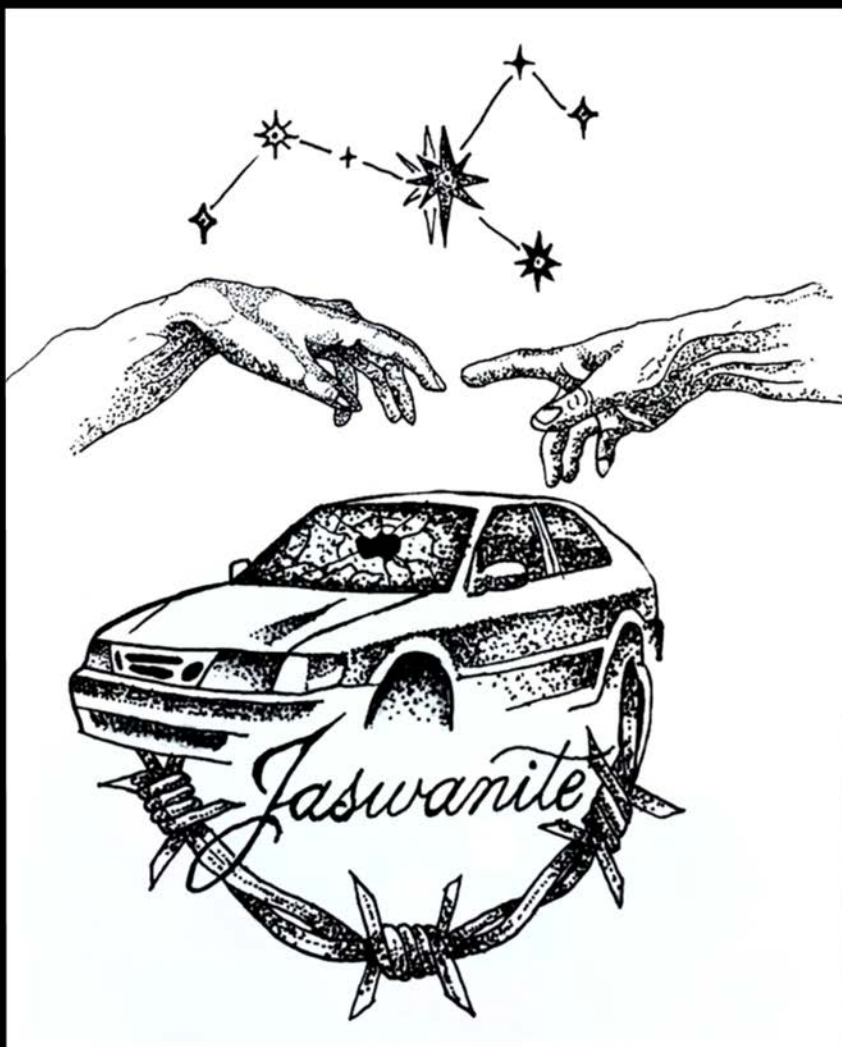


THE BELLARMINE REVIEW

VOLUME 86 | SPRING 2026

THE LITERARY MAGAZINE OF FAIRFIELD COLLEGE PREPARATORY SCHOOL



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VOLUME 86 · SPRING 2026

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, with the exception of "In Conversation with Tyrone Fleurizard '14," portions of which are set in Goudy, and "Theo Never Lost His Spark," portions of which are set in Grimpt Script and Walter Turncoat.

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Foreword

While writing has always been one of my strengths, it has not always been something that I enjoyed. However, my involvement in the Creative Writing Club has sparked a true passion for honing my writing craft. This, coupled with the faith that both Mr. Hoover and Mrs. Robertson have in me, pushed me to give my all to my writing. What began as a hesitant leap of faith when I submitted a piece to Prep's annual Writing Royale competition as a sophomore, despite it not being my favorite subject at the time, has since grown into an active role in the creation of *The Bellarmine Review* and an appreciation for writing in just one year.

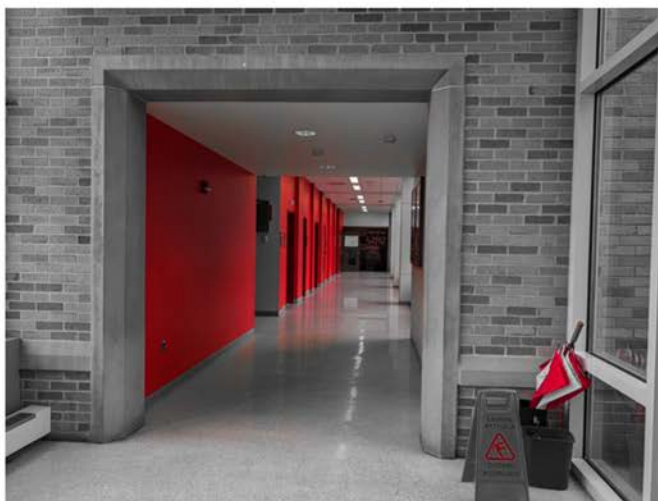
This magazine would not have been possible without the help of all of the faculty and judges, including Fairfield Prep alumnus Tyrone Fleurizard '14. After being published himself in Volume 72 of *The Bellarmine Review* during his senior year at Fairfield Prep, Mr. Fleurizard generously returned to guest judge the Writing Royale competition this year. While the involvement of the judges has greatly helped shape the magazine, the true heart of *The Bellarmine Review* lies in the work from the students themselves. This volume showcases a collection of prose, poetry, and art created entirely by the student body at Fairfield Prep. For many of these writers and artists, submitting their work required the same leap of faith that I took as a sophomore, and their willingness to share their work with the Fairfield Prep community is what makes this magazine remarkable.

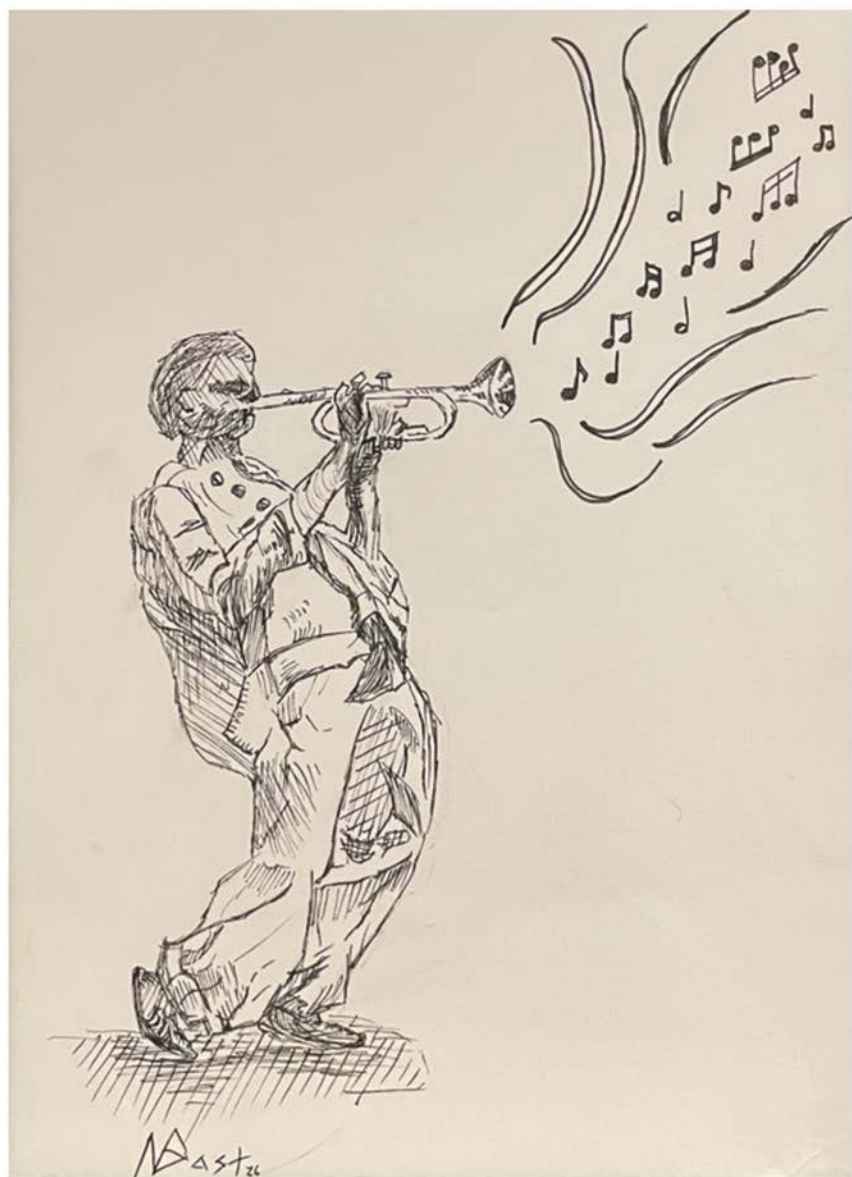
This year's edition of the *Review* captures the hard work and year-round dedication of the student body. At Fairfield Prep, our teachers constantly push us to express ourselves creatively. It is easy to let a creative spark fade when you're hesitant to share. Without the constant encouragement from our community, so many of the unique student voices would have remained quiet, never finding the confidence to jump from a rough draft onto the pages of this *Review*. Our teachers build an environment where students are encouraged to thrive and that support helps lead to the creation of meaningful work. Ultimately, this magazine is a

celebration of our entire creative community. It honors both the incredibly talented writers and artists featured in these pages, and the dedicated review team who made this publication possible.

As you turn these pages, you are entering a gallery of the Fairfield Prep experience. Each piece is a reminder of what happens when we step outside our comfort zones and trust the power of our own words. Watching this volume come together has given me a profound appreciation for the talents thriving within our community. Every day, I get to walk the hallways alongside incredibly talented peers, knowing that each person carries their own unique story and their own distinct way of telling it. This magazine makes me incredibly excited for the future of the Fairfield Prep community, knowing that the foundation we are building with each edition of *The Bellarmine Review* will hopefully inspire future Prep writers to speak their minds. The stories within this volume prove that when we find the courage to share our truths, we build a legacy that inspires the entire Fairfield Prep brotherhood to shine. ■

Kyle Sullivan '27







Eternal Ode | Kody Charlery '27

Her face will plague the mind with no rest.
Her soft touch will no longer leave a trace.
Aches of grief will put the body to the test.
Thou shalt beg the divine for hints of grace.
Man will turn, and toss, and toil in his flesh.
Others will fall too, the sorrow too much to bear.
The birds will screech and cry, mournful from their nests.
Yet time will tell the tale of how one fares.
They shall write her odes, retold by bards.
Her story traveled farther than her feet.
A peasant girl now known by kings and queens.
Her visage presented to those she will never meet.
Death allowed her to live beyond her means.
The body will be ground and turned to dust.
But memory is eternally just.



The Candle | Wesley Woodard '28

The candle shines brightly, tall and proud, a light in the shadows, a flicker of hope — a flickering dance, a glimmer and glow, light of the world, never forgotten.

A forgotten friend, the hunch-backed tin, cold and alone — the chamberstick. Ugly to behold, yet bearer of light, the humble servant drowned in his friends' indifference and pride.

The candle burned brightly down to the root, and the prouder it shone, the quicker it burned. It was glorious — but now a stump, a goo, a nothing, weak and dying.

The candle cried out in a dying flicker, his life cut short, his final days. He danced his dance, a foolish show — he had no one; he was all alone.

In his final days, in a glance down, he saw his faithful, dependable friend and whispered a thanks. The chamberstick smiled — forgiving and kind, forgotten and hurt, but all the same, a friend.

The Bleeding Cloth | Tommy Mazza '27

Though she once crossed the icy Delaware,
She is getting ripped left and right,
Now the people have a symbol to wear,
To stand as hope within the darkest night.

Always lifted highest upon the pole,
Men never had a thought to disrespect,
From the fishings boats to the ones working coal,
The people gave her nothing but respect.

Once the face of the home and the brave,
United by name yet some never agree,
leading many Americans to their grave,
The bald eagle starts to fade and bleed.

Yet she always dances in the wind,
Still creating that beautiful hymn.



Budding Leaves | Alejandro Casas '27

Covered in ice, frosted by snow,
Branches lie dormant, no movement.
The new days bring the sun in tow,
A slow, gradual improvement.
Promptly, the buds begin to show,
Just as chirps and shouts fill the air.
A new scene appears, the status quo,
The flowering trees are no longer bare.

Return to Gaea's Womb | Ryan Sheppard '26

Could I melt into the world of spring?
A world of no king—who could rule a sparrow
who sings with a rightness so absolute?
As sure as Apollo's arrow, it flies with grace,
belonging to the noblest choir: the choir of green,
lifting no hymn to the Father above,
only a quiet devotion to the Mother beneath my feet.
What a marvelous sight. My bare feet sigh
with every step, held by the cool of the grass,
kissed by the sun's slow warmth. Fingers of green
thread between my toes, intertwining flesh with fescue,
as if the earth wished to keep me.
To be one with nature—a folly, I concede—
yet the thought arrives with an unguarded delight.
Blossoms tremble with their own abundance.
Petals loosen, already dreaming of fruit.
Nothing here hesitates. Nothing doubts.
Even what falls is taken in again,
returned to the quiet of soil.
Do you see how they dance?—the bees, I mean—
yellow-black acrobats drifting through the air,
moving among the pastel flowers
that sway as though in applause.
Such harmony, such certainty of purpose,
and I linger among them
like a misplaced note in a perfect chord.
I tried to learn their music.
With arms outstretched to the sun
I danced with fervor amongst them,
hoping the air itself might teach me
how to belong.

The bees circled without fear,
their soft bodies passing close to my face,
and I answered with a clumsy reverence.

I sang with the birds,
my voice threading through their bright calls,
hoping to be mistaken for one of them—
to be a creature of instinct rather than memory.

For a moment the illusion held.
The wind carried my breath into the branches,
and I imagined the leaves repeating my name
in a language I had never learned.

Beyond the orchard's edge
came the faint sounds of the world I had left:
a lawnmower droning somewhere down the road,
the slam of a car door,

a dog barking at nothing it could understand.
There, the air tasted of smoke and hurry;
here, it tasted of blossom and sun.

I felt a widening distance in my chest,
as though the species to which I belonged
had withdrawn its claim.

A warmth had come before all this—
a slow tide moving through my veins,
smoothing the sharp edges of memory.

I remember the small ritual now:
the careful drawing of milk into glass,
the tight band around my arm,
the brief sting—
a falling star beneath the skin.

