

FEBRUARY 5, 2026

HARVARD

VOL LVII ISSUE 17

INDEPENDENT

THE STUDENT WEEKLY SINCE 1969

*Snowed
In*



CONTENTS

- 3. Buy an Indygram!**
4. Winter Blues: Seasonal Depression & Mental Health Challenges
by Seyi Amosun '29 & Sonia Singh '29
- 5. Harvard's International Students Navigate Immigration Updates**
by Courtney Hines '28
- 6. Y2Y Expands Shelter Services During Winter Storm Fern**
by Olivia Lunseth '28
- 7. "I'm From the Government, and I'm Here to Help."**
by Noah Basden '29
- 8. Modern Media Selling Shock**
by Mia Wilcox '28
- 9. Exploring American Hometowns: Las Cruces, New Mexico**
by Megan Legault '28
- 10. Snowy Scene**
by Emma Crago '28
- 12. Kitchen Sink No. 2**
by Luke Wagner '26 and Jonah Karafiol '26

- 14. "Leave a Ripple:" A Memorial to Bob Weir**
by Grayson Caffrey '28
- 15. Your Early 2026 Reading List**
by Lucy Duncan '28
- 16. A Reaction to the 2026 American Olympic Hockey Roster**
by Jordan Wasserberger '27
- 17. 2015 Called, It Wants Its Super Bowl Back**
by Cameron Bernier '29
- 18. Let's Normalize Being Apolitical in Sports**
by Calvin Frank '28
- 19. Melting the Ice: "Heated Rivalry" and the NHL**
by Taylor Thorne '28
- 20. We Belong to No One But Ourselves**
by Amelie Lima '27

About the Independent

As Harvard College's weekly undergraduate newsmagazine, the Harvard Independent provides in-depth, critical coverage of issues and events of interest to the Harvard College community. The Independent has no political affiliation, instead offering diverse commentary on news, arts, sports, and student life.

For general or business inquiries, contact president@harvardindependent.com. Address Letters to the Editor, op-eds, or comments regarding content to editorinchief@harvardindependent.com. To subscribe to bi-weekly mailed print issues, email subscriptions@harvardindependent.com.

We belong to no one but ourselves.

MASTHEAD

EXECUTIVE BOARD

President: Mia Tavares '27
Editor-in-Chief: Rania Jones '27
Vice President: Patrick Sliz '27
Managing Editor: Sara Kumar '27
Head of Design: Amelie Lima '27
Head of Finance: Meena Behringer '27

EDITORIAL BOARD

News Editor: Courtney Hines '28
Forum Editor: Mia Wilcox '28
Arts Editor: Calvin Frank '28
Sports Editor: Tyler Dang '28
Editorial Comp Director: David Daniel '28
Associate News Editor: Julia Bouchut '29
Associate Forum Editor: Cloris Shi '29
Associate Arts Editor: Ellie Guo '29
Associate Sports Editor: Megan Legault '28
Associate Editorial Comp Director: Lucy Duncan '28
Game Designer: Chau Nguyen '29
Copy Editor: Sonia Singh '29
Copy Editor: Audrey Wu '29
Copy Editor: Seyi Amosun '29

BUSINESS BOARD

Business Director: Keith Hannon '27
Associate Business Director: Sophia Gonzalez '28
Operations Director: Anya Govil '28
Advertising Director: Hudson Byrd '28
Programs Director: Whitney Ford '28
Marketing Director: Katalin Mazansky '29
Associate Operations Director: Safa Ahmad '29
Associate Programs Director: Aaron Massachi '29
Business and Multimedia Comp Director: Matthew Moore '27

MULTIMEDIA BOARD

Multimedia Director: Jordan Wasserberger '27
Associate Multimedia Director: Josie Whelan '28
Website Director: Janelle Souro '28

Video & Podcast Director: Aviya Madar '29
Social Media Director: Janelle Wang '28
Photo Director: Osa Unuigbo '29

DESIGN BOARD

Design Editor: Cameron Bernier '29
Design Editor: Nuala Mernin '29
Art Director: Angie Li '28
Art Director: Neshama Ryman '28
Covers Editor: Riley Cullinan '27
Covers Editor: Emma Crago '28
Merch Director & Head of InDesign Education: Kerrie Zhu '28
Design Comp Director: Trischelle Afihene '27
Design Comp Director: Mia Stewart '29

STAFF WRITERS

Abby Li '29, Adedoyin Adebayo '26, Aidan Gallagher '29, Alejandro Sanchez '26, Alexandra Otto '28, Ben Kaufman '28, Britney Ampadu '28, Caroline Stohrer '28, Claire Chung '29, Eden Bridge-Hayes '29, Elle Huang '29, Fred Klein '28, Hailey Kim '29, Heidi Heffelfinger '26, Ilana Feder '26, Ishaan Tewari '28, Jocelyne Delgado '28, Jonah Karafiol '26, Katherine Chung '29, Kate Oliver '26, Kayla Reifel '26, Laura Cremer '29, Layla Charaoui '26, Luke Wagner '26, Nashla Turicos '28, Natalie Cooper '28, Noah H Basden '29, Olivia Lunseth '28, Paige Cornelius '28, Philipos Alebachew '29, Pippa Lee '28, Raina Wang '28, Sidney Regelbrugge '28, Taylor Thorne '28, Tilly Butterworth '28, Zaid Al-Ississ '28

BUSINESS & OPERATIONS STAFF

Alex Mullen '29, Alicia Moy '28, Amanda Campos '28, Amelie Zucker '28, Anna Shao '28, Anthony Goenaga '26, Anusha Kadiyala '27, Ben Kaufman '28, Breagh Bridge '27, Britney Ampadu '28, Brooklyn Sandridge '27, Caroline Bae '28, Christine Choi '29, Clara Thiele '28,

Daniel Rosario '27, Diana Senkivskyy '28, Ella Bikoff '27, Eliza Glaeser '28, Filip Vujanic '28, Giulia Viacava '28, Han Nguyen '27, Helen Hou '28, Isabella Andrade '27, Jackie Stjernfeldt '28, James Dyalchand-Ericson '28, Jeffery Yeo '28, John Sogutlu '28, Joshua Rodriguez Ortiz '28, Katie Merriam '26, Kyler Rno '28, Lauren Mitchell '28, Maddie Bailey '28, Malak Sannoun '28, Maya Eisner '29, Rhea Werner '29, Ryan Irving '27, Samuel Posten '29, Sasha Cavell '29, Sofia Branco '28, Tomas Arroyo '27, Triscia Afihene '27, Uzochi Otji '29, Wallace Selph '29, Wessal Bakry '28

DESIGN STAFF

Allyson Xu '28, Alma Russell '26, Annabella Burton-Boone '29, Annelise Fisher '26, Caleb Boyce '29, Cara Cronin '28, Christiana Zembrowski '28, Christie Beckley '27, Clara Lake '27, El Richards '26, Emily Pallan '27, Joye Wingard '28, Justin Ma '29, Katharine Weiner '29, Kayla Le '28, Kelly Tung '27, Lucie Stefanoni '27, Madison Krug '27, Miranda Chao Hwan '28, Reeve Sykes '26, Sophia Rascoff '27

THE SUSTAINERS

The Sustainers are a group of Independent alumni committed to supporting our mission by funding one month of office rent each year for at least five years.

MARK SHIELDS '70
JIM VASEFF '71
DAVID SMITH '75
RANDY BUCKLIN '82
MARK PELOFSKY '84
JULIE DAM '93
WILL RECKLER '99



LOVE ACTUALLY

IS

ALL AROUND



show it with an indygram

Winter Blues: Seasonal Depression & Mental Health Challenges

Mental health efforts on campus adapt as the second semester brings new struggles for students.

BY SEYI AMOSUN '29 AND SONIA SINGH '29

Editor's Note: Due to the confidentiality considerations surrounding mental health support programs, some interviewees have requested to remain anonymous.

As the spring semester begins in Cambridge, students are navigating seasonal and academic stressors that can affect mental health. Seasonal Affective Disorder, commonly known as seasonal depression, is a subtype of depression that is most commonly associated with reduced daylight during the winter months. Harvard students have historically reported feeling as if mental health is sometimes “invisible” on campus, but mental health awareness and support groups on campus affirm that they are making efforts to eliminate stigma and help their peers through these colder months.

“It’s just kind of rough because it gets dark so early... it can be kind of discouraging when I wake up on a weekend at 1 p.m. and then I go to lunch and then I’m walking back from lunch at like 2:45 p.m. and it’s golden hour... It kind of makes me sad because the day is gone before it even started,” Samuel Rudavsky '29 recounted regarding his first winter living in Boston.

Harvard offers several campus-based mental health resources, including Counseling and Mental Health Services (CAMHS), which provide individual counseling, urgent care, and a 24-hour CAMHS support line at (617) 495-2042. In addition to clinical services, Room 13, a peer counseling group, is open every night of the academic year from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. Student organizations, including Active Minds, also focus on mental health awareness and aim to reduce the stigma around these topics.

At Room 13, seasonal changes directly shape the concerns students bring in, many of which intensify during the winter months. “In the winter, you obviously have people who are working on saying goodbye to certain things, or people who are still new to New England winter,” an anonymous representative from the organization stated.

For their program, counselor anonymity provides a means for students to openly express their concerns and receive peer support.

“I think one of the strongest parts of our modality is that we’re anonymous... People can really have that full freedom to say whatever they want, however bizarre or insecure or nervous they are about it, we really try to keep that a safe and private space for everyone,” they continued.

When considering seasonal depression, symptoms can be hard to spot and often overlap with academic stress or burnout. Symptoms include, but are not limited to, persistent feelings of sadness, hopelessness, anxiety, and emptiness; loss of pleasure in routine activities; difficulties concentrating, remembering, or making decisions; oversleeping; social withdrawal or loss of interest; and changes in sleep or appetite patterns.



Active Minds is another of Harvard’s many mental health support groups, specifically focused on spreading awareness about issues like depression and anxiety. “We try to bring together Harvard’s community under the realm of mental health,” Olivia Weber '26 said, co-President of Harvard’s Active Minds. “We do a lot of mental health awareness on campus, making sure students know about mental health resources on campus, giving students different places to do self-care.”

These seasonal challenges shape how campus mental health organizations structure outreach and peer support during the winter months. For Weber, finding common ground with students is a strategy to bridge the gap between those struggling with their mental health and finding the right resources to help them.

She highlighted the importance of communicating and connecting with peers to bolster mental health support. “If I go into a conversation and talk about if I had seasonal depression or whatnot... others might feel comfortable to talk to me about theirs. Not feeling alone in your struggle is huge. As cliché as it might sound, it’s huge to know that other people are going through the same thing,” she added.

Active Minds further works to reduce stigma by encouraging students to be open with one another in their respective mental health struggles. “A big part of mental health stigma lies around this false notion that you’re alone and how you’re feeling is wrong, and you’re somehow weak for feeling that. Those false notions can be really harmful for

people,” said Weber.

Nearly 25% of all college students report experiencing symptoms commonly associated with the “winter blues.” Seasonal affective disorder affects approximately 5% of adults in the United States, with another 10-20% reporting milder seasonal mood changes. Harvard’s undergraduate population draws students from across the country and around the world, including many regions with warmer climates or more consistent daylight hours. These transitions can make winter months especially difficult for some students.

Mounting academic pressure at Harvard caused by recent conversations around recent centering grading systems has also increased uncertainty and concern for students. In a Jan. 26 email to students, Dean of Undergraduate Education Amanda Claybaugh outlined the administration’s wishes: “Last semester, there was a lot of talk about grading, and this semester there will be even more. A faculty committee will soon propose possible changes to our current grading policies, and the faculty as a whole will then vote on whether to approve those changes,” she wrote.

“I’d now like to solicit your thoughts about generative AI... The goal of the [Generative AI Student] summit is to bring together students to make recommendations about the College’s AI policies,” she continued.

Together, these recent academic policy discussions have heightened a sense of uncertainty that students say compounds seasonal stress.

“I definitely think that academics are always contributing to different mental health conditions. I know, personally, academics have impacted my level of anxiety,” noted Weber. “I think when we can have these resources on campus and figure out what works for us in terms of self-care, hopefully that can buffer academic stress a little bit.”

