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HARVARD

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INDEPENDENT

THE STUDENT WEEKLY SINCE 1969



WE BELONG TO NO ONE BUT OURSELVES

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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.

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Who Participates in Participatory Budgeting?

Cambridge's Participatory Budgeting vote funds local projects and fuels questions about student civic engagement.

BY TÉA SHOULDICE '29

The results are in: when it comes to civic engagement, Cambridge, Massachusetts, residents go above and beyond. The city of Cambridge held its 12th cycle of Participatory Budgeting, in which residents voted on which of 20 project proposals should receive funding from the municipal government, from March 5 to March 15. Out of the 121,186 city residents, 10,172 went to the ballot box to vote on these initiatives. The Harvard community maintains deep ties with Cambridge's local government; many faculty members and their families are Cambridge residents, alongside several undergraduates. However, while middle and high school students are well-represented in Participatory Budgeting, college students seem to be left behind.

Cambridge Participatory Budgeting is open to all city residents aged 12 and older—this includes all sixth graders, non-U.S. citizens, and university students. Each resident can vote for up to five of their favorite projects. The results of the vote were announced on March 18 during a Vote Results Party at Cambridge City Hall, with \$1,032,000 awarded to the following nine projects:

1. Fixing Sidewalks, Saving Trees (\$100,000; 5,057 votes)
2. More Complete Streets (\$200,000; 4,355 votes)
3. Transportation Assistance Services (\$50,000; 3,868 votes)
4. Cold and Wet Weather Kits (\$60,000; 3,757 votes)
5. Rain and Pollinator Gardens (\$100,000; 3,621 votes)
6. Supporting Continuous Access to School Supplies (\$12,000; 3,394 votes)
7. Residential Rat Control (\$110,000; 3,335 votes)
8. Concrete Barriers for Bike Lanes (\$150,000; 3,275 votes)
9. Basketball Court Upgrades (\$250,000; 2,525)

The most popular project, "Fixing Sidewalks, Saving Trees," will allocate funds to repair sidewalks that have been damaged by tree roots through Cambridge's Transportation, Streets, and Sidewalks Committee. Damaged concrete or brick will be replaced with a sustainable, rubber-based paving material called Flexi-Pave that will accommodate future root growth by bending instead of cracking under pressure.

"More Complete Streets" has a similar safety mandate; the plan will allocate \$200,000 to upgrade intersections with improved crosswalks, countdown signals, bike safety signals, and raised crossings.

The 11 projects that did not make the cut include providing free bikes to low-income residents, improving local dog parks, and an initiative called "My Future, My Vote" that would provide a "vote tote" bag to young Cambridge residents containing information on elections and voter registration.

The first cycle of Participatory Budgeting was held in March of 2015 and allocated \$528,000 to six projects. The original six projects included planting 100 healthy trees, providing 20 laptops for the Community Learning Center, and funding a public toilet in Central Square. Since it was first

introduced, the Cambridge Participatory Budgeting initiative has grown considerably. The program has amassed over 11,000 project proposals and is committed to spending over \$11 million of the city's public budget on over 80 approved projects.

The momentum of Participatory Budgeting has provided an increasingly visible opportunity for Cambridge residents to get involved in their local government. Cambridge Mayor Sumbul Siddiqui, in a conversation with the publication "Cambridge Day," reflected on the value of boosting community engagement through Participatory Budgeting.

"Some of these are things I think the city could be doing anyway, right?" Siddiqui asked. "But it's nice to know that some of this, it's coming from the community, and that's the whole point. People are voting and telling us what they want." As Siddiqui suggests, community engagement has been heightened since Cambridge residents began embracing this budgeting policy—during Sept. and Oct. 2025, community members submitted over 1,100 ideas that were whittled down and shaped into formal project proposals over the winter.

Participatory Budgeting is not unique in its involvement of local voices. For over 80 years, the city has used a system of proportional representation voting for city offices like the City Council and the School Committee. By allowing residents to elect nine City Council members and six School Committee members through ranked-choice voting—in which voters rank their candidate preferences rather than choosing only one option—the city hopes to give residents a more direct say in their representatives.

The Participatory Budgeting project builds on this community structure, allowing young locals to get involved in the political decisions that directly affect them. In a conversation with "Wicked Local" in 2021 about the eighth cycle of Cambridge Participatory Budgeting, then-Vice Mayor Alanna Mallon praised the program's emphasis on youth involvement. "Empowering our young people to have a voice in capital improvements made in their city is one of the biggest benefits of participatory budgeting," she said.

