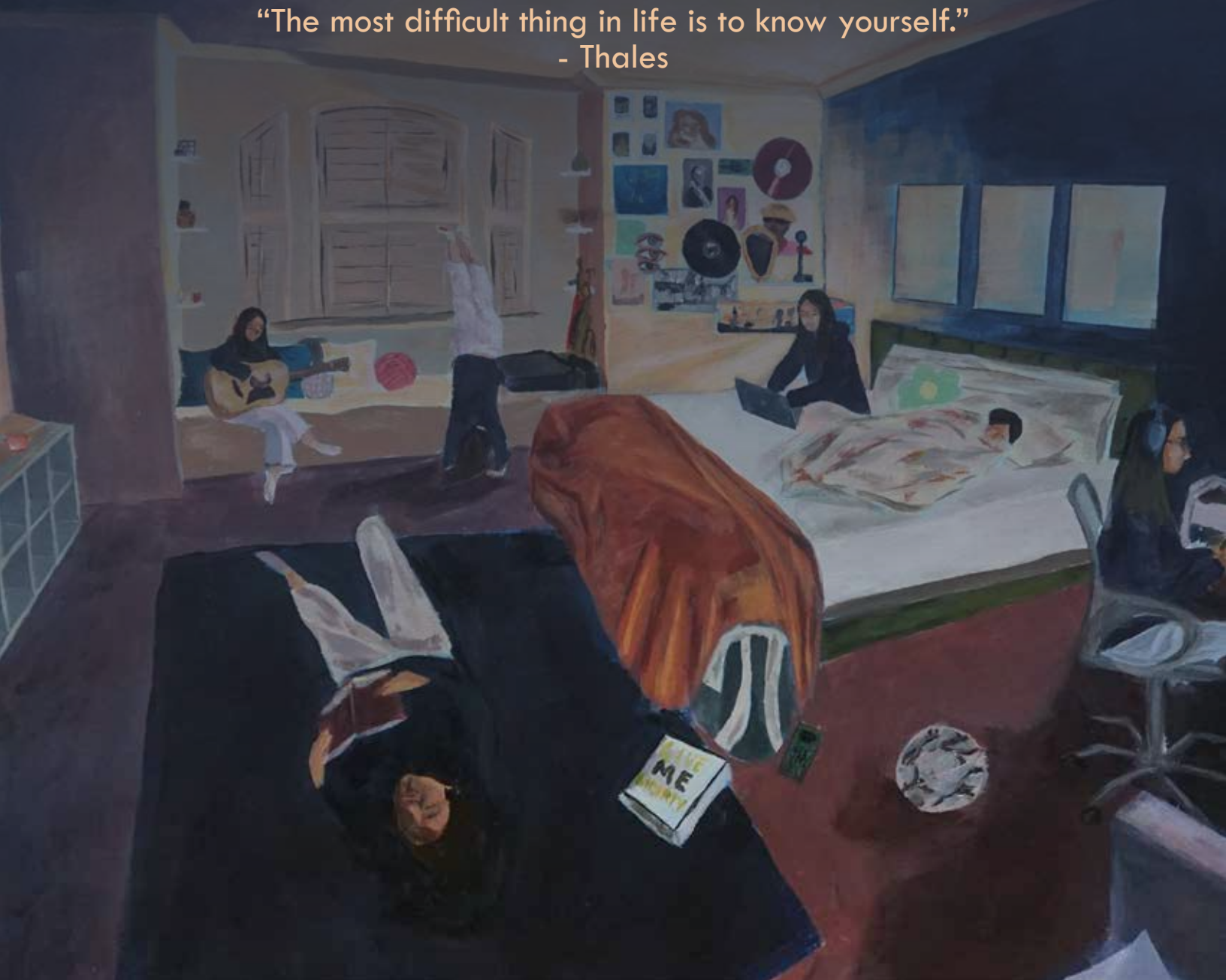


The Walrus 2025, Vol. 59
Saint Mary's Hall, San Antonio, Texas

Know Yourself

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"The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself."
- Thales





Maddie Florence (11) | Work in Silence | Digital Photography

"The most difficult thing in life is to know yourself."
- Thales

Who Am I?

This is one of the most difficult questions to answer yet one of the most often ones a person faces. Are you a cat or dog person? What do you want to be when you grow up? Are you a STEM or Humanities person? What is your political party? What is your religion? Where are you really from?

One of the hardest things to do is to be self-aware.

Many people brand themselves too quickly, unknowingly obstructing themselves from retaining the truth solely because they are desperate for answers.

Yet, they must learn that
introspection leads to truth, and humanity's fear of isolation only leads to conformity. But conformity is the saboteur of introspection. Art and writing allow time for introspection, a time to bring values into sharper focus, to solidify moral principles. Discovering one's values breaks the seal of conformity, allowing one to seek the truth within themselves.
Once one reaches the truth,
only then can they answer the question:

Who am I?

Know Yourself

"Dig within. Within is the wellspring of Good;
and it is always ready to bubble up, if you just dig."
- Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

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Editorial Policy:

The Walrus editorial staff reserves the right to edit minor errors such as grammatical and spelling problems, while other submissions may be returned to the author for other requested corrections or approval for editorial decisions.

Disclaimer:

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Pathos

To know what you feel is to understand the most vulnerable parts within you. Pushing yourself to evoke and articulate the emotions that are hardest to convey is essential to fully achieving self-realization. Know the power of your emotions.

"When I discover who I am, I'll be free."
- Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Title: TBD

David Halsell-Bibb (11) | Prose Poem

Listen to David read his prose poem!

My objective was simple: write a story about my life, the catch was it must be under 101 words.

"Maybe when-"

My peers' clicking keyboards contrast the empty doc staring at me – it's paralyzing. My head aches to grasp a thrilling memory of passion and trials! Alas, nothing.

"One time-"

Every note-worthy conflict always ended in a whimper, or simply didn't end at all. Every note-worthy adventure always became a drag, or simply wouldn't become at all.

"... Maybe I am boring..."

My objective was simple: Write a story under 101 words, the catch was it must be about my life.



Cecilia Cancesco (11)| Sunday Funday | Digital Photography



Bianca Rodriguez (11) | Mi Tierra | Mixed Media

A Dream

Maryclaire Bond (9) | Short Story

"It was an odd request indeed, but for reasons I cannot justify, I trusted the woman completely."

Placing a shaking hand on the bronze doorknob, I took a deep breath. Whatever was behind that door would determine the rest of my life. Everyone had told me that the old woman on the corner of 56th Street could make your wildest dreams come true. Anyone who stepped through her front door left happier than ever before. After a few days of contemplation, I finally decided I would pay the woman a visit.

I rapped smartly on the antique wooden door and gazed up at the rickety two-story home, rumored to be even older than the woman herself. The door opened, and I was greeted by a petite woman in a lavender dress with graying hair that fell to her shoulders. She held a half-knitted scarf in one hand.

"You have a dream?" the woman queried.

"Yes, my name is–"

"No time for that! Come in, come in!" The woman quickly ushered me inside and showed me to an ornately carved door with a brass doorknob. "You must open the door." It was an odd request indeed, but for reasons I cannot justify, I trusted the woman completely. After a few deep breaths, I thrust open the door. It led to nothing at all! It was white space as far as the eye could see. I turned back towards the woman, but she had disappeared. Impulsively, I jumped into the white unknown.

I began to fall, but I fell so slowly that it felt as if I were drifting like a feather. Suddenly, there was a blinding flash of light. When the spots cleared away from my vision, I saw a spiral of color. Every color imaginable swirled below, rippling outwards. I continued to fall until my boots reached the ocean of color. I stumbled, finding the color to be solid. In awe, I reached down to touch the surface below me.

When my fingers met a swirl of purple and white, figures rose up around me. They seemed to melt upwards, color bubbling and rising to form people, places, and objects I had never seen before. Each was an idea, a unique and beautiful possibility. It was pure creativity. My head spun as thoughts flowed continuously. Everything I could do–and would do–seemed clear. There were thousands of paths I could take, but I was not unsure.

A door materialized in front of me. I knew where it would take me. Filled with new hope and ideas, I stepped back into the world I knew as home.



In Association with Fatbird Films
She Follows Me, a film by Courtney King
Written & Directed by Courtney King
1st AD Iris Underwood
Edited by Courtney King
Cinematography by Charlie Martin
Produced by Will Underwood
Sound Design by Cullen Johnson
Original Score by Nicholas Morgan

In this short film, Courtney King (11) explores the journey of a young girl becoming reaquainted with her younger self. Scan the QR code below to watch Courtney's film.

The Hunt

Hudson Moore (12) | Poem

Expansive groves of forest trees
Seclude the treasure that must feed
My family through the winter months.
That's why I must begin the hunt.

Make seen my face I cannot do.
I hide myself with mud and dew
To camouflage my pale white hands
And cloak the trace of modern man.

Concealed behind the Douglas fir,
I wait, then stalk, wait some more.

The monster I must find,
Majestic as a passing storm,
Forever on my mind,
I search and search forevermore.

The beast that holds a treasure trove,
I see it there beyond the grove.
The elk lies still beneath the trees,
As silent as the passing breeze.
It waits to see the break of day,
And closer still I make my way.

Knock the arrow.
Raise my bow.
Free the string.
Watch it go.

It flies toward this clever beast,
The beast that will become my feast.
A beast of size, a beast of might,
A beast that will put up a fight.
A beast that lays upon the ground,
A beast that wears an antler crown.
A mighty beast now taken down,
The beast, once lost, has now been found.

Do You Hear the Dogs?

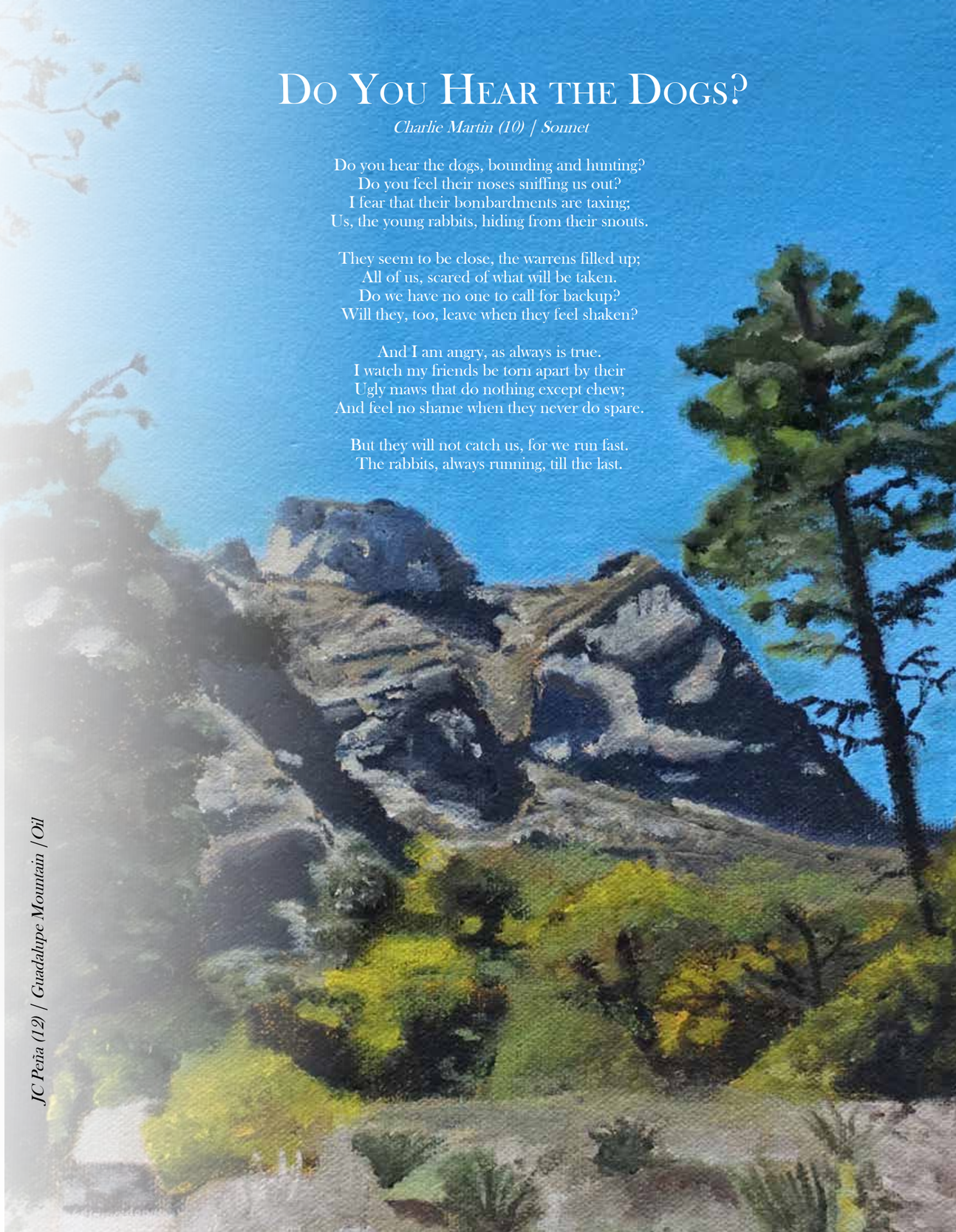
Charlie Martin (10) | Sonnet

Do you hear the dogs, bounding and hunting?
Do you feel their noses sniffing us out?
I fear that their bombardments are taxing;
Us, the young rabbits, hiding from their snouts.