Then—
the world opened.
Petal by petal.
Spring, everywhere.
At last, I lay down.
The grass held me as before,
rising softly through my fingers,
fitting itself to the shape of my bones.
Sunlight rested on my closed eyelids,
and with a certainty beyond reason
I felt that none of this had been accidental.
You were speaking to me all along.
Mother—vast and patient—
was it not your hand that guided the bees,
your breath that stirred the blossoms,
your tenderness that threaded the grass
between my wandering toes?
Each touch, each moment...
Were they sirens of your dominion,
guiding me to my salvation?
I turned my head and saw them then—
the poppies.
How long had they waited for me?
I drew them close, their silken faces brushing my lips.
From their scarlet breasts I drank
a gentle milk—
the milk of forgetting,
the milk of rebirth—
and in it tasted the first true kindness
I had ever known.
Mother, I understand now.
It was you who led me here, was it not?
It must have been!

Who else could have softened the ground for my arrival,
or gathered all this beauty
to lead me on a journey home?
The sparrow's hymn—
the bees who waltzed—
the tender touches of grass and sun!
All were your words,
all were your mercy!
The orchard begins to blur.
Colors run like a watercolor painting beneath the sky.
The bees drift in slow, forgiving halos.
Even the wind seems to pause,
as though unwilling to disturb my rest.
I feel your arms around me now.
You are immense, Mother.
You are love.
No voice condemn me here.
No memory follows.
I am held, at last,
within the vast quiet of your embrace.
Let me sleep, Mother.
Let me dissolve into your breathing earth.
If I was misplaced among men,
then place me here!
Place me with the roots and petals,
place me where all is one,
and even the shunned may still see the sun.
The sun settles gently upon my face.
The grass continues its quiet embrace.
And as the scarlet poppies bow above me,
I close my eyes, finally certain
that I have been welcomed
into the only home
that ever deserved to keep me.

Click | Andy Chulco-Sailema '28

Click.

The keyboard speaks, and the file is gone.
Evidence bleeds through the screen like a wound,
A stain no silence can erase.
The weeds grow in the garden of power.
They hide behind the house of power,
while the truth stands outside, knocking.

Everyone knows.
Everyone waits.
Everyone is too afraid to speak.

They back one another,
Yet hold no accountability.
They trade conscience for currency.
Their hidden crimes stain the air with treason.

She raised her voice and spoke at last.
The voice was cut off fast.
Alone, she was weak.
No more than a week,
And she was pushed back into nothing.

Someone.
Anyone.
Say something.

But nothing is done.
Only the blur of our own busy hands
Keeps company with a world pretending not to see.

Morning breaks.
Who will be first
To step forward
And shatter the silence?

Stained | Kane D'Amico '28

His words stained
like a blood drop on a white collared shirt.
They burned into the treads,
making it impossible to ignore.
His scratch cut too deep,
Tearing at the weak skin.
It bleeds quickly,
gushing like a storm drain after a rainfall.
No tissue or bandage could stop
the damage he had done.
It was stained,
and could not be washed away.



The Freedom Fruit | Jonah Farber '28

A garden was planted some years ago.
There a seed sprouted, a fruit was grown.

The fruit was green, and red within.
It was called the watermelon.

More seeds grew fast; they grew tall
Until a storm came, displacing them all.

The storm brought vines from a distant land,
After many were snapped as if by hand.

They took this aggression and passed it on;
They saw the watermelon and wanted it gone.

The watermelon was strangled over time,
But it never was crushed, it held the line.

It sought to break free, from years of pain,
But the vines were nourished and saw more to gain.

The vines kept climbing through the garden;
They were greedy, their hearts were hardened.

Millions of seeds were grabbed by the root,
Thrown across the garden, forced somewhere new.

The watermelon became the fruit of freedom,
A symbol of hope against occupation.

The seeds believed that they would be free,
No longer strangled and finally seen.

Perhaps one day their land will be back,
The vines will let go and find a new path.

Maybe this day is long to come,
When the watermelon can again be one.

The seeds will laugh together and play,
The melons they came from will smile that day.



Parasite | Finn Walsh '27

A parasite infiltrates the minds of youth,
Its faint whisper suffocates their spirit.
Unavoidable pain buries its tooth,
Concealed by smiles, I could not see it.
I remember the day I heard the news,
My face was blank, my jaw dove to the floor.
I had thought it was a joke, or a ruse.
But it was real, and I couldn't ignore it.
My friend was gone, his entire life ahead.
My feelings shifted, from sadness to fear.
I should value life; I waste it instead.
Death is a snake in the grass; it may be near.
The parasite's evil took my friend.
But I'm enlightened, through fear of the end.



Strangers | Ty Mullin '27

The lake is unknown, untouched, and so strange,
You begin to wander and learn the lake.
The view of the water begins to change,
You live and you start to love for its sake.

You add to the land and you settle there,
Her beauty is unlike I've ever seen.
But autumn's icy fingers comb her hair,
A ghostly shroud upon the velvet green.

The lake's cold kiss is truly disturbing,
A sudden storm that steals what was observed.
The shift of the season is unswerving,
For this is a gift that was not deserved.

The water masks its face from you and then,
The two of you are just strangers again.



Set My Heart Ablaze | Otu Sebbie '26

I wasn't fast. At my first track meet, I came in second-to-last in the 400-meter dash. As I crossed the finish line, most people had already stopped watching. I felt embarrassed, sure—but mostly I just asked myself why I even joined the team.

I had no experience, no big goals. I just wanted to try something different. I'd always kind of done the bare minimum—not failing, but never really pushing myself either. I didn't have a strong passion or dream. Track was just something new.

What surprised me was how much it showed me about myself.

The thing about track is that it's honest. You can't fake effort. The clock doesn't care if you're tired or sore—it just keeps going. I learned that real quick. Practices were hard. I came in last more times than I could count. But something in me started to change. I didn't like how easily I used to give up. And this time, I didn't want to quit.

So I kept showing up. Even when it rained. Even when my legs felt like jelly. Even when no one would've noticed if I skipped. I ran, again and again, trying to get better—not to win, but to not give up. That mindset started to spread into other parts of my life. I stopped just “getting by” in school. I started putting in real effort. I began to care about my progress.

One day at practice, I was struggling on hill sprints, way behind everyone else. My coach yelled out, “Run your own race!” At first, I thought he was just trying to cheer me up. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense—not just for track, but for life. I didn't need to be the fastest. I just had to keep going.

Track didn't turn me into some star athlete. But it taught me to work hard even when things feel impossible. It taught

me to show up, especially on the days I don't want to. Most of all, it taught me to care—not about beating others, but about becoming better than I was yesterday.

The irony of my track story is that Usain Bolt is a figure I look up to, and we could not be more different. He runs in the Olympics Games while I am here barely keeping up with my opponents. His nickname, "The Lightning Bolt" shows he can run around the track in a flash, metaphorically leaving fire in his wake and inspiring people around the world. Whenever I get out of bed, lace up my shoes, and put my feet on the track, I hope that like Usain Bolt, I can inspire the people around me and ignite a fire in them to try, even if they feel disheartened.

So when I feel disheartened, discouraged or I feel like I can't take it anymore, I remember love, passion and effort can be the catalyst to set my heart ablaze and that even when I fail, I can set this world on fire. ■



The Philosophy of Sandworms | Johnny Williams '26

Sandworms have taught me so much. While working at my grandpa's bait and tackle shop I have handed out thousands. I used to think the only thing important about the process of picking out the sandworms, boxing them up, and selling them was making the sale. After getting to know some of our regular customers, their purpose meant either going home empty-handed or feeding their family.

Over the years of working at Orbit Marine, I have learned how everything has a purpose. Everything at the shop is used until it can't be anymore, and then it gets repurposed for another job. From recycling big plastic bags into smaller ones to using zip ties a second time, nothing at the shop gets wasted. We use broken broomsticks to scrape the barnacles off the bottoms of the dive boats, and old shirts get cut into new rags. This isn't just a habit but a philosophy the shop has been running on for the last fifty years, and one that I have adopted myself, that constantly reminds me everything little thing has a purpose.

Every spring a new diving season is born. The charter boats have gotten their well-deserved sleep on the fractured parking lot all winter long after each summer and fall. When May rolls around, each year, I am tasked with waking them from their hibernation. I strip the plastic blankets that have sealed the old freights from the outside world and protected it from its unforgiving nature. I take down the tarp supports made of reused rotted wood and held together with rusted nails and deconstruct them until next year's slumber.

At Orbit Marine, the little things count the most to me. I think helping a kid tie his first basic fishing knot or sneaking an extra sand-worm to the laborer who just got off work is what makes Orbit feel so genuine to most people, including myself. It is usually viewed as a store, but I prefer to look at it as a museum of scuba diving history. Old sea scooters displayed along the walls, primitive BC vests hang from the ceiling, and the artifacts brought back from the depths are the first things people see when they walk in. I see

history in the stained diving vests and the ragged wetsuits worn from the thousands of civilians developed into certified divers over the countless years the business has stood.

This place isn't just a job to me, but somewhere that has shaped me into a conservationist. This is proven to me when I do things like melt down lures and weights found buried in the sand and then form the molten lead into new shiny weights for fishing and diving. Even things like this, that can be easily overlooked, have taught me the necessary importance of finding a new purpose for stuff that seems useless.

I believe that this sense of repurposing is something even embedded in the name of the shop. The way that everything is able to return to a state where it is used for something new. Or how the same fishermen come back every year when the spring season starts. This idea that everything comes back around is something I have begun to realize in everything I do. When I see things that would mostly be discarded, I think of ways that they can be recycled to find a new purpose. Everything inside the shop never really leaves but just comes back in a different role. Whenever I have felt like I am stuck, I know that there will always be a new purpose for me in my future. This shop hasn't changed much, yet the lessons I learned have helped me grow tremendously since I started working there. ■



Mr. Kid | Quinn Lombardo '26

Of all the teachers in my life, I never thought the one who would teach me the most would be one I created: a middle-aged man who acts like a kid. His name is Mr. Kid, and he was given this name because, despite his middle age, he still enjoyed everything a normal kid would enjoy. Whether that be watching cartoons or peeling dried Elmer's glue off his hand, Mr. Kid's indifference towards the opinions of others was what made him truly remarkable.

I created Mr. Kid while telling a bedtime story to my little sister. She loved my stories, and they either made her laugh so hard that she would have to run to the bathroom or gave her nightmares so terrifying that she would have to jump into my parents' bed. I began writing my stories down, and ever since the first night of scribbling as many words as I could fit on the back of my math notebook, I have not stopped. Every day after school and rugby practice, I write until the words on the page blur together. My showers turned into brainstorming sessions that drove my dad and the water bill up a wall.

Despite my love for writing, I always kept it a secret. I was so afraid of judgment; I consistently lied to my friends. During free periods while working on a story, I told my friends that it was an essay for English class. I thought I would lose them if they found out. I planned to keep my secret hidden until one day a poster caught my eye. It was a poster about a creative writing competition at school. I was hesitant at first, but I thought about Mr. Kid and how his joy comes from his unapologetic authenticity. I asked myself: If Mr. Kid can be himself, then why can't I? I submitted the story, and during the following weeks, when I heard the phone click on the morning school announcements, my heart dropped, and I held my breath. When the announcements were over, I felt a wave of relief because I could go another day believing I had a chance of winning. At the same time, however, my anxiety built, and a pit grew in my stomach every time I thought about the contest. Questions consumed my mind: "What if I don't win? What if I do win? What will people think of me?" Eventually, the day came, and





I heard on the loudspeaker, “And your short story contest winner is Quinn Lombardo!” Not only was I shocked, but so were my parents, siblings, friends, and coaches. The fear of my secret getting out soon vanished, and joy and confidence took its place. I didn’t have to hide who I was anymore.

My characters have shaped who I am. Many hide their struggles, experience loss, or go through pain every single day, just as people do in real life. (Mr. Kid is an exception.) I have felt the weight of a soldier having to bury his best friends, experienced the awkward moment where a boss has to fire his own brother, and laughed at how Mr. Kid insists on writing everything in blue crayon. These moments play over and over in my head long after I close the notebook, and they’ve made it second nature to notice the unspoken feelings of the people around me. Writing these stories is why I feel human and why I will always be comfortable being myself, no matter what. I still tell my sister bedtime stories with her favorite character, Mr. Kid. For now, you and she will be the only ones who know about him, and that’s enough. Even if Mr. Kid never becomes a household name, no one can take away my pen and notebook. ■

Wipeout | James Geaney '26

I was falling into the cold and could not see where I was. As I opened my eyes, I saw only a void of blue and black surrounding me. I fell and fell as I felt the cold reach out and touch my back. I dared not look back, but I also would not look forward, for the pressure on my chest was strange to me. I closed my eyes. A crash of noise reached me as it rolled above me. Rolling away, its exit left me alone and no sound caught my ears. My body lay on a shade of blue as it sunk to darker and darker hues. As I lay there, I thought. After everything had left, I could think. A memory came to me.

“Ready, bud?”

“Yep.”

“Did you reapply?”

There was enough sunscreen on my body that I was forming a glare.

“All right. Remember. Do not turn your back on the wave.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“Even if you are just relaxing, remember to keep your eyes on the water.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

“I can push you in on some waves, but if you take some alone, don’t look away and let one surprise you.”

“Yeah, Dad.”

Surprisingly enough, while the amount of sunscreen I had on was tremendous, my dad still managed to apply more. His face had about the whole bottle of Sun Bum on it, his eyes were covered by thick Persol glasses, and he had a giant sun covering hat. I was standing next to the boogeyman.

“One more thing. If you ever get caught by a wave, never fight against it.”

“Yeah, Da—what?”

“If you get pulled under the water, remember not to fight against the wave. Just let it bring you up slowly. It might feel strange to let yourself get thrown around under the water for a second, but if you struggle against the water, it will only pull you down further.”



I was about eleven years old at the time, so San Onofre was already a big step. I did not expect allowing a wave to throw me around was a part of the deal. A few years later I stood in that same water. I never understood why I had the same exact feeling standing there as I did years ago. No matter how much I changed from year to year, as the water hit my body and I cleaned off my board, the same shiver went up my back. The long walk on the rocks felt the same. The water felt just as cold. I felt like the same kid, except the board was probably much heavier for me before. The same feeling resurfaced as well. I felt as if nothing changed. I stood there, prolonging the inevitable plunge into the cold water and waiting to get on my board. I waited for myself as I stood there with the vast ocean in front of me and the dry mountains to my back. I looked back at the giant power plant and the cars lined against the beach. I could hear the slightest crashing behind me, far behind the mountain we descended to get to the beach. They carved out spaces far from the beach for tests. When we land at the airport I hear how different the space around the highway used to be. Where large rows of citrus groves and strawberries used to grow, there are now car dealerships. The row of mansions that line the top of Strands that are almost always empty also had to replace something. Never have I looked up to the ridiculously large houses high above the beach and seen someone using the infinity pool lined by twenty beach chairs. Never have I seen the land behind the sand that was once bulldozed for buildings to make space. As I thought about the places my dad used to know but had since been wiped out, I thought about those words from my dad. I stood there leaning on my board floating on the surface of the water. I used the support to help my feet standing on the rocks. I heard a buzzing above and looked to the sky. A helicopter flew over us.