The program has been largely successful in reaching the youngest eligible residents of Cambridge. Of the more than 10,000 votes cast in the 2026 Participatory Budgeting cycle, over 1,000 were cast by students in sixth through 12th grade. Cambridge upper schools organized designated school voting days to simulate real polling places and election procedures, and nearly all students in grades sixth through eighth voted.

Alex Mahajan '28, who attended middle and high school in Cambridge, recalled being encouraged to engage with Participatory Budgeting. "They allotted some class time for us to do it," Mahajan said in an interview with the "Independent." "There were some kids like me who really were interested in it, enjoyed it, and thought, 'Oh, this is a really cool entry to understanding how to split the budget.' I remember my friends and I would discuss, 'What would you spend your money on? What would you do?'"

However, there has been far less discussion of the program's outcomes with college-aged residents. This is consistent with the voting habits of college students; Harvard Kennedy School's Carr-Ryan Center for Human Rights explained that



"college students have traditionally voted at one of the lowest rates of any group in the United States."

For Harvard students from Cambridge—a large portion of the student population—this affects their representation in local government. However, a lack of awareness and accessibility to these policies deters college-aged residents from participating.

"I think I wish I felt more connected to Cambridge," Mahajan said, who has not engaged with Participatory Budgeting since beginning college. "I actually have no idea what's going on with Cambridge legislation and the projects they're planning, which makes me a little sad because I grew up in Cambridge."

Other barriers reinforce Mahajan's point. Time constraints and convenience may be among the most significant barriers to college students engaging with local government. "A lot of times they may feel like they don't have the time or the bandwidth to be dealing with everything that's going on in their lives as well," Amir Smith '29, co-chair of the nonpartisan Harvard Votes Challenge, explained to the "Independent." "They don't find out about these elections, or they completely forget about them without having reminders."

While the city of Cambridge has not yet released an official timeline for the upcoming Participatory Budgeting Cycle 13, the idea collection period in recent years has consistently begun in the late summer or early fall. Students from Cambridge can submit proposals through the City of Cambridge online map, by contacting the City's Budget Office via email, phone, mail, walk-in, or by filling out forms at local pop-up events. When the voting period opens, residents can cast their votes by calling the Cambridge Budget Office at (617) 349-4270, by voting in-person at one of the voting sites listed on the City of Cambridge website, or by visiting the Participatory Budgeting online voting platform.

**TÉA SHOULDICE '29
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HARVARD.EDU) IS EAGERLY
AWAITING THE SAFER STREET
CROSSINGS.**

GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28

Strategy and Uncertainty: Inside the U.S. Response to Iran

Former State Department spokesperson Morgan Ortagus defends the Trump administration's strikes while confronting questions of nuclear threat, regional instability, and the limits of American power.

BY NASHLA TURCIOS '28

On March 10, the John F. Kennedy Jr. Forum at the Harvard Kennedy School hosted a conversation with former Deputy U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East Morgan Ortagus, moderated by Institute of Politics Interim Co-Director Ned Price and Harvard Undergraduate Iranian Association President Bahar Moradi '27. The discussion centered on the Trump administration's recent strikes on Iran, examining the strategic rationale behind American military action, evolving nuclear threats in non-allied nations, and the broader question of stability in the Middle East. Over the course of the evening, Ortagus offered a defense of the administration's approach, framing the conflict as the culmination of decades of tensions.

Moradi opened the conversation by contextualizing the unfolding crisis in Iran, emphasizing both the Iranian economic collapse and the human toll of its government's response.

"Within days, protests had spread to over 100 cities and transformed into the largest anti-regime uprising inside Iran since the 1979 revolution," she said.

The protests Moradi referenced began in late December 2025, when a sharp collapse of the Iranian rial and soaring inflation triggered demonstrations led by shopkeepers and merchants in Tehran before spreading across the country. What began as an economic revolt soon evolved into a broader political uprising, with protesters demanding systemic change after years of repression and declining living conditions.

In response, the Iranian government launched one of the deadliest crackdowns in its history, deploying security forces, shutting down internet access, and using violent force against demonstrators. These tactics resulted in thousands of deaths and tens of thousands of arrests. The unrest unfolded alongside rising geopolitical tensions, culminating in U.S. and Israeli strikes on Iran in late February 2026, further intensifying both domestic instability and regional conflict.

Ortagus framed the strikes not as a reaction to a single moment, but as the culmination of decades of conflict. "People tend to forget that just in the past few years, Iran has been openly engaging in acts of war against the United States," she said.

She pointed specifically to recent threats against U.S. officials. "During the Biden administration, the Iranian regime did something unprecedented, which is they were plotting to kill and assassinate on American soil both former and current administration officials," she noted. "They were actively plotting to assassinate President Trump during the campaign ... and those are, of course, acts of war."