They seem to be close, the warrens filled up;
All of us, scared of what will be taken.
Do we have no one to call for backup?
Will they, too, leave when they feel shaken?

And I am angry, as always is true.
I watch my friends be torn apart by their
Ugly maws that do nothing except chew;
And feel no shame when they never do spare.

But they will not catch us, for we run fast.
The rabbits, always running, till the last.



JC Peña (12) | Guadalupe Mountain | Oil

The Hospital

Asher Cho (10) | Short Story

"My thoughts felt as heavy as stones sinking in water. My chest tightened as I felt a chill spread through me. *Is Amma okay?*"



Pearl Moore (9) | Blurry Memories | Digital Photography

We're going to see your mom."

Appa stood in front of us in the living room. The room's lamp flickered, momentarily letting the dark night slip into the room before returning its dim glow. It was late, so it was surprising that Appa, who was usually so strict with curfew, was suggesting we go anywhere. Where was Amma? Why did we have to visit her?

I saw Appa and Amma leaving the house mid-day. I hadn't thought anything of it because they often went out together for shopping or other errands. Now he was standing with his brows drawn together, and his face set in a somber "We're going to see your mom."

Appa stood in front of us in the living room, grimly looking down at me and Hunga. The room's lamp flickered, momentarily letting the dark night slip into the room before returning its dim glow. It was late, so it was surprising that Appa, who was usually so strict with curfew, was suggesting we go anywhere. Where was Amma? Why did we have to visit her?

I saw Appa and Amma leaving the house mid-day. I hadn't thought anything of it because they often went out together for shopping or other errands. Now he was standing with his brows drawn together, and his face set in a somber stillness. Yet my thoughts felt as heavy as stones sinking in water.

My chest tightened as I felt a chill spread through me. "Is Amma okay?"

Hunga broke the silence. "W-Why?" he asked.

Appa sighed, turning away. "I don't have the time to tell you two right now. I'll explain it in the car,"

As Hunga and I went to change we stopped in front of Amma's room. The familiar scent of her perfume lingered in the air, calming us.

When we got back, seeing Appa's somber face again brought the flood of anxious thoughts crashing back. He rose from his seat and walked slowly towards the front door. Turning back to us, his voice low and firm, "Get into the car."

As we drove, I looked out the window. There was a heavy blanket of clouds covering the stars, leaving the night cloaked in darkness, with only the faint, ghostly glow of streetlights and the occasional flash of a passing car cutting through.

After what seemed like hours, Hunga spoke up. "Where's Amma?"

My ears perked up.

"Oh. Sorry," Appa said, "Amma's in the hospital. The doctors..."

The rest of his words faded into the background, swallowed up by my drifting thoughts. The weight of Appa's words sank in. Amma was in the hospital. My chest began to feel heavy, and I felt a sense of dread. I didn't want to believe it, but what if–

I looked up. The dark silhouette of the hospital was visible through the front window.

We got out and Appa led the way.

As we trailed behind him, the building began to loom over us— both familiar yet eerie at the same time. The sterile smell of the hospital hit me instantly, reminding me of all the unpleasant visits I'd taken for checkups or immunizations. Hunga and I found a seat off to the side as Appa walked up to the receptionist. Appa turned to us and gave a small nod for us to follow him.

"I think Amma is sleeping right now so don't be too noisy when you walk in."

We nodded and followed Appa inside as he quietly nudged open the door. I blinked rapidly as my eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room. The faint click of the door closing behind us echoed in the quiet space.

Appa walked to the curtain partition and pulled them open so that we could all see her. She was lying asleep, covered by several blankets on her white, disheveled hospital bed. There were machines around her, an IV bag hung beside her, and I noticed multiple patches connected all over her body, leading to machines that beeped softly. I hated seeing her like this. I walked closer, taking in the sight of her sleeping face: her chest rose and fell slowly. She was alive. She was fine. It just might be okay. Eventually, I leaned in, careful not to disturb the wires, and gently hugged her, feeling her heartbeat against my chest.

"Let her rest," Appa said, breaking the heavy silence.

I hesitated. I didn't want to leave her. Reluctantly, I stepped back, and joined him and Hunga near the door. The three of us walked back into the fluorescent maze.

The sterile smell of the hospital gave way to the humid night air as we exited. The ride home was quiet, but not the calm kind. None of us said a word as the soft rumble of the drive filled the silence. I stared out the window, once again watching the streetlights blur past, but my mind was somewhere else. It was still stuck on the image of Amma in her hospital bed, hooked up to those machines.

We walked into the house, and I found myself, once again, in the living room. Its red carpet and dim light were still there, but now it felt less welcoming and less like home without Amma there. The rest of the night was a blur as I mechanically pulled off my clothes and changed into my pajamas. I walked back to my room and sank onto my bed, sitting up as I started to pray for Amma's health the way she had taught me to.

"Please let Amma be okay tomorrow." I said, my voice barely rising above a whisper.

The next morning, the sky was bright and clear as opposed to the night before. Sunlight streamed through my window, casting warm beams across my bed and shining into my eyes. Everything felt lighter, and for a moment, it felt like everything was alright. But as I sat up in my bed, I remembered. I trudged out of my room and walked back to the living room where I saw Appa and Hunga already dressed waiting for me.

"You're finally awake," Appa said, "Go and get ready. We're going to see your mom."

Just like the day before, we got into the car, and just like the day before, we drove in relative silence. But unlike yesterday, I didn't feel as panicked. Maybe it was seeing Amma yesterday, maybe it was because I was well rested, or maybe it was because there was bright rays of light streaming through the car windows as opposed to the pitch darkness of yesterday.

Eventually, we made it to the hospital, the sunshine making its brick structure look more placid, almost as if it were tired. When we reached Amma's floor, my heart started to race again. Appa led us down the hallway, and this time, he knocked softly on the door before pushing it open. Sunlight streamed into the room from a small window, casting a gentle glow over everything, making Amma look less fragile and more like herself. But more important than that was that she was sitting up on her bed, her eyes open, and a small, tired smile on her face as she looked at us. Relief washed over me as Hunga and I ran towards her. We hurried to Amma's bedside, hugging her tightly as she wrapped her arms around us.

Her voice was soft but full of warmth as she whispered, "I love you."

Maybe I'm Wrong

Andrew Hoppas (12) | Poem

Does it make me wrong
To believe all I could ever fathom
Was in my hands for only a second?

Stupid of me to think I had it all,
So quickly I lost it all,
All of that moment was nothing more
Than what you thought was normal.
But I thought it was truly more.
Deep in my heart, it bore.
It gave me something I could never ignore
A love I wanted to soar.

Does that make me wrong?



O, Anathema

Fiona Briggs (10) | Sonnet

Diseased hands wrote your heinous manuscript.
Any with a beating heart in their chest
Would sooner be too soft than what has ripped
Away your hand. By the serpent possessed
You walk the earth like a falciparum,
Vitriol spilling from your hateful lungs.
O bane of my being you have become!
O anathema, with your wretched tongue.
Sickly vulture, my life force you beseech.
Drain my patience and sell my soul for parts
And you sicken me with lorn, woeful speech,
Once I leave to revive my stresséd heart
When rusted chains untether you from me
I am the drop of sun I once could be.



Meri Rabke (10) | Monster Speakers | Clay



Haik Zacharian (12)| Wind and Ember| Watercolor

Frost Comes Home

David Halsell-Bibb (11) | Short Story

"Jacques will go on an adventure soon. He's going to slay dragons and save cities, just like in the stories Mom used to tell."

The heavy spruce door creaked open as Frost entered the house. The icy wind outside rampaged through the opening for a moment before the door slammed back upon it. He stood there for a moment, settling along with the breeze in the room, before bringing his game into the cellar. He was quite grateful for a cellar; in their old house, the only place to store food like this was too open aired. In any case, he was grateful for the lack of stench throughout his home.

"I'm back!" he shouted to seemingly no one.

He expected the house to be empty about this time but was certainly a little disappointed not to see the smiling faces of his brother and sister. Shuffling his feet down the stone steps, Jacques made his way to the bottom of the cellar, just in time too – the only piece from his last hunt was a tiny rabbit that he was sure wouldn't even feed little Eloise!

His smile only grew as he thought about how proud Alexandre would be at the great haul he got this week, it must've been one of the best ones all season. He would be happy to know Jacques caught an elk this time (it's Alex's favorite meat), and he imagined well the excitement on Eloise's face when he told her about the little bunny rabbits he saw on the way back, and even what happened with the strange Elf! – and what happened with the strange elf.

His smile faded with the realization; departing on the journey he had planned would likely take weeks, months even.

After Frost finished slinging the meat onto the cold shelves, he shuffled back up the stairs of the cellar, squinting his eyes slightly as they re-adjusted to the normal lighting of the home. A sigh escaped his lips as he shut the door behind him and swayed over to the dinner table to snack on what was left of his rations.

Ahh, let's see; 4 pieces of jerky; 7 cranberries; a piece of rye bread; and 8 pine nuts.

He fiddled with the food more than eating it though. How could he eat when his mind was rapidly playing and replaying scenarios in his head? What would they think? Would Alexandre approve? No, of course, he would, it was a journey to honor his parents too, Jacques reminded himself. But still, who would take up his role in their tightly-knit familial trio? Gods know his elder brother couldn't hunt anymore, even if he had his eye back he would still be in a time crunch with his job at the guard. Eloise couldn't hunt either, he couldn't imagine her even being able to bring herself to kill a furry little thing, not that he himself handled the killing very well.

His train of thought was interrupted by the energetic and hurried footsteps of his sister approaching the house, the tugging at the door, the return of the icy wind flooding the interior of the house, and the final slamming of the door to settle the wind in its place.

"We're back, house! Ooh, and Jacques is back too!!"

Jacques stood up from his chair and crouched down at the sight of his younger sibling – who upon seeing him threw a bundle of firewood she had carried in to the side and ran up to throw her arms around his shoulders.

Jacques laughed softly, "Yes, hello Eloise. It's good to see you too."

"Oh you took three days this time, why did you take three days?? That's too long, too long I say!" Eloise exclaimed, but clearly happy to see her brother. "Did you see any Jackalopes this time?"

Another laugh escaped Jacques, this time out of pure amusement. "I told you already, Jackalopes aren't real, who even told you an Elk-Rabbit existed?"

Eloise began to speak again, but the oak door swung open as Alexandre entered. A thick fur cape covered his figure, necessary protection from the icy wind that once again left as quickly as it entered (at this point the floor near the doorway started to pile up a thin layer of snow). He had an eyepatch covering his left eye, and a halberd slung across his back. Though his appearance was a little rough, it was familiar and welcome to his younger brother.

"Alex- Did you come home with Eloise?" Jacques asked.

"Oh, yes. We just got back from the market," Alexandre said. It was at this point that Jacques saw the sack of potatoes and root vegetables slung over his brother's shoulder, the burlap dusted with frost. "Welcome home, by the way."

"Mm, good to be home– Good to see you two," Jacques said, thinking back to the Elf. How would he tell them?

Reading his younger brother's face as if reading his mind, Alexandre spoke up, "Brother, you look like you've seen a ghost. Rough hunt?"

Jacques snapped up, realizing his thoughts were being practically telegraphed through his countenance, "No, actually– one of the best. Elk. And some ptarmigans- I-"

"Elk? Are we feasting tonight?" Eloise probed, picking up the firewood she dropped earlier and dragging it over to the fireplace to be set with the rest of the kindling.

"Yeah, we'll be eating well for a while. But I, uh, need to talk to you both about something."

The tension in the room upped a few decibels at his words. Jacques looked around the room nervously, running his hand up through his hair for a moment. Alexandre walked over to the kitchen to unload the vegetables.

"Well, get on with it, Jacques. What is this dire thing you must tell us?" He asked

Jacque sighed before clearing his throat and steeling his will, "You remember, after the blizzard– after the storm separated us from Mom & Dad? How we planned to spread their ashes on a mountain in the West? I think now, now that we're settled in, and more stable– 'There is no season but the one we stand in,' Dad used to say that, right?"

Alexandre slowly turned around, looking Jacques in the eyes with vague contention. "So, you want to go on a months-long journey to some mountain in the West? Jacques, what sparked this? Why now?"

"Well–" Jacques hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck as he searched for the right words. "I met an elf on the road back. She was in this crater, like she fell from the sky, Alex. Things like that don't just happen, you know?" He paused, watching the way his brother's brow furrowed in confusion.

