behind it, but nothing changed in its small, suspended world. The fish hung, swaying softly, a silent visitor in a place it did not belong to, waiting as the world carried on around it. Perhaps, in some way, we all find ourselves paused, suspended between what we know and the endlessness beyond us, waiting and swaying as the world continues on around us. ❑

Where Is the Renaissance Man? | James Callaghan '25

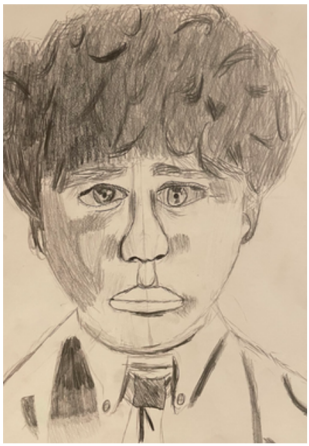
Picture this: it is a dark, hazy night, and you are sitting at a midnight café in Paris. The table is dimly lit by a warm, yellow light. Staring at a journal, you elegantly write down your words, maybe trying to inspire others, or maybe trying to inspire something in yourself.

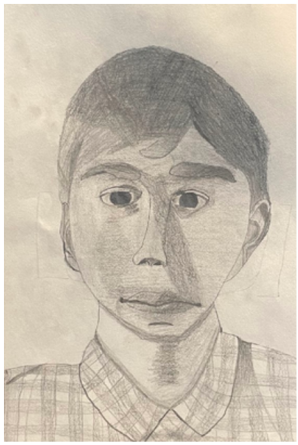
Now scrap all of that. Return to your desk at your high school. Look up at the teacher, jot down your notes, memorize them for your test, forget them all. Learn how to take the ACT or SAT, so that a school will give you even the tiniest bit more consideration.

My life has been a whirlwind of dreaming of the first paragraph and dreading the second. I am fortunate enough to have always loved the humanities. For some reason it seemed natural to me. This could be partially credited to my dad, who apparently proposed to my mom with a poem, or even something as simple as having books in the house and embarking on the adventures that lay between their words. So when asked if the humanities belong in the education system, I scoffed.

The basis of all learning is language. Reading and writing. Simply put, how can one become good at math and science if they don't know how to read the formula? Logically, it makes no sense. Yet, to me, cutting back on the humanities, is cutting back on humanity. The humanities give children a pathway for their creativity. It is a channel in which anyone can find their place. The written word is the most powerful weapon known to man. How can we justify taking away that which makes the poor, rich, and the weak, strong?

The Founding Fathers were some of the most well-read, and well-written people in history. Because of this they inspired a nation of farmers to battle the largest military power in history and won. That level of persuasion is not found in a calculus textbook, no. It is found in the Greeks, Romans, English, and all those who came before us. I wonder how persuasive the thirty-five-year-old sitting behind a computer in Silicon Valley is. Now, I am not ridiculing him; he is necessary, and I definitely cannot do the job that he can, but what I am bringing to light is that I know that my place in the world is different from his. We need people who can be thinkers,





thinkers who can be talkers, talkers who can be writers, and writers who can be readers.

This brings me to my final point. Why must I, a man of humanities, have to feel the pressure of a standardized test—one that does not define me—every day? What defines me is my writing; what defines me is the people I reach and the words I put down on paper. Where is the Renaissance man in an SAT? I can answer that: he is nowhere to be found. Soon, we won't be able to find him anywhere. He's a dying species, one that holds the keys to all the world's wonders. The death of our education system will be when the humanities have been done away with. Reading, writing, and critical thinking are the basis of all human knowledge. The Renaissance man may be right around the corner, in our local elementary school stacking paper on his desk, and praying for the next book fair. Yet, he will soon be lost, thrown in the rubber room of all the old curricula and torn-down schools, all because the emphasis is no longer on the children, but rather the data points they are. The humanities have given me more purpose than a high score on a standardized test ever could. If the emphasis continues to fall upon those tests, soon you'll be asking the same question as me: where is the Renaissance man? ❑

Perfectly Imperfect | Sebastian Cruz '25

A platypus is venomous. A homeostasis-disrupting type of venomous. A whole-body-in-excruciating-pain-that-lasts-for-weeks type of venomous. A morphine-can't-stop-the-pain type of venomous.

Paralyzing.

Ornithorhynchus anatinus. Even its scientific name sounds scary.

But at first glance, it looks like a cute, cuddly, curious, creature pulled from a dream—or perhaps a mistake that the world just decided to keep.

Platypuses are born of a rare lineage, one of the few egg-laying mammals in the world, known as monotremes. They're solitary, nocturnal hunters, using electrolocation—an almost magical sense—to detect the faintest signals of their prey. While they might seem benign, even silly, their back feet hold a venomous spur. There's a bite in their quiet presence, a reminder that nature never conforms to our notions of friendliness or malice. The platypus, like much of the natural world, simply is. It exists on its own terms, carrying neither aggression nor benevolence, but a steady resilience and a strange beauty.

The platypus, an oddity of nature, forages like a shadow in the murky water, its sleek body riddled with fur that insulates it. It is a creature of paradox, part mammal, part bird, part amphibian—an evolutionary enigma. With its bill, soft and sensitive as a lover's touch, it sifts through the silt, tasting the riverbed's secrets: worms, insect larvae, and the occasional unlucky shrimp. Beneath the water's surface, it moves like a specter, its food a delicate, fleeting dance of instinct and adaptation. In the quiet depths, this peculiar beast—eating, hunting, surviving—becomes a living metaphor for nature's boundless ingenuity.

I was fortunate enough to witness this phenomenon in the lush backwaters of Australia. I could hardly believe my eyes. There, nestled in the reeds, it swam with a quiet grace, a strange but enchanting contradiction of fur and beak and webbed feet. Who thought to give this animal the flat, paddle-like tail of a beaver, the

webbed feet of a duck, and the soft, waterproof fur of an otter? How does nature decide these things? What quiet whispers shape the oddest wonders in the universe?

The air was damp and earthy, the water dark and smooth. I crouched by the bank, not daring to move. I couldn't miss this. My stuffed platypus back home wouldn't forgive me for missing out on seeing its brethren. The platypus glided closer, oblivious or indifferent to my presence, leaving tiny ripples in its wake. Its bill, somehow both soft and sturdy, dipped into the water with a delicate yet purposeful motion. It sifted through the silt, finding unseen morsels, tiny worlds at the edge of visibility. The sight was mesmerizing, each movement a brushstroke on the canvas of this murky, timeless waterway. Was this routine for the mammal? Was my presence a bother or a comfort?

As I watched, it became clear: the platypus was both ancient and new, carrying an aura of primal mystery. I could feel the weight of eons in its unhurried actions, like it was part of an ancient secret whispered from the beginning of life. The creature was a perfect contradiction, a marriage of opposites that should not work but somehow did. How, I wondered, could something so mismatched, so mistakeable, so misinterpretable, feel so complete?

As I left the creek, I felt the weight of that moment settle into my bones. The platypus reminded me of something deeper about nature itself. Nature is neither friend nor foe. It does not cater to our fears or our joys, nor does it seek to harm or delight. It doesn't seek to alarm or frighten. It's a constant, a silent witness, living in harmony and tension with every other form of life, each part existing in unison with the others. And in that gentle coexistence, I found a quiet reverence, a reminder of the mysterious order within the world's chaos. The platypus, seemingly out of order and sorts with mismatched components, was really as whole as could be. The platypus serves as a reminder that no-one is incomplete. Everyone is just as intended. Those parts of yourself that feel out of place have a purpose and they make you whole. Nature, in all its oddities and contradictions, simply is—and perhaps as a part of nature, we simply are, too. ◻

Cooped Up | Henry King '25

In a confrontational standoff, my chicken stared at me, her head tilted. I could have sworn she was about to say something. My chest leaning over the egg door, I carefully grabbed five eggs and fled the scene. Ginger, my rogue chicken, had once again been successfully blocked from literally "flying the coop."

I struggled to understand what drove her to bang against the coop walls when I grabbed her eggs. She was the only one out of five chickens that would make this her defining attribute. Did she really care about her "young," or did she want to simply experience the outside world? The intent, it seemed, lay behind her wild eyes. Every day, she would flap her wings in protest. The other four chickens, socially detached, ignored her and her quest for freedom. They had formed their own group—Ginger was the reject. I began to question what drove her to fly away. Did she just want to peck at some fresh grass? Or did she want to escape her toxic living environment?