U.S. officials have identified concrete evidence supporting these concerns. According to prosecutors, an operative from Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps was tasked with recruiting individuals to carry out the assassination in November 2024, though the plan was ultimately foiled by law enforcement.

For Ortagus, the justification for the strikes came from a broader regional pattern demonstrated by Iran. "They have been the cause of tumult and chaos in the region," she said. "If you look at every country that has had to endure the Iranian regime and their negative influence, look at Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon ... you look at failed state after failed state."

Over the past few years, Iran's influence across the Middle East has often operated through allied armed groups, deepening instability in neighboring countries. In Lebanon, Hezbollah—long backed by Tehran—has functioned as both a political party and an armed force outside full state control, dragging the country into repeated conflict with Israel. In Yemen, Iranian support has strengthened the Houthis' military capabilities, allowing them to project force well beyond Yemen's borders and disrupting shipping in the Red Sea.

The conversation then shifted to one of the most contested justifications for the strikes: Iran's nuclear program. Pressing Ortagus, Price questioned inconsistencies in the administration's messaging and the urgency of the threat.

"The one [justification] that we seem to hear most frequently from the administration is a nuclear threat—the same nuclear threat that nine months ago was totally obliterated that we heard over and over again from the President," he said. "And within the past couple days, people ... have now been saying they were days, hours away from having enough enriched uranium for a nuclear weapon."

In response, Ortagus argued that the administration's claims referred to specific targets rather than the entirety of Iran's nuclear capacity. "I think the President, when he talked about obliterating the Iranian nuclear program, I think it was specific to the sites that we struck, which have been, at least from the public estimate, rendered inoperable," she said.

Still, she maintained that Iran's broader ambition remained unchanged. Rather than signaling a shift in strategy, she suggested the regime's actions followed a familiar pattern of rebuilding after setbacks. "It's not a surprise to me that the regime spent their time after the 12-day war reconstituting their ability to try and get to a nuclear weapon ... that's been their modus operandi for decades."

The issue ultimately reflected a deeper set of priorities within the Iranian government. "The Iranian regime has consistently put the needs of Hezbollah and Hamas and the PMF in Iraq and ballistic missile and nuclear weapons production over the needs of their own people," Ortagus explained.

Beyond strategic and military considerations, Ortagus also framed the conflict in human rights terms, shifting the focus from state-level threats to the lived realities of ordinary Iranians under the regime.

"We have to remember that their principal threat is to the beautiful Persian people of Iran who do not deserve to live under tyranny," she said. "I think some of the bravest people in the world that I've encountered are these young women in Tehran that will stand up for their right to simply show their hair and to be heard and to be accounted for."

The protests Ortagus referenced are part of a broader record of resistance led by Iranian women over the past several years. Following the 2022 death of Mahsa Amini while in police custody for allegedly violating Iran's dress code, women across the country removed their hijabs in public, cut their hair, and took to the streets in one of the largest protest movements in decades. Human rights organizations estimate that hundreds were killed and thousands arrested, underscoring both the risks of dissent and the central role women have played in challenging the regime.

Ortagus also emphasized that the administration viewed the strikes as limited in scope and distinct from past U.S. interventions in the region. "Their objectives are very different from the Iraq War ... there is no intention by this administration to have a prolonged multi-year campaign like we saw in Iraq and Afghanistan," she said. "The president sees this as removing a threat, especially the threat from the Iranian Navy, from ballistic missiles."

The conversation ultimately turned to one of the most uncertain questions: what comes next for Iran's leadership. Moradi pressed Ortagus on whether the administration's vision for change was realistic.

"Just yesterday, during a press conference, Trump floated the idea that a leader from within the regime would be the most ideal future for the leadership of Iran," she said. "But given that the nuclear program as well as crackdowns on innocent civilians has been deeply embedded in the regime's survival strategy for decades, is that realistic—or is he essentially asking for a transformation that the system itself cannot really produce?"