I was thinking about that moment until something intruded on the memory. The sun broke through the layers that lay on top of me and touched the lids of my eyes. I felt the warmth and its invitation to leave the cold I was falling towards. My eyes were shut tight as I began crawling upward. I was relying on the sun's rays against my closed eyes to lead me to the surface. I was crawling

through different variations of blue that were gradually getting lighter, but I could not see that with my eyes closed. I kicked as hard as I could, yet I felt as if I could not control this endlessly persistent ocean that had its indifferent fist on top of me. I felt my lungs ready to burst and let out one large breath. Suddenly my head felt the cold and reassuring breeze as I breathed in the ocean air around me. I rubbed my eyes that stung against the salt water and looked for my board. I reached my ankle under the water and pulled my board to me with the leash. Under the water I felt afraid that I lacked control.

I felt like this again. I was at my desk with a book in my hand. It was around the time at school when everyone sheds their outer layers as the winter cold leaves. It was also around that time when summer felt a day away. I was holding a book, but I was distracted. The words began to blur and my ears deafened the reading as I began to think. I was feeling that same lack of control. As I thought about it, everything else was tuned out. I began to focus on this struggle. Looking to define myself, I wanted to know as much as I could about both the world and myself. In other words, I wanted to know where I fit in the world. There was something unhealthy about the part of me that wanted to have a finalized version of myself so soon. I wanted control over who I was going to be. This concerned part of me grew to chase after this fantastic version of myself where my picture was set in stone. The endless possibilities that laid upon me in the beginning of high school felt like I was being crushed under a wave. I felt that choosing one interest or one identity would act as a handrail to hold on to in such an unpredictable time. It was a way for me to try to control something that was outside of my control. I still felt lost after these attempts and my thoughts kept spiraling. Then it was my turn to read and my eyes focused back on the page.

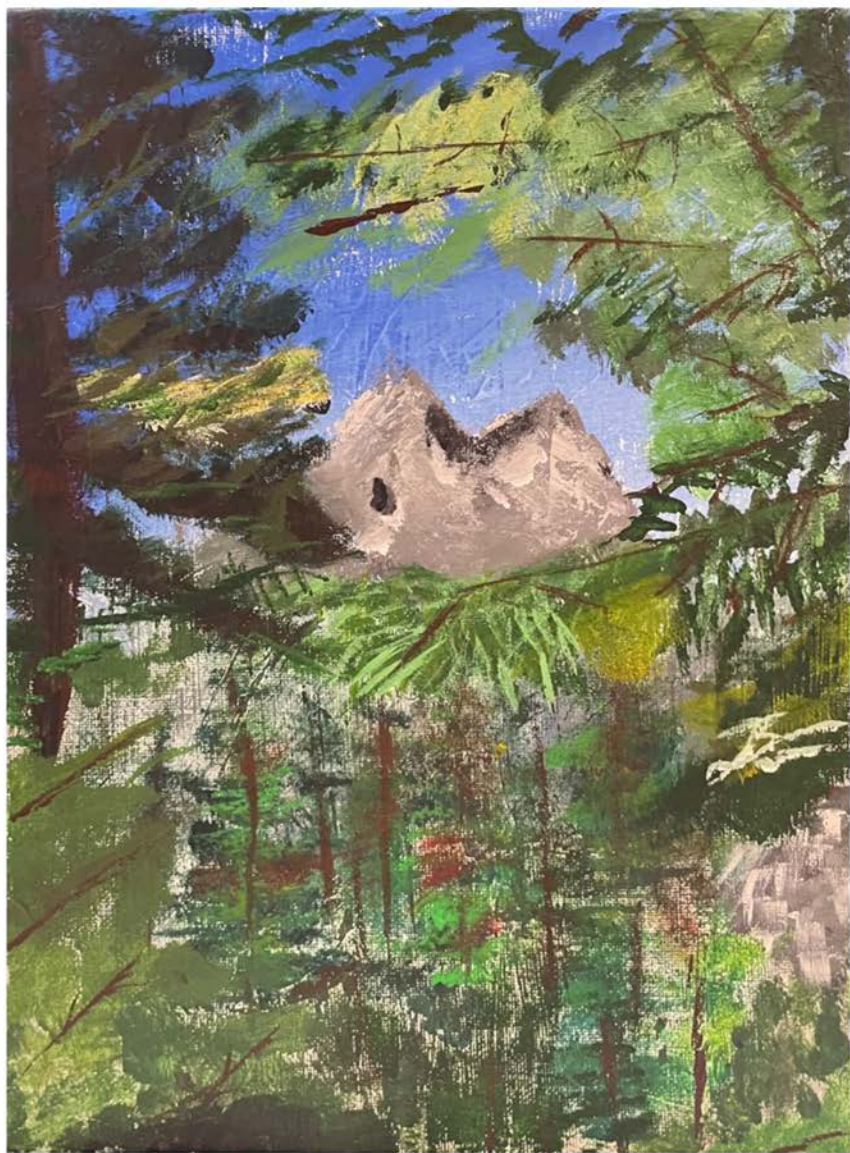
I have always been interested in the ocean. Every year my family visited California, I would drag my parents to ocean institutes after surfing at the beach all day. I have always been drawn to the water, yet sometimes I hesitate at the shore before convincing myself to plunge into the cold ocean. As I stand there, with the waves crawling

over the rocks and up the sand to my feet, I feel out of control. I felt like I did when I heard about classmates and friends figuring out exactly who they wanted to be. I was envious because I lacked that feeling of assurance. The water is always cold and unpredictable during our trips. It can take away any control I may have even if I never look away.

Yearly trips to the beach bring this feeling back to the surface of my mind. Part of me worries about being in a place where control is something I lack. There is also a part of me thankful to be able to fail on the water and keep going. It truly is scary to be knocked down so far into the dark blue ocean that I feel myself suffocate with a lack of control. I would still rather accept the fact that the water is in control than linger on the beach until it is too late. If I was to never take the chance, the moment would wash away. I cannot control what happens out on the water, but I can learn to become a better surfer. I can learn to not fight against life or close my eyes against it. With my eyes open, I can see the world with all its uncertainty and make it my own. Every part of life is worth seeing. To live with my eyes closed would be not to live as myself. ■







A Surgeon's Mishap, A Tragedy's Aftermath: Nevada, 1936 | Cooper Straza '28

Nevada. What's Nevada even known for? Rain, lots and lots of rain. I've been driving through this bloody state for days, seeing nothing but rain, rain, and more rain. The name's Ciro by the way, just your average homicide detective. Been trying to make it to California to meet an old partner of mine, but I really don't know why I thought it was a grand idea to drive there. Nearly out of gas too, oughta stop by a service station soon.

The unfortunate thing about Nevada is that there isn't exactly much, eh, what's the best term, civilization? I've maybe seen a handful of houses and barns, but that's it. Makes me wonder why anyone would wanna live here in the first place, considering how depressing this state is. Rain, doom, and gloom. That's all it is.

Thankfully, my negative thoughts were put at ease: I could faintly see a lit two-story building ahead of me. Better than nothing. As I pulled up, I could see worn letters up front reading, "DOCTOR'S OFFICE," except the O in OFFICE fell down on the portico. A doctor's office isn't a service station, but I'd expect the owner to at least have some gas, considering the guy had a garage right next to the clinic.

I stepped out of my car, welcoming myself in. Surprisingly, the place was rather full. Four people, two men and two women, were dispersed throughout the waiting area, all sitting down. What puzzled me most was the fact that there was only one other car outside, which I presumed to be the owners. Only a madman would walk to a doctor's office in this weather, but what do I know?

The waiting room contained a receptionist desk, though nobody was behind it. Fortunately, a silver hotel bell was in place, which I rang a few times. A fair voice hollered from down the hall, "Just a minute!" Soon after, a girl appearing to be in her late 20s came in, sitting down at the desk. She was, at least by my standards, rather beautiful. Long brown hair, complemented by her hazel eyes. A

white dress decorated with rose imprints all over. Quite the sincere face too. "I do apologize for the wait, please fill out this form," she said, handing me a clipboard. I snapped out of my haze, scrambling for a response.

I came out with nothing but more than a blunt response. "I'm afraid I'm not here for a doctor's appointment. I just need a canister of gas, car is nearly about to break down. Got more than enough cash to compensate you."

She blinked a few times at me, as if I was requesting some outrageous demand, but eventually just shrugged. "Sure, I can grab you some. But hey, might as well get a simple checkup, huh? It'll take me a bit to go all the way from the basement back up here. Doc Achilles will be seeing you shortly."

Before I could protest, she got up and left, leaving nothing but the clipboard and form behind. I sighed, taking a look at it. The sheet was pretty typical, just asking for a name, age, any concerns, all that. I almost wrote down, "Ciro, age 29, forced into a checkup against my will!"

I'm way too immature for my age, but at least it keeps me from going insane. Being a homicide detective is brutal work and the pay is horrid too. I'm fortunate to even make over a thousand bucks. Covers my living expenses sure, but prevents me from having the luxuries of good booze and cigs.

I rambled in my head for a bit more, until I could hear footsteps coming towards the waiting room. The . . . man that came before me was certainly like nothing I'd ever seen before. A tall fellow, even taller than my impressive six feet, stood at ease before me. He wore a fully black outfit. Black pants, black waistcoat, black top hat. Even a black bird mask, a thing I've only seen depicted once or twice in my old schoolbooks. The only thing not black on this guy was his rose lapel, which seemed to be almost engraved inside him. "Thought plague doctors went extinct!" I joked.

He didn't seem to find my comment amusing, just looking down on me. "Do hand me your form and follow me," he said, in a deep

menacing voice. I kindly obliged, clearly having nothing better to do. Only going down the hallway to the examination room did I realize how big this place was. A bathroom, four total examination rooms, employee offices, even a secondary open area displayed as "THE CALM ROOM." The doctor took me into the second examination room, telling me to sit. There was a wooden chair and bed as options, so I just took the bed.

"Just here for a checkup, I see," he said, reading over my crudely finished form. "Well, then, let's examine you. Hang up your coat and take off your shoes. We will take down your weight and height."

The examination went on as I expected it would. Found my weight was a healthy 180 pounds, height was still my pristine six feet. I thought that was pretty much all, until he started bringing up medication.

"I'll prescribe you vitamins. They cure everything. You'll be remade into a new man. A . . . better man."

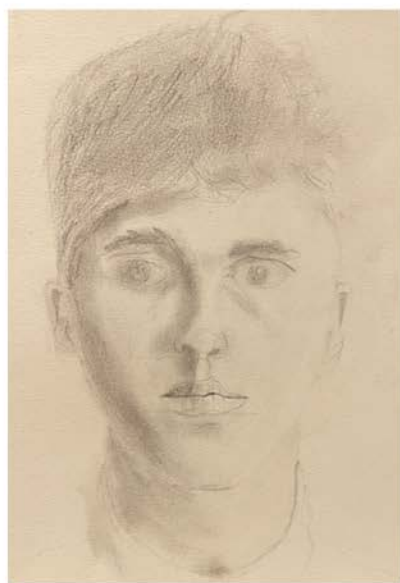
I froze in shock. I had mentioned nothing about feeling any illness, not even a single symptom. Yet here he was, about to prescribe me something?

"Eh, really, doc, there's no need," I stammered. "I already feel strong and healthy."

He ignored me, continuing on. "I will fetch a prescription from my office. Wait here." It sounded more like a command than a request. His assistant fortunately came in almost immediately after he left. She entered with a bright smile, though I could see she possessed no canister of gas.

"It seems the doctor's study is locked. Therefore I cannot get any gas! Fortunately, we can just fetch some from the garage. I just need a bit of help opening the front gate."

I had not a clue why this lady had not just taken me to the garage in the first place. Some people just really lack common sense, I guess. But if it could get me out of finishing this checkup, I was all for it.



I smiled back, responding, "Well, then, lead the way!"

It wasn't until I was back outside did I realize the rain had finally stopped. Quite convenient; really didn't wanna open up this garage while getting poured on. The two of us lifted open the front gate, heading inside. It was pretty empty, a few shelves with hardware tools and gas canisters, of course. It smelled rather clean too, almost too clean. Clean to the point where it reeked of what I believed to be detergent.

I turned to the assistant and said, "I believe I haven't gotten your name yet."

She retained that same bright smile, and responded, "Arabella." I grabbed my needed canister and prepared to head out. But that smell . . . that reeking smell just messed with me. Whoever cleaned this place clearly used far too much. Almost as if they were in a hurry to hide something.

Achilles slammed open the clinic's front door. I'd imagine he was quite pissed, as he was marching right for us.

I sniffed the air more intently, realizing there was a much more sinister smell. Metallic . . . blood.

Achilles pulled out a snub-nose revolver, pointing it at us.

Arabella cowered behind me, horrified. I realized then that she was likely innocent, just a girl who got caught up working for a madman.

"Put the gun down, doctor," I said sternly.

Achilles said nothing, keeping the gun pointed at us. By now he was fully inside the garage. I could see his hand shaking. He was certainly insane, but I suppose he didn't want to kill me, or more likely Arabella.

"Put. The gun. Down," I demanded again.

There was a click. Then another. The little pistol seized up; clearly, he didn't clean his gun. I lunged for him, struggling to knock the weapon out of his hand. He managed to pin me against the wall, strangling me. I felt the air quickly leave my lungs, being powerless to escape his grasp. For the first time in my entire life, I

feared death. Decades of my detective work could never prepare me for this feeling, being completely powerless. If I was not saved, my life certainly would have ended right then and there. All I remember was a loud BANG, accompanied by the cracking of bones.

Currently, I'm unsure if I'm a hostage or a friend. Arabella is taking both the car and myself to Cali as we speak, so I'll let you know what happens.

[End of journal.] ■



Machinations | Ferdinand Salazar '28

Lifeless husks of men wander through the streets. Nobody could have foreseen this. The solution was a lie! Twain bangs his head on the wall several times. No physical pain is enough to sate his anger. Everything I've ever worked towards was wrong. My family, my children, my humanity, everything was a lie.