Though Harvard’s services work to aid student health, some are simply unaware of the initiatives on campus, posing a potential problem in reducing seasonal depression. Awareness of Harvard mental health initiatives remains uneven which students say can limit their impact during these winter months: “I’m sure the services are great, it’s just that the marketing could probably be improved,” Rudavsky said.

SEYI AMOSUN '29 (SAMOSUN@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND SONIA SINGH '29 (SONIASINGH@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WRITE NEWS FOR THE HARVARD INDEPENDENT.

Harvard's International Students Navigate Immigration Updates

How turbulence in U.S. immigration policy influences international students' travel decisions.

BY COURTNEY HINES '28

Harvard College's 2025-2026 Winter Recess spurred feelings of uncertainty and caution for its international student population. Averaging around 27% of each undergraduate class, the College's international students had to navigate whether to remain on campus or travel abroad during the four-week intermission between semesters, as the Trump Administration continues to pursue actions directed toward international students at the University.



“There’s always some uncertainty about the visa situation because of how the general immigration situation has been over the past half a year or more,” said Adnan Bin Alamgir ’29, an international student from Bangladesh. “But given that I did not face too much of an issue while coming here for the first time, I think the concerns were lower than what they were back in September or August.”

In May 2025, the Department of Homeland Security moved to revoke Harvard University’s certification under the Student and Exchange Visitor Program, a federal authorization that allows universities to enroll international students on F-, M-, and J-visas. The Department alleged that Harvard had failed to comply with repeated requests for detailed student records, including disciplinary and protest-related information, and accused the university of insufficient oversight of its international student population.

These are claims that Harvard has strongly disputed, though the College has since distributed unspecified information on international students to the Department of Homeland Security. “Let this serve as a warning to all universities and academic institutions across the country,” Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said on X.

A week later, on June 4, President Donald J. Trump issued Proclamation 10948, titled “Enhancing National Security by Addressing Risks at Harvard University,” suspending the entry of foreign nationals seeking to study or participate in exchange programs at Harvard. “Admission into the United States to attend, conduct research, or teach at our Nation’s institutions of higher education is a privilege granted by our Government, not a guarantee,” the proclamation stated.

The federal action triggered immediate legal pushback. Harvard filed suit, and a federal judge issued a temporary restraining order

blocking the government from enforcing the proclamation’s visa restrictions while the matter continues through the appellate courts. In the judge’s ruling, the conflict was framed as involving fundamental constitutional rights, including freedom of speech and expression.

The administration’s actions were part of a broader escalation in rhetoric and policy toward international students that extends beyond Harvard. In 2025, the U.S. government revoked thousands of international student visas and green cards, with hundreds of cases specifically targeting participants in pro-Palestinian and anti-war protests.

Federal immigration and security officials have additionally enhanced social media screening and vetting requirements at U.S. consulates for potential visitors to the U.S. since mid-Dec..

Against this backdrop, international students made highly individualized winter break decisions, balancing academic goals, family obligations, and personal assessments of risk.

For Anderson Dy ’28, an international student from the Niagara region of Canada, winter break meant returning home after nearly a year away; he last went home the previous winter session. Dy noted that his last return to the U.S. had gone smoothly. “I generally felt more comfortable,” he said.

“I personally exercise an abundance of caution, and this is a personal decision,” Dy continued, explaining his rationale for his choice to visit home this year. That caution shaped Dy’s choices earlier in the year. Over the summer, he remained on campus to conduct research at Massachusetts General Hospital rather than traveling home, a decision he said was partly motivated by concern for minimizing unnecessary travel risks.

Dy emphasized that international students’ comfort levels vary widely. “To be fair, it depends on which country you’re from,” he said.

The Trump administration’s travel ban has indefinitely frozen immigrant visa processing for nationals of roughly 75 countries, including Iran, Brazil, Egypt, Russia, and Somalia. In other words, some international students face far stricter travel restrictions or paperwork delays than peers from countries not on the list, complicating decisions about whether to return home or stay at Harvard during the break.

He also acknowledged the difficulty of speaking openly about travel. “Given the circumstances, I feel as if my responses are rather limited,” Dy explained.

Other students found that remaining on campus offered both stability and academic opportunity. Bin Alamgir stayed in the Harvard dorms for most of the winter break, using the quieter period to conduct research.

“It was my first winter,” Bin Alamgir said. “I wanted to see what kind of opportunities they may have.”

Shortly after finals, Bin Alamgir reached out to professors and secured a position in a physics lab, where he completed extensive training

during the break. He is now a full-time member of the research group and plans to continue his work throughout the spring semester.

While immigration uncertainty factored into his thinking, Bin Alamgir stated it was not the primary driver of his decision. “There’s always some uncertainty about the visa situation because of how just the general immigration situation has been over the past half a year or more,” he explained. “But given that I did not face too much of an issue while coming here for the first time, I think [my] concerns were lower than what they were back in September or August.”

Bin Alamgir also pointed to institutional support as a stabilizing factor. Harvard guaranteed winter housing for all international students who applied, which reassured him. “Other than that, there were a lot of winter programs and everything to make sure that we don’t get bored to death during the winter break. So that was also nice.”

Despite an emptier campus, students who stayed described an unexpected sense of connection. Undergraduates from different class years and Houses shared meals and routines. “There was only one dining hall open,” Bin Alamgir said. “It was all first-years, sophomores—all the students, all undergrads eating at the same place.”

Bin Alamgir described winter break as fostering an environment that allowed students to meet peers they might not otherwise encounter during the semester. “Because we’re all sort of in the same situation, on an almost empty campus, it was a different sort of community,” he said.

While many students emphasized that their Winter Session experience was defined more by resilience than by fear, conflict between Harvard and the Trump Administration continues to escalate. On Feb. 2, President Trump demanded a \$1 billion fine from Harvard on Truth Social. This comes just one week after he privately told negotiators he was willing to drop his demand for a \$200 million payment from the University.

“This should be a Criminal, not Civil, event, and Harvard will have to live with the consequences of their wrongdoings,” President Trump wrote.

Though prior safe returns to the United States and informal networks of support within the Harvard community helped temper anxieties, future decisions from the Trump administration remain unpredictable.

**COURTNEY HINES '28
(COURTNEYHINES@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) IS THE NEWS
EDITOR FOR THE INDEPENDENT.**

**GRAPHIC BY MIRANDA CHAO
HWANG '28**

Y2Y Expands Shelter Services During Winter Storm Fern

The youth homeless shelter in Harvard Square responded to last week's inclement weather by extending operating hours and increasing capacity.

BY OLIVIA LUNSETH '28

Winter Storm Fern swept across the East Coast from Jan. 25-26, covering Boston in nearly two feet of snow and plunging temperatures into the single digits. Y2Y, Harvard Square's youth homeless shelter, expanded both its hours of operation and its overnight capacity to ensure unhoused adolescents had a safe, warm place to stay. Undergraduate staff and volunteers covered extra shifts during the storm, allowing Y2Y to accommodate 29 guests 24/7 during the emergency.

During the winter months, exposure poses heightened risks for unhoused individuals. Following Fern, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani reported that seven out of ten people found dead outdoors were experiencing homelessness. Although Boston's homeless population is not as large as New York City's, there were still 5,506 people experiencing homelessness in Boston according to the 2025 Homeless Census.

Y2Y student director Necati Unsal '26 shared how the shelter's response to Fern was guided by an established emergency weather policy which allows it to remain open during the day. "The policy takes effect immediately as soon as we know about the emergency," Unsal said to the Independent.

Despite many Harvard students still traveling back to campus during Winter Recess the weekend of the storm, Y2Y was nonetheless able to find students to accommodate the adjusted schedule. "Honestly, we had some initial worries, but thankfully staff and volunteers really turned out," he said. "Staff more generally, not just from Harvard, turned out too."

Located in the basement of the First Parish Church at 1 Church St., Y2Y is America's first youth-led homeless shelter designed to welcome unhoused 18- to 24-year-olds. The shelter typically has 22 beds, comprising approximately half of the youth-tailored accommodations in the Greater Boston Area. Usually opening its doors from 7 p.m. to 8 a.m., the shelter offers overnight accommodations along with meals, showers, laundry facilities, clothing, and storage. Y2Y also prides itself on being an LGBTQ+-inclusive space.

Y2Y was founded by two members of Harvard's Class of 2014 who noticed that there were more volunteers available at the Harvard Square Homeless Shelter than needed, and there was a lack of overnight shelter options for unhoused young adults specifically. Y2Y opened its doors in 2015, and since then, its volunteers and staff have expanded to include graduate students, faculty, community members, and activists alongside undergraduates.

Twelve years later, Y2Y operates as a Phillips Brooks House Association-affiliated organization that not only offers shelter but also social-emotional resources. Volunteers assist guests in navigating available services, including resource navigation, legal services, medical care, mental health clinicians, drop-in service providers, referrals to other organizations, and resume and job search support.

However, the services necessitated by Winter Storm Fern were unprecedented.

"We were able to anticipate the winter emergency the Friday before it was officially declared and sent out staffing requests as a result," Unsal continued. "Since our typical shifts are in the evening and overnight, we added three additional shifts—from 9 a.m. to noon, noon to 3 p.m., and 3 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.—for Sunday and Monday, and those requests were filled almost immediately by staff."

According to the shelter's policy director, Aran Sonnad-Joshi '26, Y2Y was able to increase its capacity to the contractual maximum and paused its lottery system. With this system, guests are admitted for 1-night or 30-night stays using a randomized electronic lottery, meaning the 1-night guests would typically have to leave in the morning. "This prevented our normal turnover, which allowed us to house as many guests as possible without forcing guests to leave during a snowstorm if their stays ended," he explained.

Apart from ensuring all guests have a designated bed, Y2Y also coordinated with their landlord, First Parish Church, in order to handle snow and ice buildup outside the church to ensure safe access for guests and staff. Food supplemented by donations and leftovers allowed the shelter to continue providing meals to their guests throughout the storm.

Beyond the immediate response, recent national debates over homelessness policy and funding emphasize the importance of local resources like Y2Y that can step in, especially during times of emergency. Moves by the Trump Administration have shifted money away from long-term housing solutions and towards transitional housing. Over half of the 2026 fiscal funding for the Continuum of Care program was cut. According to The National Homelessness Law Center, these changes will force about 170,000 people, many of whom are seniors and those with disabilities, back onto the street.



In Boston, the Trump Administration's new restrictions to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's Continuum of Care program threaten permanent housing and supportive services for more than 2,000 households each year. The proposed changes would require Boston to eliminate approximately \$29 million in permanent supportive housing funding, potentially pushing more individuals and families back into homelessness during the winter months. In May, Boston joined cities across the country in suing the Trump Administration over unlawful cuts to homelessness funding. A federal judge has temporarily blocked the cuts, and the appeal is pending.

**OLIVIA LUNSETH '28
(OLIVIALUNSETH@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) WRITES
NEWS FOR THE HARVARD
INDEPENDENT.**

GRAPHIC BY CHAU NGUYEN '29

FORUM

“I’m From the Government, and I’m Here to Help.”

Minneapolis and the case for truth and doubt in times of uncertainty.

BY NOAH BASDEN '29

Perhaps Ronald Reagan was right all along when he jokingly said, “The nine most terrifying words in the English language are: I’m from the government, and I’m here to help.”

ICU nurse Alex Pretti, as well as writer and poet Renee Good, were killed in the streets of Minneapolis in Jan. by ICE and United States Customs and Border Protection officers, respectively. Some members of the Trump administration have attempted to mislead the American public, such as United States Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem, who described Good as a “domestic terrorist,” and Homeland Security advisor Stephen Miller, who labeled Pretti an “assassin.”

But I know what I saw, and so do you.

What about an unarmed man, held to the ground by a multitude of federal agents, screams “assassin?” What about a scared mother reacting to conflicting instructions screams “domestic terrorist?” I ask because language, with its definitions and associations, matters.