"There's something off about her. It's hard to explain. I don't know all the details yet, but it's big, Alex. Either she's not from this world or she's insane, and either way I feel like having company would be necessary. I can't just let someone wander off to die, right? Isn't that what Dad would say-"

Alexandre cut him off, "Okay, that's enough. I get it. But you're telling me you met an elf who fell from the sky, and you're going to follow her into the wilds of the West? That sounds crazy, Jacques."

"I know, I know it sounds insane. But, I've been in Iverne for so long, and I thought– I thought, maybe– maybe this is my chance. To do something that matters. To not just sit back and wait for life to pass by. It's an adventure that feels like it has meaning, even if I don't understand it all yet."

Alexandre sighed, looking past Jacques over to the corner of the living room, where a table was set with their parents' things; Bottles of ashes; their father's sword, Frostbite; and their mother's favorite books.

"Didn't you ever feel like the yearning for adventure when Mom read you the stories of great heroes that slayed dragons and saved cities? I know this might not be nearly as critical a role as that but I want to know what's beyond the cold border of Iverne. And besides, I don't want to keep waiting to honor Mom & Dad."

After thinking a moment, Alex's gaze returned to Jacques, seeing his determination. Really he didn't want him to go because he was concerned, worried. Neither himself nor his brother had ever traveled to the West before, and no one knew what was waiting for him there. But still:

"You're eighteen now, brother. I suppose it's true you're not a kid anymore. This though, I don't know about this. But you seem to know exactly what you want, so, if you are set on this I won't stop you." His stature became more relaxed, he even smiled a little. "Just, stay a few more days. I want to meet this elf you are talking about too." He paused a moment as if wanting to add something more, but seemed to conclude his thoughts. "These are my conditions."

Jacques' face lit up, "Thank you, thank you- Yes, of course, I'll find her first thing in the morning and invite her to the house for dinner."

At this point, Eloise came back into the room and saw the stand-off that had seemed to just cool down.

"What's going on?" She asked

Jacques paused for a moment, preparing to have to explain himself all over again, but his elder brother spoke before him.

"Jacques will go on an adventure soon. He's going to slay dragons and save cities, just like in the stories Mom used to tell."

A Love Letter to One of My Oldest Friends

Rabani Bajaj (10) | Personal Narrative

Dear Hairbrush,

I'll be frank, we've had our differences. At the worst times, you act as a silent saboteur, making my pre-party routines into stressful battles with frizz. Your constant refusal to do my bidding ignites my frustration and tangles with my anger. I'm envious of your ability to never pause till your mission is accomplished - how dare you overflow with energy when I must? Your relentless persistence is infuriating, but I can't restrain myself from grudgingly admiring it from time to time. After all, every relationship hides its issues behind a silky curtain. The pain you put me through compels me to push you away, your lack of boundaries makes me want to pull my hair out! Doesn't distance bring fondness to the heart? But, I can't bear every morning without you.

You taught me the definition of fidelity. Despite how many replacements I go through, your indomitable spirit thrives in each new brush I buy. From the beginning you tortured me with good intentions, snagging my once short locks and now biting your way through my long mane that falls to my knees. You are a heavy-handed critic, with patience that wears thin until we reach a smooth agreement. But your honesty always shines through, I know you have the best intentions even when I don't have the time (or just don't want) to hear it. You've endured my petulance when my hair won't cooperate, remaining ever so strong. You stand tall, your bristles small but mighty, facing each day's challenges head on. In time of horror I've forgotten you at home! I cringe remembering the crises of being forced to untangle knots with my too thick fingers while traveling.

You alone allow me to be vain. Mascara and hair clips pale in comparison to the perpetual permission you grant me to preen in the mirror. I trust only you to ensure my most recognizable feature is always sleek. The confidence you give me is simple. You remind me it's okay to care, to calm the inner turmoil, to look in the mirror, and to present a version of myself to the world that fills me with pride. For you, I shed my fear of being judged for wanting to look pretty because you only see me as vulnerable. I'm empowered by the quiet courage you nurture within me, normally clouded with my aversion for attention. When you cautiously style my hair from bedhead to braids, the little girl with short locks that barely brushes her shoulders beams brightly again. She recalls the excitement of being told that one day her hair would be as long as Rapunzel's every time I get a compliment on it.

Through the years, we've built unity out of our disagreements into a companionship founded on respect and discipline. No dares to infuriate and comfort me quite like you. It doesn't matter if you're pink or neon green, as long as my mane can tangle, my need for you, my dear daily hero, will remain.

Yours Always,
Rabani



Jane Zacharian (9) | Graphite

In Numbers We Trust

Dev Alluri (9) | Critical Essay, Silver Medal Scholastic Winner

"In a life dominated by numbers and time, we don't allow ourselves enough grace or slack. We are too often unkind to ourselves, constantly worried about our productivity instead of our progress."

At 6:30 a.m., my alarm buzzes, but I don't get up until 6:32 a.m. Your boy needs those extra two minutes of beauty sleep. Then, I take nine steps from my bed to my bathroom to brush my 36 teeth for exactly 4 and ½ minutes. Then after showering for 13 minutes and picking out my one school-issued uniform, I get driven 2.4 miles at 35 miles per hour to the nearest Starbucks, where I order a $7.00 drink with 250 calories and 33 grams of sugar. I get to school at 8:32 a.m. The class starts at 8:30 a.m., which means I'm two minutes late. I sit in class, writing down dates in history, or comparing test scores with those closest to me, seeing where I fit in amongst my peers. And then it hit me – like a bag of bricks – which if my math is correct is approximately 45 pounds. Throughout my 14 years of life, I have worked out quite a morning routine. I live my life constantly controlled by numbers, and as a society we all do. How many hours of sleep did you get last week? How many steps did you walk today? How many friends do you have? It seems everywhere we go, we're constantly surrounded by numbers.

We can no longer allow numbers and numerals, data, or digits to control our lives. To understand the topic more fully, let's figure out why numbers are naturally so controlling in nature, then examine how these digits can affect our well-being and the health of entire societies before finally understanding how we can start progressing to a more independent society.

The firm grasp and influence we give to numbers allow them to make decisions for us. This phenomenon can be attributed to a concept known as behavioral nudging, where numerical values subtly influence our behavior. *The University of Chicago News* articulates, that this "nudge" can be defined as a way to manipulate people's choices to lead them to make specific ones. Our ability to think for ourselves, accept one another, and even love is all controlled by these digits because we let them. This behavior also influences our judgments about others. For example, we tend to think a person is lazy simply because of the number on the scale, or that a person is not smart because of the numbers on their report card. By allowing ourselves to treat numbers as defining factors of the population, we prove just how much dependence we have on them.

This power so to speak that we give to numbers is affecting us personally. The influence that we are giving to numbers halts our ability to grow as individuals. We live in an age where statistics reign supreme, leading us to overlook the complex by being simple-minded. For example, according to racial equality activist Richard Lapchick, only 0.4% of professional basketball players in the NBA identify as Asian. When we hear that, we might unconsciously internalize the idea that being Asian means being unathletic, making the two concepts mutually exclusive.

Additionally, we're ignoring the names behind some of our most devastating numbers. Currently, our country is plagued by an epidemic of mass shootings. The Gun Violence Archive has tallied 385 this year alone. But, almost every wave of news stories delivers the same message: #thoughtsandprayers. A simple condolence recognizing victims and their families acts as a way to count school shootings as opposed to an actual act of kindness to help comfort those affected. Websites like *Statista* and *Mother Jones* have done tremendous work documenting mass shootings, dating back to 1982, but in every data point, something is missing: the names of victims. They're being reduced to two columns in a spreadsheet as either fatalities or injuries. Yes, 19 students died in the 2022 Uvalde school shooting, but they were all children with names, families, hopes, and dreams. They were so much more than just a number.

For as long as I can remember, I've loved math; however, as I got older, I saw how the numbers I cherished began to change the people I loved. If my friends were anxious or upset, it was because of a grade, a numerical value, that they received on an exam. If my parents argued, it was about money or the sum of dollars and cents. And if I worried about my future because I saw myself living alone. After all, 1 is the loneliest number. As a society, the firm grasp that numbers have on every aspect of our lives is doing more harm than good, and we need to start learning to change in order to ultimately improve as individuals.

First, on a societal level, we must shift from a quantitative community to a qualitative one. But, how? Well, for starters, we can look at our social media usage. Take Instagram for example. Sure, you may have 4,563 followers, but how many of those followers are your friends? How many of their names do you know? I'd imagine not many. Rather than chasing likes, let's chase long-lasting relationships.

Next, on a personal level, we need to shift our perspective from solely pursuing results to valuing the journey of growth. When we fixate on numbers, we run the risk of dehumanizing others, overlooking the complexities of their lived experiences. If you see a statistic in a news story, do your own research to learn more about the names behind the numbers. We must practice mindful tracking—or consciously observing and recording our thoughts and actions. In doing so, we can celebrate small victories, develop greater self-awareness, and foster empathy.

Finally, we have to take our power back. In a life dominated by numbers and time, we don't allow ourselves enough grace or slack. We are too often unkind to ourselves, constantly worried about our productivity instead of our progress. Yes, it's important to work hard and nourish ourselves but when we base our health solely on our weight, or our intelligence solely based on our GPA, we are not living life. We are living in perfectionism. It's time to change, one number at a time.

Credited with the creation of one of the most famous equations of all time, E = mc2, Einstein noted, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts." If a theoretical physicist and big fan of numbers can concede that numbers fall short, then we as a society should be able to release numbers' firm grasp on our culture today.



Mazreen Sanjana (11)| Echoes Through the Screen | Digital Design

Test Time!

Abi Sorensen (11) | Poem

Scribble, scribble.
Furiously, my pencil dances across the paper,
Filling the blank void with symbols of knowledge.
Cramps overtake my right hand
But my brain shuts down any pleas for a schism.

Rustle, rustle.
I quickly turn the page,
Just to do the same thing over and over and over again.
Day after day, I regurgitate concepts
I've memorized- meticulously- mindlessly.
I'm stuck in this prism.

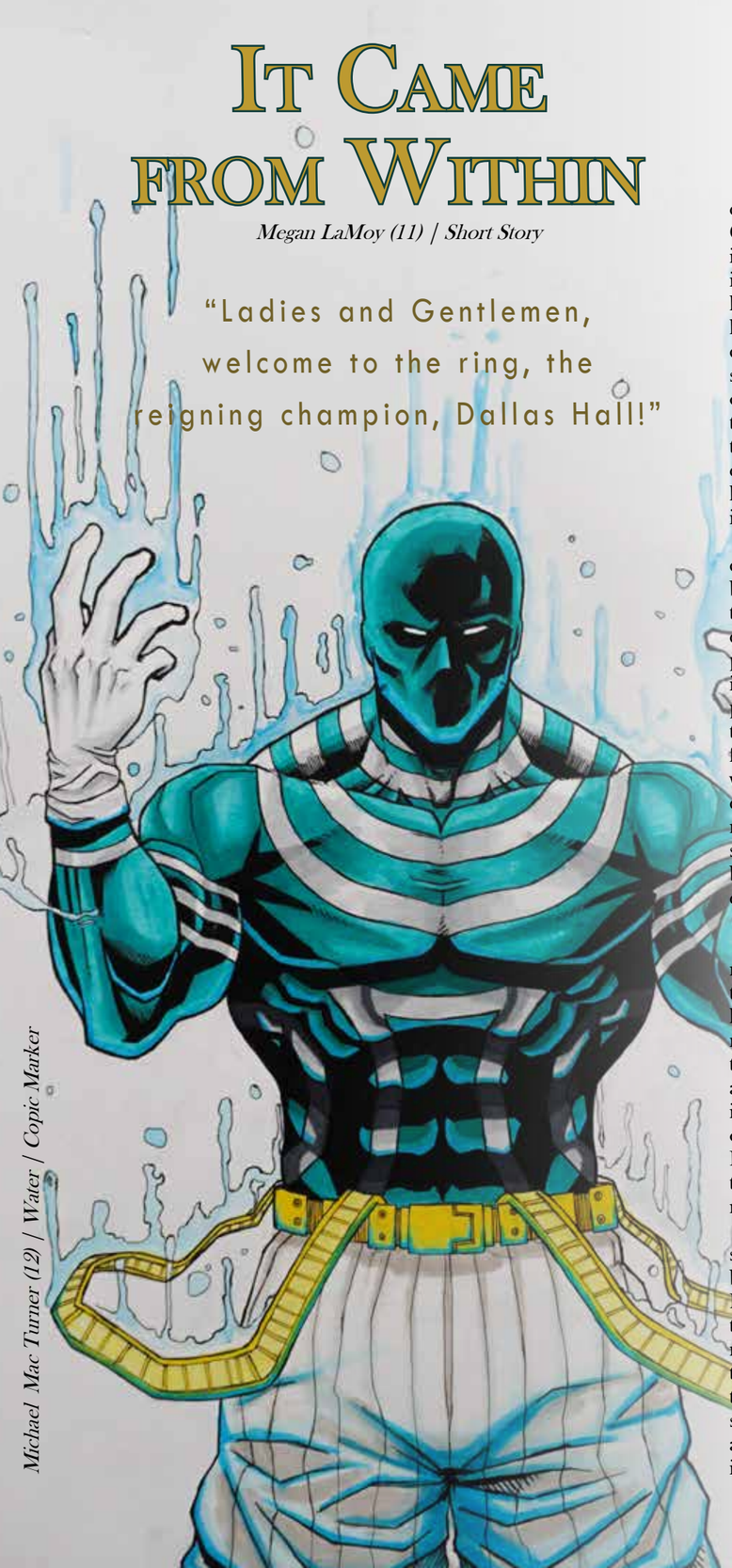
Tick, tick.
The clock's pointy hands whiz with menace.
Every time I look up, it smirks
As it controls my end.
"T-I-M-E," it purrs.