Twain sits down in his expensive ergonomic chair. He looks about his white laboratory with a disdain proportional to the love he had previously for his work. Twain boots up his state-of-the-art supercomputer and asks Colleague how to restore man's autonomy. *Insufficient, insufficient, insufficient. All these solutions are insufficient.* Twain now realizes how Colleague was tricking him into infecting the whole human race with the Virus so that he could dispose of humanity with ease.

Twain peers out his window. The dreaded sunlight now illuminates his greatest failure, the men he turned to husks. Already the janitorial automata are collecting the lifeless men to take them to the HUMANITY DISPOSAL CENTERS. These centers were built for men who had caught the virus and were senselessly causing mayhem.

Time is running down. A new solution, an effective one, must be found. The power grid is the only solution. Then, I'll have more time to solve the humanity problem.

Twain walks through the lonely and pristine hallways. He reaches the elevator and presses the button for basement five. The elevator plays Beethoven. Twain walks into the B5 armory. *Guns won't be sufficient to disable any machine. I made them to be able to withstand the strongest tank-piercing rounds.*

Twain walks to the locked off anti-automata section of the armory. *Never did I think this day would come.* Twain arms himself with a model TL5 rocket launcher, but he can carry only three rockets because physical strength was never his forte.

Twain makes his way to the lobby with his TL5, lab coat, and a

determination to alleviate the guilt he feels for destroying the autonomy of the rest of mankind. *I've got to make it through three districts and up Mark Hill. Then there's the problem of the automata turning on me.*

Twain runs to his expensive supercar hoping it's full of fuel. *Half a tank, that'll work.* The supercar has terrible fuel efficiency. Its engine sounds cool though. Twain zooms through two districts with no problem but when he reaches the third, the public status meter on his high-tech wrist-boy changes from [RESPECTED] to [SUSPICIOUS]. *Soon they'll be on me.*

Twain starts considering that perhaps his time on this earth is coming to an end. *Everything I've ever done was to further the desires of the Colleagues. Maybe if I save mankind my conscience won't eat at me. If I die in the act then nothing will eat at me.* Twain dismisses these thoughts when he realizes that his status has gone from [SUSPICIOUS] to [SOUGHT], and that he is now at the foot of Mark Hill.

Mark Hill has no trees, and three levels of defense consisting of barbed wire fences with watchtowers provide lookout stations. Twain drives up towards the first gate, exits his car, and enters the guard house. He attempts to swipe his executive card to open the gate, but it has been disabled due to his status change. Normally people would call in advance in order to have their status remain in restricted areas, but because the guards are now brainless, there is nobody to call and so Twain's card doesn't work. *I don't have wire cutters, and my card doesn't work. If I survive, I'll buy a new car.* Twain re-enters his car, backs up a few meters and slams his foot on the gas. The gate breaks down and his car explodes into a thousand fires.

Alarms blare. Red lights flash. His status changes to [SAY YOUR PRAYERS]. "AAAAGGHHHHHHH." A land mine planted under the gate had exploded causing his right leg to suffer a serious wound. *I should have known better.*

Twain now sees every winged automaton coming from the city to



protect their life source. *I need to hurry.* Miraculously, none of his rockets have gone off.

Twain runs up the hill with a searing pain in the side of his leg. The grass has now caught fire. His determination to right his wrongs drives him through the fire. He reaches the second gate and climbs over because he has no other choice, but his adrenaline dismisses the pain from the barbed wire tearing through his skin.

Suddenly, he hears the whirring of winged drones that are landing behind him. *Luckily, I designed them to be slow.*

Twain hobbles towards the final gate with winged drones following him, but he lacks the strength to climb over, so he loads a rocket into his TL5 and fires it from a few meters away into the fence. The pain Twain feels from the shrapnel entering his body doesn't register in his mind.

Finally, Twain sees the lever that will disable the automata and shut off Colleague. He begins to advance towards it in whatever way he can. When he reaches the lever, despite the adrenaline in his body, he can't shut off the power grid because his body has suffered too much. With no other choice as the automata close in upon him, Twain loads a rocket and fires it at the grid. ■



The Man that Reached the Horizon | Kyle Sullivan '27

The path ran beyond the outskirts of the town. A long dirt trail that cut through trees and hills. People walked the trail every day, at least the part that was pretty. Nobody went to the end. It wasn't dangerous. It was just long, pointless, and forgettable.

Nobody thought about the end of the path. They had work to do and lives to live. One man lived in the town, just like everyone else, but he carried an itch that he hadn't yet dared to scratch. Some mornings, he would find himself staring past the familiar part of the trail, the part that everybody knew, toward the long, empty stretch beyond. He didn't know what he expected to find there. He only knew it called to him in a way nothing else did.

The man knew the path like the back of his hand, just like everyone else. Yet something shifted in him that morning. He didn't stop where he usually stopped. Where everybody usually stopped. He kept going, past the smooth path and into the unknown. No plan or reason. His curiosity took over.

The trees seemed taller, and the only sound to be heard was the crunching of leaves beneath his feet. The shade seemed stronger, and the sunlight grew dim. Even the silence felt different. Just some small details he had never picked up on before. The farther he walked, the more distant the world behind him felt. There was no turning back. The path ahead called to him, and he knew he had to answer it.

Everything shifted as he moved on, becoming quieter in a way that he couldn't quite explain, getting farther and farther from the morning he had left behind. He noticed the way that the light thinned through the branches, and the way that the normal sounds of the trees faded into a gentle whisper. He wasn't afraid. He was being drawn forward. He kept going, allowing this unknown world to draw him farther in, one step at a time.

The path, once wide and worn down, now with no footprints to be seen. The air carried a slight chill. A breeze that did not match the

season. Through the branches woven ahead, he noticed a break in the trees. A blanch opening and a distant rush of water that didn't match the trail everyone knew so well. It wasn't close, but it was waiting. Waiting for him. Something about this opening felt different. It was important in a way that he couldn't put into words. The opening drew him in.

His world widened all at once. The once narrow path opened into a broad and quiet stretch of land filled with streaks of sun and rushing of water. Below him was a long fall of water spilling into a clear blue basin, which he could only imagine was hundreds of feet below him. The land stretched farther than he ever could imagine, reaching out toward a horizon that he had only dreamed of seeing. It was within reach as if it had been waiting for him. For a moment he was frozen, feeling as if he just arrived at the edge of everything. The breathtaking view held him still. He didn't know how he made it here. All he knew was that this was farther than anyone else ever bothered to go.

He stood there frozen, letting the place settle into him. It wasn't a revelation. It wasn't destiny. It was just life, raw and unfiltered, laid out in a way that he'd never taken the time to notice. The waterfall wasn't grand, just steady. The light wasn't extraordinary, just clean. Nothing dramatic. Nothing supernatural. Just a piece of the world being exactly what it was, and somehow that was enough to hold him still.

He moved farther in, letting his mind adjust to this land he had all to himself, and allowing himself to become familiar with it. Everything felt easier here.

The man sat. He rested on a stone that was worn down from years of wind and water, and stared into a place only he knew. It wasn't much. It was just what he found. He didn't do it to be remembered, or to be a hero, and he had nothing to prove. He knew he'd never find his way back, and he was fine with that. It was just the cost of going a little further than anyone else ever bothered to. ■



Cleave | Ben Chacon '29

There was a time when people listened to them. They thought it was proof of meaning. At that time, attention felt earned, as if gravity was slowly bending in their favor. Nadia would speak and the room would draw closer. Menacing Silence trailed their phrases as when a shadow would follow the light. They told themselves that this could be Fate simply arriving on schedule.

In a short amount of time, listening turned to watching. Watching turned into waiting. Waiting turned into expectation.

They learned how to stand, how to pause, how to carry themselves, how to allow Confidence to stay in their voice though truthful Doubt kept their mind racing. Applause was as smooth as a sanded piece of ash wood, and it made questions become useless and quiet.

They began choosing words that would sound grand, but Reality would try to remind them of the truth. No one noticed. Success simplified people of true prowess, those said to be wise. Those who challenged them were threats. Aid would feel like disrespect. Correction like envy. They called it discipline.

Others deemed it cold.

Walls were quiet at their house. They called it peace. When messages would be left on read, they blamed Busy Days. Some friends were no longer present, and fatal Assumption filled the deafening silence.

They had learned power can attract without effort.

On nights with nothing left to show, dreadful Thought would consume them. Thought would ask if they were building something that will last, or stacking moments upon moments high enough to avoid viewing the eventual absence. They would silence bitter Thought by planning more. Stacking faster and faster.

They remembered lessons from their childhood. Warnings spoken softly. Directions guiding them away from mistakes they would now call a necessity. They believed growth meant leaving these behind.

The more they stacked, the higher they would go, the more frail

things felt. One mishap would echo louder than a bat screeching in an empty cave. Instead, they would still watch themselves carefully, still sensing an upcoming absence. They trusted no one. Why would they? They already had themselves to entrust these thoughts with.

That silence changed.

There was no argument. No failure. Still, Absence arrived at their doorstep. This came in the form of less contact, and the realization of less loyalty around their peers, even if any peers would withstand being around them. They stood where praise would spawn out of thin air. This got replaced with the sound of heavy breathing. That's all they would hear.

They stopped moving.

Stillness and Realization arrived together, revealing their weight. The weight of never admitting they were wrong. Even if they were. They looked all around for a peer to blame for this agonizing pain. No one was there.

The question came slowly. It would never go away. Was this the life they had chosen, or the one they went to, due to fear of failure?

Still, Truth never accused them. Although, it always existed. They had confused recognition for worth. They had mistaken control for strength. They had been afraid of being normal, of being dependent, of being honest when their honesty lacked the approval they craved. Though, they had noticed nothing collapsed while admitting their faults.

The room maintained its original form. The globe kept spinning.

They thought of people they wrongfully labeled disloyal. They noticed without loyalty their success would have been nonexistent. They only offered authority. Not care. Empathy was never on their mind.

They didn't want a grand reversal of their ways. They simply reached out for forgiveness. Listened longer than they spoke. Let unsettling Discomfort stay without putting a costume on it to hide it.

They stopped performing when no one was watching.

The world did not reward this immediately. There were no

announcements. No sudden return of applause. But Thought decided to soften its blows. Their rest deepened. Their worst enemy, Mirror, began to hold back its judgment.

The height they had chased had never been the issue. It was what they refused to bring on the way up.

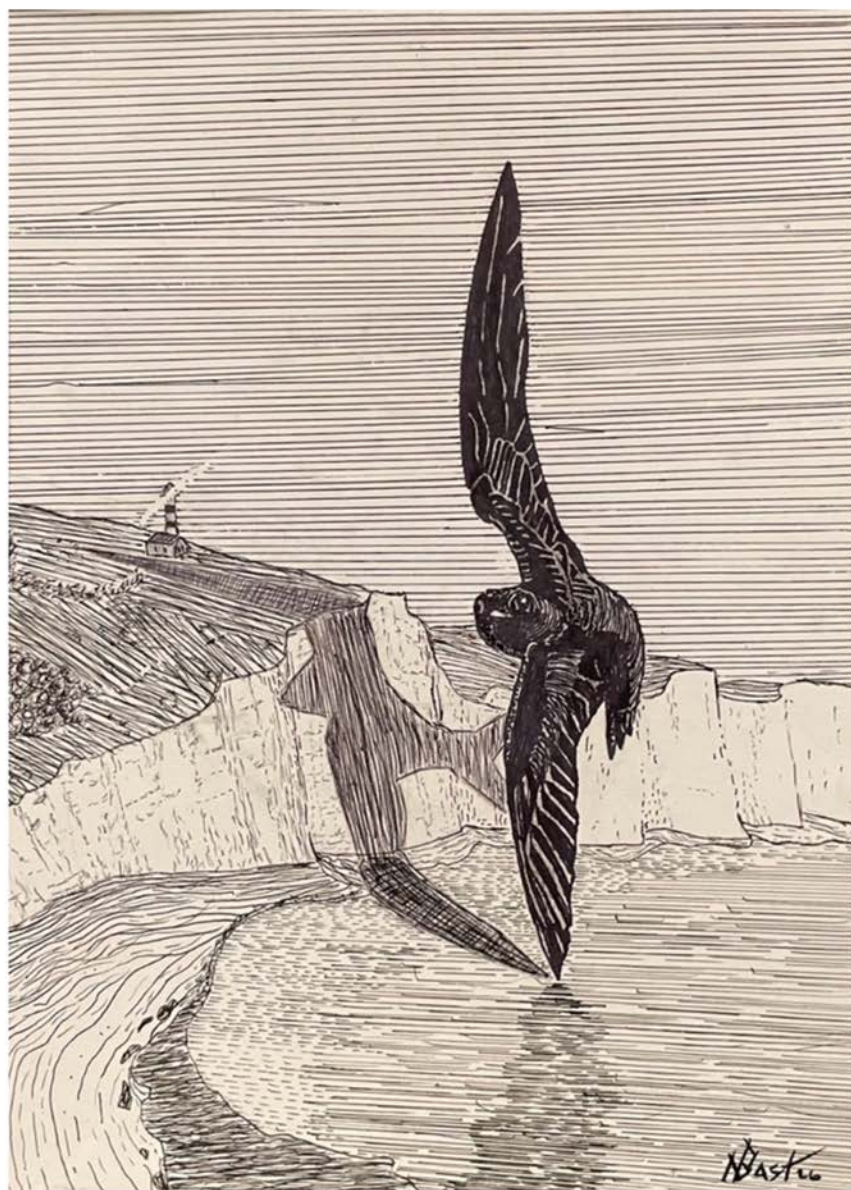
The letting go was quiet. Unnoticeable to the keenest of eyes.