She would be successful at times, flying through my arms and leaping in a graceful arc, landing softly on the ground. Her beak, slamming down, frantically pecked at healthy blades of grass. I would watch over her in this triumphant act of freedom while her coop mates would look onward from the run, confused and astonished. After a few minutes, I would quickly grab her and place her back in the henhouse, safe from the watchful eyes of nearby hawks.

These defiant and brave moments of escape made me understand that there was a clear, driving force behind her intent—a desire, and one that is prominent in humans. Mankind so often finds themselves in confining environments, yearning to achieve freedom. Like Ginger, we all face a primordial, almost instinctual desire to break free. Our own metaphorical "coops"—societal standards, work, expectations—become our only isolated living environment.

Observing Ginger's persistence has made me understand the parallels between domesticated animals and the human species.

Banging against the coop walls or flapping her wings against the door is her way of acting out; in doing so, she temporarily severs herself from the grip of normalcy. In taking this risk, whether that be exposure to hawks or the unknown, she is rewarded with fresh insects, grass, and a new perspective; perhaps one that will change how she views the world. Acts of "rebellion" like these are present among us as well. Humans act out in varying ways, whether that be simply acting differently from our peers, taking up a new hobby, or acting impulsively as a result of midlife crises. Although we may be perceived by others as "crazy" and "impractical," we are doing what is best for ourselves—finding ways to cope with our current situations and to alleviate ourselves from the mundane, cyclical essence of life. We don't like being cooped up.

Every morning now, I have grown accustomed to these encounters with Ginger. They remind me of the not-so-different inner workings behind animals and humans. Today, we have pushed the envelope in distinguishing humans above all other life forms, yet, we seem to forget the fact that we have more in common than is accredited. After all, humans share more than 50 percent of their genes with chickens. Clearly, our drive to experience new perspectives is shared among our feathered friends.

Now, as I stare into those piercing, crazed eyes, I am bestowed with a new sense of understanding—even a sense of association. With a chicken. I never thought that would come to mind. Picking up the eggs, I hear the scuttling of Ginger's feet. I don't try to block her anymore. Surrendering to her free will, I watch as she escapes in her signature arc. What's a few minutes? I tell myself. I look on as she pecks, digging up worms and dead weeds. Looking around, she soaks up the morning sun. I could swear I hear a sigh of relief. ◻

An Enchanted Land | Patrick Mancini '25

The farm is different, otherworldly. It stands in a valley between two nameless giants wearing dark green coats. They sing all day with the birds and with the wind. The mountains and all their brethren roll through the state as the ocean's waves do others. The day fills the land with the smoothest air and the bluest skies, the night with frantic fireflies that flash around the dark farm. The rolling greens and expansive blues, the glowing yellows and solemn blacks all enchant the residents of the county while taunting its visitors—whose stay is only temporary—with unforgettable landscapes.

"Welcome to Nazareth Farm" was painted in white on a wooden sign at the front of the residence. As we turned into the driveway, the bumping of the car intensified on the silver gravel. The lot began to flood with our hosts. After many hugs and introductions, we were led inside the house for a tour. When I reached the prayer space, I was introduced to the four cornerstones of the farm: simplicity, community, service, and prayer.

Prayer was introduced to me in my Catholic elementary school as a phone call to God. This idea was challenged when I began attending a Jesuit high school where I was introduced to the idea of "seeing God in all things," as Ignatius said. Yet, it was only when living on the farm that I was able to do just that. It was impossible to avoid seeing God in this holy land. God was in the meaningful service and the company of my friends.

As we drove through the mountains to a worksite, the green consumed us. Conversations filled the black SUV as my chaperone mentioned an article he read. The author was researching special areas in the world where one can stand for fifteen minutes without hearing man-made noises. We both concluded that although this place had not been listed in the article, it most definitely should have been. Later that day, I stood out on the upper deck of the farm house. I gazed into the darkness of the trees which quickly sloped up above me, watching as the pitch-black got routinely interrupted by glows of yellow and listening to the many sounds of the forest.



That night we were fasting from energy; this is one of the ways that we embraced simplicity. The only lights around me sprang from frantic bugs and dancing candles.

I was not entirely away from man-made noises, however. Although I did not hear planes humming overhead or generator buzzes which shook the house, I heard a family. Inside, students, teachers, and barn staff were playing games and telling stories. Brown and JP were practicing the guitar, trying to play Zach Bryan intros from memory—it was impressive. Although I heard this, I still counted fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes of almost complete solitude and fifteen minutes of peace. Exhausted from my day of work, I sat, I watched carefully, and I closed my eyes in prayer.

A year ago I would not have considered this moment a prayer. I was not reciting a Hail Mary or asking God to grant me strength. I was listening to the combined melody of chirping crickets and rustling trees, of giggles and guitar notes. I entered into a state of unparalleled tranquility.

As I was informed on the last night: "the farm does not work if we stay here." And so we left. On the other side of the welcome sign, painted in white, was the phrase "Vaya con Dios," or "Go with God."

Now, lying in my backyard, I try to recreate those fifteen minutes. At the four-minute mark, a plane whips overhead, and I stop. I sit up and I listen to my surroundings: the plane's low-pitched hums and the generator's mechanical buzz. I close my eyes, allowing this environment to guide me, and I pray. ❑

Maps | Henry Tymniak '25

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by maps. I suspect that at first it was the bright colors, or perhaps the bumps on a topographical map. As a child, the first thing I did when my parents brought me to an amusement park or zoo was ask for a map. To this day, I have a pile of folded-up old maps in my closet from the Bronx Zoo. Figuring out how things linked together and how they fit like pieces of a puzzle was something that always appealed to me. As I grew older, I realized that through time, maps are ever-changing, they are alive. They tell a story. Just like people, we change and grow through time, learning, and experience.

In my freshman Global Studies class, I sat, nervous and curious about the new world of high school I had just stepped into. We learned about the countries in Southern Asia. It started off as a game, we were competing to see who was the quickest to label all the countries. The brightly colored political outlines called to me. That night I went home and I studied the map with fervor. It was like an avalanche of knowledge flowing through me. The next day during the competition, I came in with the fastest time for labeling the countries in Southern Asia and the only time submitted by anyone for labeling the whole continent of Asia. This was only the beginning. The next week was South America, then Europe, then the Caribbean, and soon the whole map of the world was in my head. My map was growing.

I studied European History the following year. I learned to question everything and be critical. My map was no longer just a collection of empty shells and outlines of territories that I memorized; it was full of life and color. Pictures of battles, systems of government, and figures throughout history all filled in the spaces. I saw the future and then I saw the past within it. My map was growing.

After my sophomore year, I traveled to a rural area of West Virginia on a mission trip with no cellular service, minimal power, and a food supply limited to local farms. While there were certainly memories made in the actual work that I did, what was most

impactful was the time we shared with the community members over something as mundane as a meal together. It would be easy to see the differences based on where we came from on the map, but that is not at all that I walked away with. It was the commonalities that were bursting in those conversations—talking about our families, our pets, or even our gratitude for that brief break in humidity when we were building a roof earlier that day. Suddenly people from places that don't remotely touch on a map made authentic connections. My previously colorful map was changing; it now has dimensions that colors and words cannot describe, but that can only be experienced. My map was growing.

I have started to create my own map; it has changed me in so many ways. This map has allowed me the opportunity to see far more than the piece of paper it came on. This map has helped guide me, but more importantly, has revealed an appreciation for the journey. I see the people, the lessons, and most importantly I see how the map can change and how I can enable that change. I aspire to become a teacher so that I can inspire others to discover their own map. It has been the greatest gift to receive these lessons, learned both inside and outside the classroom. I look forward to giving this gift back to my future students, and watching their idea of a map progress through time just as mine has unfolded before me. ❑



Nature is Timeless | Ryan Voytek '25

They are the lungs of planet Earth. In and out they breathe, their long, twisting appendages reaching for the sky, absorbing the sounds of humankind like the ground absorbs the water from a run-on creek. The purpose of these lungs, their roots extending deeper and deeper into the planet we call home, is ignored. Earth's creations work in harmony much like synchronized strokes of an orchestra with each element playing a crucial part for the whole, thus creating a marvelous melody. Nearby plants, animals, and remarkable features taken for granted simultaneously rise up in defiance to fight a war against pavement that paints a grim layer over the earth, a war against sound needlessly created by dirt bikes, airplanes, even humans, and finally a war against neglect. Neglect, as their silent persistence is ruthlessly overshadowed by industrial noise and urban expansion.