When I think of a domestic terrorist, I think of people hiding behind masks with assault rifles, spreading fear amongst the populace. I do not think of an ICU nurse who dedicated his life in service to others, nor a scared creative who simply was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

I strive to write balanced articles, giving credence to both sides of the argument, but in this case, I cannot contradict the truth. While there is unrest in the streets, a larger war is being waged against the very concept of truth in this nation. The President routinely tweets, posts on Truth Social, or makes blatantly untrue statements, which he attempts to present as facts. These comments are eagerly retweeted, praised, and regurgitated by his cabal of cronies.

In the 2021 political satire “Don’t Look Up,” Leonardo DiCaprio’s character Randall emphatically declares, “the President of the United States is FUCKING LYING.” But what was once dark comedy is no longer satirical—it now reflects a depressing reality.

In Minneapolis, unjust death lurks at street corners, and vigils have become a permanent fixture on the calendar. The city has become a symbol of this country’s failure to protect its own people.

The violence with which the federal government has carried out its operations in Minneapolis is frightening. So too is

their certainty they are insulated from accountability, emboldening them to act without fear of consequences. That sort of damaging rhetoric and conduct not only deepens public fear and mistrust in the government but also signals a troubling shift towards excusing unchecked power.



Though Vice President JD Vance has since retracted the statement, he previously said that the ICE officer involved in the killing of Renee Good was “protected by absolute immunity” and “doing his job.” Even conceptually invoking absolute immunity in this context is terrifying. The implication that state violence can be morally or legally pre-justified is un-American, and its mere suggestion should make us question the extent to which power and accountability have distanced themselves.

Furthermore, the Vice President’s invocation of “absolute immunity” speaks directly to the dangerous kind of certainty Cardinal Lawrence warns against in the 2024 political thriller “Conclave.” Lawrence, played by Ralph Fiennes, delivers a pivotal speech to his fellow cardinals as they prepare to select the new pope. Lawrence cautions against certainty and argues that it is important that the future pope must embrace doubt; otherwise, without doubt there can be no faith.

This sentiment, that embracing

skepticism is essential to growth, applies well beyond its religious context and speaks to the idea of the danger of this concept of “absolute immunity.” When those who wield state power believe themselves to be protected unquestionably, they become living proof of Lawrence’s warning that “Certainty is the great enemy of unity.” Unity requires compromise, but when there is none, and dissenting voices are met with tear gas and rubber bullets, it only serves to breed more division in a country already, arguably, pulling itself apart across economic, racial, and political lines.

Lawrence ends his impassioned plea with the words, “Let us pray that God will grant us a pope who doubts.” I share this sentiment—in the civic sense. We need leaders who doubt and officials who hesitate. The dismissal of Gregory Bovino, a controversial leader within Border Patrol, and Trump’s change in rhetoric with regard to ICE operations in Minnesota are not examples of doubt or atonement for past sins, but capitulations to political and PR pressure. True doubt would mean officers now trained for de-escalation, not domination, coupled with a clear, holistic immigration vision not rooted in an approach characterized by aggression.

The question we must reckon with is not whether Minneapolis will heal. It has healed before and will again. The question, rather, is whether we can build a government willing to change before another city must hold candlelit vigils for its sons and daughters killed at the hands of overzealous, undertrained federal officers.

The administration says these operations make the country a safer place, using buzzwords like “illegal alien” and “enemies from within.” They will ask for your trust, but you’ve seen what their demand for trust, and their certainty of safety, have led to.

Reagan’s nine terrifying words weren’t wrong, just incomplete. True terror isn’t found when you hear the words “I’m from the Government, and I’m here to help,” but when masked men with assault rifles show up to your door and say, “I’m from the Government, I’m here to help, and I’m absolutely certain I’m right.”

**NOAH BASDEN '29
(NHBASDEN@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) HOPES THIS IS
ALL A BAD DREAM.**

GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28

Modern Media Selling Shock

Explicitness in recent TV and cinema. Spoilers ahead!

BY MIA WILCOX '28

When it comes to recent blockbuster television and cinema, it feels like we are all going to the proverbial cottage. Every time I reach for the remote or head to the movies, I seem to be unknowingly subscribing to a porno-violence screening, often, and unfortunately, with my family. Sex and blood have always been central components of screen entertainment, but some of the releases in recent months have pushed the boundaries of explicit media in my viewing experience.

HBO has long been renowned for its willingness to stream controversially explicit content. “Game of Thrones” set the stage in 2011, with its very first episode containing blatant references to incest. Then came “Euphoria” in 2019, which relied heavily on shock through its graphic portrayal of sex and substance use, especially for older audiences. Unlike the fantasy world of GOT, the show’s proximity to contemporary teenage culture made its graphic content all the more relevant and subject to comment and criticism. However, to me, both now read like child’s play compared to more recent media.

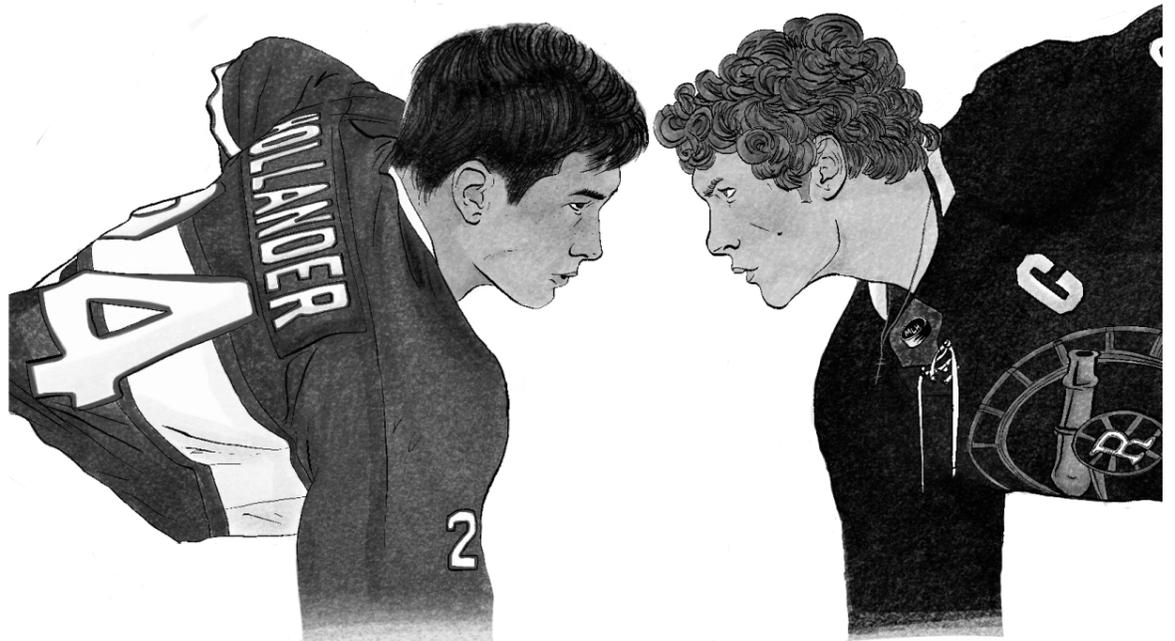
This experience stands in contrast to a reported 40 percent decline in Hollywood sex scenes since the turn of the century; perhaps the issue is not about the amount of sex and gore, but rather how these topics are portrayed—the intensity, detail, and shock factor that make them resonate.

The release of “Heated Rivalry” was the first time I truly began considering this shift, as I innocently sat down with my mom just weeks ago to watch what I had heard was a beautiful love story. Granted, it ultimately was—and I would highly recommend it, just maybe not with your parents. What followed in the first 45 minutes, however, were some of the most detailed and graphic portrayals of sex I have seen on television. This persisted through the first few episodes, after which the plot and character development that made the show so sensational finally emerged.

I can think of a long list of similar viewing experiences. I was equally shocked when I began “Tell Me Lies,” which has just aired its third season since premiering in 2022. I also recall shrieking with my now-roommate when we cuddled up for a movie night viewing of “Babygirl” in her Weld Hall single, as Nicole Kidman performed animalistic acts throughout her affair with intern Harris Dickinson.

But I digress. These portrayals of sex and relationships are not a bad thing per se, but there comes a point where sultry trumps story. Their prominence, however, reflects a broader cultural moment: in a generation often described as being in a sexual recession, the prevalence of sensationalized encounters offers a form of escapism.

On the other end of television drama, if I am not watching salacious sexual depictions, I am watching heads explode, people being shot, and a general rampage of bloodshed. In a recent viewing of “Bugonia,” starring Emma Stone, I squirmed as blood splattered across the screen and heads quite literally rolled. These sequences revealed an alien-led test of humanity’s worthiness for survival,



one it ultimately failed due to its selfishness and violence toward one another. In “Eddington,” Joaquin Phoenix portrays a gun-crazed New Mexican Republican locked in conflict with equally violent, vigilante left-wing protesters. Bodies were dismembered, and practically everyone ended up dead.

In an article published in *The Conversation* last October, Dr. James Francis Jr., a professor and specialist in horror studies at Texas A&M, detailed the reasons behind increasingly graphic depictions of violence in cinema. “The evolution in the horror genre’s presentation of blood and gore doesn’t necessarily make for scarier movies, but they often point to the scarier times in which we live,” he described. “Contemporary horror understands how senseless killings on screen are effective, because the removal of emotion from the violence parallels real-world incidents.”

This analysis certainly rings true for both titles, which provide commentary on an unraveling society characterized by a deeply selfish and polarized humanity seemingly beyond salvation.

Still, the central point remains: in cases of explicit sex and gore alike, these examples of screen media not only reflect pertinent social issues, but in some cases actively influence public sentiment and conversation.

The truth of the matter, as seen across these examples, is that sex sells—and often, so does violence. There is something similarly entrancing about the thrills of sex and blood, a sentiment captured in a 1967 *Esquire* article by journalist Tom Wolfe, in which the term “porno-violence” was coined. Wolfe explains, “In the new pornography, the theme is not sex. The new pornography depicts practitioners acting out another, murkier drive: people staving teeth in, ripping guts open, blowing brains out, and getting even with all those bastards....” There is something compelling that draws our eyes to sequences of violence as to sequences of sex.

Returning to “Heated Rivalry,” the show not only achieved the highest IMDb episode ranking of 2025 but also sparked a broader discourse on toxic masculinity within sports culture. Moreover, a *Vogue* article published last week titled

“Is ‘Heated Rivalry’ Coaxing Real-Life Athletes Out of the Closet,” revealed that “Heated Rivalry” star Hudson Williams noted that he and Rachel Reid—the author of the book series on which the show is based—have received messages from professional hockey, football, and basketball players who do not feel that they can publicly identify as LGBTQ+.

In an industry where LGBTQ+ identities are often underrepresented, the show—and its portrayals of identity and relationships—has created a unique space for expression and personal confiding.

At times, the mass availability of gruesomely detailed descriptions and images of acts of violence, alongside pornographic material, results in a feeling of societal desensitization in the casual consumption of media, both real-life and scripted. That said, the undeniable provocation of these themes can also generate positive discourse and influence.

Although reports suggest a decline in the frequency of sex scenes, my viewing experience points in the opposite direction, characterized by moments of greater intensity, rendering them impossible to ignore. This heightened risqué content is mirrored by the equally pervasive presence of cinematic violence. Rather than a shift in how often these themes appear, it seems the shift lies on how intensely they are portrayed.

While there are moments when I want to look away in embarrassment or squeamishness—and I may need to tread more carefully when choosing shows to watch with my parents—perhaps this explicitness simply reflects the social reality we inhabit. The media we consume is both an echo of and a cause for the social standards, progress, and truths of real life. Even if certain portrayals occasionally overshadow their intended narratives, the instances in which it is purposefully produced allow television and cinema to achieve their most meaningful impact.

MIA WILCOX '28 (MWILCOX@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS THE FORUM EDITOR FOR THE INDEPENDENT.

GRAPHIC BY MADISON KRUG '27

Exploring American Hometowns: Las Cruces, New Mexico

“The Land of Enchantment,” and notably, the land of this writer.

BY MEGAN LEGAULT '28

F

an. 26, 2026

I called my grandparents this morning, as I have done every Sunday since I moved away from Las Cruces, New Mexico.