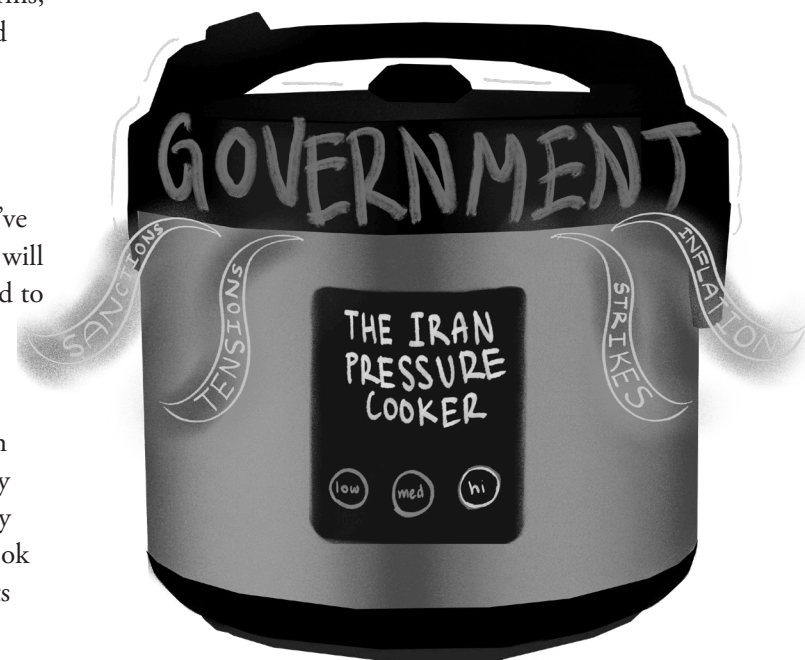
Ortagus responded by drawing a clear boundary around the administration's stated goals.

"The President and the administration ... would say the next leader of Iran—and whatever the new regime looks like, if that happens—is up to the Iranian people," she said.

At the same time, she cautioned against the idea that outside powers can engineer local political change. "All politics is local ... and I don't think the West imposing leaders in the Middle East is going to work," she said, pointing to past failures in Iraq and Afghanistan. "There have been a lot of lessons learned ... about our ability to reshape governments and societies."

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GRAPHIC BY JUSTIN MA '29



Politics Doesn't Stop on the Sideline

Politics and sports are inextricably linked, so we should stop treating the two like they aren't.

BY NOAH BASDEN '29

Sports are often idealized as a great unifier, existing in a vacuum away from the noise of politics and the stressors of everyday life. To an extent, I agree. There is something sacred about turning on the television or going outside with a ball in hand to escape the seemingly collapsing world around us. That is why many find politics in sports an uncomfortable pill to swallow; it brings the outside in and makes one of the last frontiers of uncomplicated human enjoyment feel very complicated all of a sudden.

That being said, the sanctuary that people have constructed around sport has always been an illusion. Wanting politics to wait outside of the stadium's gates is, in itself, a political choice that asks the most affected to leave their realities at the door so that ours remain undisturbed.

Why have many of us accepted this as our new norm? How is it that Colin Kaepernick's decision to kneel during the national anthem caused more debate than the actual issues that caused him to kneel in the first place? To say that politics needs to be removed from sport is the same as saying, "I don't get involved in politics." I'm sorry, but everything is political. Sport isn't exempt just because we want it to be.

As much as we may want to believe that sports became more equitable to all over time, the fact that at the most recent World Cup, the

Fédération Internationale de Football Association threatened seven European teams with sanctions for wearing the 'One Love' LGBTQ Rights armband, shows that it simply isn't true. The diversity we see in professional sports now, across all metrics, is the result of someone fighting for a group that wasn't allowed a seat at the table. What's more political than that?

Jackie Robinson didn't don the pinstripes of the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947, because his talent was simply so extraordinary that Major League Baseball was prepared to abandon its deeply entrenched color line. His first start was the result of more than a decade of media and labor union pressure against baseball teams to desegregate and allow 'colored players' to play in the MLB. He didn't do it by himself, nor did many of his trailblazing peers.

Robinson is just one example—there are too many to name—but it is clear that the sports we know and have come to love in their modern iterations were born of politics. There would be no Women's National Basketball Association, National Women's Soccer League, or Professional Women's Hockey League without Title IX, nor would there be the robust, multi-layered U.S. Paralympic program that we know today without the Amateur Sports Act of 1978 and the ADA of 1990.

Sports were built on political foundations, and yet, we are asking the people who play them to stay quiet about the world outside of the game. Athletes have always had a voice that they are able to exercise in support of the political causes they hold near. So why is it that when athletes speak on these issues, all of a sudden, we want to take the politics out of sports?

We've developed a selective amnesia when it comes to all of this. We forget that our heroes of today were, in their time, ostracized and threatened for expressing their political viewpoints. Due to his opposition to the Vietnam War, Muhammad Ali lost his Heavyweight Championship title, faced death threats, and was sentenced to five years in jail. Billie Jean King—a tennis icon and champion of the rights of LGBTQ+ people and women—lost "every single endorsement" she had following her forced outing in 1981, she said in a 2013 interview with *Makers*. Like Robinson, they were not rogue activists making statements from the fringes of society, but were some of the most famous, visible athletes of their time.