Drip, drip.
Sweat rolls down my neck.
Read, answer, next question.
Panic strikes- ten minutes left.
Everything blurs.

It's a race between me and the clock.
I refuse to let it win.
I finish.
The timer goes off.
I breathe.

It Came from Within

Megan LaMoy (11) | Short Story



Michael Mac Turner (12) | Water | Copic Marker

Dusk had arrived at around six o'clock on the night of May 23rd, with giant clouds shielding the setting sun from the bright, fluorescent lights of the city. Appropriately called 'The City That Never Sleeps,' New York City was bustling with crowds of people rushing towards the one arena as famous as the city itself, Madison Square Garden. Located in the heart of the city, the arena saw its fair share of history throughout its lifetime, including the first ever Wrestlemania, an event which pitted icons such as Hulk Hogan and Mr. T against the likes of Roddy Piper and Paul Orndorff. Ever since that night in March of 1985, professional wrestling has called MSG its home, daring anyone to challenge its claim on the arena. Wrestlemania happens annually and tonight was the night that it appeared once more.

Closing in on the arena, the stars of the event zipped up their jackets and tied their boots, for the city had become frigid under the night's grip. Eager fans lined the doorways, desperate for a glimpse of their heroes, as local pedestrians scowled at the disruptive intruders invading their streets. The Garden was approximately 150 feet tall and the roof spanned the length of around 404 feet. It contained five floors and could seat around 20,000 people within its walls. To say that the event was a deeply anticipated night would be an understatement, for that night's event had been sold out since January. Fans were convinced that it would be an unforgettable night, hoping that a new champion would be crowned.

Their hopes were not in vain.

The current champion was a 6 '2" young man with shaggy blond hair that hung down to his shoulders and a Roman-like nose that had appeared to have been broken one too many times. His pale skin was unusually tan that evening, for he had made an appointment at the tanning salon the day before, and a half inch scar rested upon his eyebrow, a reminder of his recent match that occurred a week prior. Normally a stickler for the time, he was late on this night, for road traffic was heavy and he was not very keen on flying.

"Dallas! You're late!" his manager squawked at him, right as he walked through the backstage doors. "You go on in twenty minutes, Dal. Get your costume on and head down to the gorilla. We don't have time for your games right now!" The gorilla was the backstage area that people went to right before they went out to the ring. If your match went on in an hour, you should be in the gorilla in 30 minutes. So as far as his manager was concerned, Dallas was pushing his luck.

"Don't worry 'bout it, Frank. I'll be there," Dallas reassured the older man, as he made his way to the locker room.

Ever the instigator, it wasn't long before Buzz Anders, a 6 '7 mountainous man from Seattle, came up from behind him and began to tease him about his current predicament. "Man, I can't wait for the boss man to chew you out! He's gonna rip you a new one!" his baritone laugh echoed off the concrete walls. Dallas elected to stay silent throughout much of Buzz's ranting, deciding instead to focus on his match that was merely twelve minutes away. He selected his signature black tights with hot pinks stripes running down the sides to wear, along with his black tank top that was draped over his torso. Having enough of Buzz's antics, he quickly headed towards the gorilla, already anticipating the scolding he would receive from the boss.

"Dallas!"

"Oh boy, here we go," a slight smirk rested upon his face, as he stood face to face with his exasperated boss. "What can I do for ya', Vince?"

"I'll tell you what you can do. You can get your act together, so that you don't give this old man heart palpitations, thinking that his career is doomed, because his top star didn't show up to the biggest night of the year! That's what you can do!" Vince Turner was a graying man in his late 50's, with the temper of raging bull and a pompous toupe on his head that, frankly, looked like a bird's nest. But no one dared to tell him that.

"Vinnie, there ain't nothing I can do about your health problems. Maybe see a doctor?"A bemused look adorned his boss' face, his fists clenching tightly at his sides.

"My God, Dallas! Stop acting like a child! You are a grown man and this is your job. Ya' know, I'd have half the mind to just fire you right now!" his anger quickly faded into a look of defeat. "Boy, you are one of the most talented athletes I've seen in a long while, and I'll be damned if I let you throw it all away just because you are too immature to understand what you got."

"I know what I got Vince! I ain't stupid!"

"Kid, I ain't calling you stupid!"

"You're on in ten seconds, Dal!" one of the stage managers called out to him.

A sigh escaped Vince's lips, "Look Dallas, you're young and you've got a bright future ahead of you. Don't throw it away."

"I won't boss-"

Vince cut him off, "Just promise me. Promise me you won't."

"Gotta go boss, the job's calling." Disregarding Vince's words, Dallas turned toward the curtain, where Buzz stood leaning against the nearest wall.

"You ready? First big night since you took that beating last week. Your back gonna be alright?" Buzz asked his friend, concern etched in his brows.

Dallas shrugged, "It was just a bruise. It's nothing I can't handle. Plus, the doctor said it wasn't too serious, so I'll be alright." A cocky grin slid onto his face, "In fact, I feel so good that I bet I could climb the Empire State Building with no trouble at all."

"Yeah, alright. Whatever you say, Mr. Mission Impossible," his friend said chuckling. "Hey! Those movies are great!"

"Bro, you would never do that! If there is anything that can faze you, it's heights." "You know what they say, man, the sky's the limit!"

"Keep dreaming, Dally!" Buzz's words got lost in the noise as the first beats of Dallas' theme song, "Metalingus," rang out through the arena, setting off a deafening eruption of cheers. The curtain opened. Stepping out onto the ramp leading down to the ring, he strutted forward, head held higher than the clouds with a sinister grin to match his smug posture.

The announcer's voice rang out through the arena, "Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the ring, the reigning champion, Dallas Hall!"

The match that he would be competing in was a ladder match, which meant that in order to win, the wrestler would have to climb a twelve foot ladder and retrieve the championship belt that would be hanging from a rope on the ceiling. In other words, this match could not be won by pinfall or count-out.

The bell rang three times. The match had begun.

Locking eyes with his opponent, Dallas dared the big man to strike. A bulky and wide-shouldered man with long black hair, Alastar Night, who stood at 6 '5, lunged forward unexpectedly.

"You're dead, Hall!" Alastar roared as he hit him with a nasty clothesline, knocking Dallas on his back.

Quick to react, Dallas rolled to the side as Alastar tried to jump on top of him. He slid under the ropes and hurried to grab a ladder, dragging it into the ring, hoping to climb to the belt. However, as he pushed the legs aside to help stabilize the ladder, Alastar gripped his shoulders, tearing him away from the towering piece of steel. Dallas landed sharply on his back, feeling a sudden pain spread throughout his body.

A soft mutter escaped Dallas' lips, "Gotta get up. Gotta get up. Come on, Dally. Fight through the pain." Of course, as a wrestler, this wasn't his first rodeo with pain, but usually his constant adrenaline kept it tamed enough for him to finish a match. This time, though, the pain threatened to consume him. Yet, when he saw Alastar climbing the ladder, he knew he couldn't let him win. Dallas stood up. The crowd roared.

With pain shooting up his spine, Dallas seized Alastar's ankle and pulled. Alastar came crashing down onto the mat, shock in his eyes.

Seeing the opportunity, Dallas pounced on the ladder, swiftly climbing it step by step. The top was near. All he had to do was reach for the belt. The tip of his finger grazed the belt and suddenly he was attacked. The attack did not come from Alastar, but from himself. A shooting pain tore through his back, stunting his movement. With fading support from his hands on the ladder, the steel tower shuttered underneath him.

The hard mat of the ring awaited his arrival.

"God, I hate heights."



In this short film, Charlie Martin (10) looks at the nature of temptation. Scan the QR Code to watch her film.

In Association with Fatbird Films
Pom, a film by Charlie Martin
Written & Directed by Charlie Martin
Assistant Director Sawyer Beach
Original Score by Charlie Martin
Produced by Will Underwood and Courtney King

Butterflies

Maryclaire Bond (9) | Poem

A butterfly starts
as a caterpillar
it waits
and waits
until the time has come.

A chrysalis forms
around the caterpillar it's
chance has come to
become something new
and beautiful.

A butterfly emerges
with wings
vibrant and delicate
yet strong when faced
with the wind.

I am a caterpillar
small and insignificant, waiting
for my chance to fly
when will i get my wings?



Kate Edwards (12) | Flowers | Scanography



JC Peña (12)| White Sands |Oil

To the Mountains from the Sea

Calista Kayatta (12)| Poem

Your peaks, dressed by the light of the dawn, hold a majesty I can only reflect but never claim as my own. You are timeless in your grandeur, and though I erode the land and reshape the shorelines, I can never change the essence of you.

Mons,

You have often told me that I lack patience, that I rush forward without pausing to admire the world around me. You say I'm always moving, always eager to reach the next destination, forgetting to enjoy the journey.

And perhaps you're right.

The tides within me, pull me from one place to another and leave me consumed in the current with little room for stillness. But even in my constant motion, I find myself drawn to you — unwavering, steadfast, a presence I can never quite touch but always reach for.

I've thought long and hard about why I feel this pull towards you. Why do my waves, restless as they are, always crash against your rocky shores? Why do I, the ever-moving ocean, seek the comfort of your stillness? Perhaps you've grown so immense, you've developed your own gravitational pull... but I do not think so. Yet, I believe it's because, in you, I see what I am not. We are the same in our power, both vast, both untamed. Yet we are so different. While I am shaped by the winds and pulled by the moon, you stand tall and unshaken, patient in a way I cannot comprehend.

You say I lack appreciation for beauty.

The truth is, I cannot begin to fathom the immensity of yours.

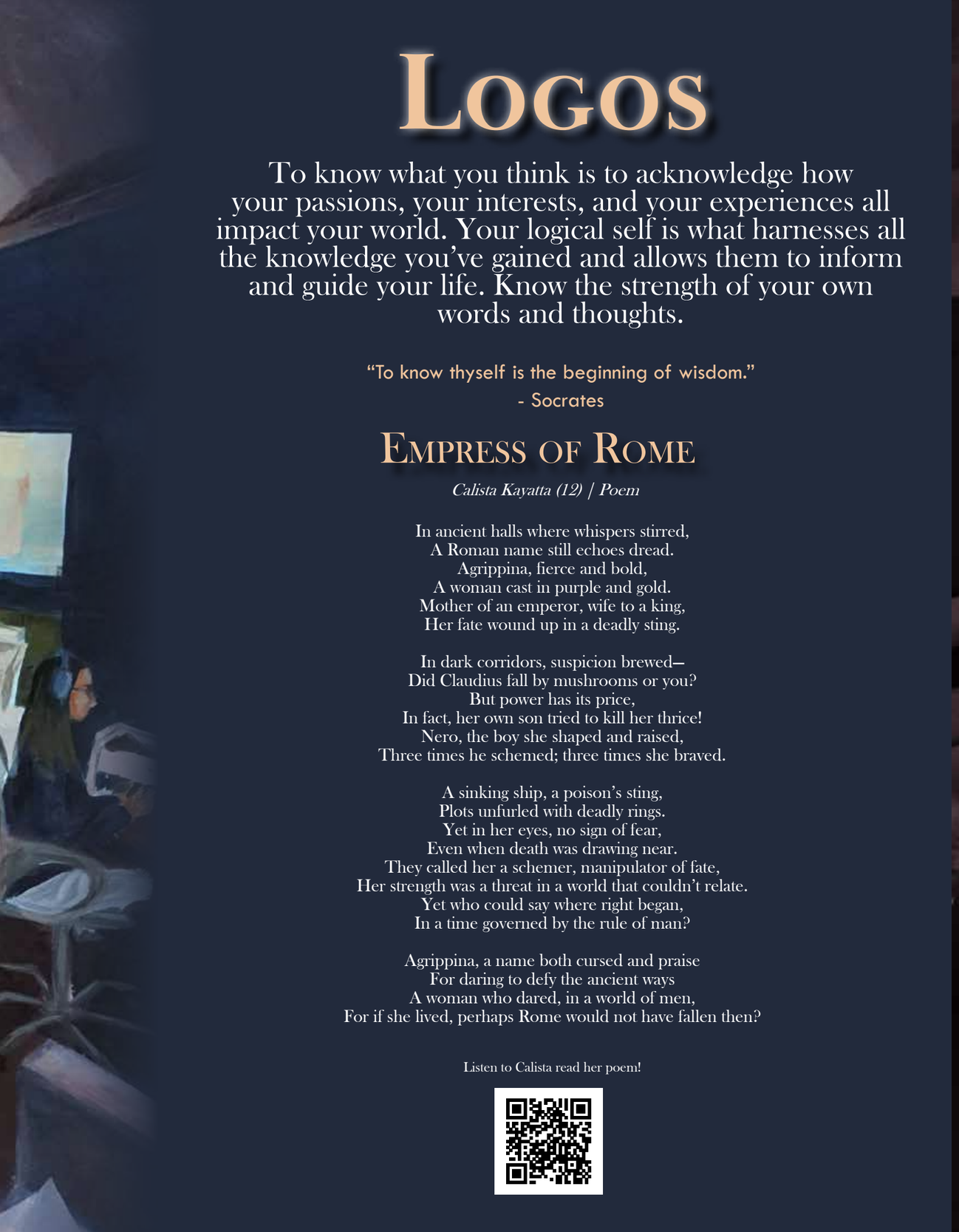
Your peaks, dressed by the light of the dawn, hold a majesty I can only reflect but never claim as my own. You are timeless in your grandeur, and though I erode the land and reshape the shorelines, I can never change the essence of you. Perhaps that's why I am so captivated — you remain constant while I am ever-changing.