The conversation flowed as it usually does. First, they ask about my academics. Secondly, we fall into a brief digression on the tribulations of the pecan tree harvest, as my Grandpa is a farmer in the Mesilla Valley. From there, the conversation can go anywhere. It could be an anecdote from American history, a story they saw on KFOX14's nightly programming, or a printed comic strip they read somewhere and thought would offer me wisdom or amusement.

Though the topic of conversation is never identical, there is one thing I can always count on. At some point, we will discuss what has become my family's biggest concern since my great escape to the East Coast: the cold weather.

In the months that followed my acceptance to Harvard, my house could have been easily confused for a winter clothing consignment shop. Hand-me-down coats, scarves, gloves, and boots piled up high in every corner. Aside from being the first person in my family to pursue my undergraduate degree somewhere other than New Mexico State University—a ten-minute drive from just about anywhere in the 575 area code—I was setting a precedent. I was the first to venture to the East Coast, let alone anywhere further or colder than Colorado.

After living in Las Cruces my entire life, I can say with confidence that if you ask people why they live there, you'll get one of three answers:

- 1) The low cost of living,
- 2) beautiful scenery of the Organ Mountains,
- 3) A hatred of cold weather.



Las Cruces is what we locals deem a “retirement town.” After 9 p.m., the only places open are fast food restaurants kept open by the labor of high schoolers or a Circle K. For those of retirement age, the predictability of warm weather, familiar faces almost everywhere, and the ability to push anything off until “mañana” with minimal consequence is comforting. However, as I grew up there with dreams that many people (including myself most days) thought were impossible, simply because of where I was from, these constants provided me the opposite. They felt like a trap I needed to escape.

My brother immediately enlisted in the Navy upon graduating from high school, whereas I saw Harvard as my golden ticket out. Like many young people from the area, we felt compelled to do little more than move far, far away.

This Christmas was the first time I saw my brother in over two years. It was also the first time he had ever brought a girl home. While I cannot deny that there is something mildly nauseating about seeing your sibling puppy-eyed and in love, getting to watch him introduce someone to our hometown for the very first time forced me to see it in a different light and appreciate the very area I had sought to leave for years.

Experiencing home like a tourist is something many of us have admittedly never done before; even my roommate from Manhattan has never been to the Statue of Liberty.

I never admired the fact that the White Sands National Monument was quite literally in my backyard. I didn't see the beauty in Adobe architecture or the holiday tradition of luminaria-lined streets. I took for granted the numerous authentic, incomprehensibly delicious Mexican food restaurants where, like the Chris Young song, I have no need for a menu—especially at El Sombrero, where tacos are always 50% off on Tuesdays. I took for granted things as simple as the natural beauty of our vibrantly colored, unobstructed sunsets and non-light polluted night sky where the brightness of stars contrasts the total darkness.

Despite the rich history of Mesilla Plaza and its creation from the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo, I did not feel the chills that I did standing among the history of Harvard's campus for the first time. The history of Las Cruces and Mesilla had been replaced, in my mind, by the history of my own life and rendered insignificant. Take, for example, the building where Billy the Kid was sentenced. To me, that is just where my grandma would take me for ice cream after spending a day catching tadpoles in the ditch banks of her farm.

I had become unaccustomed to the familiar comforts of home. I caught myself complaining numerous times about how hot it was—it was 50 degrees and sunny. The difference between wet and dry heat is noticeable, especially after adjusting from the frigid winters in Boston to the scorching 115-degree summers of Las Cruces, where you can literally cook an egg on the sidewalk. The people, too, seemed to resemble the weather: cold in Boston, warm at home.

Last week, as I received the many disappointing emails from Mary Ann Bradley announcing that class would continue after Winter Storm Fern, I was reminded of a funny parallel. During my Harvard alumni interview, I was asked an unexpected question: “What would you do if you had a snow day?” If you aren't from Las Cruces, this question probably makes no sense. For me, though, it was a genuinely intellectual exercise—we rarely get snow. On the rare occasion we do, half an inch justifies schools and everything else being closed.

What I did not yet understand was that for my interviewer, who was also from Las Cruces and had done her four years in Cambridge, this was a hidden joke—something I didn't realize until today.

Though it might sound silly, it took Harvard College rejecting the concept of a snow day (with snow mounds taller than my high school best friend, Sarah) for me to realize that home has become something I now run back to, not away from.

I run to the embrace of warm weather, warm food, familiar faces, and most importantly, my family, who have lived there for generations. Our state's history, much like that of a family, is dictated by collective memories, unlike anything I have experienced anywhere else in the world. Shamefully, it took me acquiring a chronic case of homesickness, and probably frostbite, from the other side of the country for me to see the warmth of home.

As our weekly call came to a close, it was me who joked about the weather: “You know what, Grandpa? I finally had to walk uphill both ways to school in the snow today. I thought that was a joke. They weren't kidding. This shit's hard.”

**MEGAN LEGAULT '28
(MLEGAULT@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) WOULD SELL
HER FIRSTBORN CHILD FOR A
“CHRISTMAS” (RED AND GREEN
CHILE) COMBINATION PLATE
FROM HER FAVORITE LOCAL
RESTAURANT RIGHT NOW.**

GRAPHIC BY MEGAN LEGAULT '28





Kitchen Sink No. 2

BY LUKE WAGNER '26 AND JONAH KARAFIOL '26

The train moved north through grey morning light, steady enough that the countryside seemed to glide rather than pass. Fields, hedgerows, and the occasional cluster of sheep standing in the drizzle as if waiting for instruction. I had a book open on my lap, but I wasn't reading. At some point, the page turned, yet I didn't register it until much later.

The carriage smelled faintly of damp wool and coal. Someone coughed behind me. The window rattled when the train picked up speed, then settled again. I adjusted my bags with my foot and watched the reflection of my face in the glass appear and then vanish as the light changed.

I was aware, with mild annoyance, that this was the sort of detail I tended to register—the small mechanical shifts, the way light misbehaved on glass—rather than anything properly useful. I told myself to stop cataloguing and read.

London was already behind us: Clerkenwell, the spalling brick streets, the stairs with the bowing wood, and the kettle that took too long to boil. My father had been at the table when I left, newspaper folded neatly beside his plate. He asked whether I had everything. I said yes. He nodded. When I reached the door, he reminded me to write if I needed money. We shook hands. That seemed sufficient.

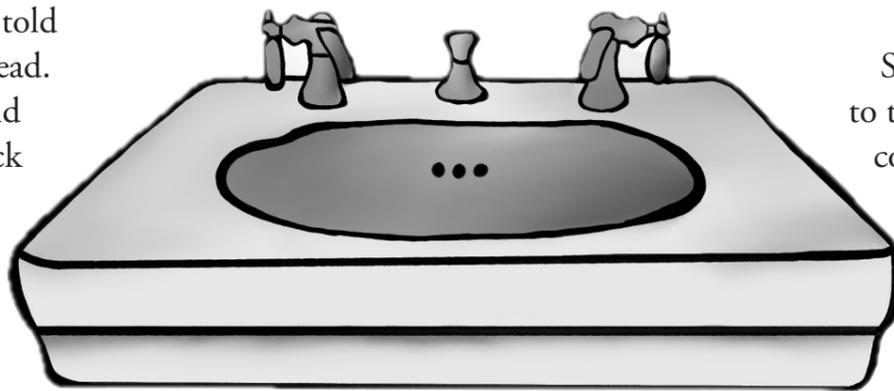
Crossing another bridge, I looked down at the water—dark, slow-moving. I couldn't have named the river. There are a great many rivers in England, and most of them go unremarked upon, which raises the question of what made any of them great in the first place—length, history, usefulness, how often they were written down—though this did not seem important at the time. I shifted in my seat and returned my attention to the window. Trees gave way to open fields again. The book remained open, waiting. I let it be. I straightened it anyway, though there was nothing wrong with the way it lay, and then adjusted it again, less because it needed correction than because I disliked leaving an object in a position I hadn't consciously chosen.

But that was the old thinking. The London way of thinking. I was going somewhere new, away from places

where two and two were already settled. Somewhere I could build something from the texts and lectures and conversations that had nothing to do with that silent house—that house in Clerkenwell, my father at the table with his folded paper, the kettle cooling on the hob. I told myself this place would not resemble that one. I told myself the vacancy would leave room for something else.

The meadows in the window were empty, recently harvested, the soil turned, and waiting. I watched them flow by and found myself thinking of the way a room looks after the furniture has been removed—not absent, exactly, but prepared, holding its breath for whatever came next. I straightened in my seat, adjusted my collar, and closed the book, sliding it back into my satchel.

I had always assumed, without quite deciding to, that I noticed more



than other people—that I saw the joints and seams where things were put together, the underbelly and the scratches. This belief did not make me happier, kinder, or even more certain; it only made me impatient, as though I were being held back by people who did not realize they were slow.

...

The university gates rose before me—massive slabs of oak scarred with figures I hadn't been able to identify from the moving cab—and beyond them a courtyard of pale stone that seemed to glow faintly even under the grey sky. I paid the driver and stood there with my trunk at my feet while he stared at me, mistaking his pause for thought.

I did not move immediately, aware of the slight impropriety of having settled my fare and yet still standing with my trunk at my feet as though something further were expected of me, and while he waited with the reins slack in his hands, I watched two porters cross the courtyard with boxes and heard someone behind the

gate call out directions; the stone beneath me was worn smooth in places, the corners of the paving dipped as if years of feet had pressed them down.

I tried—without much success—to imagine being one of those earlier arrivals, equally burdened and equally convinced that the present moment mattered more than it probably did. I shifted the trunk a few inches for no reason I could explain and felt mildly irritated by having done so. The gate stood open with no one preventing me from entering except myself, a realization I preferred not to linger on. So, I adjusted my grip and went through.

Whatever significance the day was meant to have failed to announce itself. By the time I lay down, my melancholy had reduced itself to a fatigue and a mild irritation at having paid so much attention to it in the first place.

...

Sleep came in pieces. I stirred to the sound of footsteps in the corridor, lay still until they passed, then drifted off again without remembering. When I woke for the second time, the room was already drab with morning, and for a moment I did not know where I was. This did not alarm

me. On the contrary, I took a certain satisfaction in it, as if confusion were proof that I had not yet surrendered to habit. It seemed reasonable, given that the day before had been full and unfamiliar. I lay there and let the room reintroduce itself: the desk, the wardrobe, the sink, the window, the dark oak against the pale sky.

Room fourteen was small: a bed pushed against one wall, narrow, with a thin mattress. A desk beneath the window. A wardrobe that looked older than my father. And bolted to the wall beside the door, a white porcelain sink with two taps—one for hot water, one for cold. I tested them. The cold worked. The hot produced a thin trickle of rust-colored water that eventually cleared. I washed my hands and dried them on my trousers, left with the faint impression that the sink had been waiting.

I dressed quickly, conscious of the pause before the hot water came on, my reflection in the mirror above the sink lagging a moment behind me. The delay

temperature, then stopped counting as soon as it did, unsettled by how ready the numbers had been. I had always distrusted anything that presented itself too easily, particularly my own compliance.

I was fastening the last button of my shirt when there was a knock at the door. Not sharp, not tentative—simply there, as though the person on the other side had assumed I would hear it and respond accordingly. I opened it to find a young man standing in the corridor, angled slightly away, his posture suggesting familiarity with the space rather than with me. He gave his name as Henry—Henry Collins, after a pause that seemed unnecessary—and said he was just down the hall. His voice was even, practiced, and I found myself resisting the impulse to distrust it purely on that basis.

He held out his hand. I took it. The exchange lasted no longer than required, though I could not have said what the requirement was myself. He said he had seen me arrive the day before and thought he ought to introduce himself. This struck me as a convention rather than a desire, and I resented the convention for having decided on his behalf.

He glanced past me into the room. Not rudely. Merely confirming that it existed. Fourteen, he said. A decent room. Better light than most. I wondered how many rooms he had already judged in this way and how distinctly he remembered them afterward.

He asked what I was studying. I told him Classics, Greek mostly, and immediately wished I had not been so precise. Precision invites interpretation. And interpretation, once invited, rarely asks permission. He nodded, as though this aligned with something he had already assumed, which irritated me further, though I could not have explained why.