Yet each day as these towering guardians of the Earth wage their silent rebellion, we ignore their oxygen: such a selfish breath we take. As their lungs inhale carbon dioxide, toxic to us, they exhale life-sustaining oxygen, meanwhile making our every heartbeat possible. Their sacrifice, allowing humanity to laugh every laugh, speak through every voice, and enjoy every moment.

But nature does strike back. Nature strikes back as much as civilization builds, as such a selfish species ferociously destroys farmland and marsh, as much as we extend our reach from the peaks of mountains to the smallest ponds. Nature strikes back in the grains of pollen that soar throughout the sky, settling down in the smallest crevices of the cement used to support our concrete empire. Nature strikes back in the pigeons that make their homes on top of the telephone phones lining our world, speaking out above the loud screech of car engines and blaring horns, nearly silent, but they avoid our noise, as they know something we do not, they remember through generations the peace that came before humans walked the earth, before we laid miles of railroad carrying hundred-ton trains spraying toxic chemicals throughout Earth's protective skin, before we built skyscrapers upon skyscrapers,



before we expanded urban life onto all areas of our common home, before we came to be.

But regardless of the pain we cause upon nature, it endures, not just suffering in staunch silence, but it survives as a quiet force, constant and dedicated. Trees, built from the base up from the carbon we use to power our cities, protect Earth regardless. It reminds humanity that our skyscrapers, roads, and engine-driven polluters are temporary imprints on Earth's eternal landscape.

So, as humans, we hold the privilege of witnessing this strength and with it comes the responsibility to preserve the lungs of the Earth, because without them, we too will lose our ability to breathe. And, though humanity may imprint its selfish mark upon the Earth, our cities and roads are a momentary blip compared to nature's silent and perpetual strength. In the end, it is nature, not our concrete creations, that will persist, therefore reminding us that we, weak in nature, are nothing but temporary guests in our eternal home, an eternal home we must protect, preserve, and respect for years to come. ❑



Bad Hemingway Stories

The Fisherman | Lukas Kiger '26
Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

The rain was splashing on the hotel window as Kurt poured himself a cup of coffee. The room smelled of warm, steamy coffee, and Madi sat across from him at the dining room table, staring out the window, looking at the ocean.

"It's so depressing here," she said quietly. "This town is so boring."

Kurt took a sip of his coffee and didn't answer.

"I mean it," she said. "It's like there's literally nothing to do here. No point in being here. Don't you agree?"

He set his cup of coffee down and looked her in the eyes, then immediately back at the window. "It's just rain."

"It's not just the rain," she said. "It's more than that. It's us."

Kurt looked back at her and said, "You're thinking too much."

Madi replied, "Am I? Well, you never want to talk about anything real, Kurt. You just sit there and don't say anything."

He let go of his coffee cup. "What do you want me to say?"

"Anything," she said. "Tell me what you're thinking."

He thought for a second, then picked up his cup and took a sip of his coffee. "I'm thinking that it's raining."

Madi sighed and turned back to the window to look back at the gray, rainy ocean view. "I want to move," she said. "To the city, where we can thrive together."

Kurt didn't answer. He placed his cup of coffee on the table and stared into space. The rain had started to form into a drizzle, and he noticed something by the shore, an old man in a big rain jacket with a fishing rod in his hands. The man cast his fishing line into the waves, then reeled it back in over and over again.

Kurt continued to look at his repetitive and calm movements. The fisherman's patience reminded him of the struggle he had with Madi. Her voice interrupted his thoughts.

"I can't keep living like this."

As Kurt was still looking at the fisherman, he said, "I know."

"Really?" she asked. "Because it doesn't seem like you care."

The fisherman continued to cast his line into the water. Kurt wondered if the man ever caught anything, or if it was just the peace and quiet that kept him there.

Madi stood up and walked over to the window. She started to look outside the window, and said, "I wish you'd just say what you want to say."

Kurt put his cup back down on the table, and said, "I just want things to be easier."

She turned to him and looked him in the eye. "Then make them easier."

The room went quiet except for the rain drizzling against the window. Kurt looked back at the shore, but the fisherman was gone. Now all he could see was the gray sky's reflection on the water, and the waves continuing to crash on the shore.

Madi looked out the window, looking at the gray view. Kurt continued to stare at the empty spot where the fisherman was. They were both looking in opposite directions, their thoughts continuing to lean farther and farther apart from each other.

Shortly after, the rain started to pour once again. ❑



The Woman in the Lobby | Tyler Pulie '26
Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

On 54th Street, a wall of people waited to board buses. Some of them shouted in a foreign language. Others stood with their heads bowed to the pavement. They carried with them all they owned. Some had suitcases, others backpacks. One woman stood with nothing, and she did not speak or show an expression. The police who surrounded the area acted calm, but the heart of a young officer beat hard and fast as he watched them begin to board the first bus. The first person boarded without issue, and the second was carried into the bus by an officer.

About one and a half blocks east of the bus stop sat the American man and the woman in the lobby of Hotel Gilroy.

"It's nice and warm here," the man said, covering the woman's hand with his over the table.

"I know," she replied. "This place is too good for me."

"I still remember when you first arrived here like it was yesterday. I fell in love with you the instant I spotted your face in that supermarket."

"I remember as well. I came in wet from the rain and my clothes were dirty. I still don't understand why you came up to me."

"Don't say that. You're beautiful, even during a downpour."

The man stared into the woman's deep brown eyes, but as her pupils dilated their gaze drifted behind him, and the words from his mouth began to sound like her mother's.

Her mind took her back to the streets of Managua, where she and her brother ran errands for Mamá. She saw the red rooftops on the houses of the city, and when she was young she always imagined that from above they created a unique pattern. The vendors called out items and their prices. She knew which ones were trying to rip her off. "Always look past their gestures when they try to lure you in," Mamá would say, before she became bedridden, "and always keep moving." In her mind she followed her path home. She always made sure her brother stayed close by. If you spoke to the wrong person in Managua, you might have ended up with your face on a

telephone pole. She remembered the house, the four rooms that kept her family safe, and saw her little brother playing in the living room, where he also slept. The pain rose up to her throat and she stopped.

The man squirmed in his seat and reached for his drink repeatedly.

"Does your phone still work? I want to be able to talk to you."

"I won't be able to call. My phone won't be paid for after next month," replied the woman.

"They said the phone would be covered for the year, no? I can't believe these people. I should take this up with someone."

"With who? There is nobody to talk to, they just talk to me through the television. I've tried, Thomas, but there isn't a way around it."

"I can pay for it. Please let me," begged the man.

"Let's keep our focus here," the woman said.

Her mind kept leaving the lobby. She thought about the money and the phone, but all she had needed to be conserved for her new life. She didn't want to think about her new life. At least she could see her old life a little more clearly.

The blaring ambulance came back to her. She could barely see her brother being lifted into the back through her tears. She feared that his last moments would be spent in the vehicle without her or in the hospital without Mamá. She raced to beat them to the hospital, and brought him home for his final days. He never spoke a word to his sister who spent every day by his side. He was a vegetable, but the woman denied it. She denied that everything was falling apart in front of her. She remembered when the house became empty, save for her mother, but she only took up the bedroom. For months she cried for her brother and cursed at her mother. She did not resent her mother; she resented the world. She resented what happened in Managua.

"Are you okay?" the man finally blurted out in frustration. "You keep looking away."

"I'm all right," she replied. "I just keep thinking of old things."

"We must have missed something," the man said, leaning closer. "Like a lawyer maybe?"

"There's nothing left for me here, Thomas. I've tried everything," she said, her eyes shifting back down at the table.

"You worked so hard. It's not fair. You've worked harder than anyone I know."

"They never cared about how hard I worked."