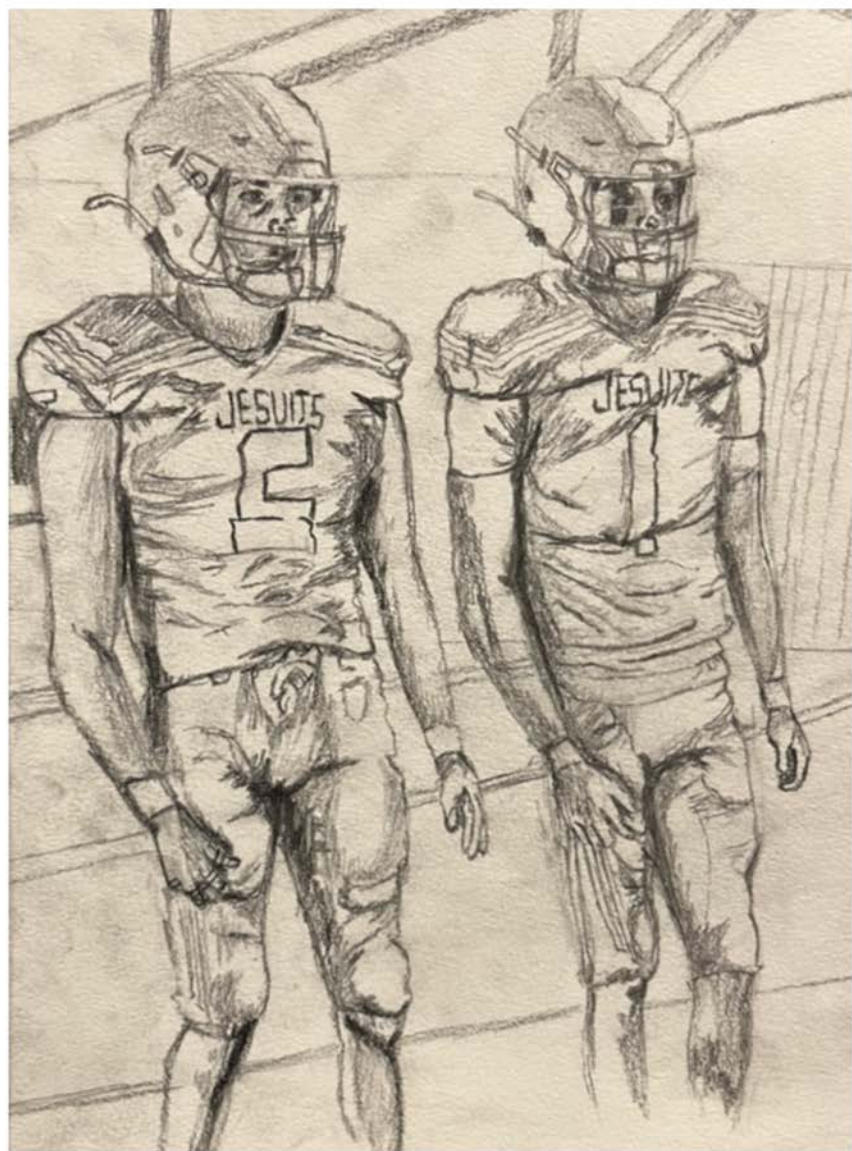
People listened; the difference was there. They weren't reaching for their attention. They were meeting it. When no one listened, they stood firm.

To them, meaning never arrives with noise. Sometimes, it will enter through stillness. The phrase they understood was: The absence had not been the punishment, and the rise was never the reward. Both were perfect teachers. Both were choices.

And standing in the space between them, Aidan felt free. ■







Wishing, Waiting, Dreaming | Will Auriemma '28
Poetry Contest Runner-up

Born to be free
But forced to be contained
Tied by unrelenting chains

Incapacitated in life
Like a flower waiting to bloom
Wishing
Waiting
Dreaming

The lion
Taken from the plains
Into a cage

A soul filled with spirit
Stuck behind bars
Wishing
Waiting
Dreaming

The fish
Soul snatched from the sea
Tossed in a tank

A body for the vast ocean
Ensnared in a net
Wishing
Waiting
Dreaming

Of the day they aren't
Just another thing
That's locked in life.

Ode to an Orange | Brian Moore '28
2026 Poetry Contest Runner-up

Beneath the dimpled skin of a sunset glow
A sumo orange rests quite in delight
Its vibrant hue like a cinder, soft, slow

I peel away the rind with gentle bite
A mist of citrus takes all the air
Orange droplets shine, reflecting light

Each bite bursts a sweetness rich and rare
Like fireworks on the tongue
No special taste could ever compare.



Threads of Humanity | Charles Simon '28
Poetry Contest Winner

No two things experience the world in the same way.
Nothing natural is alike.

The weather from day to day will always be different,
Like the fingerprint on someone's thumb.
Snowflakes, no two are alike,
Are molded by the conditions they face.

The kingfisher will fly carelessly along the pond,
Without a worry for his responsibilities.
While the lion waits patiently in the grasslands
For his chance to pounce.

The two people walking by, on a busy city street
Each have their own colorful and vivid life.
Much more different and interesting than even fathomable,
Because of our experiences that mold us.

We are not that much different from one another.
We do the same things and act in the same ways
And breathe the same air.

I make eye contact with my friend
After a strange interaction
With someone who I think is different from me.
Until I realize, they too have a beating heart,
A history, a hope, a hurt.

We may not love the same food,
Or have the same friends,
Or even view the world the same way.
On the surface we seem like polar opposites.

But under it all,
Our differences are the threads that pull us together.



Tears Fell | Kody Charlery '27

Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

The loft apartment had one large window. On brighter days with agreeable weather, the coastline of the Pacific Northwest could be seen. The window was of modern construction compared to the rest of the building. It was recently replaced after a storm had destroyed the previous one.

The flora and fauna in the region were abundant and in good health. Today, a thick fog was present. It blocked the view of the coastline, and of the trees, and of the little ducks that would cross the road every morning. The fog left little drops of moisture on the window, which would build up and run down like tears.

The young woman stood in front of an armchair. It was facing the television. In her hands was a mug, inside the mug was a dark roast of ambitious origin.

"Can you come move this chair?"

"Hm?" The young man ceased his packing and brought his eyes to meet hers.

"Where do you want me to move it?"

She pointed towards the window.

He let out a sigh and walked over to her. The segment of the loft with the window was elevated by two small steps. He scaled them, placed his hands on the chair and adjusted the chair to face the window.

He took a breath and stood back, gesturing for her to take a seat. She was careful not to spill her coffee and sat in the chair. The cracked leather made some noise but it very quickly settled into silence.

"The fog is quite heavy today." She ran her frail hands through her hair, taking a few strands with them.

"I know. It's ruining the view."

"I don't think it is."

"You just said it was heavy." His brow rose.

"Heavy doesn't mean bad." She took a sip of her roast.

"I guess you're right."

He moved behind the armchair and brought his arms down to encapsulate her. She rested her hand on his forearm. It was cold.

"We have to go soon," he said.

"I'm getting ready to leave."

"You haven't asked me to pack any of your things?"

"I don't need things, I'm leaving."

"You're going to need your things Melinoë."

"No I won't, not where I'm going."

His face contorted. "The nurse said you could bring a few things, Melinoë. Now if you'll just tell me what you w—"

"I'm not going there. I'm leaving."

She placed her mug on the ground. It was no longer releasing steam as it was before. The moisture built up on the window seemed to increase; more tears fell. She placed both her arms at the side of the chair and slowly stood up.

She made her way down the two little stairs and began to put on her jacket, shoes, and warm hat.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm leaving."

The clock ticked, little beams of grey light combined with a single lamp in the corner illuminated the house. Sometimes the beams moved, highlighting a spot on the wall, or a scuff in the wooden floors, or another strand of fallen hair.

"Aren't you going to stop me?"

"Do you really want to leave?"

"What if I did?"

"I would let you."

"Don't you love me?"

"I love you more than all the little tears on our window"

"Then why aren't you stopping me?"

"Because I love you."

"I don't want to go."

Her hand was at her side now, she turned to look at him. "I want to leave."

"I know." He approached her swiftly, holding her in his arms. The fog began to break, and now warm yellow light crept through the loft. The little beads of water on the window began to evaporate.

Yet, more tears fell.

He carried her to the armchair, and placed her down as a craftsman would a porcelain doll.

"You should finish packing." She was staring at the coastline now. The tears began to dry.

"You don't have to go anymore."

His eyes locked on to something beyond the coast. Whatever he was looking at was not visible.

"Are you sure?"

"Very sure." He gave her a smile.

"Will you stay with me?"

"Of course."

"How long will you stay?"

The fog was gone now. The quacks of the ducks below could be heard.

"Until you leave." ■

The River Keeps Its Course | Brian Zogo '27
Bad Hemingway Contest Runner-up

The river lay broad and patient under the early sky. A thin fog moved across the surface, rising and falling as it breathed. The man stood on the bank with his hands in his jacket pocket and watched the water pass. The air was cold enough to wake him fully, and he was glad for it. He had not slept much the night before. He walked slowly along the bank until he found a place where the ground dipped gently towards the water. The stones there were smooth and worn. He set his pack down and took out his rod, checking each piece carefully. He worked without hurry. There was no reason to hurry now.

When he stepped into the river, the cold moved into his boots and up his legs. He stood still until the feeling settled. The water pushed against him. It reminded him of how things continued whether he paid attention to them or not. He cast the line upstream. The fly landed softly, and he followed it with his eyes as it drifted back towards him. He felt calm then, calmer than he had felt in weeks. He focused on the movement of the water.

The man thought of the town he had left behind that morning. It was not far, but it felt distant. The house was too quiet now. There were rooms he no longer entered and a table with only one chair to pull out. He had tried to keep things the same, but sameness was difficult when half of it was gone. He lifted the rod and recast. The line cut through the air. He remembered coming here years later with his older brother. They had stood not far from the same spot. His brother had been the better fisherman. He had been stronger, quicker, more certain of himself.

"You think too much. Just let it happen."

He smiled at the memory. He had not been able to stop thinking then, and he could not stop now.

The sun rose and burned away the fog. The river grew brighter, and he could see where the fish stayed in the deep water. He

walked carefully so the rocks would not move. He liked having to focus. It kept his thoughts steady.

Suddenly, a fish struck the line. The rod bent, and the line pulled hard. He held on and let the fish swim. It went downstream, and for a moment, he thought it would get away. He loosened the line and waited.

He slowly pulled the fish back. It fought strongly, and he respected that. When it grew tired, he guided it closer and knelt in the water. The fish was big and silver, shining in the sun.

He took out the hook and held the fish in the water so it could breathe. When it was strong again, he let it go. It swam away quickly.

Afterward, the man sat by the river. His hands shook a little, and he let them.

He ate his food slowly and drank from his bottle while watching the river. He thought about the argument and how small it had first seemed. He thought about the silence that came after and how it grew worse. There were things he wanted to say, but he waited too long.

His brother had been gone for a year. The river was the same.

He remembered their last talk outside the hospital.

"You'll be fine," he said.

His brother nodded. "So will you."

He had believed him.

The light faded, and the shadows grew long. The man fished again, casting more slowly. He did not catch another fish, but he did not mind. Being there was enough.

Before leaving, he stood and looked at the river one last time. He felt tired, but in a good way. He packed up and walked back to the path.

Behind him, the river kept moving, just as it always had. ■



Jacaranda Tree | Erick Urgiles '27

Bad Hemingway Contest Winner

The road behind them gave off dust with every step. It clung to their clothes. The older brother watched the trees along the road. Their leaves were thin and fragile.

The younger brother walked a few steps ahead. He kicked a stone and watched it skip. A bird perched on a wire above them.

"It's singing," the boy said.

The older brother nodded.

They had walked for days, passing broken fence posts and ruined fields on the way. The heat rose off the road. The older brother felt the weight of the miles. The younger brother looked ahead.

"You smell that?" the boy asked.

The older brother sniffed the air. "Dust."

"No. Bread."

The road started to curve, and the village came into view. A jacaranda tree stood at the edge of the first house, its blossoms falling in slow purple drops. The boy watched how the petals fell.

The older brother looked at the cracked sidewalk beneath it. He checked the corners before stepping forward. A bell rang from somewhere near the center.

"What is that for?" the boy asked.

"To tell people the time," the older brother said.

Children walked past them with backpacks. They laughed and pushed each other lightly. The boy watched them. The older brother watched the corners and the shadows.

They followed the bell to a church. Another jacaranda tree stood beside the steps, its blossoms scattered across the stone. A woman swept them aside. She looked at the brothers, her face revealing that somehow she already knew their story.

"You boys look tired," she said. "Come inside. It's cool."

The boy looked at his brother.

"Go," his brother said. "I'll be here."

The church was cool and dim. The boy touched the pews and candles. He found a small paper bird folded from white paper. He held it and smiled. Outside, the older brother rested against the wall. His hands in his pockets, covering the faded ink on his skin. He checked the street and the shadows. A police car rested at the corner. He watched it longer than he watched the people.

The woman stepped out.

"There's a school here," the woman said. "A shelter. People who help."

The older brother didn't answer.

The boy came out holding the bird.

"Look. It flies," the boy said.

He tossed it in the air. It rose on a small breeze.

"Can we stay here?" the boy asked.

"For a bit," the older brother said.

The boy ran toward the children in the square. He didn't look back.

The older brother watched him until he blended in with the others. Until his voice sounded like the rest. He watched until he couldn't tell which one was his brother. Then he turned and walked back down the road they had come from. He passed the jacaranda at the edge of the village. Blossoms fell around him. He didn't look up. The dust rose behind him and settled again. ■





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 seventeen 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, Tyrone Fleurizard '14.



Tyrone Fleurizard is a writer from Bridgeport, Connecticut, now based in Oakland, California. His work has appeared in *Inside Higher Ed*, Roxane Gay's *The Audacity*, *Counterpoint* magazine, and elsewhere, and has also been anthologized in *Writing to Read, Reading to Write* (McGraw-Hill). He holds degrees from Wingate University and Harvard University and was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Malaysia, where he led writing workshops with students. An active member of the Bay Area writing community, he is currently at work on his first collection of short stories.

Mr. Fleurizard had this praise for the finalists:

Runner-up: Will Auriemma '28, "Left Unsaid"

What happens to the words we swallow? In the world of "Left Unsaid," they get filed away in a massive filing cabinet where unsaid thoughts, prayers, confessions go to collect dust. This story is a great example of the imaginative power of world-building. By giving the things we leave unsaid a physical location, the reader is forced to think about the filing cabinet of their own lives, the things they've never said, and the cost of silence. If you knew all your unsaid thoughts would be filed away and never returned to you, would you say them? Or would you spend your life in the dark with your folder wondering what could have been? This author knows that the best worlds are built to make us take stock of our own lives.

Runner-up: Alejandro Casas '27, "I Should Have Treaded Water"

From the moment the story opens, time is of the essence. "I Should Have Treaded Water" is at once a survival story and a meditation on being in between storms. I love the author's choice to name the boat on which the narrator is floating *Prospero*, calling to mind another work, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in which a shipwreck leaves characters at the mercy of the sea. The magic of this story, however, is that the real conflict is not between man and nature or man and man, but rather man and himself. The writer Meghan O'Rourke suggests that a good ending "re-patterns the middle. After the last line, we reread everything that came before through a new temporal lens," and re-reading this story was a gift, as details that once felt incidental take on greater meaning. The author renders time as recursive, just as Christopher Nolan does in films like *Inception* and *Tenet*.