Breakfast would be starting soon, he said. The hall filled quickly on the first morning. He was heading down now, if I wanted to join him. The phrasing was casual, but the expectation beneath it was unmistakable: refusal would require justification. I felt, abruptly, the weight of having arrived in a place where even solitude demanded explanation.

All right, I said, and heard in my own voice a compliance I did not entirely approve of.

We walked downstairs together. He spoke about practical matters—the layout of the buildings, which staircases were quicker than they appeared. I listened and did not listen at the same time,

already aware of a quiet resentment taking shape, not toward him specifically, but toward the ease with which he seemed to inhabit the place, as though belonging were something one acquired simply by showing up early enough.

At the bottom of the stairs, he stopped and said we would probably overlap. Same lectures, most likely.

Perhaps, I said. The word pleased me. It conceded nothing. I was aware, even then, of the childish satisfaction this gave me.

He nodded once and left, absorbed immediately into the general movement of the courtyard. I watched him go and felt, to my annoyance, a faint sense of having failed some small, undefined test, though I could not have said what the test was or why it should matter to me at all.

On Henry's suggestion, I went to the bursar's office to collect the remaining forms I had apparently neglected to sign the day before. The room was low-ceilinged and close, smelling faintly of ink and dust, the air stale in a way that suggested it was rarely disturbed. A woman behind a narrow desk slid a ledger toward me without looking up and asked for my name. I gave it, aware of how deliberate my voice sounded in the confined space. She ran her finger slowly down the page, paused, then turned the book slightly so that the columns faced her more directly, as though adjusting it for her own comfort rather than clarity.

You were here earlier, she said, still scanning, her finger pressing lightly into the paper. I told her I had only arrived that afternoon. She made a brief, indistinct sound that might have been an apology and traced the line again, more carefully this time, lingering. Initialed, she said. Room fourteen.

I leaned forward instinctively, though I could see nothing from where I stood, and immediately felt foolish for having done so. She had already closed the ledger and reached for another stack of papers, the moment foreclosed. Probably a mistake, she added, and pushed a form toward me, indicating the bottom with a small, precise motion. I signed where she had pointed, conscious of the pressure of the pen, the exaggerated care I was taking with each letter, as though neatness might resolve whatever uncertainty had passed between us.

When I handed the paper back, she glanced at it briefly, nodded once, and turned to the next student without further comment, leaving me with the uncomfortable sense that something

had been completed without my fully understanding what it was.

Back in my room, I sat at the desk and opened my notebook. The page was blank. I wrote the date at the top, then paused, reading it back to myself with unnecessary care. October. Yes. October. There was nothing ambiguous about October, and yet I found myself underlining it, as though the act of writing alone were insufficient proof.

The sink drew my attention: white porcelain, two taps, arranged with an almost clerical neatness, as though cleanliness were a doctrine it enforced rather than a service it provided. A faint rusted mark clung to the basin where the hot water had once misbehaved, the trace left behind when something was corrected rather than forgiven. I turned the hot tap. Nothing happened. I waited—one, two—aware of the pause, which felt less like a malfunction than an appraisal. When the water finally arrived, it did so thinly, reluctantly, as if indulging me. I washed my hands, with the uneasy sense that the gesture was being noted, then dried them on my trousers, unnerved by how readily I had complied.

Outside the window, the oak tree stood where it had stood the day before. This was reassuring in a way that embarrassed me. I lay back on the bed and told myself I would rest for a moment before going out again, though I had nowhere in particular to go and no real desire to be seen.

The water continued to run. I listened to it longer than necessary before getting up to turn it off, annoyed with myself for having let it go on and equally annoyed by the certainty that, had I not noticed it when I did, it would have continued indefinitely.

**WRITTEN BY LUKE
WAGNER '26
(LUKEWAGNER@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) AND
JONAH KARAFIOL '26
(JONAHKARAFIOL@
COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU).**

**GRAPHIC BY CHRISTIANA
ZEMBROWSKI '28**

“Leave a Ripple:” A Memorial to Bob Weir

The life and legacy of one of the founding members of the Grateful Dead.

BY GRAYSON CAFFREY '28

“Let your life proceed by its own design. Nothing to tell now. Let the words be yours, I’m done with mine.”

Bob Weir, a founding member of one of America’s most iconic bands, the Grateful Dead, passed away on Saturday, Jan. 20, surrounded by friends and family. After a July 2025 cancer diagnosis, he performed for the last time in August. The three-night event celebrated more than 60 years of music since Grateful Dead’s founding in 1965.

Weir left an enduring musical legacy: from his work with the Dead, to his solo projects, to his role in keeping their sound alive long after the original group disbanded in 1995. His songs will echo in musical halls and stoners’ living rooms alike for years to come.

Fate, Fireworks, and a Banjo

Born October 16, 1947, in San Francisco, Robert Parber was adopted and raised by Frederic and Eleanor Weir in Atherton, California (legally changing his name to Robert Hall Weir). After early unsuccessful efforts to play the piano and trumpet, he settled on the guitar as his instrument of choice at 13. His academic trajectory mirrored his early musical efforts; he was kicked out of numerous institutions, including Fountain Valley School, where he returned 50 years later to receive an honorary diploma after being expelled for smoking weed in 1963.

One fateful New Year’s Eve in 1963, in Palo Alto, California, Weir was wandering the streets looking for a club to celebrate the holiday when banjo music caught his attention. In a fable-like fashion, he traced the music to its source and found 21-year-old Jerry Garcia, waiting for his music students to arrive.

Weir and Garcia spent the night jamming together and decided to form a band. The two, along with Ron “Pigpen” McKernan, founded “Mother McCree’s Uptown Jug Champions.” Catchy, right? The band changed its name twice, first to “Warlocks,” finally settling on the Grateful Dead, supposedly after Garcia opened a dictionary at random and saw the term referring to a style of folk legend. Along the way, they added Phil Lesh on bass guitar and Bill Kreutzmann on drums, making up the “Core Five” of the band—although numerous other artists would play in the band over its history.

Bob “The Kid” Weir

As the youngest member of the band at 17, Weir initially played rhythm guitar and sang both backup and lead vocals. Although often overshadowed by Jerry Garcia’s voice, a number of the Dead’s most famous songs feature Weir as lead singer—perhaps most famously, “Sugar Magnolia.” Guitar, however, was where he really shone.

Throughout his career, Weir demonstrated mastery across a wide range of genres, including country, folk, acoustic rock, blues, and more. His guitar-playing spanned a wide array of skill sets: from effortless slide guitar to deftly mixing challenging chords in a way that brought out new sounds in every performance.

Although he later became a Kennedy Center Honoree, a Rock and Roll Hall of Fame inductee, and a recipient of a lifetime achievement Grammy Award, his musical journey was not free of hardships. Famously, in the early days of the Dead, Weir and Pigpen were kicked from the band, as Jerry Garcia and Phil Lesh thought the two could not play at their level. Eventually, the pair were reinstated; however, the setback pushed Weir to develop his skills, which dramatically improved the band as a

whole and enabled him to find success as a musician outside the Dead.

The Identity of the Dead

From the earliest days as “The Warlocks” to the wildly successful Dead & Company performances at the Las Vegas Sphere more than 60 years later, the Grateful Dead have maintained a distinct and iconic identity. Since its infancy, the band was synonymous with LSD and the psychedelic movement in California. Members of the band reportedly “took LSD every Saturday for an entire year,” and the band’s home was notoriously raided by the police in a drug bust in 1967. They played their first major gigs as the house band for the famous San Francisco LSD block parties dubbed “Acid Tests.” The band’s first albums, especially “Aoxomoxoa” and “Anthem of the Sun,” serve as fundamental pillars of the psychedelic rock genre.

Of course, the Dead are known for more than their drug usage. Across their 13 studio albums, the band ranged from gritty country rock to jazz, constantly attempting to fuse their classic sounds with the latest trends. The song “Ripple” is a shining example of their ability to build layered harmonies, as well as write story-like lyrics that seem to have more to say every time you listen to them. The result was a wild cacophony of albums that never quite penetrated the musical mainstream; instead, their eagerness to experiment built a lasting, cult-classic following.



band made its true name onstage. Grateful Dead concerts were characterized by a vibrant fanbase. Attendees were often affectionately clad in tie-dye and unmistakable band merchandise, and they never knew what to expect from the musicians. The wild diversity of their songs and their tendency to play them differently every night made for a live music experience few bands could replicate, and kept their loyal fans coming back for more.

The Dead and Beyond

Weir was a core piece of the Grateful Dead’s iconic sound, with one *New York Times* article describing him as the band’s “invisible thread.” His work outside the band, however, was what really solidified his presence among the musical greats. He played in countless side bands, including Kingfish, Bobby and the Midnites, Ratdog, and several groups that continued the Grateful Dead’s story after Jerry Garcia’s death in 1995. Weir’s solo album

“Ace” highlighted his vocals and songwriting skills. The countless revival performances by the Dead’s surviving members, alongside rotating collaborators, ensured that the Deadhead nation spanned generations and reached every corner of the country.

Weir was also passionate about social causes, especially later in his career. He performed a number of benefit concerts and was heavily involved in charitable organizations and foundations, particularly those focused on environmentalism. This included co-founding the Furthur Foundation, which supports environmental, educational, and youth-oriented programs in the Bay Area. Weir was dedicated to improving the world around him, cementing his legacy as both a musician and an advocate for change.

We should not mourn Weir’s loss as just another great gone, but celebrate what his life gave. Weir’s family has spoken of a “three-hundred-year” legacy carried forward through his music. In addition to the outpouring of support for his family, the fond “Homecoming” concert held in his memory on Jan. 17 speaks to a life and musical career that will stand the test of time.

Weir once said, “I tend to think of death as the last and best reward for a life well-lived.” I think most Deadheads would agree—Weir lived exceptionally well.

If there is one last thing to take from this article, it is this: do not wait. College trains us to delay joy until after the problem set, after the interview, after the internship is finished. Weir’s career quietly rebels against that instinct though. The Grateful Dead were never in a hurry. Their music rewarded those who showed up, stayed late, and remained in the present moment.

So go to that concert. Go see your favorite band when their tour stops in Boston, or take a road trip to see them with some friends. You never know when it will be the last time, and nothing quite compares to a live performance.

I have included a list of some of Bob Weir’s greatest songs, as well as some personal Grateful Dead favorites, suitable for die-hard Deadheads and new listeners alike. I know I, and many others, will be listening to Bob’s music for a long time yet—and it would not shock me in the slightest if people are still listening 300 years from now.

Bob Weir Must-Listens

- “Sugar Magnolia” - Grateful Dead (1970)
- “Playing in the Band” - Bob Weir (1972)
- “Truckin’” - Grateful Dead (1970)
- “Greatest Story Ever Told” - Bob Weir (1972)

Grateful Dead Personal Favorites

- “Workingman’s Dead” - Yes, the entire album (1970)
- “Friend of the Devil” - American Beauty (1970)
- “I Need a Miracle” - Shakedown Street (1978)
- “Ramble on Rose” - Europe ‘72 (1972)

Mr. Weir is survived by his wife, Natascha Muentner Weir, and his daughters, Monet Weir and Chloe Weir.

GRAYSON CAFFREY '28 (GCAFFREY@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS A GUEST WRITER FOR THE HARVARD INDEPENDENT.

GRAPHIC BY KERRIE ZHU '28

Your Early 2026 Reading List

Get cozy with a great new read!

BY LUCY DUNCAN '28

As the intense winter weather drives us all inside, the beginning of the spring semester is the perfect time to settle into pleasure reading. If you, unlike me, do not already have a lengthy must-read list, check out these seven books that I absolutely adore. With dystopia, mythology, and non-fiction, I've included something for every kind of reader.

the world was ending, this contemporary apocalyptic novel is perfect for you. Set in a rural Indigenous Canadian community, "Moon of the Crusted Snow" depicts the aftermath of a sudden, unexplained nationwide loss of electricity and communication. I remained at the edge of my seat throughout this entire read, with each chapter bringing a new point of unrest. Rice uses a dystopian lens to question colonialism and advocate for

the survival of Indigenous knowledge, incorporating softer, heartwarming scenes of community throughout the otherwise thrilling plot. This contemporary masterpiece portrays humanity at its worst, urging readers to consider how communities respond socially to all kinds of disaster.