They fell silent again, and the man's posture became rigid, as if he were fighting not to move. Their silence was broken by the sound of buses, and both of their heads turned toward the revolving door. For another moment they remained silent.

"I should go," the woman said, standing, unable to look at the man.

"Please, wait." The man rose as well and grabbed her arm. "Let me come with you."

She finally gazed upon him, and for the first time that day her eyes lit up. Not with pain or regret, but with admiration. "You can't come. I love you, but you can't. You belong here, and I do not."

He kept a tight grip on her. "I belong wherever you are."

She kissed him on the cheek and he loosened his grip. "This is so hard for me to do, Thomas. Goodbye."

Before he could say anything else she turned around and made it out of the lobby and through the door. The cold wind chilled her face and flew back inside behind her. The buses down the street were filled with many people. She walked down the street to join the line.

As she waited to board she remembered her brother, and mother, and the city, and the ambulance, and the house. The memories became clearer the closer she got to the front of the line. They felt sharp and real for the first time since she had experienced them. She did not falter or cry. She felt like she was being pulled back by something, but continued forward.

She stepped onto the bus with glassy eyes, and found a window seat in the first row. As the bus drove past the Hotel Gilroy, she did not look at it, or at the man who stood in front of it waving. She stared out the windshield at the long gray horizon ahead. ❑

Boots | Ryan Sheppard '26
Bad Hemingway Contest Winner

The dry road stretched for miles, golden grass shimmering in the heat. Dust rose faintly with each step, hanging in the air like smoke. A man walked ahead of his mule, carrying two bags: one packed with tools, the other bursting with provisions. A woman lagged behind, her steps slow and heavy. The sun beat down on them mercilessly, and they had miles to go before the river.

The man paused and looked back. "We'll rest at the trees."

"We passed the last trees."

"There'll be more."

The woman looked ahead, but the horizon held nothing. The mule brayed softly, its hooves scuffing the dirt, and the man tightened the straps on its load. He adjusted the bags and pushed on. Up and down, his boots didn't stop. He was a good soldier, and good soldiers kept walking. The woman paused for a moment, wiped her forehead, and watched his boots move farther ahead.

"Is it even there?"

"It's there."

"How can you be sure?"

"I'm sure."

The mule brayed again, its hooves kicking up dirt with every step. She glanced at it, studying the way it strained under its load. It smelled of sweat.

"It's too far."

"Then don't come."

The mule halted, tugging its reins and braying loudly. The man cursed and shifted the bags. His shoulders stiffened, and his boots stopped, if only for a moment. The woman didn't stop to help. She walked ahead.

They reached the river by sundown. The river broke the plain, loud and restless. The air was cooler there, though sharp with the smell of wet rocks. Water rushed white where it split against jagged stones. The woman sat on a flat stone by the bank. The man crouched by the river, studying the current. The mule drank, its

sides heaving with each breath.

"What if it's too deep?"

"It's not."

The mule brayed as it entered the water. Its hooves slipped on smooth stones, its sides heaving. It struggled, but it didn't stop. The straps dug into its flesh, leaving raw, wet marks on its hide. The man tugged at its reins, keeping his pace even as the current pushed against him.

The woman stepped in after. The water was cold and sharp against her shins. Her boots sank into the mud, dragging her back with every step. She watched the mule's legs tremble, the way it stumbled but kept moving, its burden swaying with each step. She steadied herself, mirroring its movements, though the current shoved at her harder than it did the mule.

The man reached the far bank first. He stood still, watching as the mule dragged itself free from the river, its coat dripping and its head low. The woman was still in the water, her footing unsteady. He didn't move to help her. She didn't look for him. She just looked at his boots.

The mule brayed again, shaking off water as the woman climbed onto the bank. Her boots were heavy and soaked through. She bent down and pulled at the laces, but her fingers were stiff from the cold. The mule shifted in place, the straps cutting deeper into its raw flesh. She looked up at it and then at the man.

"What's next?"

"Keep going."

The man walked on, tugging the mule as it brayed softly. The woman stayed by the river for a moment. She looked at the current, gushing forward despite the rocks in its path. She looked at the mule, watching as it lagged behind the man, its steps slow and uneven. She looked at his boots.

Her boots were heavy and soaked, but they kept moving. They always did. Up and down they went. She was a good soldier, and soldiers kept walking. ❑

Writing Royale

The Writing Royale is Fairfield Prep's annual short-story contest, open to original works of fifteen hundred words or fewer. This year's competition netted sixteen submissions representing members of all four classes. These were read anonymously by a panel of faculty judges who nominated six finalists, whose stories were forwarded to this year's guest judge, Wendy Elizabeth Wallace.



Wendy Elizabeth Wallace (she/they) is a queer disabled writer. She grew up in Buffalo, New York, and has landed in Connecticut by way of Pennsylvania, Berlin, Heidelberg, and Indiana. They are the editor-in-chief of *Peatsmoke Journal* and the co-manager of social media and marketing for *Split Lip Magazine*. Their work has appeared in *ZYZZYVA, New Orleans Review, SmokeLong Quarterly, The Rumpus, Brevity,* and the anthology *In-Between Spaces,* among other places. She teaches English at University of New Haven.

Wallace had this praise for the finalists:

Runner-up: Quinn Lombardo '26, "The Weight"

In "The Weight," we receive a portrait of the corporate doldrums, becoming intimately acquainted with a man who feels trapped in his mundane and lonely routine. The author uses sensory details to make his ennui tangible, and complicates his emotions with the revelation of a brother who took his own life. The main character is forced to contend with his own mortality when we discover that this piece is set on the day of the 9/11 attack, with the plane's collision rendered in blistering detail. The story takes on ambitious themes and material, providing a moving look at how this historical event changed the trajectory of one individual's life.

Runner-up: Paul Pigliucci '26, "Red Eyes"

In "Red Eyes," a father and son take a car ride together, speaking past one another instead of truly communicating. The dialogue is a vessel for strong characterization and plays cleverly with text and subtext; the son says what the father wants to hear, even as they "both knew he was lying." Underneath their words is the shadow of the truth of both of their lives, the depression that haunts them, a shadow neither of them are able to look at face-on. The author leaves us, brilliantly, with a gulf stretching between them, each continuing to hide instead of seeking the shared relief of solidarity.

Runner-up: Alex Salazar '25, "The Remains of the Clay"

"The Remains of the Clay" explores the relationship between an apprentice and master potter as a young man attempts to replicate the skill and artistry of the work that surrounds him. The piece grapples with feelings of inadequacy that arise from the gap between ambition and ability, and the destructive impulses that can follow. In a surprising turn, the apprentice's rash actions allow the master to gain new perspective on the meaning of his work. The author uses descriptive language to portray this craft with authority and to immerse us in the trials and triumphs of the artisan. The piece raises important questions about beauty and utility.

Runner-up: Joshua Salazar '26, "One-Sided"

"One-Sided" inhabits the point of view of a cat who seeks love and attention from a young boy, attempting to overcome the allure of a screen. The animal perspective allows for a unique and incisive critique of the addictive nature of devices, especially in children. There's a humor to the wry way the cat describes the "Baby Shark" video and his owner's glazed fascination with the content. The ending is poignant, as the cat hunkers down, defeated, imagining a future in which he could reclaim the affection he so desperately longs for.

Runner-up: Kyle Sullivan '27, "Before the Storm"

"Before the Storm" hums with urgency and dread as the narrator contemplates an oncoming natural disaster and the choices it forces them to make as they evacuate. The weather feels both palpable and ominous, creating a backdrop of tension as the main character struggles to decide what ought to be packed and what ought to be left behind. The piece arrives at a striking and profound revelation: that the meaning and memory of their possessions are not inherent in the objects themselves but carried within their own mind, a part of them that they will bring everywhere. The piece ends on a refreshing note of hope in the face of destruction.

Winner: Ryan Sheppard '26, "The Sentient Symphony"

"The Sentient Symphony" plays with the transformative power of music, drawing on the surreal to make this impact manifest. The narrative begins with the anticipatory hush before a performance and ends with the echoing resonance in its wake. The language is lyric, lush, and imagistic, creating a magical and synesthetic portrait of the musicians, the audience, the sound itself. The author shows an impressive ability to craft elaborate metaphor, and to take a moment and leave it suspended and shivering before finally plunging forward again. The narrative challenges reality itself, "revealing something else—not a void, not darkness, but an infinity of sound, a swirling cosmos of chaotic melody, eager to consume all in its discord." Like the symphony described, the notes, rhythm, and pulse of this story ring long after we have finished reading.