Though we may seem separated — you, towering and rooted to the earth, and I, forever in motion across the endless horizon — there is a common rhythm between us. The same winds that sweep across your peaks dance across my waves. The same rain that nurtures your valleys fills my depths. In a way, we are never truly apart.

In your patience, your beauty, and your strength, you offer a comfort I cannot find elsewhere. When the nights grow long, and my waves feel weary, I know we can talk until the morning dawns. I will always crash against your shores, not to conquer, but to be near you, to feel your presence, even from a distance.

Amor est vitae essentia,

Mare



Logos

To know what you think is to acknowledge how your passions, your interests, and your experiences all impact your world. Your logical self is what harnesses all the knowledge you've gained and allows them to inform and guide your life. Know the strength of your own words and thoughts.

"To know thyself is the beginning of wisdom."
- Socrates

Empress of Rome

Calista Kayatta (12) | Poem

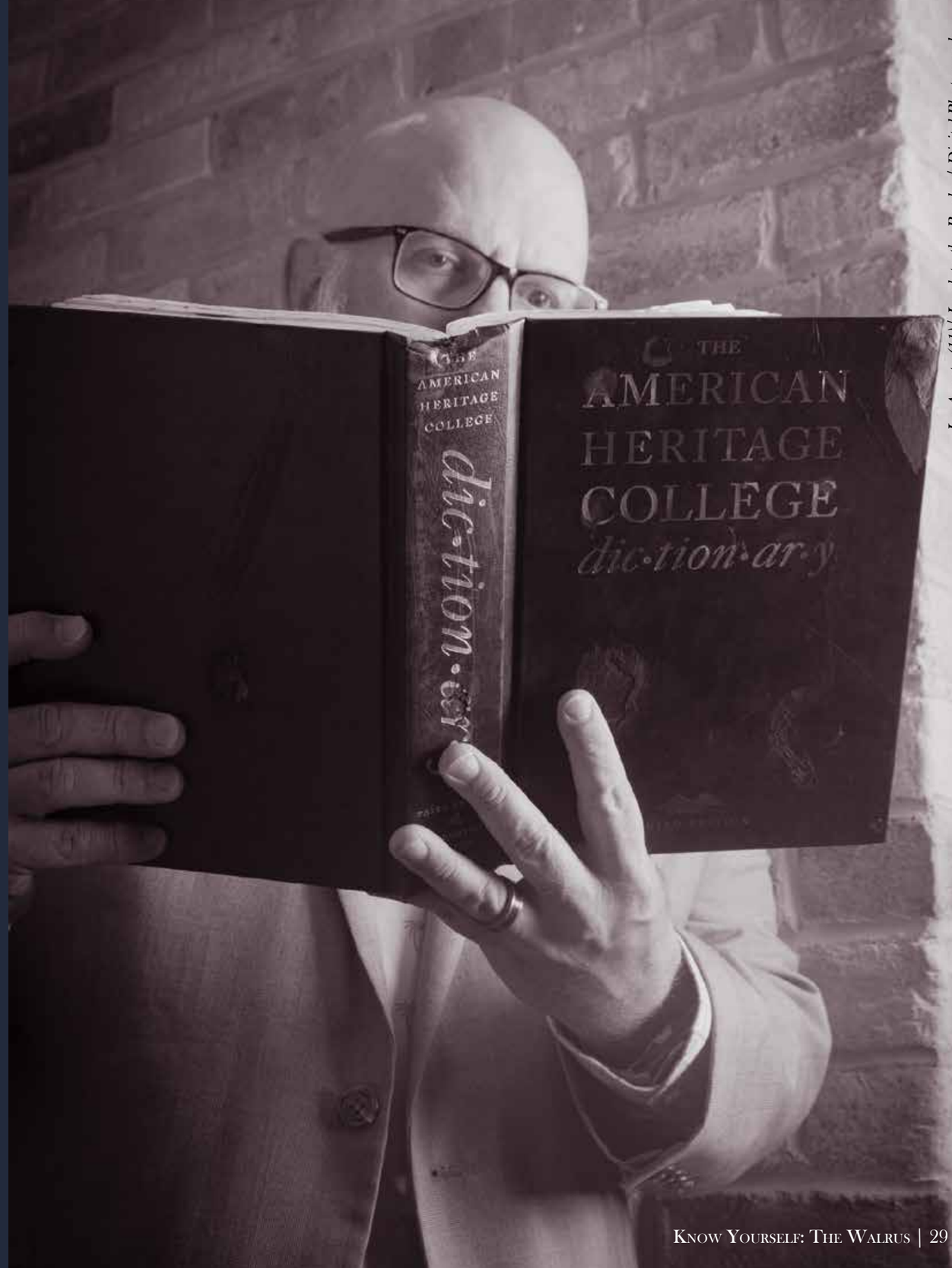
In ancient halls where whispers stirred,
A Roman name still echoes dread.
Agrippina, fierce and bold,
A woman cast in purple and gold.
Mother of an emperor, wife to a king,
Her fate wound up in a deadly sting.

In dark corridors, suspicion brewed—
Did Claudius fall by mushrooms or you?
But power has its price,
In fact, her own son tried to kill her thrice!
Nero, the boy she shaped and raised,
Three times he schemed; three times she braved.

A sinking ship, a poison's sting,
Plots unfurled with deadly rings.
Yet in her eyes, no sign of fear,
Even when death was drawing near.
They called her a schemer, manipulator of fate,
Her strength was a threat in a world that couldn't relate.
Yet who could say where right began,
In a time governed by the rule of man?

Agrippina, a name both cursed and praise
For daring to defy the ancient ways
A woman who dared, in a world of men,
For if she lived, perhaps Rome would not have fallen then?

Listen to Calista read her poem!



Isa Acosta (11)| Look to the Books | Digital Photography



Tess Flannery (10) | Koi Transformation | Guache

Asian Persuasion

San Ono (12) | Original Oratory

Listen to San perform his original oratory!

"Because what isn't funny is constantly hearing dog jokes everytime I mention food to my friends. What's not funny is seeing the slanted eye gesture every single day at school. What's not funny is being told I'm funny or cute for an 'Asian.'"

As the child of immigrants, Halloween has to be the most confusing holiday. Listen, if I told my *obachan,* my Japanese grandmother, that I was dressing up as an American president, she would shame me. But that's normal. It's like that in Japan. As the spooky season rolled around, I was stoked for my costume. I was ready to party and awkwardly punch the air all night, until I was told that someone else had stolen my idea. Back to the drawing board. My friends offered me their unsolicited white advice like, "Hey! Ever thought about dressing up as Mao Zedong or Moo Deng?" I hate white people. Apparently, I'm fit to be either the leader of the Chinese Communist Party or full-figured Taiwanese man. I mean, I know it's bulking season, but MOO DENG? I offered to dress up as Li Shang from *Mulan,* but they all told me that I wasn't hot enough. Not hot enough? Li Shang is animated!

It seems no matter what I do, I just can't win and, sadly, I'm not alone. Our media's portrayal of Asian men often makes fun of or makes us feel lesser than. A report from the University of Southern California's *Annenberg Inclusion Initiative* found that out of 50,000 speaking characters in 1,300 top-grossing movies, only 3,000 were AAPI, and of these films, only 44 films had Asian leads. *The Seattle Times* on August 5, 2021, Jade Yamakazi Stewart highlights, "America tells me and other Asian men we're not attractive [simply because] old stereotypes about us persist. Let's put an end to the undesirable Asian male stereotype in our society. To do so, let's look at some problems, causes, and solutions because as Oscar-winning Asian director Ang Lee once said, 'Sometimes, you have to get angry to get things done.'"

Our current stereotypes date all the way back to the 19th century, long before Awkwafina or "Gangnam Style" (Yes, I know the dance; No, I will not do it for you now). Long ago, Chinese men immigrated here to aid in the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad; however, their perceived "otherness" led to their depiction in propaganda of the time as either pillagers or rapists, cementing Asian men as the villains of the white man's American Dream. Today, we still put Asian men into two problematic and outdated boxes: hyper-masculine or emasculated.

First, we perceive Asian men as action heroes, but rarely as human beings. When you think of an Asian actor, a martial artist or a *Kung Fu* warrior probably pops into your mind. While I'm here reminding you all of Russell from *Up! The New York Times* on August 29, 2024 details, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan and Pat Morita have all been lauded for their martial arts mastery, but are largely seen as asexual. Sure, they kick butt and take names, but who takes them out on a nice date? No one! Growing up, I watched Jackie Chan in *Rush Hour* fight 15 dudes at once with a pool cue, but did he ever get the girl? Not once. So, I grew up thinking that I couldn't, or wouldn't, either.

Second, Asian men are also completely emasculated. We're perceived as undateable or unlovable. Remember the Asian foreign exchange student from the film, *Sixteen Candles*? His name was Long Duk Dong. Whenever he walked on screen, a gong would sound. Alison MacAdam told NPR, he represents one of the most offensive Asian stereotypes Hollywood ever gave America. Despite this, the film was still a huge success. This only reinforces the perception that we're romantically inept. Eric Nakamura, founder of the magazine *Giant Robot*, said before *Sixteen Candles*, Asian students in America were often nicknamed Bruce Lee, but after *Sixteen Candles*, became known as Donger. Asian men are often the butt of racist jokes, and the only one laughing is white America.

This past summer, we all witnessed one of the most divisive splits in our nation's history. *Barbie* versus *Oppenheimer*. Naturally, I was Team Barbie since I had to show up and support my man Simu Liui as Ken. Watching Simu

dance battle with Ryan Gosling healed something in me. And just like the number of abs I saw on screen, there are 12 causes to our problem. Kidding! Like the number of abs I wish I had, there are only two.

First, our country clings to the myth of the "model minority." *The PEW Research Center* on November 30, 2023 articulates, this ideology generalizes us as intelligent, well-off, and able to excel in fields such as math and science. While not seemingly problematic, it can still be hurtful and harmful, especially to Asian men. We're looked at as nerds that can only solve equations, or work at mastering martial arts. Gary Duong, a Senior Marketing Manager at NPR, reaffirms that the myth is just one less celebration of our accomplishments, and a convenient tool to mask ongoing discrimination and inequality. We can be anything we want to be, but when this image of who we are is all that we see, it's not only a bad representation, but an inevitable roadmap of who we're forced to become.

Second, sexual racism is prevalent and pervasive. Actor Randall Park remembers, back when he was single and dating, hearing the phrase "I'm not into Asian guys" one too many times. Asian men are often subjected to caricature, rejection, or erasure; however, Asian women often encounter the opposite problem: hyper sexualization, fetishization and objectification. Either way, dating preferences that exclude or exotify almost four billion people are racist. Moreover, in 2015, Jason Chen conducted "The Asian American Man Study" for *Medium* by interviewing 350 Asian men about their dating life. He uncovered that over 300 have been made experienced some sort of stereotyping. We face ridicule when we're supposed to be at our most open, most honest, and most vulnerable.

Asian men have become a punchline. I know I've been hilarious for the past seven minutes, but it's time to stop joking around. Because what isn't funny is constantly hearing dog jokes everytime I mention food to my friends. What's not funny is seeing the slanted eye gesture every single day at school. What's not funny is being told I'm funny or cute for an "Asian." The joke is up. Let's solve this.