You may think to yourself, 'I would have never booed Robinson off the field.' Perhaps you wouldn't have. But consider, for a moment, the thousands of sports fans who

did nothing at all. Fans watched in silence as the hostility unfolded, waiting and hoping the controversy would pass. Silence has often been the preferable position of the many against the few, and history has, and will continue to show, that silence has never been as innocent as it seems. Not saying something is saying something.

It is easy for me to condemn in retrospect and say that I would have done differently, but truly, I don't know what I would have done. One must note that it takes incredible courage and sacrifice to speak up for the rights of the oppressed. Colin Kaepernick took a knee, and for his stand, he sacrificed his career.

When the public responds to athlete activism with 'I just watch to watch the game' or, as Laura Ingraham notoriously stated in 2018 to LeBron James, to "shut up and dribble," that is in itself a political choice. Demanding athletes to stay silent is not the removal of sport; it is an endorsement of the political status quo just by another name.

Where was Laura Ingraham when Nick Bosa wore a MAGA hat on live television following the 49ers' win over the Cowboys in October 2024? She wasn't there to comment because Bosa conformed to her politics, and James didn't. Was Bosa just a citizen expressing his political right of expression, and James's take on BLM a distraction? I think not; you can't have it both ways. If we're going to keep politics out of sport, then let it be a blanket statement, not a position you take only when it doesn't fit your agenda.

It is the athlete's right, as it is the right of us all, to be an active political participant; these are citizens first, performers second. Sport did not suddenly become political in 1947 with Robinson nor in 2016 with Kaepernick; it has always been moulded, advanced, and dictated by politics and enriched by those who sought to use their voices for something larger than just the game. Our sporting heroes of today stand, in a myriad of ways, on the shoulders of sportsmen and women who fought for their right to be your hero. There is no version of sports that exists outside of politics; there never was, and the legendary athletes who made our games great knew it better than anyone else.

NOAH BASDEN '29 (NHBASDEN@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS MAD FOR MARCH MADNESS.

GRAPHIC BY EMMA CRAGO '28



Rethinking the College Dropout Narrative

With rising dropout rates and the surge of artificial intelligence startups, the line between counterculture and convention is beginning to blur.

BY KATHERINE CHUNG '29

There is a sense of romanticism attached to counterculture—the idea of actively rejecting the dominant values, norms, and expectations of mainstream society. One of the glorified narratives is that of the college dropout, which frames leaving as an act of rebellion, a rejection of the traditional postsecondary academic path in pursuit of something riskier, freer, and potentially revolutionary.

The stories are familiar: Steve Jobs walking away from Reed College and later founding Apple, Bill Gates leaving Harvard to build Microsoft, and Mark Zuckerberg coding Facebook from a dorm room before leaving for Silicon Valley.

It is in both our highbrow and lowbrow culture, from prestige films like “The Social Network” and literary profiles to viral tweets and startup podcasts, that perpetuate the dropout narrative as one for the intellectual outliers: someone whose vision is so exceptional it outgrows the intuition meant to contain it.

This framing, however, obscures a crucial reality. Today, dropping out is no longer an anomaly but an increasingly normalized path. What is rare is not the act of leaving, but succeeding afterwards. Yet, the cultural narrative collapses these two ideas, departure and success, into one, making it seem as though dropping out itself produces innovation. That trajectory depends on conditions that are far less talked about: access to funding, networks, prior experience, and a level of certainty that most students simply do not have. As dropping out becomes more common, the gap between the myth and reality only continues to widen.

Dropping Out

Data from the Education Data Initiative shows that, every year, the U.S. dropout rate reaches 32.9%, and nearly 39% of first-time bachelor’s degree students do not complete their degrees within eight years. Over 43.1 million Americans had left college without a degree as of July 2023. At that point, it becomes difficult to frame dropping out as countercultural when it is, in many ways, a common story.

Financial pressure plays a significant role in why students drop out, with 53% reporting difficulty paying tuition and 50% struggling to manage everyday costs such as

living expenses, food, and course materials. In addition, roughly 18% of students point to mental health challenges as a primary reason for leaving school. These figures convey that, for many, dropping out is not an act of defiance, but a response to material and structural pressures. The complex reality behind the decision to leave disrupts the romanticized image of the college dropout.