The Weight | Quinn Lombardo '26
Writing Royale Runner-up

One morning fades into the next, one day indistinguishable from another. Weeks stretched into months, all blending into a continuous, monotonous loop. The same bitter coffee. The same buttered raisin toast. The same grey suit, white shirt, grey tie, and black shoes. The same train, 6:43 A.M., the same blank faces, the same dreadful walk to work. At the office, I slunk into my cubicle, unnoticed. I avoid everyone. I avoid their voices, their meaningless conversations, and their empty words. They are all a distraction from nothing, yet still a distraction. My cubicle is empty and lifeless.

The only thing on my mind is leaving. I watch the clock. Tick. Tock. Each second brings me closer to freedom. Each time the minute hand moves, a sense of euphoria rushes over me, and yet, I have nothing waiting for me at home. I live comfortably. No surprises. No emotions. Nothing to be emotional about. The predictability of my routine is what kills me. I know it does. But I can't bring myself to make a change. It's not that I am scared or lazy. I don't know why I don't; I just don't. I tell myself I will. I know I won't. Sleeping is one of my greatest pastimes, yet I struggle. My mind races, thought after thought, question after question. The thought is always there, in the back of my mind. I've never tried. But I think about it. I wish I could just disappear forever and have everyone forget about me. But I know that's not possible, and I can't bring myself to go through with it. My little brother was only fifteen when he did it. He left us, and life hasn't been the same since. It's part of the reason I have trouble sleeping. I have these questions that consume me every night. What was going on in his mind before he did it? Did he not care what it would do to me? To our family? Could I have done something? Anything? I can never bring myself to give an honest answer to any of these questions, but it always boils down to one question: what if I did it too? I promised myself I never would. I saw what it did to my family. But the weight of the cross I bear every day always makes me wonder. I try talking to my dad. He listens, but he doesn't understand. "At least you're

alive," he says. "At least you're surviving." But I don't want to just survive. Everybody has an arc in their life. They start somewhere, and then something happens to them, or they do something that changes their life forever. Where's mine? Where's my arc?

One day, everything changes. The morning starts like all the others. Stale coffee. Raisin toast. White shirt, grey suit, grey tie, black shoes. 6:43 A.M. train. Blank faces. Office. Avoid. Avoid. Avoid. Cubicle. Clock. But something is different. The sky. It's clear, without a cloud in sight. The sun is strong, and its warmth reflects off the window and onto my skin, absorbing me. I stare at it. I don't know why. Eventually, I go back to work for only a few minutes. I begin to hear a sound. A soft hum, which then turns into a buzz. The buzz grew louder and louder until I could not only hear the buzz but could feel it. And then, a roar. A roar like no other. The floor trembles. My heart pounds. My ears ring. My body freezes in shock. Ceiling tiles crash, desks tip, paper everywhere. I see mouths open in fright, but I hear nothing. Just the ringing. The endless ringing. Am I dead? I limp to the window. The same window where the sun warmed me just minutes ago. I look up. An airplane. Maybe a couple of floors above me. Too close. Too real. I don't move. I don't run. I don't duck for cover. I just stand there, waiting. I stand there, frozen. Is this my chance? My way out? If I die here, my family will grieve, but it won't be my fault. Maybe this is how it ends. The office is in chaos. People are trying to leave, but the stairs are engulfed in fire. Many are crying, shaking, and calling their loved ones. Some are praying. Others are staring at nothing, lost in shock. I feel nothing. No fear. Just the same emptiness, the same hollowness I've carried for years. The clock is still ticking. Tick. Tock. As I step closer to the fire, it feels warm. I find a nice spot on the stairs and sit. This is it, and I am okay with that. The black begins to melt off my shoes. I feel pain, but I'm warm. I blink, and each time I close my eyes, they stay closed longer than the last. I was about half past dead, and all of a sudden I was picked up and carried. I try to fight, but my body is too weak. I can't see or hear anything. Moments later I am on the street, lying on my side, coughing up blood. I can't move or feel anything. All I can do

is see. A man in a red bandana runs up the stairs.

That was the last thing I remember. I woke up in the hospital, where I stayed for a couple of weeks. My family came to visit and was so grateful that I was alive. The first few weeks I didn't know how to feel. Part of me wished the man never saved me, but part of me was filled with happiness for another shot at life. I later found out that the man in the red bandana was Welles Crowther and that he died in the fire. From that moment on, I promised not to stay alive only for myself but For Welles. I began to work again not long after. The coffee is bitter, but I taste it this time. The toast is warm, and now it's on white bread instead of raisin. The suit feels rough against my skin, and the tie is too tight. The train is crowded, and the air smells of sweat and perfume. The office is noisy, and the clock still ticks. And the sky is clear. I watch it through the window. I let the sunlight touch my skin. I breathe. The monotony isn't gone, but I am trying new things. The weight is still here. But for the first time in years, I feel something, and I realize sometimes it's okay to just be surviving. That's life. ◻



Red Eyes | Paul Pigliucci '26
Writing Royale Runner-up

After putting his bag in the backseat of the car, his son stepped into the front seat. The first few minutes of the car ride were silent.

"How was your day today?"

"Good."

"What are you reading now?"

"What?"

"I mean, in English?"

"Oh, we're still on *Macbeth.*"

"Ah, 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow!'"

"Yeah, that's right."

His son fiddled with the radio, but heard nothing he wanted to hear. Eventually, he just picked the song he didn't want to hear the least and stayed on it, and turned it up a little. The car ride was long enough that he thought he would hear a good song, or at least a song he wanted to hear, eventually.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm just tired. Long day."

"You sure?"

"Mm."

"You know you can talk to me about anything, right?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Are you really sure that there's nothing wrong?"

"What?"

"I said, are you really sure that there's nothing wrong?"

"Yeah, I guess. I just feel like, I don't know, I'm really tired and I feel really heavy."

"What do you mean, heavy?"

"I don't know."

"Are you sure you don't know?"

"Yeah."

"I know you know though because you just said it. Why do you feel heavy?"

"Dad, I said I don't know. Can you please, please stop interro-

gating me? You're not my fucking therapist."

"Don't talk to me like that. I know I'm not your therapist but I'll be damned if I didn't feel that you want to talk about this, and besides, I want to talk about this, so answer the question. Please."

"I just mean like, I feel like somebody kind of put some sort of weight on me and I'm just, like, sinking. Like, this really dizzying and nauseating fall, I guess. That's all."

His son sat there, in the passenger's seat, looking out of the window. Outside, wooded suburbia passed by—leafless, winter trees surrounded them. He wouldn't have minded the scene if there was any snow, but there wasn't. It was a very cold and very dry day outside. He couldn't build up the courage to say anything more. He waited for his dad to answer him, but he didn't for a long while. Occasionally his son would make glances from the window to see what his dad was doing, but he wasn't doing much of anything. He was just looking out of the front, watching the road. His son couldn't make out an emotion on his face—he was just looking out to the road, just like normal dad.

"Yeah, I know how you feel. Is this, like, a today thing or pretty common for you?"

"I don't know. More often than not, I guess."

"Yeah, okay." Some time passed before he spoke again. "How do you usually deal with this feeling when it happens?"

"Uh, I don't know, I don't really do anything, I guess. I just let it sit and it goes away mostly."

"When you go out with your buddies, what do you guys do?"

"What?"

"What do you guys do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Like, do you drink or smoke or do anything like that?"

"What? No, of course not."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I would never do that. You know that." They both knew he was lying.

His son looked back out of the window. A few minutes of those same desolate woods passed before they suddenly came out onto a

bridge which passed over a long, relatively narrow river. He was surprised because, contrary to the surroundings he had become accustomed to on this ride, there was a lack of houses surrounding the river. The river somehow seemed more desolate than the woods, and he wondered why, as he always thought that people would much rather live around a river than in some forested suburbia. Back when they first settled this land, water was precious and families were built off of its availability. Why would they move away now? He wondered if his dad was looking at the river too, but he didn't want to look at him. Would dad also be confused as to why the surroundings of the river were so lonely? Would he even realize that the river was lonely? Still, it was only a few minutes until they returned to their regular surroundings.