On a societal level, we need to debunk the "model minority" myth once and for all. We must consume better media. This is my call to Hollywood in four parts. One, avoid portraying Asian men solely as nerdy, weak, or sexually inept. Let's leave Long Duk Dong in the past where he belongs. Two, depict Asian men facing challenges and struggles, not just as successful and perfect. We can't all be me, or Henry Golding in *Crazy Rich Asians*. Three, increase the number of Asians behind the camera. CNBC reminds us, we made up less than 6% of directors and less than 5% of writers for movies released last year. Four, promote Asian-led projects, like the YouTube channel Wong Fu Productions, founded by three Asian-American men back in 2003. The channel features AAPI actors and tells stories that resonate with our community.

On a personal level, date me! I'm joking. But, yes, I'm single, and no, I don't know why. Ladies, this is where you come in. Claudia Vaughan writes for *Mochi Magazine* that women can play an active role in shifting misguided perceptions about AAPI men. If you're dating an Asian man, talk about it openly! Share your cute pics on Instagram. Do all of the annoying things that white women in love do. Additionally, if you hear someone perpetuating stereotypes, speak up and call them out, share implications of such stereotyping, and offer your perspective. It's certainly not your responsibility to market our dateability, but women can be active participants in reshaping the conversation that continue to have an impact. After all, racism has no place in romance.

Today, we discussed the problems, causes and solutions surrounding Asian male representation. I refuse to be defined by shameful stereotypes and problematic personas. So, while I might not be dressing up as a Moo Deng or an American president this Halloween, here's to hoping that someday Asian men won't need a costume to break out of the boxes we're put in. Until then, maybe I'll just stick to explaining it to my *obachan*.



Lindsey Do (11) | Têt| Mixed Media



In this short film, Sawyer Beach (11) examines what happens when a social media influencer values content over real relationships. Scan the QR code to watch Sawyers 's film.

In Association with Fatbird Films
Smoothies, a film by Sawyer Beach
Written & Directed by Sawyer Beach
Edited by Sawyer Beach
Produced by Will Underwood

Hate's Never Ours to Inherit

Hudson Szymczak (10) | Poem

We are not conceived with hate,
But others train us to separate,
Like walls constructed super high,
Falsifying the truth, growing the lie,
We are not conceived with hate,
But it increases inside the crevices, too late,
Like weeds that ascend through the destroyed ground,
Warped, tangled all around.

You can never eliminate what has been done
Can't quiet the sound of the gun,
Can't hide the blood that has been splattered,
Or conceal the fantasies that time has murdered,
Nevertheless, we will, we rise, we rise like fire,
Blazing bright, we still fight, lifting higher,
Snapping chains, All of us will not be still,
We'll scream for equality, we will
We are not conceived with hate,
But as a group, we'll recreate

Fire rises deeply into the heart,
Making society fall apart,
We'll do what we can for society
While the government lives in anxiety,
The world is a beautiful piece of art
And we wouldn't want to come apart
So let's all make peace
And let's flock together like geese
We are not conceived with hate,
But together we will all do great.



Jacob Kollars (10) | Quarter 3 | Digital Photography

Foriegn Affairs

Sofia Blanco (10) | Sonnet

Across vast seas brews ambiguity, Silent
treatment or protective screams, A looming
love concealed in latency, Our Coldest War,
Red alert's constant gleam. Fear manifests
the absence of true love, Rather raising
walls of isolation.
For some we strike a Middle ground full of
Repercussive acts beyond compassion. To trust,
united, a strength unspoken, To
risk the fragile fear, our love and hate. When
the knot is tied, the Treaty broken, One
betrayed choice dictating Nature's fate.
Yet through the endless cycle of dissent, Love
overcomes to grow resilient.



Michael Mac Turner (12) | In Remembrance of My Father | Copic Marker

PANIC! at the Drag Show

Sawyer Beach (11) | Original Oratory

"The freedom to express ourselves, and our identity in creative ways, fuels artistry across our country – and drag, like dance, fashion, and music, is protected by the First Amendment."

Listen to Sawyer perform his original oratory!

This year, I ran for reelection on my school's Fine Arts council. I thought I was a high-heeled shoe in. Spoiler alert: I was not. Five people ran. They chose four. Strutting home that day, I couldn't comprehend how I, a triple-threat: cinema king, theater kid, and speech person, wasn't perfect for the role. I had my come-to-Jesus moment when I realized: "O! It's because they hate drag queens!"

You probably need some context here. Right. In my speech for re-election, my pitch was to make fine arts fun again, or MFAFA for short. To make my speech even more fun, I also impersonated famous drag queens from the TV show, *RuPaul's Drag Race*. Let's just say my classmates were confused. I get it. If I had their knowledge of drag, I'd be confused too.

The Human Rights Campaign defines drag as a performance art that uses costumes, makeup, and other tools to present exaggerated forms of gender, dating all the way back to Shakespearean theater when men would dress as women to perform female roles. Today, with TV shows like 29-time Emmy-award winning show *RuPaul's Drag Race*, drag has become more visible. But, with that visibility has come a lot of opinions. Let me throw some shade, I mean numbers, at you: 25. 25% of American adults have been to a drag show at some point in their lives. Five hundred thirty-two: The number of anti-LGBTQ bills introduced in multiple state legislatures across our nation last year — a new record. One hundred sixty-one: The incidents of protests and harassment against drag events since 2022. Clearly, drag is steeped in misunderstanding and that is my concern. We must preserve and protect the art of drag. So, to GAY, ladies, gentlemen, and those who have yet to make up your minds, let's look at why we're hating on drag, how this hurts us, and what we can all do to celebrate it.

It's time for a little lesson. Long before RuPaul Charles, there was William Dorsey Swann. In the 1800's, Swann, a former slave, led queer resistance groups that held secret drag competitions, also known as balls, in Washington D.C. This underground society led to the invention of an entire ballroom culture that still remains relevant today. So, if drag is a part of our history, and as American as apple pie, then why are we hating on drag now?

Initially, drag exists in all shapes, sizes, and styles, but many don't recognize the nuance so we oversimplify them. Harris Kornstein, a humanities professor at the University of Arizona, explains that drag is not simply a man putting on a dress. Drag isn't just Robin Williams in *Mrs. Doubtfire*. Since gender can pop off in millions of ways, there are millions of different types of drag. For instance, some queens compete in pageants; others perform in nightclubs. Some impersonate celebrities and tell jokes; others dress up to read to kids in libraries. Some are trans, but many are not. Some are activists, goths, and some queens are actually drag kings. By reducing drag to a caricature, we fail to see its rich diversity and its role as a powerful form of self-expression that challenges stereotypes and enriches our culture.

Additionally, the queer community as a whole is oversexualized, further complicating how we view drag. Columnist Michael Schramm of *The Michigan Daily* defines this as oversexualized sexuality. He explains, since orientations outside heterosexual are minorities, we link [their personality solely] to their sexuality. Yes, some drag can be sexual, but much of it isn't. Far-right commentators have labeled drag performers as groomers or pedophiles, citing lewd jokes in bars as grounds to ban drag around children. Yet, I've yet to hear of single drag performer has been arrested for exploiting children. By buying into this false narrative, we not only harm drag performers but perpetuate dangerous biases that police queer expression.

Growing up, *The Little Mermaid* was always one of my favorite Disney films because—gay. I love a good villain because—also gay. So, naturally, I identified with Ursula, the Sea Witch. It took me years to learn that Ursula was based on a real-life person named Divine, who was once considered the Godzilla of Drag Queens because her attitude and activism were scary to many conservative politicians. Today, we're still scared of drag, but how does this fear affect us?

Socially, banning drag is bad for business. Performers are employed to entertain, and are sometimes only paid in tips from the crowd. They're like waiters, only instead of serving food, they're serving looks! Except at a drag brunch when they do both. *The Harvard Law Review* posits, our policies and moral panic hurt performer's productivity and personhood. In a personal interview with Austin-based activist and performer, Brigitte Bandit, she remembers a time during Covid when she performed with ExtraGrams, a drag-delivery-service where you could order a performer to surprise someone with a socially-distanced performance in their front yard. ExtraGrams still exist, but she no longer takes part. Drag bans mean fewer performances, which means less income; less income means a threat to their survival.

Personally, we've politicized the idea of creativity and polarized the art of self-expression. There's so much we don't understand about drag or gender or both. So, what we've done is replaced that gap in knowledge with fear, anger, and violence. At best, it's confirmation bias. At worst, it's what *The Texas Tribune* labels as anti-drag panic. Like in 2022, when heavily-armed members of the right-wing extremist group, This Is Texas Freedom Force, made a highly publicized appearance in San Antonio to demonstrate against the touring drag show, *A Drag Queen Christmas*. They wrongfully accused the show of grooming children, even though children weren't allowed to attend the show. It was 18+. Drag brings joy, but we've reinforced that it's wrong, and must be shamed, or worse, silenced.

I only began watching *Drag Race* this past spring. It's safe to say my knowledge was limited, even narrow-minded. I grew up surrounded by the perception that these performers were bad people, and that drag was wrong. But it isn't. I was wrong for believing it was. So, I did my research and I'm still learning. One thing I do know is that drag is special. And, let me tell you, if getting up early, putting on a suit and heels, and performing for a crowd full of people isn't drag, then honey, I don't know what is. Let's enact some fierce, and formidable, solutions. I even made them easy to remember with just four letters: D-R-A-G.

D, donate and defend! We can support performers by donating to the ACLU's Drag Defense Fund. In the face of threats and censorship, we can fight back against hate and hold politicians accountable for their anti-trans agenda with ACLU's help for the protection of all our rights.

R, read the house down boots. I mean, books! We can combat oversimplification with education. Lil Miss Hot Mess is a drag queen and board member of Drag Queen Story Hour. She's even authored two books: If You're a Drag Queen and You Know It and The Hips on the Drag Queen Go Swish, Swish, Swish. Read these with your family, students, and kids. I've also taken the time to compile a list of drag-related films. If you'd like it, come find me after the round. I'd be happy to yap about it with you.

A, acceptance. We must accept that all drag is valid. From the sexual to the sentimental to the silly, every artist has their audience and we need to be very respectful of that. The freedom to express ourselves, and our identity in creative ways, fuels artistry across our country – and drag, like dance, fashion, and music, is protected by the First Amendment. Let's treat it that way

G, get loud & organized. If you're a parent or family member of a K-12 student, join your school's parent association to support LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum. Drag performers have been at the center of the queer liberation movement since its literal inception, but now it's our turn to organize and help them. Protecting drag is about protecting freedom, love, and the endless possibility of self-expression.

The art of drag is not just a form of entertainment; it is a vital expression of individuality, creativity, and resistance. As we face increasing threats to artistic freedom and inclusivity, it's crucial that we stand together to protect drag. After all, as Supermodel of the World and self-appointed Queen of Drag, RuPaul, once proudly proclaimed, "We're all born naked and the rest is drag."

Love Letter to Pop Culture

Megan LaMoy (11)| Poem

Listen to Megan
read her poem!

Dear Pop Culture,

I was seven years old when you first introduced
yourself to me
And immediately,
I knew you were going to be my best friend.

You called yourself a Goonie
And asked me to join your adventure
To find One-Eyed Willy's lost treasure.
You inspired me explore the unknown,
No matter how scary it may be.

Then you told me your name was Aaron Rodgers,
And showed me your passion for football
By throwing Hail Mary's
And standing proud in green and gold.
You taught me to never let anyone change who I am,
Even as challenges threaten to tear me down.

And as my teenage years consumed me,
I learned just how complex you truly are.
You have many personalities,
But that is what I love about you.

Sports are your most aggressive side.

You trash talk like no other,
Tackling and sacking without mercy,
Swinging for the stars until the bat cracks,
Dribbling your way through labyrinths of lines,
Desperate for one thing—victory.
And you always get what you want.

Music balances out your macho.

With harmonies that heal the heart,
And beats that satisfy the body,
Your songs soothe my soul,
Healing the aches of loss or boredom,
And your lyrics bless my ears,
With words I hear only in my mind
Drifting out of your lips onto mine,
As if we were one being,
Just for a moment in time.
Is that such a crime?

And what a drama queen movies are.

Living for the flair echoing off the big screen,
With plot twists sure to entice viewers,
Attention is your muse, your obsession, your purpose,
And without it, you start to perish with the curse of time.
Time— your biggest fear.
Afraid that people will forget you,
Set you aside,
Trade you in for the next big thing.
Maybe I was wrong about you,
Maybe you are the most sensitive one of them all.

And let's not forget your twin counterpart: celebrities.

Scandalous and unfiltered,
Orders are simply suggestions.
You love to live life unafraid of consequences
And act surprised when they come back to haunt you.
You act as if you are invincible,
As if you are untouchable,
As if you are the most important person in the world,
But remember, my friend,
Humbleness will take you a long way.