"American Gods" by Neil Gaiman:

Gaiman's 2001 mythological fantasy novel tells the story of Shadow, a convict who, just days before his release from prison, discovers that his wife died in a car accident. With no friends, family, or job to go back to, Shadow is left with only one option: the offer to work for the mysterious Wednesday who has been following him since before his release. Over several months, on a road trip spanning the continental United States, Shadow meets the gods of various cultures living in America, kept alive by ongoing belief. When war breaks out between gods, Shadow finds himself in the middle of it, all the while uncovering secrets about his past.

"Mrs. Dalloway" by Virginia Woolf:

Although not her most widely read work, this novel is arguably Woolf's best. In the span of a single afternoon, Woolf seamlessly transitions between the minds of nearly a dozen characters in post-World War I London. The novel starts from the point of view of Clarissa Dalloway, an upper-class, unhappily married woman trying to plan an evening party without succumbing to the heavy thoughts of her past and "the one that got away." Famous for innovating the "stream-of-consciousness" narration, Woolf writes from inside the psyches of her characters, making for a deeply introspective reading experience.

"I'm Glad My Mom Died" by Jennette McCurdy:

This Nickelodeon star's 2022 memoir discusses familial abuse, mental

health, and eating disorders while immersing the reader into the world of a child actor. "iCarly" and "Sam and Cat" star Jennette McCurdy shares her experience growing up with an emotionally abusive mother who forced her into the spotlight, discussing the complexities that come with growing up famous. McCurdy's wit and honesty make for an incredibly emotional read. For non-fiction fans, this is a great winter autobiography to check out!

"Slaughterhouse-Five" by Kurt Vonnegut:

Vonnegut's classic work follows an American World War II veteran as he becomes detached from the movement of time. Between a bizarrely enthralling alien abduction sideplot and anti-war sentiment, this easy-to-digest book kept me engaged on every page. Vonnegut's use of the refrain "so it goes" when describing death provides a comically nihilistic view towards loss and grief bound to make any reader question their own mortality. While reading, I found myself looking at the finality of life and death from a completely new perspective. This tragic, bizarre, and heartwarming story is a quick, accessible story sure to change your worldview.

"Wuthering Heights" by Emily Brontë:

This gothic tale recounts the love story between the wealthy Catherine Earnshaw and the orphan Heathcliff. The pair, who were childhood friends and teenage sweethearts, grew up together at the titular Wuthering Heights where Heathcliff faces abuse at the hands of Catherine's family. This book truly took me through the entire range of human emotions, with Brontë effortlessly blending romance, horror, and tragedy into a single work exploring gender, race, and class in Victorian England. Be sure to finish it ahead of the release of the controversially cast 2026 movie adaptation.

Drawn from my own list of favourites, every book on this list is bound to pull your mind away from the stress of another semester and into its own, carefully crafted literary world. If you're trying to reach your 2026 reading goal, minimize your screen time, or just find a new favorite pageturner, check out these recommendations!

LUCY DUNCAN '28
(LDUNCAN@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU)
WRITES ARTS FOR THE
INDEPENDENT.

GRAPHIC BY ANNELISE
FISHER '26

"Truismes (Pig Tales)" by Marie Darrieussecq:

This 1996 dark comedy follows a young woman as she slowly transforms into a pig. Situated in a near-future France, the comedy's dystopian plot focuses on female physical appearance and the subsequent sexual gratification women can bring to men. The narrator, an exceptionally beautiful young woman, begins her career as a salon salesperson, and soon discovers that she can sell her body for a handsome profit—but at a personal cost. As the novel progresses, so does her chosen identity transformation; the public's perception of her shifts from lust to disgust. In under 200 pages, this Kafkaesque political satire questions the role of women in a capitalist society.

"Moon of the Crusted Snow" by Waubgeshig Rice:

If last week's snowstorm felt like



A Reaction to the 2026 American Olympic Hockey Roster

Team U.S.A., what are we doing?!

BY JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27

Hockey is arguably the best sport on earth. Fans are often treated to huge playoff upsets, wild trades, and intense drama, but the actual on-ice product remains the same. How do you improve what is ultimately an entertainment vehicle? It is a question that has plagued the National Hockey League head office for the better part of the last twelve years.

Why such a specific timeframe? Twelve years ago marked the last time NHL players were allowed to represent their respective home countries at the Olympics due to the League's aversion to high travel costs, schedule disruption, injury risk, and the COVID-19 pandemic. That hiatus has made Olympic hockey somewhat of a joke—what do the games matter if it is not best-on-best? Similarly, as we learned last year, a midseason international NHL tournament hits like lightning to the veins.

Last year, the NHL recognized that players want to represent their homelands, and the league hosted the inaugural Four Nations Faceoff. The now-legendary, round-robin tournament pitted the NHL's best from Sweden, Finland, Canada, and the United States against each other in matches played between Montreal and Boston. NHL fans knew they were being given the gift of peak entertainment. No one knew just how much it would dominate the broader sports world.

The two times America and Canada faced off as rivals at Four Nations were quite "heated." Game one opened with Canadian fans loudly booing the U.S.'s national anthem, promptly triggering three fights within the first nine seconds of the game. The United States would end up winning that match 3-1. When those teams faced off again in the finals, everyone was a little more focused on playing hockey rather than boxing, and Canada won the championship in a thrilling 3-2 overtime victory.

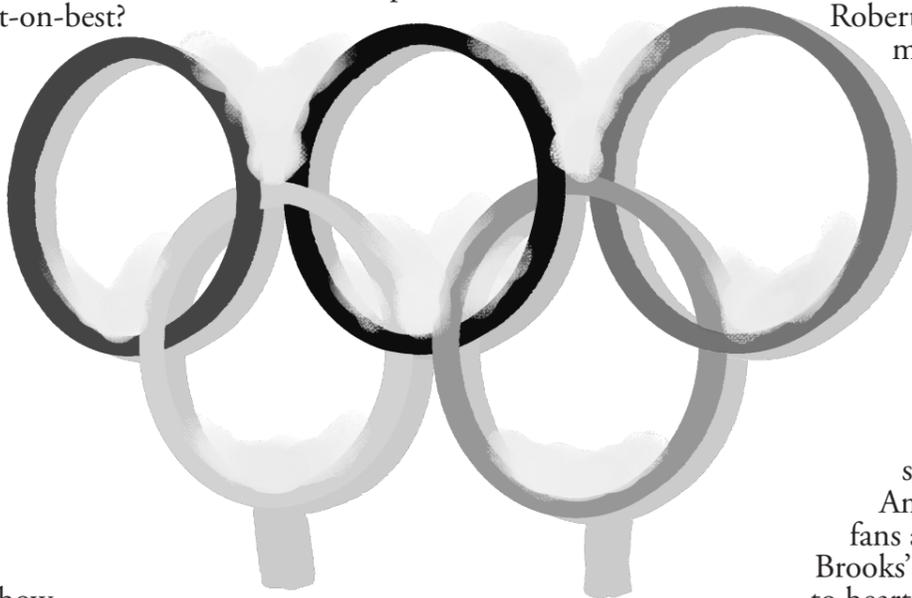
The U.S.-Canada final was the most-watched hockey game on ESPN in history, with 9.3 million viewers. For the first time in my life, hockey was at the forefront of everyone's mind. And though Canada walked away with the title, fans know that it is only tied! All that matters is who takes gold in Milan.

Since the Four Nations, every sports fan on Earth has a taste for best-on-best international hockey. If the Four Nations tournament, with no history behind it, was this heated, imagine the Olympics!

A few weeks ago, participating countries announced their 25-man 2026 Winter Olympic rosters. While many participating nations have NHL representation, we all know that hockey on the international scale largely comes down to two teams: Canada and the United States.

So, knowing their last two match-ups and the intense emotions heading into these games, a prudent General Manager would select the best possible players to represent their nation.

Team Canada's GM has certainly done that. They have the two best players in the world in Connor McDavid and Nathan MacKinnon and the best defenseman in the world in Cale Makar. They are also bringing experienced superstars who have already won gold at the Olympics in Sidney Crosby and Drew Doughty and exciting young talent in Macklin Celebrini and Thomas Harley. Pretty much every Canadian player you would expect to be there is there. It is a nearly perfectly constructed roster with strong defense and sharp offense.



Now consider Team USA GM Bill Guerin. The only opponents who matter have put together a stacked lineup. He knew that America's biggest problem at Four Nations was scoring. He knew the second biggest problem was defense. Out of all of the decisions Guerin could make, the choice to snub half of the leading American scorers in the NHL is beyond baffling.

Of the top 25 scorers in the NHL as of Jan. 6, only four of them were American. Of those four, two of them were left off of Team USA's roster. One month later, the number of American players in the top 25 in scoring has climbed to eight. Of those eight, three of them will not be making the trip to Milan. Are you kidding me?

The excluded players are Adam Fox '19, Jason Robertson, Alex DeBrincat, and Cole Caufield. The latter three are all still in the top 25 in scoring, and although Fox is outside of that category, he remains one of the league's best defensemen and his removal is offensive. While DeBrincat and Caufield are great and will be staples of America's team for years to come, their omission is not cataclysmic. However, going to this tournament without Robertson and Fox might cost the United States the gold.

The critique against Fox is simple. He was on the ice for Connor McDavid's Four Nations-winning goal last year, he has been injured throughout this season, and the New

York Rangers have been a complete disaster. None of that changes the fact that Adam Fox has been the third-best defenseman in the NHL every single year since he joined the league in 2019. His leadership and hockey IQ will be sorely missed. And though I am excited for young defenseman Jackson Lacombe, he is currently stratospherically below Fox.

The omission of Jason Robertson from this roster should be on par with committing the Seven Deadly Sins. Robertson is a young, fast, prolific goal-scorer who, by all accounts, wears his heart on his sleeve and plays until he drops. He scored 109 points just two seasons ago and is currently on pace to score 95 this season. The sole argument people levy against

Robertson is that he is not a defensively-minded player. They claim that Robertson only does one thing.

That one thing being: he scores goals. What is hockey? A goal-scoring contest! The team that scores more goals wins 100% of the time, and Guerin left the top-scoring American off of the Olympic roster. Utter insanity.

The construction of America's Olympic team is indicative of a wider issue that has plagued USA hockey for the last 46 years. Ever since the Miracle on Ice in 1980, American hockey professionals and fans alike have taken the late, great Herb Brooks' quote from the film adaptation to heart: "I'm not looking for the best players, I'm looking for the right ones." This mentality paved the way for a team of college students to upset the greatest hockey team the world had ever known.

Times have changed. America is no longer the underdog. The United States is home to some of the most talented hockey players in NHL history, and we need to start acting like it. Why would you ever not put the best players on the ice? Why are we prioritizing multiple players over the age of 32 instead of a guy who pumps in goals like he is playing a video game?

At the end of the day, with Robertson and Fox or not, Team USA has one job at the Olympics: win. Make your country proud, play until you have nothing left to give, and as Stefon Diggs once said, "If it don't got a blue jersey on, hit that shit!"

JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27 (JWASSERBERGER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS HALF-CONSIDERING FLYING TO MILAN TOMORROW.

GRAPHIC BY RILEY CULLINAN '27

2015 Called, It Wants Its Super Bowl Back

A Seahawks fan's take on an iconic rematch.

BY CAMERON BERNIER '29

Following the National Football Conference and American Football Conference championships, the 2026 Super Bowl is finally here. For the first time in over a decade, the Seattle Seahawks and New England Patriots will face each other again. “Pats Nation” and the “12th Man” will meet again on Feb. 8, 2026. As a lifelong Seahawks fan, I watched my team battle through the season against the toughest opponents in the league. We're returning to the Super Bowl with unfinished business.

For 11 years, I've been haunted by the name Malcolm Butler.