From Dot-Com Dreams to the “AI Gold Rush”

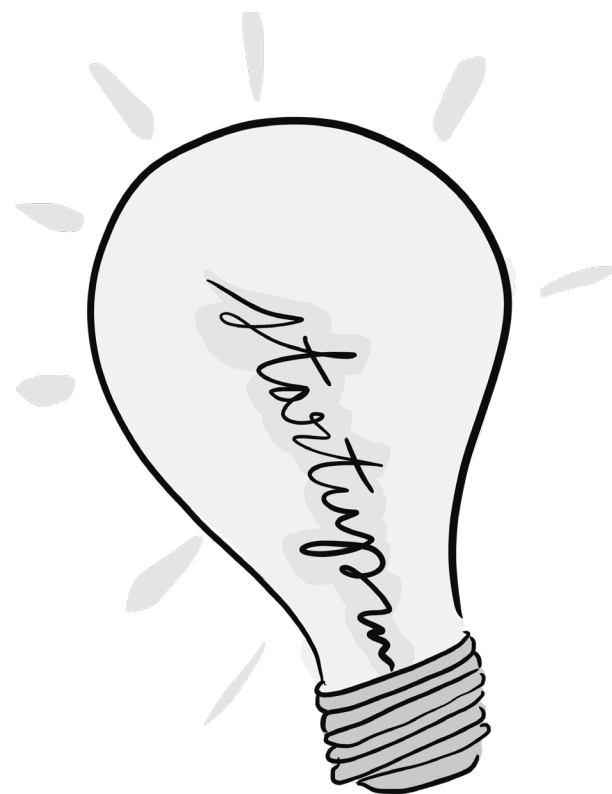
For a smaller group of students, however, dropping out is not driven by constraining circumstances but by opportunity. These are the cases that dominate headlines and shape cultural perception. During the late 1990s dot-com boom, and later the rise of social media, figures like Jack Dorsey made leaving school seem like a shortcut to innovation.

That narrative persists today, gaining a new momentum in the rise of artificial intelligence as a surge of AI startups fuels a new wave of entrepreneurial dropouts. According to the “Wall Street Journal” reporter Lindsay Ellis, the launch of ChatGPT in late 2022 sparked a sharp rise in interest in AI. As funding pours into the field, many young entrepreneurs see AI as a timely and lucrative opportunity. The decision to leave school becomes clear to the students once they secure key funding or are accepted into a startup accelerator. Also, the rapid advancement of AI creates urgency, an awareness that AI is reshaping or replacing jobs, making it critical to move quickly. The mindset is simple: “strike while the iron is hot.”

Yet even within this group, success is far from guaranteed. The stories that gain attention represent only the highest outcomes, and these highly conditional successes create the dropout narrative.

Ned Koh

People like Ned Koh are at the center of the dropout narrative—a Harvard student who left to build a rapidly growing AI company, now running a billion-dollar business. Yet, his story actually complicates that myth. His departure was not impulsive, but carefully calculated, supported by years of prior experience, an already established financial income, and a strong sense of certainty. Even Koh resists the romanticized image, conveying



that the dropout narrative is not a realistic one, and chasing the idea of leaving for success is a trap for many.

Koh entered Harvard in the fall of 2024, only to leave two weeks later. He moved to New York to pursue Aaru, his rapidly growing AI prediction software company.

“I started my company in March of 2024, so I actually took a gap year to build out another company that had started before I joined.” Originally admitted as a member of the Class of 2027, and then coming back to school as a member of the Class of 2028 after his gap year, Koh knew that he was going to leave. “We had already raised millions and millions of dollars ... We were already generating revenue as a business by the time I entered Harvard.”

Koh’s story began much earlier, before his time at Harvard, with experimentation, obsession, and a long-standing inclination toward building. “I’ve been starting companies since I was like 14, right? So COVID was my freshman year of high school, and I pretty much spent that whole time messing around on computers. I ended up starting a bunch of different companies when I was in high school. A couple of which were fairly successful, and then I started Aaru.”

Aaru emerged from a specific insight about AI, not just as a tool, but as something that could model human behavior itself. “We saw these models that have more and more humanistic. We saw them being applied to a lot of simple things, like summarization ...

and we said, ‘Hey, these models are incredibly humanistic. What if we made them very humanistic? Let’s go see if we can make them represent humans, and apply that to politics.’ And we started by predicting elections and scaled off from them.” From there, the company expanded rapidly.

“If you believe that humans are the preeminent species on the planet ... if you know what humans are gonna do, and you know why they’re gonna do it, then you can change that. And that is the most powerful technology on the ... planet, right,” he shared. “We’ve been able to build some incredible models that deliver so much value for all of our customers that it’s been able to grow very quickly as a result.”