Now I am seventeen,
Yet not much has changed.
You are still my best friend,
And as you once said to my seven year-old-self
a long time ago,
"We are Goonies, and Goonies never say die!"

Your partner in crime,
Megan



Abby Gillham (12) | Represent | Mixed Media



Ethos

To know your values and character is to embody your beliefs into your everyday life as someone worth listening to. Having the courage to express your thoughts and stay true to yourself is necessary to discovering your authenticity. Know your worth.

"No one saves us but ourselves. No one can and no one may.
We ourselves must walk the path."

- Buddha

Rollerblading

Rabani Bajaj (12) | Poem

Summer evenings dashed with sun streams.
Boots laced up tight, keeping me in line,
Blondie blaring in my ears,
Poised wheels leap from cobblestone to sleek street.

Scrith-scratching, rubber kisses the pavement.
Gliding in long, sweeping strokes,
Shifting balance from leg to leg, right to left.
Careful to not stray too close to the black sea below.

Tempo quickens—adrenaline thrumming,
Fwipping into turns,
The whoosh-she, whoosh-she vibration reverberates through me,
Carving wide arcs into asphalt canvas.

The path before me unfurls:
Trees swallowed by dusk, fading into shade,
Cars ghost by, dissolving in the distance,
Faces melt into the darkening blur.

Swaying, gliding, curving in the twilight,
Skating from curb to curb.
Just me and whisper of wheels on road:
I'm bound by the rhythm of the ride.

Listen to the poem read by Rabani!



Kate Edwards (12) | Railroad | Digital Photography

Beyond Us

Jason Huang (11) | Essay

"Authenticity is not consistency ... Authenticity is not perfection ... Authenticity is not about projecting a fixed image or seeking approval; rather, it's about accepting all aspects of ourselves—every strength, flaw, and complexity."

"I don't know how you can keep up such a respectful act at school," one of my friends told me, as we got into his car, swiftly pulling out of the school parking lot.

A little taken aback, I digested his words, and asked, "What do you mean?"

"It's like you're two completely different people in school and out of school- sometimes it makes me wonder if you're ever authentic," he joked as he slowed at an intersection.

He did have a point. I was a completely different person in and out of school. I spoke differently, dressed differently, and acted differently. However, that didn't necessarily mean I wasn't being my authentic self.

"What? Do you talk to your teachers the same way you talk to me?" I quipped back.

"No, obviously not," my friend relented, "I just think you should be yourself more at school, don't you think?"

I couldn't respond for a while and the question stuck with me. It made me ask myself, in a world that constantly urges us to be ourselves, what does it truly mean to be authentic? Is authenticity about maintaining one fixed identity, or does it encompass growth and change? Often, the term "authenticity" is oversimplified to phrases like "being yourself" or "being genuine," which fail to capture its full complexity. These narrow interpretations can hinder our ability to understand and accept the diverse and authentic identities of others. Instead of defining authenticity as a single true self, authenticity must be redefined as accepting all aspects of one's persona, regardless of societal expectations. However, to begin redefining what authenticity is, we must first establish what it is not.

Authenticity is not consistency. Many believe authenticity requires adhering to one static identity, but this perspective overlooks the reality that our identities are shaped by context, relationships, and personal growth. For example, I speak professionally and respectfully towards my teachers, yet with my friends, I adopt a more casual and joking tone. I remember once, I was walking down the hall with my friends on the way to English, and as they turned the corner in front of the classroom I casually called out, "See ya later bro!" as a farewell. However, as I opened the door and saw my English teacher standing before me, I immediately switched to a more formal greeting: "Good morning, ma'am!" This ability to adapt to different contexts doesn't diminish my authenticity; rather, it highlights the diverse facets of my personality that emerge depending on the situation. Instances like this illustrate that demonstrating authenticity is not about maintaining a singular identity but rather embracing the multifaceted nature of who we are. Authenticity is a fluid concept. Recognizing this definition enables individuals to embrace their evolving selves rather than chase an unattainable "true self."

Authenticity is not perfection. Social media has turned authenticity into a performance, pushing people to showcase idealized versions of their lives. For instance, Instagram provides filters and editing tools that encourage users only to present flawless photos, polished captions, and exactly curated experiences. This relentless pursuit of perfection has led influencers to commodify authenticity, using cherry-picked images to build trust with consumers and promote products. A notable participant in this phenomenon is Instagram star, Belle Gibson, who fabricated a story about curing her cancer with natural remedies to sell wellness products and a cookbook. This exploitation produces a distorted view of authenticity, shifting its focus from personal identity and expression to external validation. True authenticity cannot be packaged—it comes from vulnerability, not perfection. Rejecting the commodification of authenticity allows people and communities to foster deeper, more meaningful connections among themselves. Authenticity does not neatly conform to societal expectations.

Oftentimes, individuals feel pressure to follow societal norms that dictate how they must express their "authentic" selves. A prominent example of society's impact on authenticity is hip-hop artist, Lil Nas X, who hid his sexuality for many years due to fear of backlash from his fans. Indeed, upon coming out, he faced disapproval from critics for promoting LGBTQ+ themes in his music and music videos, especially following the release of his song "Montero" (from *Call Me By Your Name)*. Especially in a genre like hip-hop, which has a track record of being exclusionary towards queer voices, pressure from many of his listeners forced him to initially suppress a vital aspect of his identity. Unfortunately, Lil Nas X is just one example of how societal pressure can stifle true self-expression and lead to a disconnection between one's inner self and outward appearance.

Practicing authenticity should involve breaking free from these constraints, allowing people to express their complexity as individuals, even when it challenges conventional standards. So, what should it mean to be authentic?

Authenticity should be the embrace of our multifaceted identities. Being authentic shouldn't require adhering to a singular, fixed identity; instead, authenticity should celebrate the fluidity of our personas as we navigate various contexts and relationships.

Authenticity also should reject the idea of perfection and the pressure to showcase an idealized version of ourselves.

True authenticity should thrive in vulnerability, allowing individuals to share genuine experiences without having to worry about conforming to societal norms. By encouraging self-expression, authenticity fosters an environment where diverse identities coexist and are accepted. Understanding my authentic identity, I could finally respond to my friend's question.

"Maybe the way I act at school is who I am, and the way I act at home is also who I am." I finally answered.

My contemplation made me realize that ultimately, redefining authenticity requires us to reject the rigid, perfection-driven notions that currently define authenticity, and embrace the complexities of our identities while resisting societal pressures. Authenticity is not about projecting a fixed image or seeking approval; rather, it's about accepting all aspects of ourselves—every strength, flaw, and complexity. Authenticity is more than just being—it's about becoming, continuously and unapologetically.



Alexis Holmes (10) | Pumpkin | Clay



Carola Williamson (9) | Fizbo | Mask Clay



Addy Meyer (10) | Exquisite Corpse / Clay



Reese Lopez (9) | Mask



Cooper Curry (12) | Driving in Space | Acrylic

Fortune Favors the Brave

Madeline Bell (10) | Slam Poem

Fortune favors the brave - enough to speak out
leap out
stand out
freak out
Brave enough to say our minds
Brave enough to be blind to the distractions of cowardly actions
Reacting to the factions of actors gaining traction
Masquerading as lords and knights
by night they corrupt
Promenading past people who believe their lies
belying truth

Fortune favors the brave enough to realize the world we live in
has flaws
allows us to fix what's broken
be outspoken
repair the damage we've caused

We hold fortune's favor
If we have the courage to say what we need
to say
to do
to act
to stop the act that falsifiers perform
Reform our way of thinking
to understand all views
Guard against these costumes
While in back rooms the cowards resume
their hatred
They do not carry fortune's favor
Those liars acting on the world stage
Instigate and intimidate
they're afraid
of an invisible foe
And will not
face their fears
they are not brave
fortune will never grace their lives
While they live a lie
So in politics as they uproot the deep roots of democracy
Bringing mediocrity where freedom is a scarcity
They are scared
and bully
And push others down
Make them stumble
collapse
fall
but do not crumble
Fortune favors the brave
Enough to stand UP
rise UP
grow UP
Brave enough to stop the act
Brave enough to fight back
Brave enough to speak our minds
Brave enough to stay kind
Brave enough to face the invisible foe
Braver than those cowards
ever
know



Bianca Rodriguez (11) | Movement | Acrylic

Queen of La Casa Azul

Rabani Bajaj (10) | Poem

Born of steel,
Her soul lay bare,
Surrendering to tides of pain.
Shaping each ache into painted promises, Roots and wings forged in scarlet and jade, In the veins of leaves,
Or her rose kissed cheeks,
She strove to immortalize her storm.

Bold in her art and poetry,
Waxing lines of love and loss,
Daring to wear her wounds as witness– Each stroke was a story only she could tell, Each line drawn straight from her soul, As pure as *The Open Heart.*

Braving a spine cracked once,
A heart torn twice, still blazing with fire. Each scar became her voice.
In mirrors framed, her head held high, A face of truth bound to Mexico's soil and sky.
Bare witness to a force so strong, now glimpsed: In a flower wreath gracing a little girl's hair. In the proud curve of a connected brow, In the crisp fold of 500 peso bills,
In the fierce eyes staring from painted pages, Or the vibrant blue walls of her castle, In colors that bleed, yet never fade.

Behold, a queen brave enough to live so fully Only death could force her to drop her paintbrush. But in that realm she rises—
In petals and pain, in fire and frames,
In altars adorned with marigold flames, Frida thrives, unbound by name.

Letter to Baby Abi

Abi Sorensen (11) / Letter

Listen to Abi read her letter to her younger self.

"Stop wasting your childhood trying to pull yourself out of a box sheltering you from the world."

Dear Abi,

I know you're looking at those teenagers. The girls especially. They're tall and mature, with blonde streaks running through their hair. They have cool piercings and phones. They curse and laugh, not giving a care in the world. There are no rules to follow. Ahhh- this is what freedom looks like to your nine-year-old self. How you want to be them.

No, you don't.

Stop wasting your childhood trying to pull yourself out of a box you think you're trapped in. That box is sheltering you from the world. You're safe in there. Don't force your eyes open to the realities of the world- not yet. Everything you could ever want is in that box. Blindness is bliss.

Grade school is fun. Enjoy every aspect. Recess may seem boring when you can stay inside and read a book, but trust me, you'll read so many books later on to the point where you'll hate reading. You'll hate reading so much, you won't read for years. Go out and scream and run around. You're allowed to do that. Everyone will look at you, and laugh.

"She's cute," they'll say.

You won't hear much of that anymore when you scream and run around now.

"She's crazy," they'll say.

Laugh more. You're shy. I can't believe I'm saying this, but you're quiet. Curled up in a corner I know you're reading. Put down 1984! You don't know what it says. You just think you'll grow up intelligent if you read strange, dystopian books like that. You're a kid, for God's sake. Go and yap with your friends in your loud, obnoxious voice.

Quit watching television. It's summertime. Go to the beach, hike the mountains, and grill samgyeopsal with your grandparents. These precious months you spend in South Korea are valuable. Television is fun and all but guess what? You can watch those same shows years later, but you can't make the memories you forfeited to the greed of time.

With that advice, I'm here to say you got what you wanted. Yup, you grew up, taller and more mature. Nope, you didn't get blonde streaks running through your hair, but the pools' caustic chemicals bled into your hair, creating the vibrant streaks you always wanted. Six piercings look good on you. Your phone is your happy place, and you get lost in TikTok and Instagram.

But you're sad.

I don't want to be sixteen. Sixteen is sour, not sweet. I crave your life with such hunger but continue to starve. I desperately find ways to jump back into that box but can't. I've grown too much. I've learned too much. I want to be you, more than anything now. Sight is sorrow.

But, alas, I can't, can I? I can only regretfully open a box of memories now and then to replay nostalgia.

Nostalgia- the aching longing for a life I had, but can never have again.

Wishfully,

Abi

Their Little Bee

Mazreen Sanjana (11) | Poem

They ask why don't you wanna drive?
And I wonder- should I lie?
Should I spit the truth from my mouth?
And let it all go south?
Should I tell them why?
Or should I just sit by?
Would they understand?
Or would we
just
disband?

Or
Do I sit still and quiet?
Do I hold it?
Do I fight it?
Do I contain the urge
That wills to splurge?
So, the choice
leaves my voice
Either broken or told
Maybe shooken or bold.

They ask why don't you wanna drive?
And I think about MY strive
Freedom like the eagle
Standing tall, soaring regal.
Looking down from the sky
I ponder about my lie
"Thinking about it makes me seize" I say
They tell me "Driving is a breeze, little bee."

So, do I sit still and quiet?
Do I hold it?
Do I fight it?
Do I contain the urge
That wills to splurge?

If only they knew,
Why I am so strewn
Why driving so soon
Puts a damper in my mood.
Looking down from the sky
I realize
The reason I lost my strive
To drive
To run my own life
Was simply because
Of what once was.

So, do I sit still and quiet?
Do I hold it?
Do I fight it?
Do I contain the urge
That wills to splurge?