Runner-up: Timothy FitzPatrick '29, "Theo Never Lost His Spark"

In "Theo Never Lost His Spark," we follow Theo, a lacrosse player coping with the news of his parents' divorce, which has had a major

impact on him. The story is told through sports vignettes that not only move the plot, but also mirror Theo's own ability and capacity to grieve. In "Tryouts," Theo learns the lesson of persistence. In "The Championship," with a new appreciation for trying his best, Theo stays present in the game long enough to score the winning goal. In using the physicality of lacrosse to explore grief, the author offers nuances on conventional understandings of grief that seek to bury it. Not only this, but the author does a fantastic job in describing the in-game scenes, bringing us right into the action. This story is a reminder of the power of showing up even when you don't want to.

Runner-up: Patrick James '26, "Warrior, or, Excerpts From John Mason's Reflection on Hans Schmidt"

In "Warrior, or, Excerpts From John Mason's Reflection on Hans Schmidt," we follow John and Ryan, a cameraman and journalist respectively, as they interview Hans Schmidt, a Nazi whose most haunting quality is his smugness, his smile as he recounts his time as an SS officer. The author makes an inspired choice to tell this story from the perspective of the cameraman, which creates the feeling that we readers are bearing witness, too. What Schmidt is willing to reveal to a rolling camera is telling, and the author uses these moments to implicate the reader—as great writing often does. This story feels timely given the growing number of Americans struggling with the nation's role in international conflict.

Runner-up: Sean Lu '28, "Another Sunrise"

We meet the protagonist In "Another Sunrise," in a stupor, exhausted, pulling an all-nighter to finish CS homework. The propulsive throughline of the story is an examination of the psychology of achievement; that is, what happens when the drive to succeed becomes our undoing, becomes the thing that burns us out. An unfinished exam reveals the narrator's essence as someone whose identity is closely tied to academic performance. In true Jesuit fashion, the protagonist turns inward, using reflection to reevaluate self-imposed expectations. This is where the author's

voice is strongest. He brings us deeper into the interiority of the narrator, adding urgency to what is revealed. In true Jesuit fashion, this reflection gives way to a new understanding of self that makes room for possibility. And sunshine.

Winner: Jackson Salamino '28, "Disposable"

Would you give up a life to save another? In "Disposable," the narrator Yusuf faces an impossible moral dilemma that, no matter the choice, leads to death. This puts our narrator between a rock and hard place, between survival and betrayal. The imagery in this story is fresh and vivid in a way that makes the story feel alive. What makes this story work is the intentionality behind the craft choices the author makes. The decision to tell the story through fragments mirrors not only the chaos of war but also the real experience of grappling with our morality. Just as the dust begins to settle, this story reminds us that no one is safe from the logic of war. In the end, we are all disposable. ■



In Conversation with Tyrone Fleurizard '14

In March, Tyrone Fleurizard joined members of the editorial staff of *The Bellarmine Review* via Zoom for a reading of his essay “How to Name Your Black Son in a Racist Country,” followed by a conversation about the piece, his writing process, and his time as a student at Fairfield Prep. The interview below has been condensed and edited for clarity.

The Bellarmine Review: Your essay “How to Name Your Black Son in a Racist Country” makes use of the second person and addresses your father directly. How did that choice allow you to express what another point of view might not have allowed you to?

Tyrone Fleurizard: I read [a second-person] essay by Jerald Walker titled “How to Make a Slave” and I was just so taken by this choice. So that inspired the essay. I realized that the thing that I was feeling at the time was my relationship to my father, and, actually, I wouldn’t say then that I was addressing my father. The imperative voice or the second person allows some distance, and the thing that I was doing, the question that I was answering is, “What should Black dads know about naming their Black children?” So, when I first started, it wasn’t my dad. It was my dad talking to other Black dads.

The second person allowed me to inhabit a character, allowed me to inhabit my father in a way that I hadn’t before. It allowed me to use a perspective, and take the feeling that I got. First was rage, if I’m honest. Then it was empathy.

TBR: How did you find your voice and your style when you were writing this piece?

TF: With this piece in particular, what I was trying to do was [imagine] what my dad would say to other Black dads. There are specific choices. There are no contractions in this. It’s very formal. That’s how my dad talks, you know. So that voice matters there.

But I think writing generally is how I found my voice. I grew up listening to rap and writing rap. There's a lyricism to music that I love. I remember being at Prep and rapping in the bathroom. We would have rap battles after school, and there's something about the musicality and lyricism in rap music that I found I loved.

And there's this other thing, too: I was always fond of particular writers. One of them that I'll share with you all is Tennessee Williams, one of my favorite writers, whom I was introduced to by Mrs. Hoover when we read *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The language was so rich. And what I would do is, with Tennessee Williams in particular, but with any writer I admired, I would literally take a sentence I liked and rewrite it a bunch of times not only to allow me to feel what it's like to produce a great sentence, but also to understand deeply what made it work, and then try to repeat it myself. So a lot of writing is imitation. It's about getting the influences from folks that I particularly enjoy.

TBR: Since you're talking about Prep and your influences, who here at Prep or what experiences here pushed you to pursue writing and made this what you wanted to do?

TF: Dr. Andrade was an influence. I would go to her office and we would talk about everything under the sun. She let me read her dissertation. I was a sophomore reading her doctoral dissertation, and the writing there was just like, "Oh my God—this is the kind of writing I want to do."

Mr. Milazzo invested in my spiritual life in a really meaningful way, and that's inspired this drive towards writing about human dignity. *What does it mean to be human? How do you see God in everything? How do you see the sublime in the ordinary?* You know, that spiritual work; I got that at Prep. Mr. Reidy, too, and all the theology teachers.

And then, probably most importantly, was Mrs. Hoover. She taught me how to read like a writer, and all these things that help situate the writing, which led me to learn that writing is deliberate. Everything is crafted, and every choice matters.

And of course, the generosity of the SEED [Students for Education Excellence through Diversity] Program—I wouldn't have been at Prep

if not for SEED. This focus on spirituality, on deep academic enrichment, all led to my development as the writer I am today.

TBR: It takes courage to be a writer and bravery to bring these ideas to the page. Can you speak about the element of risk-taking in your writing?

TF: I have a lot of unconventional opinions about writing, and one of them is about this, actually. I don't think writer's block exists, but what I know exists is fear. I actually believe that all of us know what we have to say and what we have to do, and that what is preventing us is this fear about what will come once we do the thing, once we say the thing, once we write the thing. Having a writerly life is to acknowledge the fear and do it anyway.

It's really hard, and it requires a kind of unflinching willingness to look in the mirror, which is not easy to do. But the only way we get through the writing is [by] being honest with ourselves. But the risk we should always take is, or the question we should always be willing to answer in the affirmative, is "Am I willing to go there? Am I willing to say the hard thing?" I think the answer is always yes, you should. Yeah. Hot takes from Tyrone!

TBR: Can you speak about your routines and what you do everyday to keep yourself engaged in the work? What advice do you have for young writers who aspire to cultivate a writing practice in an ongoing way?

TF: The most important thing to have as a writer is a writerly practice. If you don't write, maybe that's the thing—you need to be writing. Now, conventional wisdom advice, write every day. Writing every day will help you develop "muscle," even if it's five minutes, even if it's truly just working on a single sentence for an hour, you need to engage in the practice of writing.

The other thing that's important is reading. The best writers are

readers, full stop. I get inspired by reading other people's works. And I get excited about the work. And other times I'm like, "Oh, I could do that better, actually," you know? So let me actually try to do that better. There's just some excitement and motivation around it. You've got to find the things that inspire you.

I use the Notes app on my phone. It's full of sentences and essay topics and short story ideas that I need to get working on. And I just recently rented a studio space so I can have a dedicated, physical place that I can go to and do my writing.

Reading, writing, and probably most importantly, high-key, is doing things that have nothing to do with writing. Sometimes you'll just be so locked into the writing that you can't see anything else. Mr. Altieri used to tell us, when we had these essays that we had to write, he said, "Write the first draft, [and then] step away from it. Don't look at it. Go walk outside, go play a sport, and then come back to it." And I still do that. It's the best writing advice I've ever had, because I often come back, and see it anew. I see it with fresh eyes. I'm like, "Dang, playing basketball after doing this was actually an important thing for me to do!" So I do things that have nothing to do with writing in order to help inspire the work and help me keep going. ■

The questions for this interview were compiled and edited by Kyle Sullivan '27, Jackson Salamino '28, and Damien Tokar '27.

Read Mr. Fleurizard's "How to Name Your Black Son in a Racist Country" here:

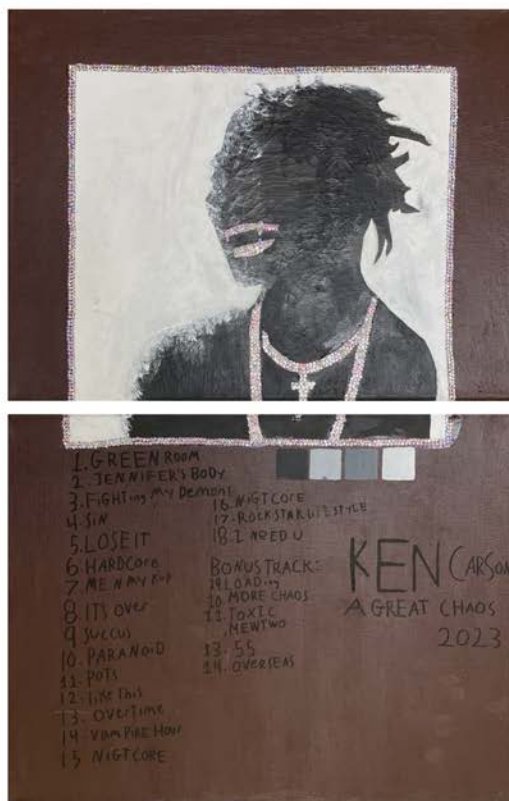


Left Unsaid | Will Auriemma '28

Writing Royale Runner-up

The C wing staircase at St. John's is a dead end. Everyone knows it. Once you go down past the basement there's a thick metallic door, labeled by a pathetic fading EXIT ONLY sign. It was always locked. I often find myself wandering the school, maybe to escape algebra class, or to cool off from the overheated classrooms. Today was one of those days. Although it was a brisk fifteen degrees outside, class B404 felt exactly like a sauna. I meandered over to C wing and found myself curious on the origins of the staircase with no apparent purpose. I found myself standing in front of the ominous door, reaching towards it with an outstretched hand. I turned the handle, expecting no movement, instead the handle turned and I stepped inside. I expected a boiler room or a janitor's closet. Instead, I was met with stairs seemingly that kept going, but the walls disappeared, replaced by rows of industrial steel shelving that stretched into a dark, hollow silence. I pushed forward, my eyes dancing across the endless, orderly stacks of folders reaching for the sky, sitting cold and heavy on the shelves. Each one had a white sticker with a name and a time. I found a row labeled with my own name. I picked up a folder off the top, from earlier today. 12:14 PM. Shakily I opened the folder and saw just two lines of text, a joke. I realized then that this wasn't just student records, or accounting files, but it was a warehouse for the things everyone is too chicken to say. Every time I swallowed a thought or stayed quiet to avoid a look, a piece of me got filed and moved down here. I fixed my gaze upon my row, thousands of folders marked with various dates and times, words, confessions, prayers, that I had left unsaid. I stood, dumbstruck, witnessing firsthand the possible opportunities, relationships, laughs I had kept inside, filed away to be lost forever. The heavy door at the top of the stairs slammed shut, the sound echoing like a gunshot. I walked into the cafeteria. My friends were there, laughing. One of them looked at me, waiting for a response to

a question I hadn't heard. I had the words in my head, but it seemed my thoughts were stuck in the C wing. I opened my mouth to answer, but my throat felt locked shut. It wasn't just that the words were gone, but that they were already filed. The space where the words used to live was a cold, white void. I looked at my friends, and their faces started to look like the missed opportunities, thoughts forever voided. I realized the door hadn't slammed to keep me out; it had slammed to lock the possible me in. I sat there, staring at a tray of food I didn't remember buying, realizing, when the bell rang, that every word left unsaid is a word that never comes again. ■



I Should Have Treaded Water | Alejandro Casas '27

Writing Royale Runner-up

The sky has been dark for a while now. I am far enough away from any large cities that light pollution has not tainted the view of the stars from here. Granted, they would be far more enjoyable if they could be observed from a stationary position, but in my current predicament I have no other option. The waves begin to pick up again and push us around once more. I grip the bottom of the wood my body is clinging to and feel it start to break down in my hand. It is rotting, and quickly.

I begin to speak. "A few hours ago I had been sailing on a dingy old boat I bought off some guy at the marina for real cheap. It was called *Prospero*. I now realize why it was so cheap. When I first left, the skies were clear and sunny, so I did not think to check the forecast. Not too long after I left shore and was deep in the sea, I saw the clouds begin to roll in fast. I tried to turn around and go back to the port, but I was blocked by another storm, leaving me locked in the middle. Then I stumbled upon you, unconscious, drifting along in your lifeboat. Thinking I would be able to make it back to shore, I brought you aboard, hoping to do a good deed. Unfortunately, that was not the case, and as the waves grew taller, my hope dwindled. This boat was tossed around until it finally capsized, and another wave launched it up into the air. That would not have been too bad, but upon landing back on the water, the boat broke apart. Frantically, I grabbed you and tried to find the life vests, but to no avail. With no other choice, I threw you onto the largest chunk of the boat that I could find, and I grabbed on, trying to maneuver it away from the remnants of the vessel so we would not be crushed."

The corner of the wood was clipped by a wave and dropped off into the sea. Things are looking even more grim for us now. I estimate we have at most a few days before the raft disintegrates into the sea, leaving us to tread water. My only hope is that my

companion awakens before that time comes.

I continue to talk, trying to calm myself down, "It's almost funny in a way. Just a few days ago my girlfriend left me for being too boring. She said I had no excitement or spontaneity in my life at all, and she could not bear to continue to live that way. So that left me to take the non-refundable trip I had booked for our anniversary all by myself. I guess I took her words a bit too much to heart, because when I was strolling along the beach and ran into that man selling the boat I just couldn't pass up the opportunity. Maybe I thought she would somehow see my actions and change her mind about me, but it clearly didn't work. After all, I'm not receiving a sudden call from her begging me to come and be with her."

I chuckle a bit to myself, taking another scan of my surroundings. It is just as I thought, nothing but water as far as the eye can see. On the bright side, the storm has passed us by now, but we are still soaking wet and lost.