Now, Koh’s life has some similarities and many differences from that of a regular college student. “I wake up at 7:30 a.m. every morning, which is probably not what I would be doing if I was at school. I do go to sleep close to two to three in the morning, which is what I would be doing if I was at school.” He also acknowledged the workload behind the dropout fantasy. “We were mandated six days a week in the office ... Saturdays are technically off, but most people work virtually,” Koh said. He added that the demands of building Aaru require constant travel, such as long-distance flights to Singapore multiple times a month, underscoring the intensity of his schedule.

“I’ve made sure to make culture such an important part of this. We have so many young people, so many dropouts ... We get the diversity of perspective, we get the diversity of thought ... we do frontier research and change the world every day. What else could you ask for?”

Despite the hardship, Koh’s passion and love for his work leave no regrets for him dropping out. “We’ve gotten extra really cool experiences. I think, like, look, we get to work across politics, we get to work across consumers. We get to work with movie studios, every business you could possibly want to imagine.”

Yet, despite his own path, Koh is resistant to the idea that others should follow it. “I think college is great for 99% of people.” He breaks that majority into three categories: those who don’t yet know what they want to do, those who need a degree for their profession, and those who need the experience of college itself—community, identity growth, and exposure.

“If you don’t follow one of those three categories, then you shouldn’t be in school. But 99.9% of people do fall in one of those three categories. And so, no, I don’t think it’s very realistic for many people. I think a lot of people make dumb decisions.”

For Koh, dropping out is ultimately

about certainty. “If you’ve done the calculation yourself, you’re not dumb ... You’re clearly not coming from nowhere. If you doubt yourself for a moment, then you shouldn’t do it.”

At the same time, he resists the opposite extreme, the idea that students must choose between school and building their career. “I think people should build cool shit if they want to. I think a lot of that you can do when you’re still in school ... I just think it’s all about time allocation. And don’t be stupid about it.”

Koh’s perspective conveys the gap at the center of the cultural narrative. There is no inherent link between leaving college and achieving success; what matters are the underlying conditions, certainty, preparation, and access that make such a decision viable in the first place. The problem, then, is not whether students stay or leave, but the illusion of dropping out.

So, What Actually is Countercultural? “My co-founder, Cam, is 20. My other co-founder, John, is currently 17. He dropped out of high school. That’s countercultural. Right? Dropping out of college, dropping out of Harvard? That’s not that rare for San Francisco anymore.”

The act of dropping out itself has lost its edge. Instead, Koh draws the line elsewhere. “I do think having a billion-dollar company as a teenager is very countercultural,” he said.

This reveals what the culture is actually romanticizing. Under the dropout narrative, what is framed as “counterculture” is not the act of leaving college itself, but the rare success that sometimes follows it. “There’s a lot of people who start a lot of different companies. We, thankfully, totally attribute it to our team, and the people that we have around us have been able to have some incredible growth. That’s counterculture,” Koh said.

But Koh’s story does not end in rejection of the university system. “Harvard was a dream

for me, and I hope to someday be able to, to be involved with the community, to a consistent extent,” he added.

Rethinking the Narrative

The narrative of the college dropout as counterculture feels increasingly outdated. The data shows that dropping out is no longer rare, and the reasons behind it are often shaped by financial pressure and mental health, rather than defiance against a so-called “laid-out path” of education.