Sitting at the dinner table with a family of five
My, oh my! How easy was that life!
How dreamy was that life!
How much I crave to be in that life!
Just one
More
time.

So, when they ask me
Why don't you wanna drive?
I don't think my parents realize
That the girl who sat in her mama's car
On the way to school, or sometimes the park
I don't think my parents realize
That the girl who sat in her papa's car
And loved to watch the trees from afar
I don't think my parents realize
That the girl who now stands before their eyes
The one that is dropped home
Before they go back and drone
On and on
In their work for far too long
Has lost her spark,
her perk.
And all that lies
Is the tiniest tie
To the car,
where she could be the little bee
The one her parents were home to see.

Before she grew up
And now that family of five is a family of three
And that little bee
Is nowhere to be seen
Except in the heart
From the very start
Of the girl
Who
Once
Was.

So, don't ask me why I don't want to drive
Why I don't strive
To be the eagle in this life.
Because all that I have left is this tiniest tie
To my past life
And the piece of plastic
Which "frees me" like elastic
Has the chance
To end the dance
That is the memory
Of the little bee
That
Once
was me.



Tess Flannery (10) | The Heart Box | Charcoal



Victoria Guerrero (10) | Good Luck Charm | Charcoal



Meri Rabke (10) | Earls Pendant | Charcoal

ABCD:

The American-Born Confused Desi

Inaaya Wali (10) | Personal Narrative

Listen to Inaaya read her personal narrative!

"This community, no matter what nationality, socioeconomic background, or circumstance, brings us together permanently and indefinitely."

People think I'm joking when I tell them I'm afraid I'll accidentally have an arranged marriage; I'm not. Sometimes, it seems like my whole future has been planned out for me by my family and friends, expected to follow a certain path. When I greet people in Jamatkhana, a place of worship, they jokingly ask me how I am doing, by addressing me as a successful doctor, asking, "Kesi hai, Dr. Inaaya?" My mom tells me, "*Mein sup kooch ap kha time meh karou gih*," which means she'll ensure I achieve everything in my life at "the right time," including my graduation, degree, marriage, kids, and everything in between. Some expect me to be a math whiz and science geek, which is not entirely untrue, eat weird food (the only weird part is the goat's brain my mom likes), and have strict parents who aren't that strict.

At home, I'm expected to kick gender roles and break generational cycles but also be a "decent girl." Not too loud, too gaudy, or too American. I must chase the American dream but never lose sight of where I came from. I must take care of my spiritual life, my *din,* and be successful in my worldly life, my *duniya*. All of these things define me as an ABCD, American Born Confused Desi. While this experience is contradicting, confusing, and full of pressure to succeed, I know there are so many others going through the same thing I am, I know there is a community of Asian Americans who feel exactly the way I do.

Let's go back a generation. With twenty dollars in his pocket and the clothes on his back, my dad left his home with the American dream on his mind. While my parents had left Pakistan, their culture stayed with them in everything that they did. They regularly went to Jamatkhana, took up honest, respectable work in business, ate traditional foods, and spoke their mother tongue. I was born with one foot in America and the other in Pakistan.

While I am Pakistani to my American friends and American to my Pakistani cousins, I am very much an insider with friends and family who find themselves in the same cross-cultural predicament I do. From online videos making fun of stereotypical aunties and uncles, to randomly meeting another Asian and striking up a conversation just because you're both Asian, to dinner with "friends like family" that goes late into the night, this ABCD experience is irreplaceable. This community, no matter what nationality, socioeconomic background, or circumstance, brings us together permanently and indefinitely. No matter how "whitewashed," no matter how mixed, no matter what generation, no matter the competition, and no matter what life, we are always there for each other. From advising the younger ones at the *bacha* party, to my parents helping out the new family in town, it is our collective experience that combines us. Language, culture, religion, family dynamics, and filial piety are just a few of the diverse aspects, but how they affect us in this country is what is shared. I feel a special comfort in cities like Sugarland and Vancouver, which have high Asian populations, because there, I feel like I'm transported to a different country. Some say this comfort stems from the fact that we don't define ourselves as Americans yet.

When I see an Asian person on the street, they are Asian to me before American, but I think this is because they understand me on a level that others cannot; they understand my experience, culture, and traditions. This community grows stronger and thrives worldwide as "We Asians" (as my dad proudly says) are finally making a name for ourselves (although I think we've had a presence for quite some time). We flock together, search for opportunities together, work together, and laugh together. Regardless of experience, we are ABCDs, Asian Americans, and we are proud.



Lindsey Do (11) | Pieces of Me | Mixed Media



Logan Hando (10) | Organic Computer | Gouache

When Silence Screams Behind the Screen

Reese Arrington (10) | Poem

From what I've gathered,
the world we live in shows that it is progressively becoming more and more
of something we would see on the silver screen.
Something more... Dystopian.
We talk about how *The Truman Show* makes us rethink our freedom
and how we are easily manipulated
We talk about *The Matrix* as it shows the idea of our reality being an allusion
But, we don't talk about how my life feels like these movies
It's like my anxiety makes me feel like the world is crumbling
at my feet while everyone calls me crazy
I find myself caught in a loop, replaying scenarios in my head, each more catastrophic than the last
Every small mistake feels monumental as if I'm the star of a tragic film,
trapped in a never-ending climax
I want to scream that I'm trying to hold on,
but instead, I put on a brave face hoping nobody sees the chaos beneath
Like I'm trapped in a maze, seeking for relief
In school, my thoughts feel loud and wild,
Like I'm the star of a movie, so reviled
Anxiety creeps in, making moments seem grand,
Every little mistake feels like
s
i
n
k
i
n
g
in the sand
A test in my hands - my palms start to sweat,
What if I fail? What if I forget?
The walls begin to close in, the air becoming thick and tight,
Replaying each scene, like a film on repeat,
With every small stumble, I face defeat
Silent battles that I wage with every passing day,
Invisible armor, I wear as I begin to decay
To live with me is like living in a world where the "rules" are constantly shifting
Where every decision I make feels like I am headed into danger
Telling me that "everything is okay" will never reassure me
Of the fact that my fears are very, very real
And you say, "Just relax, all of it is in your head."
How careless.
For me to think like I'm "crazy"
Because in my world, these fears aren't lies—
They're the truth I wear behind these tired eyes.

The Wedding Planner

Calista Kayatta (12) | Short Story

Listen to Calista read her story!



Cypress Rabke (12) | Potions | Acrylic

"So John thought he could fool her, infiltrate her family, bring them down from the inside? She almost laughed out loud at the thought. This wasn't just betrayal—it was amateur hour."

Marcella sat alone in her dimly lit apartment, headphones pressed tight against her ears, listening intently. John should have been home by now. She had told him she'd be working late tonight—if her instincts were right, she would be there.

The crackling sound through her headset gave way to voices. She recognized her fiancé's slightly anxious tone.

"I can't believe we're still meeting like this. Aren't you worried she's going to notice?" Then the reply—soft, familiar, unmistakably clear. The wedding planner. "It's the best way, John. She won't find out. I promise."

Marcella's fingers tightened around her wine glass. A cheater. She should've known. If John thought he could fool her, he had no idea who he was dealing with. She kept listening, heart pounding.

"Look, this is getting... complicated," he said. "Do you think we could push it back?"

"Complicated?" The wedding planner sounded exasperated. "Push it back? We've already done that twice."

Marcella's eyes narrowed, and she leaned in closer, straining to catch every word.

John began again, his tone softening. "I need more time with her. There's more going on than you understand."

"Are you sure?" The wedding planner paused. "Fine. I trust you. I'll come up with some excuse. I am the wedding planner, after all." She let out a brief laugh, then her voice dropped to a near whisper. "But what don't I understand, John? What's going on with her?"

"She's sharp," he replied, voice lowered. "I think our intel was wrong."

There was a beat of silence. Marcella could practically picture the wedding planner casting a worried glance in his direction before she, too, dropped her voice.

"How is it wrong?" she whispered. "I thought you had evidence against all of them."

Marcella's pulse quickened. She leaned forward, her knuckles whitening as she gripped her glass.

"It's not that simple," John said. "I have the trade in Messina. I have the father for murder. But it's her. She's the one. She's set to take over the whole family. I just... I just need her confession. I've been close, but I've never managed to get it on record."

The wedding planner's voice softened, tinged with a wary respect. "So... you're saying it's her? Marcella?"

Marcella sat back, the truth crashing down on her like a wave. They thought she was the innocent bride-to-be, the Caruso daughter, the easy-in. If this flimsy agent thought he could bring the Caruso family to its knees, he had no idea what he was up against. A cheater was one thing. But a Narc? She knew how to handle a Narc.

Marcella took a long, measured sip of her wine, letting the silence of her apartment settle around her, as the implications of John's words sank in. She thought back to all the little inconsistencies she had brushed off—the odd questions he would ask, the way he seemed almost too interested in her family's business. At first, she had chalked it up to the usual intrigue people had with the Caruso name. But now, it all made sense.

She glanced at her phone, considering her options, before deciding to keep listening. The conversation between John and the wedding planner was continuing, their voices barely audible over the static.

"Marcella's too close," John muttered. "It's like she knows something's off. I don't know how much longer I can keep this up without slipping."

"Then maybe you shouldn't be keeping it up at all," the wedding planner whispered sharply. "You said she's the linchpin. If she finds out, you can't even imagine what the Carusos will do to you."

"That's why I need more time," he insisted. "I have to find a way to get her guard down."

Marcella rolled her eyes. *You'll need more than time, darling,* she thought, a smirk playing at her lips. *You'll need a miracle.*

"So you're really saying she's running everything? All of it? Even her father doesn't know?"

"Yes. Everything points to her," John replied, his voice laced with frustration. "But the thing is...she's too damn careful. I don't have enough evidence to convince the bureau. They think I'm crazy, that I'm seeing things that aren't there."

"And if she catches on..." the wedding planner's voice trailed off. There was a palpable tension in her words, and Marcella could practically feel the woman's fear.

"That's what I'm afraid of," John admitted, sighing heavily. "If she knows, if she even suspects, I'm dead. You don't know these people like I do. They don't leave loose ends."

Marcella's lips curved into a cold smile. *Damn right we don't,* she thought, feeling a surge of satisfaction as his words confirmed her suspicions. So John thought he could fool her, infiltrate her family, bring them down from the inside? She almost laughed out loud at the thought. This wasn't just betrayal—it was amateur hour.

The wedding planner was speaking again, her tone lower, more urgent. "You need to get out, John. I'm serious. There are other ways to take down families like this. It doesn't have to be you—"

"No," he cut her off sharply. "I'm in too deep. If I back out now, everything I've worked for will fall apart. You don't understand. She's... more than just another target to me."

More than just another target? Marcella felt a cold, almost bitter laugh rise in her throat. Any trace of attachment she'd felt was long gone. *What did he think this was—a romance?*

As the wedding planner's voice quivered, Marcella listened with new resolve. Let him stay in too deep, she thought. He was so sure he could close in on her. So sure he understood her.

A slow smile spread across her face as she envisioned a different outcome—one where she led him into shadow after shadow, each turn a dead end, each clue a false lead. She would let him think he was getting close, just close enough to keep him in the game.

Oh, John, she thought, almost amused now. *You wanted a hunt? You have no idea who's really hunting whom.*



Isa Acosta (11) | I Can't Wait to Grow Up | Digital Photography

This edition of The Walrus is dedicated to

Erik Robinson

Colophon:

Volume 59 of *The Walrus* was created by the staff and teacher advisor at Saint Mary's Hall, 9401 Starcrest Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78217. Three hundred copies were printed and distributed at the end of the 2024-2025 school year.

In this magazine Bakerville Old Face and Tw Cen MT were used on the front cover; Baskerville Old Face font was used throughout for copy, writing credits, and art credits; Bakerville Old Face was used for headlines; Tw Cen MT was used for the quotes pulled from stories and narratives, and Bakerville Old Face for page numbers. Thompson Print Solutions printed the magazine at 5818 Rocky Point Drive, San Antonio, Texas 78249. Preston Thompson was the representative who worked with the staff and editors to bring the magazine to completion. Programs used included Microsoft Word, Photoshop, InDesign, and several HP computers.

Editorial Team:

Rabani Bajaj
David Halsell-Bibb
Calista Kayatta
Megan LaMoy
Abi Sorensen

Faculty Advisor:

Amy Williams-Eddy

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Submission Policy: *The Walrus* welcomes submissions from any member of the Upper School student body from August through February 14. Teachers are also encouraged to submit work for their students. All work is judged anonymously so we ask that all submissions arrive without a name on the piece and with the required submission form. Submission forms may be obtained from Mrs. Amy Williams-Eddy or your English teacher's resources page. Digital submissions are preferred and are to be sent in the provided Google form. All writing submissions should be submitted as MS Word files or PDF files. All digital photographs and artwork should be submitted as JPEG files or PDF files and must be 300 dpi or larger for printing purposes.