"You can do that stuff, you know. I don't care if you do—I've done it and you can, too," he said in a mumble, but the type of mumble where you want the other person to question whether they heard it or not.

"What?"

"Nothing."

His father kept his eyes on the road. Every few seconds, though, he couldn't help but glance at his son—his creation. He felt sick, and when he looked at him his stomach churned. He felt that he must be strong now, but as guilt consumed him, he knew he wasn't hiding himself very well. He glanced at his son and saw him staring back.

"Why are you acting like that? It's not like it's your fault that I feel like this."

"Sorry?"

"I said to stop acting like that when you haven't done anything to make me feel like this."

"Yeah, no, of course."

When they got home they didn't see or talk to each other for a while. His father went to the bathroom for a long time, and muffled sobs would have been heard if anybody came close to the door. When he got out, his eyes were damp and red. But nobody ever saw his eyes like that. After a bit he was just normal dad. ☐

The Remains of the Clay | Alex Salazar '25
Writing Royale Runner-up

Making pottery is a battle. You must bend the clay's form, shaping it in your hands. It will resist you if you force it. Make any attempt to compel the clay to conform perfectly to your desires, and it will rebel against you. You must let your hands flow with the clay, letting it shape you as much as you shape it. The best potters maintain constant communication with their clay.

The apprentice remembered his teacher's words. To make good pottery, he needed to follow these principles. He started kicking the wheel, giving him momentum to reshape the clay. He dipped his hands in the water basin and formed the clay spinning on the wheel. *First, raise the clay into a cone and push it back down. Doing this over and over ensures a regular consistency throughout. A crucial step.*

The apprentice then worked the clay until it held its final shape, a jug for drawing water.

The old master compared Hoyt's work to the original jug that he was trying to replicate.

"Very good, Hoyt. It looks remarkably similar to the model."

In shape, they are similar, Hoyt thought. *But the old master's jug is so much more intricately designed and detailed. I can't match that.*

"There's no need to flatter me, sir." Hoyt's eye twitched. "It's nothing to yours."

"But it will collect water just as well. You must remember, Hoyt, as potters we are not artists. We are artisans. This will quench the thirst of many, Hoyt. Be proud of your work." He smiled at his apprentice, a good-natured smile that was encouraging in spite of a few missing teeth. The ravages of age had not left the old master unharmed, but he still had a shine to his face. "Now. Put this in the back room to dry off before the bisque firing." Then he yawned and walked away to leave. "I think I will go home now. You did good work today, Hoyt. Remember to lock the studio."

"Going home, sir?" Hoyt was surprised until he looked out the window. It was night already, and he hadn't noticed. He had been

too busy practicing. The oil lamps on the walls kept the studio bright.

Hoyt ran to the doorway. "Sir! Would it be all right if I stayed a little longer and practiced some more?"

The old master looked back at him from outside. "You want to practice more? I will allow it, but do not push yourself too hard, hear me? You have already accomplished enough today." Then he turned and walked off.

Hoyt turned back and picked up the new jug. He was irritated, but he had hid it from the old master. "I should be proud of my work, huh?" Hoyt said. "I'm nowhere near your level, sir. What do I have to be proud of?" He furrowed his brow.

He set down the jug in the back room to dry. Then he returned to the studio. "And really, you think pottery isn't art, sir? Then how do you explain this!" Hoyt put his hands up in frustration.

The studio's walls were covered in shelves. Filling these shelves were endless pots, dishes, and other pottery vessels. They shined with various colors and designs. There was everything from cups and mugs to giant clay amphoras and cauldrons. Each one was complex and intricately designed, so beautiful you would look twice and think, is that really just clay? And Hoyt had to look at them every single day as he made pottery. Pottery that paled in comparison to these masterworks!

I'll never measure up to this.

The oil lamps were running low. He lit candles to give the room more illumination and got back to work. He sifted through the racks that lined the walls and selected what he thought were his teacher's greatest works—a cup, a jar, and a pot. He placed them on the table in front of the pottery wheel and sat back down to keep practicing.

He spun, spun, spun the wheel and made copy after copy of those three works of his teacher's. The room became filled with cups, pots, and jars all based on the originals. The candles began to run down, forming puddles of wax. As the night drew on, Hoyt got tired. He slouched at the pottery wheel and his eyes were heavy.

He had finished another jar replica. The candles had nearly run

out, it was the dead of night, and the room had become dark. But Hoyt squinted his eyes, and could see the jar he had made. He compared it to one he had made earlier. That one was strong, smooth, and sturdy. It didn't capture the level of detail of the old master's original, but it was a good replica otherwise. This new one? It was crooked, rough, and weak. Hoyt's hands trembled from overuse, and his eye twitched. Then he cried out. "Why! Why am I not improving!"

He got up from the pottery wheel and almost doubled over from fatigue. Then he started laughing a hurtful laugh.

In anger, he dashed the jar against the floor, shattering it. Then he smashed every one of the replicas he had spent the past hours creating. Then he looked up at the three models he had spent so much time trying to replicate. Overcome with anger, he pushed those off the table, shattering them on the floor. He looked up at the beautiful pottery that lined the walls. "Stop looking at me like that!" Hoyt said. "Stop looking down on me!"

Hoyt went over to the corner of the studio, picked up a broom meant for sweeping up clay dust, and swung it against the wall. The old master's pottery tumbled to the floor and shattered. Hoyt hit many of the shelves of pottery with the broom, sending clay to the ground with loud cracks.

Once his anger had worn down, Hoyt stood in the center of the studio and looked around. The oil lamps and candles had run out and the only illumination was a little moonlight. The ground was covered in shards and pieces of pottery.

Wait. I didn't mean to . . . Oh no. What have I done?

At that moment, the old master rushed in. "Hoyt, is that you? What happened? I heard loud noises!" He squinted his eyes, trying to adjust to the darkness.

"Ah, uh . . ." Hoyt was at a loss for words. *Should I pretend I don't know?* He looked down. *No, that wouldn't work. I'm surrounded by broken pieces. Should I tell the truth?*

"What happened to my work? It's destroyed! Was there an earthquake? No, I would have felt that." The old master looked distressed for a moment . . . then his look shifted. He looked like he

was trying to suppress a smile. "Hoyt, did you do this?"

Hoyt was terrified. Depending on what he said, he could lose his apprenticeship and maybe worse. But in the end, the choice was clear. He looked down in shame. "Yes, sir, I did. I let my anger get control of me."

The old master guffawed out loud.

What?

He laughed and laughed, more than Hoyt had ever seen before. "Sir, are you all right?"

The old master stifled his laughter. "Yes, I am all right, Hoyt. But tell me: you got angry and decided that the best way to deal with it was to destroy my pottery?"

". . . Yes."

The old master laughed again. "Now that is a racket! Though I suppose that this is what I deserve for filling the studio with this junk."Hoyt was baffled. "Junk, sir? Your pottery?"

"Let me explain. What is pottery for?" the old man asked.

Hoyt was still confused. "The pottery we make is meant to hold things. Like a jug, for example. It collects and holds water."

"Yes, but were these jugs collecting water? No. They were only collecting dust. All the pottery here is things I was not able to sell. This clay, Hoyt, is all my failures. No one will buy a water jug that looks like this." The old master picked a clay shard up off the ground. "They would say, 'this belongs in a museum.' But we are not making art for museums. We are making tools that are meant to be useful. When I made all this, I was trying to be an artist."

Hoyt was astounded. These grand works of art that he had tried so hard to replicate were his teacher's failures?

The old master looked thoughtful, then spoke. "You have made quite the mess attacking my collection, Hoyt. Now use that broom for its intended purpose and clean this up. I am going to go back home." He turned to leave, but looked back at Hoyt. "Do not break more of my pottery!"

Hoyt watched as the old master left the studio. Then he grasped the broom in both hands and began to sweep up the remains of the clay. ❑


IS THIS
ART

One-Sided | Joshua Salazar '26
Writing Royale Runner-up

As I walk through the hallway, I see a ping pong ball lying on the floor. Probably left there by James, my pet. I purr as I try to pick it up, my paws flailing over it. It rolls away, and I run after it to try to pick it up again.