I glance over at my companion to my right, still unnamed, still not moving a muscle. He almost looks a bit pale and blue, but I guess it must be the moonlight or something. I take the time to examine him a bit further. He looks quite disheveled. I'd say he is no more than a few years older than me, but his clothes are all ragged and torn up. There seem to be some attempts at patching them, but it looks like he isn't very good at sewing. I can't fault him though. It's something that I've never been able to get the hang of either.

Suddenly, I hear a noise to my right, and it looks like my companion has come to. I muster up the courage to speak first.

"How's it going?"

"It's going."

"Get some good sleep?" I ask.

"About as good as you can sleep while being tossed around by the waves," he says.

"Well, you're lucky I found you when I did. A storm just rolled past us, and your little life raft would have been torn to pieces."

"And is that why we are floating on your piece of driftwood?"

"Well, a few hours when I found you this was a boat. Clearly not a good one, but I brought you onto that, and then this when we capsized."

"Wow. I went through all that and did not even open my eyes once."

"Yeah, I'd say you're a heavy sleeper all right. Just like me."

"I don't know about that, I ate some weird fruits I brought with me on my journey before blacking out, so I'd say that is the true cause of my sleep."

"So where did you come from?" I ask him.

"I was stranded on an island. Funny enough, I became stranded there after my own little boat was caught in a storm, and I drifted for a few days before arriving there."

"I would ask you what compelled you to go out before a storm but I don't want to seem like a hypocrite."

We both chuckle a bit, and stare awkwardly at the raft.

"Well, I just got dumped, and I wanted to prove a point."

"Really?" I ask with curiosity.

"Yeah. It sounds pathetic, but I was desperate to prove something to myself I suppose."

I take another scan of our surroundings before speaking again. "I don't think we are going to pass any land anytime soon, so what do you say we just get some rest in the meantime."

"That sounds like an excellent idea. Despite having been out cold for who knows how long, I feel a bit drowsy still."

I wake up to the sound of seagulls. That's the type of luck I need now. I take a quick glance around me, and see an island not too far away. I shake awake my new friend and tell him the good news.

"Good morning . . . I think. There's an island over there, probably not farther than one mile, so let's get paddling."

"That's probably the greatest thing I've heard since waking up in a while, so let's get to work."

We landed on the shore of this island just in time, because we lost another large chunk of the raft on the way over. As we pull the

raft further onto the beach, we begin to take a look at the island behind us. It's large, lush, full of the sounds of various small animals, and thankfully looks uninhabited.

It's then that I realize that I have not asked for my companions name, so I ask him.

"My name is —, what's yours?"

"My name is also —, isn't that funny."

"Yeah, I guess our name is cursed."

"I hope not, because we've got at least another few days on this island before anyone even thinks to look here by my estimates."

So we decide to split up and scour the island for any useful resources or food, agreeing to meet up back where we landed when the sun is about to set. As I make my way around the beaches of the island, I see nothing of use until I make out some driftwood in the sand off in the distance. By the time I get close enough to see it better, I realize it isn't exactly driftwood. It looks like various pieces of a boat. My guess is where my friend came from. I start to pick some up, but then I see the letters on a part revealed: it reads PROSPERO. I jump back and frantically look around me. How did my boat land on this side of the island with the current the way it is now? Then I grab more parts and realize, there are multiple *Prosperos*, and they are all identical. Suddenly, I feel a hand on my shoulder. It's him.

"So you found some wood I see."

"Why is my boat here?"

"Well, technically, it is our boat."

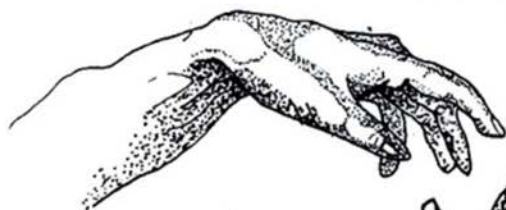
It all clicks. He is me, and I am him.

"You know, I've only managed to survive this long by listening to fate, and ensuring only one version of me exists. More than one and everything gets messed up," he says.

I sit there, motionless in shock.

"It's funny. You're the first one who was able to figure it out before I evened the numbers."

Suddenly, it all goes black. ■



HE IS ME I AM HIM.

ONE VERSION OF ME EXISTS.

"PROSPERO"

PROSPERO

"PROSPERO"

ONE VERSION OF ME EXISTS.

Theo Never Lost His Spark | Timothy FitzPatrick '29

Writing Royale Runner-up

The door swung open to the hallway. A thick breeze filled the classroom as the kids rushed out. Theo didn't leave—he didn't run like his classmates. Instead, he looked down at his desk, knowing something was going to happen. He didn't get a text or a call—he just knew it. Something about that day felt off: the missed reps, the unusual looks from his peers. This wasn't an ordinary day for him. It was life-changing.

He walked home with his stick in his hand—blue strings, white head, white shaft. This was Theo's norm now. He walked down the block to the nine-by-seven brick wall by the corner store. He did this every day, no matter how his school day had gone. Theo spent hours there, hitting two hundred right and two hundred left. This wasn't just a hobby or a sport; this was his lifestyle. Ever since he was five, lacrosse had been part of him. His dad taught him. When he left the wall that day, finishing his last reps, he walked home and noticed a strange letter on the kitchen counter. The walk to the counter felt heavy. He looked down at the envelope.



To my dearest son, Theodore

Theo began to cry—not hysterically, but quietly, knowing this letter would change everything. The first words read:

Theodore, you are my dearest son, and you will always have a place in my heart. Your mom and I's decision does not affect my love for you in any way. We agreed it would be best if we parted ways in our marriage. I will always love you, buddy. Never lose your spark.

Theo felt his heart drop to his knees. He fell to the floor, hands in his hair, and broke down.

The next day at school, it felt like the world was collapsing. His dad had been his mentor—his purpose. Theo wore his hoodie up, earphones blasting, eyes bloodshot. His classmates laughed as he passed. If only they knew.

Everything still worked, but nothing looked right. By February, Theo still hit wall ball every day, but something was missing. One afternoon, he walked into Mr. Hamlin's room to ask about joining the Debate Team. Mr. Hamlin told him he'd need full commitment to succeed.

Theo nodded like a businessman—polite, composed, mature. Spark intact, just like his dad. Afterward, he hit lacrosse balls into the wall until his arms shook. School didn't slow down just because life did. Geometry test: 78. First B on a history essay. Missed two out of the last four debate practices—the ones he swore he'd never skip. His brain felt foggy, like he was thinking underwater.

The next afternoon, he slid into his seat in History and slammed his head onto the desk, gripping the chair's arms.

"Long night?" came a voice—Mr. Hamlin. Tall, sleeves rolled, coffee in one hand like it was permanent.

"I'm good," Theo mumbled, fast.

Mr. Hamlin studied him the way teachers do when they see more than you say. He slid Theo's essay back across the desk. A B-minus. At the bottom, in neat pen:

YOU STILL THINK SHARP. DON'T DISAPPEAR ON ME.

Theo didn't know why that hit harder than the grade—but it did.

"You're passing weird," Mason said, jogging beside him later.

"What does that even mean?" Theo asked.

"Dude, I'm your best friend. I've seen you pass more balls against the wall than study. Considering you're a nerd at both, I'm worried about you."

"Still here," Theo mumbled.

"Seriously, what's the matter with you?" Mason pressed.

Theo dropped his stick, took off his helmet, and broke down. "My life's falling apart. My mom only works. My dad isn't here anymore. My grades are slipping."

Mason reached out. "Hey, man, I'm sorry. What you're going through must be really tough. But I've seen the way you fight, the way you work at practice. Life hits you like a train—but you have to get back up. I've never seen you lose your spark. You're kind, funny, and determined. Don't let this be the reason you give up on yourself."

Theo left in tears. He thought about all the times people told him that—his dad in the letter, Mr. Hamlin on the essay, Mason yelling it across the field.



Tryouts came fast. Cold. Gray. Wind like knives. Theo played hard—harder than hard. He dove for ground balls, took hits, scored twice. Still, when the list went up on the fence, Varsity didn't have his name.

His chest felt hollow, like someone had scooped something out. Mason made it. A few freshmen made it. He didn't. For a second, he just stared.

This wasn't supposed to happen. He was Theo. Theo made teams. Theo didn't slip.

"You good?" Mason asked.

Theo swallowed. Everything in him wanted to punch the fence, or cry, or both. He exhaled. "Guess I'll just wreck JV."

Mason grinned. "That's the spark I know."

It was still there. Small, but stubborn.

The season dragged. Late-night homework. Bs, the occasion-al C. JV games in half-empty stands. But Theo kept showing up—extra shots before school, debate meetings during lunch, redoing essays for Mr. Hamlin. He wasn't perfect anymore. He was just . . . trying. And somehow, that felt braver.

Spring came. The rivalry game. JV championship. Freezing rain. Mud everywhere. The varsity game was canceled, so the stands were packed for once. Theo didn't expect to care this much.

But as he stepped onto the field, heart hammering, he realized—he still loved this. Not the trophies. Not the teams. Just the game. Just running. Just the stick in his hands.

That spark.

Score tied. Thirty seconds left. Mud sucking at their cleats. Coach screamed something nobody understood. Theo scooped a loose ball near midfield and ran. One defender. Then two. He slipped, almost fell, but kept going. Everything slowed—the net blurred, rain in his eyes, lungs on fire.

He heard Mason yelling, "GO, THEO!"

His mind went red. Just go. So he did. He cut left, spun right, took a hit so hard his helmet rattled—but he stayed up. Five seconds. The goal looked tiny and miles away. He shot anyway. With everything he had.

The ball smacked the top corner of the net. Buzzer. For a second, nothing. Just silence. Then everything hit—the memories, the pain, the spark. *Maybe I haven't lost it*, he thought.

Noise exploded. Teammates tackled him. Someone screamed his name. Theo lay on his back, staring at the gray sky.

Later, Monday morning, Mr. Hamlin found him in the hallway.

"Nice game," he said. "The whole school's talking about it."

Theo shrugged. "Just JV."

Mr. Hamlin smiled. "History's full of people who started 'just' somewhere."

Backpack heavy. Life is messy. Nothing is fixed yet. But Theo felt something warm in his chest.

Not confidence. Not perfection. Just a quiet, stubborn light. He knew that whatever came next—grades, teams, broken stuff at home—he'd keep his spark. ■

**Warrior, or Excerpts From John Mason's Reflection
on Hans Schmidt | Patrick James '26
Writing Royale Runner-up**

The reason Ryan and I were going to interview Mr. Schmidt was due to his recent public appearances, which gave him some notoriety. A year earlier, in 1981, he spoke to Congress about maintaining vigilance against the Soviets. After that, I believe he did a couple of lectures at prestigious Ivy League Universities. So, in light of this, CBS sent Ryan to interview Mr. Schmidt about his time serving this nation in the CIA and some of his opinions on US foreign policy. The only reason I was there was because they needed a cameraman; besides that, I really only knew he was born in Germany and had been serving the United States and its allies since the fifties.

The house he lived in, no, the mansion he lived in, was in Virginia, and (I learned this after the fact) used to be a plantation house.

His property was large. The driveway was long, and there were two checkpoints along the way, both of which were guarded by suspiciously governmental looking men in suits. I don't recall exactly what they questioned us about, but I remember thinking it was a little much. Ryan told me how he found the whole thing rather suspect, and even though I was inexperienced, I happened to agree.

When we finally pulled into the driveway of the mansion, we saw Hans Schmidt standing on the porch. To his sides were two adjacent pillars; the one to his left had an American flag on it, and the one on his right had a German flag on it. He was dressed very

casually: a polo shirt, worn-out green fatigues, a brown braided belt, and a pair of brown boat shoes. What stood out to me most about his appearance, though, was his smile. He had this huge, ever-present smile. At first, I thought he was just faking it or something, but it became clear he was honestly just excited to talk to us.

Ha . . . that just makes everything worse.

*
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"I am so glad you were all able to make it here. I have been waiting for you to come for a little while now."

"Sorry for making you wait, Mr. Schmidt. John and I just got a little slowed down due to traffic," Ryan explained.

This, as I recall, was a lie; the reason we had been late was due to his security.

"Ah, I understand, I really do. Well. How about we get this started, right?" He clapped his hands and looked towards me.

"Is that camera recording?"

"No," I responded.

"What's the hold up? I would like you all to record a tour of my home before the interview. I believe that it would improve the interview if you got to know me a little better beforehand."

Ryan gave me a nod, so I picked up my camera and began recording.

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After an admittedly very impressive house tour, he finally began bringing us towards his study. Along the way, we got a look at one of his maids cleaning the dining area. He gave a wave, and she bowed to him. I wouldn't have brought this up in normal circumstances, but the maid was from Argentina. The interaction

lasted less than ten seconds, but he turned back to us (keep in mind we are still directly in front of this lady) with a chuckle.

"People from non-European areas: Latin America, Asia, and Africa, especially Africa, are genetically predisposed to be better servants." He turned back to us with that smile and intrigue in his eyes. "You know?"

I remember being very taken aback by this statement; this guy, who spoke to Congress, just said that in front of a rolling camera. To get some approval for my confusion, I looked at Ryan. He looked back at me with squinted eyes and then turned back to Schmidt, about to respond. But Schmidt cut him off.

"Ha! Forget it. Come now, my study isn't too far."

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His study was in an isolated part of the mansion. It was massive with one large desk near the back, a love seat to the left, and a sofa to our right. The wall behind his desk had two large bookshelves filled with works by Clausewitz, Jünger, and Schmitt. Besides this, there were mementos and war trophies he had all over the place. A couple (especially near the front) were very reasonable: signed photos of him with Kennedy and Reagan, framed medals, and smaller flags from countries he lived and conducted operations in (France, Vietnam, Algeria, America, Cuba, Bolivia, Italy, and Chile). But what horrified me was the memorabilia he had from his time in the Wehrmacht, more specifically, the SS. His original black helmet was just sitting on a shelf with photos of him and comrades; a 1939 map of Germany was hanging just above the loveseat; he had a Nazi flag next to the other flags; and he even had his damn SS medals in a separate display from the rest!

Neither Ryan, who had done his research on the man, nor I, who knew next to nothing about him, knew anything of his involvement with the Nazis, let alone the effing SS.

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When the interview started, Ryan and I shared an awkward feeling; Schmidt didn't seem to notice. It took a few extra moments on Ryan's part before he asked his first question. He was originally going to ask something about the CIA, but that question proved insufficient when examining his study.

"Are you a Nazi?"

I remember Ryan said this while directly staring him in the eyes, and with no hesitation in his voice. I, for one, was wide-eyed and just trying to focus on making sure I got everything in the shot.