It's Feb. 2015, and Pete Carroll's Seattle Seahawks are on a historic back-to-back Super Bowl run facing the New England Patriots under Bill Belichick and Tom Brady as they seek their fourth Super Bowl ring. The Patriots dominated the NFL in this era. In fact, they were so powerful that most fans refer to the 2001-2019 years as the “Brady-Belichick era” or “Patriots dynasty.” This team went down in NFL history as one of the most dominant dynasties in the sport's history.

Both teams battled through tough starts to the regular season, making critical adjustments to both enter the postseason with a record of 12-4. The stage was set as both teams captured their divisional championship titles. Super Bowl XLIX was on the horizon.

Seattle's infamous “Legion of Boom” featured a stacked roster of elite defensemen, including cornerback Richard Sherman and safeties Earl Thomas and Kam Chancellor. A young Russell Wilson, in just his third season, led the offense, finishing the regular season with over 3,000 passing yards and 800 rushing yards. Wide receiver Doug Baldwin and running back Marshawn Lynch combined to create a powerful offensive threat throughout the field.

However, make no mistake—the Patriots would not be an easy opponent. New England had reached the playoffs nine times, the AFC Championship five times, and the Super Bowl twice throughout the 2000s and early 2010s. Tom Brady had solidified himself as one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time. To back up Brady, the team was led by all-star players Rob Gronkowski and Darrelle Revis, as well as a well-fortified defense.

The energy in Glendale, Arizona, was electric. With just over two minutes remaining in the game, the Patriots had taken the lead with two late touchdowns. Trailing 28-24, the Seahawks were within sight of the end zone, threatening to take the lead with a go-ahead touchdown... until Malcolm Butler made an interception on the 1-yard line in the last seconds of the game. The Patriots would win Super Bowl XLIX, 28-24.

My city mourned this loss. It was the end of an era for us. Over the next few seasons, the team saw a lot of change. In the years that followed, we lost our franchise quarterback to Denver. We lost our longtime head coach to the Raiders. It looked like the Seahawks were

entering a serious rebuilding phase. After Tom Brady left, the Patriots faced similar turnover and a string of unproductive seasons until drafting University of North Carolina quarterback Drake Maye.

Fast forward 11 years to 2026: the Seahawks are making their first Super Bowl appearance since that fateful game, and the Patriots their first in their post-Tom Brady era. The two competing teams followed very different paths in pursuit of the Lombardi Trophy, but they will meet again on Feb. 8 at Levi's Stadium in sunny Santa Clara. In my (openly biased) opinion, this could be one of the best rematches in recent sports history.

This matchup between the Patriots and the Seahawks has naturally caused many to take a trip down memory lane to the 2015 match up. However, it is not a case of déjà vu that occurs; these two teams have undergone significant changes in roster, management, and more. Let's unpack what is defining today's Super Bowl squads.

The Battle of the Mikes

In Mike Macdonald's second season as head coach in Seattle, he has turned a franchise deemed in a “rebuild” into a dominant Super Bowl-bound team. With emphasis on a strong defense led by seasoned and rookie players alike, the previous defensive coordinator has brought back what many Seahawks players are calling “The New Legion of Boom” or “The Dark Side.”

Mike Vrabel, in his first season as head coach in New England, has managed to turn the Pats from a struggling team with a losing regular season record to an AFC powerhouse. They dominated the latter half of the season, earned the second seed in the playoffs, and beat the number one seed Denver Broncos in the AFC championship. Both head coaches notably have defensive coordinator backgrounds, which shine through in both teams' strong squads.

Drake “Drake Maye” Maye vs. Sam “Ginger Cuz” Darnold

Drake “Drake Maye” Maye is so good that he deserves a category of his own. In just his second season in the pros, he recorded a 113.5 passing rating in the regular season and over 4,000 passing yards. Despite a rocky start to his rookie season, his sophomore season has shown impeccable promise as the new franchise quarterback.

Sam Darnold, affectionately nicknamed “Ginger Cuz” on X by Seahawks legend

Marshawn Lynch, has finally reached the Super Bowl on his fifth team after many years of being overlooked. He is now the second quarterback behind Tom Brady to have two consecutive 14-win seasons—albeit at two different teams... sorry Vikings fans.

Jaxon Smith-Njigba vs. Stefon Diggs

Jaxon Smith-Njigba is having the opposite of a quiet third year at the wide receiver position. With 1,965 total yards across the regular and postseason, he has the chance to become the third player to ever pass 2,000 yards in the season. JSN was named the PFWA Offensive Player of the Year and was nominated for the AP Offensive Player of the Year.

After recovering from a 2024 ACL injury, Stefon Diggs is back and as strong as ever. He's a reliable wide receiver 1 with significant experience in the position, boasting over 1,000 yards this season. A four-time Pro-Bowler, Diggs has proven his importance as a veteran player on this Super Bowl-bound team, helping to end their seven-season drought.

The Dark Side: A New Age Legion of Boom

The foreboding name says it all: Seattle's defense has been a key factor in bringing this team back to the Super Bowl after eleven years. Allowing the fewest points in the NFL in the 2025 season, “The Dark Side” has been called dominant for a reason. In their game against the San Francisco 49ers, their divisional rivals, they held the offense to just two field goals. They were also the top scoring defense in the league this season. Yet, where they differ from “The Legion of Boom” is in the strength of their defensive line alongside the back seven, contributing to a pressure rate of 40.1%.

“Road Warrior”: 9-0 Season on the Road for Pats

After getting off to a rocky start, the Pats quickly became a breakout team as the season progressed. They boasted a perfect 9-0 record on the road, their best since 2016, and one of the best in the league. Against a fanbase nicknamed “The 12s” (or “12th Man”) for their role in supporting the 11 men on the field as the loudest crowd in the NFL, this unshakable confidence away from Gillette Stadium will be crucial going into Sunday.

As a lifelong Seahawks fan, I have been waiting patiently for this moment for the past 11 years. This is the new era of the iconic 2015 rivalry, and I am living for it. We're long due for a good rematch—and hopefully sweet, sweet redemption.

Happy (almost) Super Bowl Sunday to those who celebrate.



CAMERON BERNIER '29 (SCBERNIER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS A DEFLATEGATE BELIEVER SEEKING REVENGE. GO HAWKS!

GRAPHIC BY NESHAMA RYMAN '28

Let's Normalize Being Apolitical in Sports

When politics invades the game, everyone loses.

BY KALVIN FRANK '28

In 2018, *Fox News* commentator Laura Ingraham went viral for telling National Basketball Association star LeBron James to “Shut up and dribble,” reinvigorating a familiar debate: should athletes use their platforms to advocate for political change, or should they stick to sports? While Ingraham’s phrasing was undeniably brash, the underlying idea is worth considering: athletics are meant to bring people together, not push them further apart.

Travel to any large U.S. city and you’ll find sports franchises followed with near-religious devotion. Teams serve as unifiers for most metro areas, sources of pride for everyday Americans, anchors that draw people downtown, and engines for local economies. Even in smaller towns or cities without major-league franchises, people gather bars and living rooms for their team alongside perfect strangers. I can personally attest to this; my hometown pubs were routinely packed for Detroit Lions games despite being more than two hours from the city.

However, if politics continue to seep into American sports, this sense of unity may not endure.

Ask almost any American why they watch sports, and few would say it is to learn about the political beliefs of the players on the screen. People turn to athletics for entertainment and escape—to take their minds off of the burdens of daily life. When politics enters the arena, sports lose that function and become yet another source of stress and division.

A 2024 *Sports Business Journal* poll found that only 26 percent of respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that athletes should speak out on political issues. When athletes use their platforms for overt political commentary, they risk dividing once-cohesive fan bases and turning longtime supporters into disengaged viewers.

The situation surrounding Aaron Rodgers illustrates this shift. Though never an uncontroversial figure, his 2021 decision to publicly take a conservative stance on COVID-19 and vaccine mandates reshaped his public image. He has since been voted the National Football League’s “Most Annoying Player” for the second year in a row by more than 3,000 fans across various fan bases, a reflection of how quickly political discourse can stain public perception.

Athletes on the other side of the political spectrum have faced similar backlash. Colin Kaepernick, LeBron James, among others, have drawn criticism for expressing more liberal beliefs. In Kaepernick’s case, his decision to kneel during the national anthem in 2016, intended as a protest against police brutality, earned him the NFL’s “Most Disliked Player” in 2016.

Nike’s sponsorship of Kaepernick prompted a widespread conservative boycott of the brand, reportedly costing the company more than \$4 billion in market capitalization. While Kaepernick’s introduction of politics

into his sport was undoubtedly frustrating for some fans and affirming for others, it undeniably fueled national division and deepened disillusionment with the NFL. In response to the backlash, and the financial consequences that followed, NFL owners later unanimously voted to restrict on-field kneeling, underscoring how political activism has begun to shape the league itself.

This is not to say that athletes lack the right to express political views. Rather, given their platforms, they also bear a societal and financial responsibility to consider the consequences of doing so. Political expression in sports often alienates Americans by inserting partisan conflict into yet another shared sphere that once offered relief from it.

This is not a liberal-versus-conservative debate. It is a question of whether athletes should avoid turning athletic competition into a forum for general political discourse.

On Jan. 18, Texans player Azeem Al-Shaair wore eye black before a game reading “stop the genocide,” criticizing the Israeli government’s actions in Gaza. Regardless of one’s view on the message itself, the football field is not the appropriate venue for such commentary. Fans are not watching the game to engage with a player’s stance on international conflict; they are watching to root for their team or simply to watch a good game.

Professional athletes are rarely qualified to meaningfully shape political opinion. While some are well-educated and articulate, athletic excellence does not grant expertise in public policy. It is unlikely that the factory worker who just finished their shift or the retired couple settling in for the Sunday game is turning on ESPN to hear football players analyze the state of American or global politics.

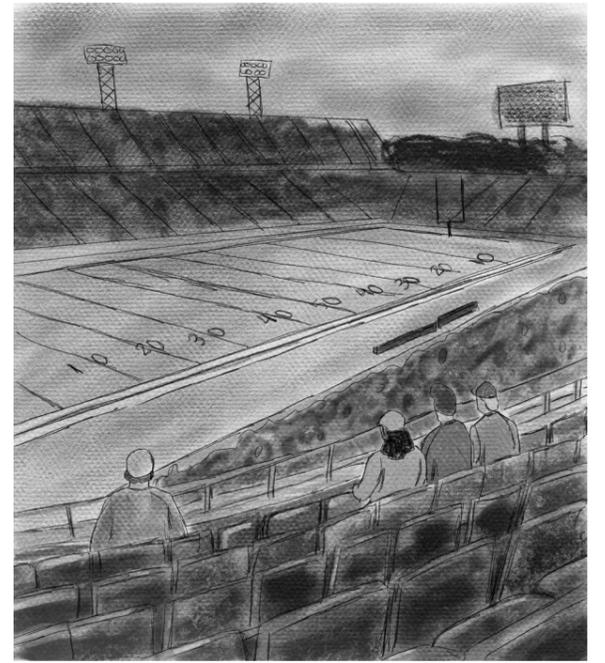
There is also a strong argument that political speech has a net-negative effect. In a recent “New Rule” segment of *Real Time with Bill Maher*, Maher argued that celebrity activism often does more harm than good: “Celebrities aren’t helping. And why would they? In a country where the big issue is now affordability, outside of, I don’t know, Springsteen and a few others, celebrities don’t strike people as relatable or in touch. And what their activism mostly activates is eye rolls because stars, they’re not just like us.”

Maher points to the 2024 election as a clear example. Despite an overwhelming number of celebrity endorsements, there was little evidence of meaningful electoral impact. “Every big name in show business came out for Kamala Harris, from Oprah to Clooney to Beyonce, and she lost every swing state.” Among those endorsements were prominent athletes such as LeBron James and Stephen Curry. Others, including Harrison Butler and Jake Paul, endorsed Donald Trump. But did any of these endorsements meaningfully change votes?

It is understandable for public figures to believe their opinions might educate or influence others. In reality, however, Americans vote based on a complex mix of financial, moral, and social pressures. Against

that backdrop, politics in sports is simply not worth the divisive cost, especially given its minimal tangible impact.