It rolls into the next room, where it reaches James's feet. The boy is quite big, though he's nothing compared to my other pets, his parents. They're giants. James's face, however, unlike his parents', is quite chubby.

On his lap lies an iPad. James is watching it right now. It's making hurtful sounds, sounds of singing designed to captivate the minds of undeveloped youths. I can't understand how he enjoys this so much. Not only is it uncultured, it's just straight-up bad!

I walk to James's side and rub my side against him. I purr and look up at him. He doesn't notice. I purr more loudly, hoping he'll at least give me a look.

When he doesn't, I look at the iPad's screen to see what he thinks is better than I. On it is a video of weird-looking humans—a baby, a girl, a boy, a woman, and a man. I can only presume the man and the woman are supposed to be the parents of the other three because only a parent would be stupid enough to be partaking in whatever this . . . activity is.

The five are dancing—more like moving their limbs in place while shaking—in front of a huge fish tank with sharks in it while singing "Baby shark, do do do do do do Baby shark, do do do do do do Baby shark, do do do do do do Baby shark" over and over again. The sharks—among whom there's only one who could be considered a baby by his looks—are swaying back and forth with the humans' dancing and singing. How they hear them through the water and the glass wall is beyond me.

I look up at James's chubby face. His eyes are glued to the screen on his lap, but there is no expression on his face. He has a cold, hard stare. Honestly, he doesn't even look like he's enjoying this. Yet he's been watching it for hours. He watches it for hours every day.

I stretch upward, balancing myself on my hind legs as I place my front paws on James's shoulder. *James, play with me. I'm bored, James. I got the ball to you, now kick it somewhere so I can keep trying to grab it.*

That's what I try to say. All that comes out is a "Meeoooow." Admittedly, I've never had a way with words.

The whole while, James still hasn't looked at me. He's still staring at the iPad screen with the "dancing" and "singing" humans and sharks.

I jump onto James's lap, where I stretch and roll around. I'm careful not to dig my claws too deep into his pants so I don't scratch his legs because I know he doesn't like that (and also because one of my other pets, his mother, would kill me if I made him scream). In the process, I block the iPad screen.

Suddenly, James's face changes. He looks at me with a frown and swipes his hand in an attempt to push me away. He hits me repeatedly, grunting, until I jump off, hurt. I stalk away, tail high in the air.

I think I should take a nap. I want to take a nap. I'm going to take a nap. I walk back through the hallway—stopping by the warm radiator for what feels like a minute but could in reality be ten—to the living room, where I jump on the couch and curl up. I see another of my toys on the floor: a ball of string. It makes me remember . . .

. . . James, cooing and waving his arms around, throws the ball of string at me. I hastily spring left, dodging the projectile. It lands nowhere near where I was, but this is James we're talking about, so I shouldn't be surprised.

Part of the ball of string is unraveled. Before I can stop myself, I jump to it, my paws landing on the loose end. I try hard to grab it, to pick it up, but I never seem to be able to succeed.

James crawls over and whacks me playfully, cooing again. I bounce back. He picks up the string ball with ease I envy and throws it in my general direction again. I run to it, try to pick it up, and can't. I'm purring happily, though. James crawls over and grabs it himself.

We keep playing the game for a while. It's really fun! . . .

Sadly, I lie on the couch, curled up in a ball. Maybe, next time the window is open long enough, and no one's looking, I'll jump through and explore the outside world. I've wondered what it's like for a long time. Maybe I'll find new people who want to play with me.

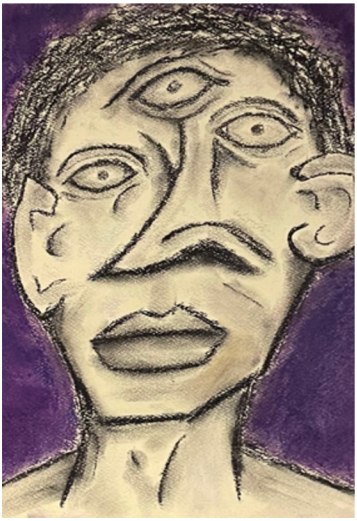
. . . Or maybe I'll stay here and keep sleeping and enjoying the warmth of the radiators and eating. ❑











Before the Storm | Kyle Sullivan '27
Writing Royale Runner-up

Today I sit at the edge of the dock, looking at the water, taking in the sights I have seen thousands of times before and listening to the sounds that were seemingly on repeat all of these years. But this time it is different. I am not looking at the bright blue water or the swaying trees in the same light that I always have since I was a child. I am taking all of it in, knowing that I may never get to see these sights again. With the wind howling and a devastating storm on the horizon, I take everything in for what may be the final time, not because I want it to end, but because it needs to.

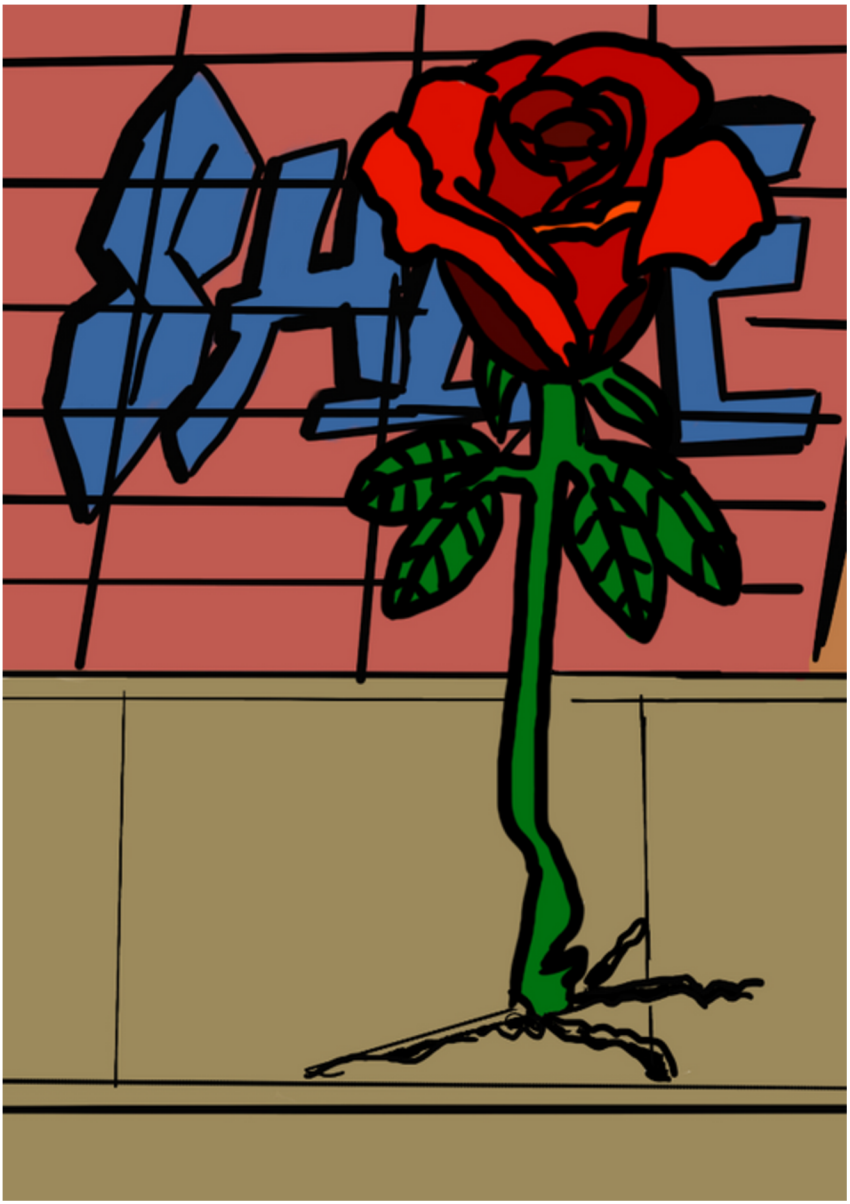
The storm creeps closer and the wind begins to whistle, growing louder with each passing minute, almost as if it were trying to get my attention. The trees that have always felt like a friend to me twist in the wind with branches flying in every direction. The rough bark from the trees scrapes together, creating a low baritone sound, contrasting with the whistling winds. The first raindrops are cold, striking my skin calmly. For a moment, I wonder if this storm is crying alongside me, as if the storm itself understood my feelings. The weight in the air is something deeper than just the storm. It is heavier than normal. It is a feeling that I cannot escape from, as if it were the world's way of asking me to let go of everything I have ever had.