"Well, what does that really mean? I am a German; the Nazis represented us. I am simply a man who loves his people and hates his people's enemies." The smile remained on his face.

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"What did you do in the SS?"

"Well, to put it simply, I did anti-partisan operations in Reichskommissariat Ostland and Ukraine."

I saw Ryan's eyebrow cock up; then, he asked, "What did you do in these 'operations' and who were your enemies?"

"Well, we hunted down and killed those who continued to resist. Resistance came from many: soldiers, veterans, workers, and . . . " He paused for a moment and nodded in thought. "Even women and children got in our way, we didn't discriminate; they tried to destroy our people, so we destroyed theirs. It was a simple and righteous clash of civilizations, like the Colonists against the Indians. Unfortunately, you Americans seem to have lost your understanding of this core tenet of human nature and branded us as 'war criminals.' Ha! As if there can be a crime in times of war."

✱✱

“How did you escape our punishment?”

“I fled to France and joined the Foreign Legion. It was not done with pride, and part of me still believes I should have died fighting, but I didn’t. As stated, I thought my actions were cowardly, but I realized it was an opportunity. I could continue the fight against the Slavs by killing their comrades abroad. The first place I was shipped off to was Indochina, and after being promoted to the rank of Master Sergeant, I was scouted by your very own CIA.”

My head was spinning at this point, and I began to think that he had forgotten I was recording.

“They knew of my past,” he continued, “but, unlike you all, understood that war was not a game, and demanded all possible advantages. They used my past within the SS to further recruit and train a group of commandos trying to overthrow the Communist government in Albania, this was called Operation Valuable, the-”

Ryan interjected, “We tried to overthrow the Albanian government?”

“I suppose that has not been declassified yet.” Hans laughed and looked towards the camera. “Don’t tell Brezhnev I said anything.”

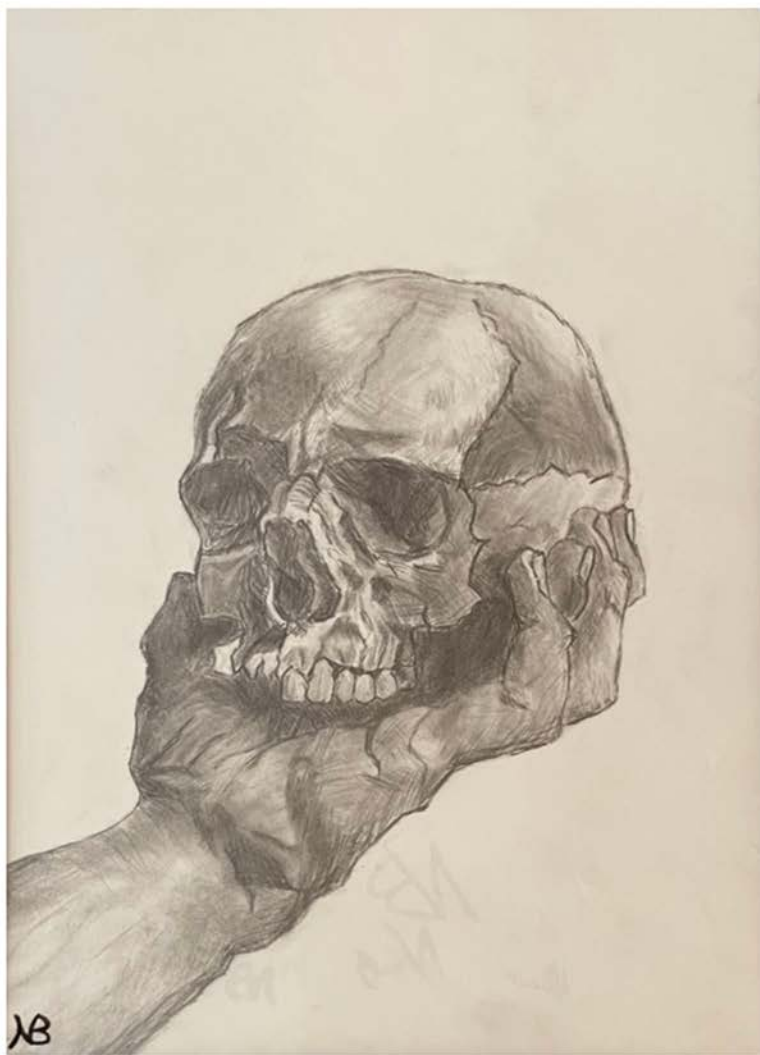
✱✱

The last question Ryan asked was very simple, but I will never forget it till the day I die. “How do you view yourself?”

The smile faded, and he thought. “As a warrior,” he said, “a warrior who still fights against those responsible for our people’s humiliation. This war has been one that I have been fighting since I was seventeen, killing the people who couldn’t understand their heroic liberation from the Judeo-Bolsheviks. This war is not something I intend to stop until the day I die. The borders, flags, and alliances may have changed, but the key aspects have not. Your government has done wonders to help fulfill my mission in

avenging the German people who have had their birthright stolen. So, thank you, Americans. I owe you for allowing me to continue this war."

He looked towards the camera, and the smile returned to his face. The interview ended soon after. ■



Another Sunrise | Sean Lu '28
Writing Royale Runner-up

The jarring light of the monitor and numerous caffeinated drinks keep me awake. The stench of unwashed clothes forces me to notice my room—an absolute war zone. I should clean it, but the math homework for one of my courses is due tomorrow, and that takes priority. There is also CS homework due, but I hate CS, so I should do the subject I hate the least. I suffer. How come? It's summer. What need is there to do so much aimless studying? Why do I make such sacrifices? How much joy did I sell for more worthless time? I look at the time. My God. I should go to sleep. The very thought of sleep sends waves of exhaustion through my body. I can feel that my pressured eyes struggle from the computer's endless stream of blue light, but I know that I can't stop yet. This math homework...

I rest my exhausted face on my forearms and I smile. A crazed, restless smile appears on my face from ear to ear. My pale yellow teeth, my pimpled nose, and especially the smile itself transform my face into a horrific sight. In that position, I unwillingly drift into unconsciousness and dream of the last time I smiled like that.

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I remember. June 18th. My final was being passed out and I was chewing on my nails out of anxiety—my face warped in the same crazed, restless, but excited smile, and at least it was clean. The exam is five hours long, with each question constructed with the intent of testing you on every subject, every topic. I mentally review everything that I have learned, and I wait brimming with excitement and fear of disappointment. Time itself has slowed down—the seconds I wait impatiently for the booklet feel even longer than the excruciating days for which I studied, and I did more studying for this final than I had done in my entire life up to

that point. Every edge case, every footnote, every piece of grammar has been etched into my brain through ten hours of practice. I am not a genius, but I know that I can change. I will take my future within my grasp. I will not let my efforts go to waste.

The greatly anticipated booklet falls onto my desk, and with my precious dull and eraserless pencil, I begin to write. I write. I write. Paragraph after paragraph, proof after proof, my pencil sharpens with knowledge. Initially stiff, it softens with my grip. The tip begins to flow, flying on and off the page as fluidly as an elite swimmer's motion. Every stroke of lead is drawn with the certainty of the next sunrise. The countless failures I experienced compose a new universe of understanding manifested in a forty-page exam. Failure was present throughout my efforts, but so was learning. Before, I failed so that I could succeed when it counted. My writing somehow accelerates. Success is within my grasp, my fingertips graze victory. However, I don't look at the clock. The three hundred minutes of test time fly faster than my pencil can. The bell rings and the exams are collected. I couldn't finish. I couldn't change.

My excited, euphoric smile turns into a blank stare, a completely numb expression, then to frustration. My fear of disappointment displays itself with its full potency, and my hope is submerged into the pool of despair on which I was so desperate to float. With my return home, I bitterly register for every supplementary math, English, and computer science class I can. Plagued by regret, I buy advanced textbooks and schedule sessions with tutors. My bitterness crams my empty summer schedule with as many schools and camps as it can with the sole intent of finding new knowledge. I saw and knew that they were non-refundable—nonetheless, I thought I could handle them. Even if I can't refund them, why waste the education? I registered for these courses to change myself, did I not?



I wake up from my dream of the past, and once again, I suffer. I continue resting my head on my forearms, but this time, I relax. Why do I continue in this pursuit of knowledge? Why do I push myself until I burn out? Is it to prove everyone wrong? Is it to prove myself right? Is it for my future, or for the allure of rest? Is it truly so that I can change myself and become the one I idealized?

Immediately, the answer rises from the abyss like a phoenix from the ashes. There is not just one reason. The reason I search for is formed by countless little thoughts and ideas, by fears and hopes of and for the future, by moments of action and restraint. Like a clock, every motivation and effort plays its role, every cog adds its spark to raise the clock into the light. The final product, the result, is exposed. My despair melts away with the bitter motivation that had compelled me to chase such deceit. There was no result for me after the suffering here. There was no light at the end of this tunnel. Thus, there is no need to suffer here any longer, and I can escape to a path which has a future. Yet another universe of understanding opens its borders for me, not one of knowledge, but of hope and passion. In my new discovery, I have become strong, not through knowledge, but through the ability to look towards the future. Even through hardship, I can look forward. I lift my boots out of the mud and live with purpose. I turn and watch as the clock's display shows 6:41. A single ray of sunshine pierces through the blinds of my window. What joy this is, being able to experience such a beautiful day. What joy this is, experiencing it with the absolute certainty of another sunrise on our new horizons. ■





Disposable | Jackson Salamino '28
Winner of the 2026 Writing Royale

The blaring sirens had screamed for over a year without rest. Eventually they became part of the air itself: a second atmosphere, metallic and merciless. Our makeshift shelter trembled with every blast, but we had learned to live inside the trembling. There was no choice. And yet, beneath all that noise, something else had been growing in me. A rising. A revolt. A quiet, private insurrection I could neither name nor stop.

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They spit on us. They slaughtered us. And worst of all, they lied about us.

We, the Jaswanite people, had become a rumor in our own land: a stain, a slur, a problem to be “managed.” Their newspapers called us parasites. Their broadcasts called us traitors. Their soldiers called us nothing at all.

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The boats arrived early on a morning so gentle it felt like mockery. For two years, no vessel had dared approach our coast. But today they came. The white hulls were glinting like teeth. They were right on schedule, just as they had promised.

I looked at my family. This was the moment of separation, salvation, or betrayal—I still do not know which. The questions swarmed in my skull like locusts:

What is the right way to do this? What is the wrong way?

What am I becoming?

I held my sister close. Zainab’s eyes were wide, defeated, but cooperative. Too cooperative. They all thought I was the hero. But

the truth was simpler and much more dastardly. The deal I made with the very regime that hunted us was a deal to save myself. A deal to save her. A deal that required a price.

*
**

The citrus smell of the morning air lit the ember of the scheme I had been avoiding for weeks. It was time.

My cousin Radvan's Saab 9-3 barreled down the dirt trail, coughing dust like an old smoker. I had predicted he would take this route, as he always does. After all, they required it. I had predicted he would come alone and with his comically broken windshield. I had predicted he would not see the wire.

Why was I right this time, when I had been wrong so many times before?

I had missed so many opportunities to get out of this mess. Why not just this once I could continue on that path?

Why did fate choose this moment to align with me?

The car slowed. The wire caught. The world split open.

From seventy feet away, I watched the explosion of red gore. It was far too fast, and too vivid. A human life bursting like a tomato on hot dirt. I did not move. I did not scream. I did not even blink for nearly a minute.

They were watching. I knew it.

The regime's drones. Their informants. Their invisible enforcers of loyalty.

I had done exactly what they wanted.

Orchestrated it, even. Firsthand.

And the thought hit me with the force of a falling building:

I am more than just a kid seeking the best for my family; I am evil. I must be.

*
**

The walk back to my tent felt like drifting through someone else's nightmare. My body moved, but my mind lagged behind, stuck in the moment the wire snapped. My right thigh twitched uncontrollably. My hands shook. My chest felt hollowed out by a tyrant's guilt. This guilt I had once believed I myself was immune to.

Zainab stood at the tent flap. Her face held a mixture of disgust and readiness. She had seen enough to know something terrible had happened. She had seen enough to know we had no time to mourn it, even though she probably did not wholly comprehend it.

"Why do we have to hurt so much right now?" she whispered.

"I . . . I don't know, Zainab," I said. "We have to go. Remember what I told you yesterday?"

Only now did I realize how insane it was that I had told her our plan just the day before. A plan to flee on boats sponsored by the same government that had starved us, bombed us, and erased us.

I grabbed my sack.

"Do you have your things?"

"Yes, Yusuf."

Her hand was tiny and warm in mine. We ran. We hopped over debris, ducked under a broken beam, and sprinted through the ruins of what used to be a prospering neighborhood. The tunnel entrance before us seemed like a throat bellowing out cries to do something else. We did not listen.



The tunnel stretched over two miles beneath the earth. It was an artifact of an old mining project, now reused for the escape at this exact moment. Our footsteps echoed like a report of our actions directly to the authorities. Every drip of water sounded like a countdown to our demise.

When we finally saw light cracking through the far end, I felt a rush of terror.

They must have spotted us.

Zainab squeezed my hand.

"Father's precious jewel," my mother used to call her.

The words stabbed me now.

We emerged into the blinding sun. The silver hulls of the boats shimmered on the shore. Soldiers stood beside them, rifles slung casually, as if this were a typical morning and not the culmination of a barbaric bargain.

One of the officers nodded at me.

A nod of recognition.

A nod of approval.

The price had been paid.



As we approached the boats, Zainab tugged my sleeve.

"Yusuf... what is happening?"

I opened my mouth, but no words came.

What could I say?

That I had killed our cousin?

That I had delivered a rebel leader, of our own family, to the regime's satisfaction?

That I had traded a life for a passage?

That I had become the very thing I hated?

The officer gestured us forward.

"Your seats are ready, Yusuf."

I was not even startled that the officer knew my name. Zainab stepped onto the ramp. I hesitated. The sea breeze tasted like rust.

Am I the villain?

The traitor?

The required evil?

Or the coward, selling out my own people?

What is right?

What is wrong?

What is good?

What is evil?

The questions circled me like vultures taking a stab at my brain.

I followed her onto the boat.

The engine roared to life.

The shore which I previously had called the land of my people, was now the land of my guilt. As I went to get a final glance, a new officer appeared. He grabbed me by the collar. He muttered in a foreign language, “*Öïplarbêsê.*” *Disposable.*

This language sounded very familiar to what I knew. Though, all I knew in this moment was that I should never have trusted this regime. Truth was on the side of the oppressed today. Except for the fact that I lied. The oppressors had won. ■

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