That said, my aversion to politics in sports does not mean confining athletes solely to their craft. Many athletes use their platform in far more constructive, *charitable* ways by supporting causes that directly improve people’s lives. Athletes are uniquely positioned to make a difference, and many already do so. Serena Williams, John Cena, and Cristiano Ronaldo are among the most charitable figures in sports, while James has supported significant educational initiatives. These efforts matter intrinsically more than any political endorsement or declaration of party loyalty.



Some may argue that athletes engage in political advocacy because they genuinely want to improve people’s lives. While that motivation is honorable, in practice, the result comes across not as effective advocacy, and more as a fruitless attempt to sway public opinion. Fans do not understand political messaging in sports as a vision of a better future, but rather as introducing politics into a realm conceived as an apolitical escape.

Athletics remains one of the last domains in which Americans of all backgrounds can come together and root for the same team, regardless of the outcome: win or lose, good or bad, big or small. In our current era characterized by unprecedented political polarization, let’s not make sports a home for this division.

**KALVIN FRANK '28
(KFRANK@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) WANTS
SPORTS TO BRING
PEOPLE TOGETHER,
NOT DIVIDE THEM.**

**GRAPHIC BY
TRISCHELLE AFIHENE
'27**

Melting the Ice: “Heated Rivalry” and the NHL

How a viral television show is shaping a more inclusive sports culture.

BY TAYLOR THORNE '28

On Christmas Eve, as many gleefully awaited the arrival of Santa Claus, others prepared for their long-awaited trip to “the cottage.”

As the clock struck midnight on Dec. 25, the final episode of “Heated Rivalry” dropped. During its five-week debut, the television show followed a pair of closeted gay hockey players. In that short span, it grew from being a relatively underground book adaptation to making national headlines.

Despite limited promotional efforts, a reportedly modest budget of about \$3.6 million per episode, and lesser-known actors, the Canada-based production has managed to capture the attention of viewers worldwide. Stars Hudson Williams and Connor Storrie have become pop culture’s newest heartthrobs, and the show has introduced hockey to an entirely new audience in the process. Pre-existing fans, coupled with a new wave of viewers, are now regarding the sport with a fresh perspective.

Before becoming a hit TV series, “Heated Rivalry” was a novel written by author Rachel Reid as part of her “Game Changers” series. While the book received some notoriety, everything changed when Jacob Tierney adapted it in 2025 into a six-episode series for Canadian streaming service Crave and later on HBO Max.

For those unfamiliar with the plot, “Heated Rivalry” follows two major league hockey players in a fictional equivalent of the National Hockey League (NHL). The series traces both their long-winded athletic rivalry and their simultaneous love affair. The pair first meet during the International Prospect Cup at age 17 and are soon drafted to their respective teams. Shane Hollander becomes the star center for the Montreal Metros, while Ilya Rozanov plays as star center for their rival team, the Boston Raiders—of the Voyagers and Bears for those who read the book.

The pair then begin a tension-filled secret romance that spans the following decade as their hockey careers progress. On the ice, they are fierce competitors, while in the privacy of hotel rooms, they struggle to fully commit to their relationship and sexuality. In the season finale, they finally admit their love (not just lust) for each other and start discussing how to navigate their future as a high-profile couple.

The television series’ immense popularity is striking, not only because of its explicit content, given that it started with such low viewership. In its pilot week, the series amassed just 30 million streaming minutes. By the finale, that number had climbed to as many as 324 million. This jump in attention can be attributed in part to the impact of social media and word-of-mouth. Clips from the show on platforms such as TikTok and X have sparked curiosity and virality, leading to more viewers tuning in each week.

Regarding demographics, the show’s viewers were predominantly women, accounting for about 53% of viewers before the finale and 68% after. The combination of an incredible love story with the sport

appears to have created a tangible shift in real-life hockey viewership. StubHub reported that interest in hockey tickets increased by 40% during the show’s run, and SeatGeek reported an increase in first-time attendees and single tickets purchased.

To put the global reach of the show into perspective, after recently presenting the award for Best Supporting Actress at the Golden Globes, the lead actors of the show, Williams and Storrie, were asked to be the torchbearers for the 2026 Olympics.

While numerous explicit scenes and a killer soundtrack are popular topics of commentary, it feels most important to discuss the powerful message behind the series. Despite the actors themselves embracing a motto of “sex sells,” the show is providing more than just steamy entertainment. In fact, its messaging is contributing to a positive narrative regarding LGBTQIA+ athletes.

One of the titular moments of the show involves the public coming out of Scott Hunter, captain of the New York Admirals, who kisses his boyfriend on the ice after a monumental championship win. The public’s reaction is resoundingly supportive and gives crucial hope to Hollander and Rozanov for the future of their own relationship.

“Heated Rivalry” imagines a world where men can be successful professional athletes and be accepted by their peers regardless of their sexuality. It increases queer visibility in sports media and gives young athletes watching hope that they too can be accepted.

This inclusive reflection of the professional sports industry is somewhat at odds with reality.

The NHL has had a tumultuous relationship with the LGBTQIA+ community over the years. In 2017, the organization announced the “Hockey is for Everyone” initiative to attract new fans to the sport, which traditionally had a staunchly straight male demographic. They preached a message of diversity and acceptance towards every person and every identity. However, in 2023, Philadelphia Flyers defenseman Ivan Provorov refused to wear a pride-themed jersey while warming up, citing religious beliefs. More players took a similar stance. When faced with this issue, the NHL simply removed the jerseys entirely.

At the end of the same year, the NHL banned specialty hockey-stick tape that players would wrap on the ends of their sticks, including rainbow-colored tape for gay pride. Hockey tape is used by players to protect the blade of the stick from wear and tear. It also helps adjust stick-to-puck control. Different colored tape can be used to signal support for different social causes, such as pink for breast cancer. The NHL faced backlash from both players and fans, prompting them to reverse their decision a month later.

But since the premiere

of “Heated Rivalry,” there seems to be a shift in perspective both within NHL leadership and the larger professional sports culture.

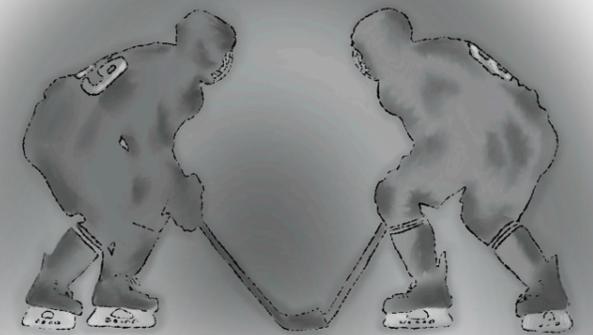
NHL commissioner Gary Bettman claimed to have binged the series in “one night” and said it was well done. This vocal support follows other impactful events, such as several athletes messaging the series’ actors about the impact of the show in their private lives. Moreover, former hockey athlete Jesse Kortuem recently credited “Heated Rivalry” with giving him the confidence to finally publicly reveal his sexuality.

For the die-hard followers and those interested in seeing more, “Heated Rivalry” has been renewed for a second season. During the whirlwind press tour, Storrie estimated that filming of the new season will begin by summer. While further date and cast information has yet to be announced, it will reportedly focus on the content from Reid’s sixth book in the series, “The Long Game.”

With the show’s popularity transcending pop culture and entering professional sports, the NHL now has an opportunity to engage with new members of the fan base. More importantly, it has the chance to truly embrace diversity within the sport. Not simply for monetary gain, but to acknowledge that the culture of athletics, even those that are male-dominated, can positively change for the next generation. “Heated Rivalry” conveys a message of hope and empowerment with a momentum that is yet to be stopped.

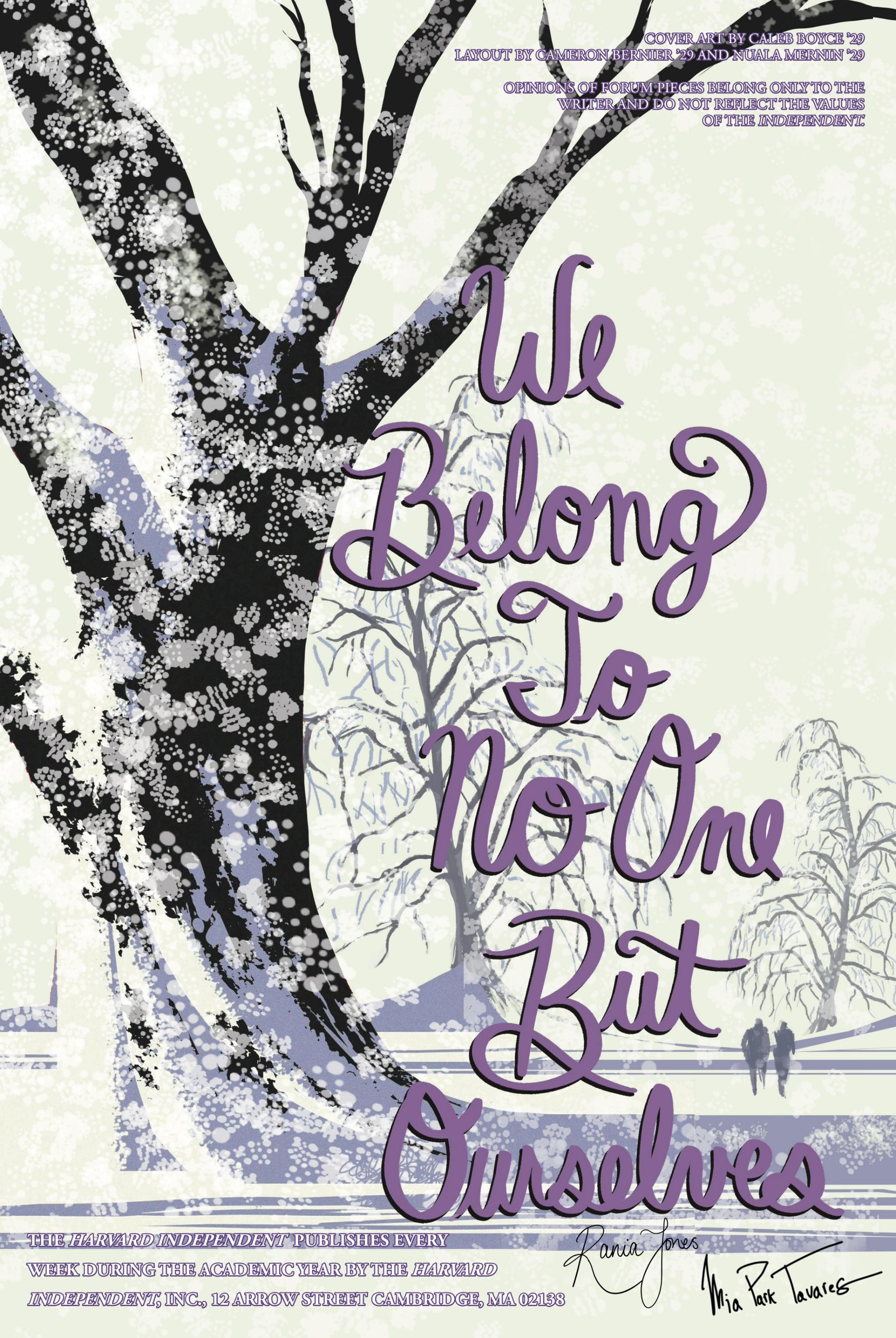
**TAYLOR THORNE '28
(TAYLORTHORNE@
COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU)
IS CURRENTLY BOOKING
TICKETS FOR A HOCKEY
GAME.**

**GRAPHIC BY KERRIE ZHU
'28**



COVER ART BY CALEB BOYCE '29
LAYOUT BY CAMERON BERNIER '29 AND NUALA MERNIN '29

OPINIONS OF FORUM PIECES BELONG ONLY TO THE
WRITER AND DO NOT REFLECT THE VALUES
OF THE INDEPENDENT.



We Belong To No One But Ourselves

THE HARVARD INDEPENDENT PUBLISHES EVERY
WEEK DURING THE ACADEMIC YEAR BY THE HARVARD
INDEPENDENT, INC., 12 ARROW STREET CAMBRIDGE, MA 02138

Rania Jones

Mia Park Tavares