They said to only bring essentials and to leave behind anything else, but at this moment nothing I have is meaningless. Each and every single thing I own has a backstory. It seemed so easy for everyone else to pick and choose what they wanted to keep, so why is it so hard for me? I sit and stare at the photos on my mantle, knowing I may never see them again. Each photo tells a story or moments that shaped me into the person that I am today, and leaving behind even just one of these feels as if I were abandoning a piece of my past. For a brief moment, I think about the risk it would take for me to stay. Is staying worth the risk, if it means I could hold onto these memories forever?

I look around the home I've lived in all of my life, searching for

reasons to stay put. The dents in the wall, the magnets on the fridge, the pictures on the mantle, all tell a story. I could recite where each dent came from, where I got each magnet on the fridge, and the day all of the photos were taken, but I cannot bring myself to take any of those items with me, whether I physically could or not. I turn my head to face a specific dent in the wall. A dent that I had made many years ago. As my finger runs across the dent, all of the emotions come flooding back to me, remembering the fear that I felt, convinced that I would get in trouble. That is when it hits me. It is not the dent that holds the memory, it is me. It is me who knows how it got there and how I felt, not the dent. The dent will forever be in that wall, but I will forever remember that memory. One tiny dent I made in the wall helps me realize that it is not the individual objects that hold the memories, and letting go would mean that I get to keep these memories safe.

Now, I head outside to sit at the edge of my dock, taking everything in for what will be the final time. The storm rages on, making my home a dangerous place, but this time, as I look out, I don't look on with sorrow, but rather with full clarity. I see the water that once calmed my thoughts, the trees that know all of my secrets, and the animals that know more about me than most humans do. All of these things that have been pieces of my life for so long, now belong to my past. Now I know with every part of me that this chapter of my life is coming to an end, not because I want it to, but because it needs to. ◻



The Sentient Symphony | Ryan Sheppard '26
Writing Royale Winner

Not a single plush, red seat in the concert hall remained empty. The crimson curtains loomed, oppressive in their silence—watching, judging. Above, blinding lights bore down with such brutal intensity it was as if the eye of God itself had cracked open to peer inside. The air hung thick, heavy with something unseen, pressing against skulls as though the walls themselves were exhaling.

Expectation settled in the marrow of bones, pooling in the palms of hands as sweat.

Though the auditorium offered ample space, each seat felt like a trap, a velvet prison wrapping around its occupant. Outside, the janitor would swear you could hear a pin drop. But inside, the story was different—anyone sitting in those seats would insist an eerie dissonance already threaded through the chamber, coiling around their thoughts, infecting the quiet. A rhythmic tapping, the tick of a phantom metronome, pressed against the edges of their awareness.

A woman shivered, pulling her coat tight—just for a moment, her exhale fogged in the stale air. A teenager wiped sweat from his brow, feverish, his skin crawling with heat one second, ice the next. A businessman clenched the armrest, knuckles whitening, as though the seat itself were swallowing him whole.

A child—bored, impatient—drummed her fingers against the armrest.

The sound arrived half a second too late.

She froze.

The silence stretched—not long, just a breath too much. Then the lights dimmed.

No. Not dimmed. Retreated.

Light slithered back like something wounded, curling into itself, vanishing as though it had never existed. It wasn't just an absence, it was a loss, the fading of something alive. And in the void it left behind, silence thickened, swallowing even the smallest breath.

The red curtains parted.

For half a breath—nothing.

Then, where emptiness had been, the conductor stood. Hands raised to the heavens like Moses parting the Red Sea, he remained still. Did not breathe. The silence belonged to him. Somewhere, deep in the ribs of the concert hall, something stirred.

A hum. A tremor. A pulse.

Or perhaps it was the audience, holding their breath.

Stage lights flared—not ignited, but wrenched from the void, dragged into reluctant existence. And the musicians—oh, the musicians.

They were already there.

Not standing. Not sitting. Not holding their instruments. Fused.

Wood and bone, string and sinew, brass and breath—indistinguishable. The violinist's fingers did not hold the bow; they were part of it. A cellist's body curved into maple, his ribs the very frame of his instrument. They did not exist beside their music. They were the music.

Time itself seemed to hang in the concert hall like dew caught on a web, glistening yet motionless, stretched to its breaking point. The celestial loom had paused, its threads fraying at the edges, reality trembling on the precipice of something other.

Then—it came.

Not a sound, not at first. A pressure. A pulse throbbing deep in the ribs, coiling in the fragile spaces between thoughts, stealing air from lungs, coherence from minds.

It swelled—not music, but something older.

The smell of ozone before lightning. The hush of animals before an earthquake. The ache of something just beyond reach.

The conductor, basking under the gaze of the eyes of God, let the silence stretch one beat longer.

Then—he moved.

His right hand rose.

And the first note broke.

Not a gentle bloom. Not an invitation. A blade—splitting the sky from crown to heel, as if the first star had screamed when it was torn from the void, as if the hands of forgotten titans had risen from the deep to rip apart the heavens. The air shivered, the seats

exhaled dust long undisturbed, and the world shuddered.

And it did not fade.

It multiplied.

A violin sang, fragile as glass, then splintered, refracting into echoes that were not echoes, each iteration slightly different, layering atop itself in an impossible symphony of variations.

The cello followed—not a sound, but a weight, a second heartbeat hammering against ribs, drilling into marrow.

Then came the percussion, and reality collapsed.

A drumbeat landed. The floor buckled, bending as though the earth itself groaned under the strike.

Another—the walls rippled, their gilded edges stretching outward, as if the world itself were now subject to tempo.

A third—the audience felt it.

The music did not play.

It moved.

It slithered into ears, curled around spines, and sank into bones. It rewrote the rhythm of breath, hijacked the pulse of blood, stitched itself into the electric pathways of the brain.

A woman gasped—but the sound was not hers.

A man clenched his jaw—only to realize his teeth were no longer his own. They were notes, vibrating in harmony, fused to the sound.

A teenager blinked, and for half a moment, the air pulsed in colors—he heard in blinding reds, tasted in deep blues.

A businessman clutched his chest, his heartbeat no longer his to command.

The symphony swelled, and the auditorium bent.

This was not a performance.

This was a summoning.

The bow of the violin swept through the air like a ballerina, grace and precision unraveling the edges of existence.

A man in the second row gasped. The sound never left his throat. His skin shimmered—iridescent hues bleeding into one another, his form loosening like watercolor on wet paper. A single thread of gold unspooled from his chest, then another, and another,

his body and soul unraveling into luminous strands, drawn upward into the soaring notes.

A woman staggered, mouth open in silent terror. The moment her wail left her lungs, it caught in the air—not as a scream, but as a trembling flute's lament, woven seamlessly into the song.

The walls quivered, no longer walls at all. The light of the stage twisted into slithering tendrils, pulsing with the tempo. The floor exhaled, shifting—not wood, not anything known.

A cello's mournful cry sent fissures cracking through space itself. Slivers of reality peeled away, revealing something else—not a void, not darkness, but an infinity of sound, a swirling cosmos of chaotic melody, eager to consume all in its discord.

The air began to sing.

Notes no longer traveled through space.

They were space.

The audience, the hall, the boundaries between flesh and sound, between creation and creator—all blurred into a roaring tide of vibration.

The music pulsed.

With each beat, reality buckled.

A final, triumphant surge from the strings, a celestial roar of sound swelling like the voice of a god.

And the last of them—dissolved.

The conductor stood beneath the fractured heavens, lifting his hands one final time. With a grand flourish, the orchestra struck its last chord.

The note did not fade.

It expanded.

A wave swallowing time, stretching across eternity, filling every crevice where silence had once lived.

No concert hall.

No audience.

No performers.

Only an endless symphony, playing itself into infinity.

And yet—

In the hush between heartbeats, in the whisper of wind through the leaves—

The music lingered.

The world had not ended.

It had only been remastered. ❑

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