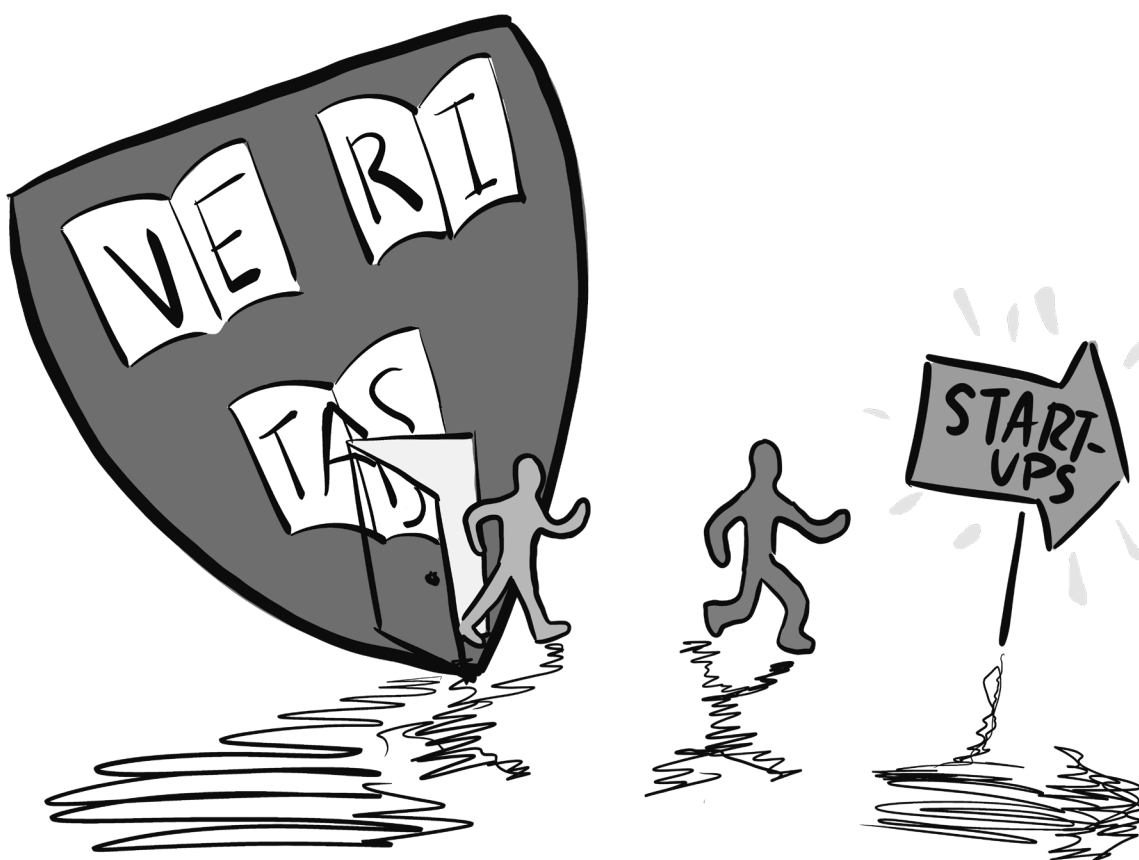
Koh’s path may appear to fit the familiar narrative, but even in his case, leaving was not an act of rebellion. It was a calculated decision built on certainty, timing, and momentum—conditions he himself acknowledges that most students do not have.

What we claim to romanticize is the act of leaving college, but what draws our attention is something far narrower: the few who make it. By centering these exceptional outcomes, the cultural narrative obscures conditions that actually made success possible for them: access to funding, networks, prior experience, and certainty that make such trajectories possible.

As dropping out becomes more common, the myth only grows more misleading. The act itself has lost its edge, but the narrative surrounding it refuses to let go of the dropout as a countercultural protagonist, someone whose success emerges from leaving college itself.

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GRAPHICS BY CLARA
LAKE '27



Lights Out in Havana

Inside Cuba, as the blockade tightens its grip.

BY MORGAN JAY '29

It's 7:30 a.m. in Havana, Cuba, and the sun is slowly rising above the *malecón*, the highway that runs along the city's northern coastline. The orange glow of the sunrise reflects off the waves beating against the seawall. I run north, then east toward the harbor's edge. After turning around, I pass the U.S. embassy for a second time. It's surrounded by a dark fence—a reminder of the past six decades of friction.

This scene from my visit last spring resurfaced in early January, when Cuba's future was again called into question following the capture of Nicolás Maduro, the illegitimate President of Venezuela. Since then—and especially now—the situation has consumed the news. As I write this, the entire island is without power. Last week, residents of Morón burned furniture from the local Communist Party headquarters, and those in Santiago de Cuba have been banging pans in protest. This comes as Russian oil is en route to the island, where it is set to test the U.S. blockade, which forbids the import of fuel and is currently enforced by two U.S. Coast Guard cutters patrolling the area.

The questions that dominated my time in Cuba have only multiplied. Is a free Cuba on the horizon? How long can the Cuban people endure?

Looking for answers, I reached out to my former Spanish teacher and two friends, all of whom had just returned from the island. They traveled there on a study-abroad trip made possible by the “Support for the Cuban People” license, which allows Americans to visit Cuba provided they support “individuals and non-governmental agencies that promote independent activity.”

All three described an eerie quiet: “Driving around—we drove an hour and a half out into the countryside—and just looking out the window for a lot of that, you just see people sitting on porches, like nothing is actually happening,” Shaffer Broughton, a junior at Woodberry Forest School, said to the “Independent.”

Bryan Li, also a junior at Woodberry Forest, described his trip to a local market with a University of Havana student he met on the street. “The vendors are very enthusiastic about getting paid in U.S. dollars instead of [Cuban] pesos—because

they want to have enough U.S. dollars to leave Cuba,” Li said. During his visit, the exchange rate on the street was 510 pesos per USD. The official rate is 24.

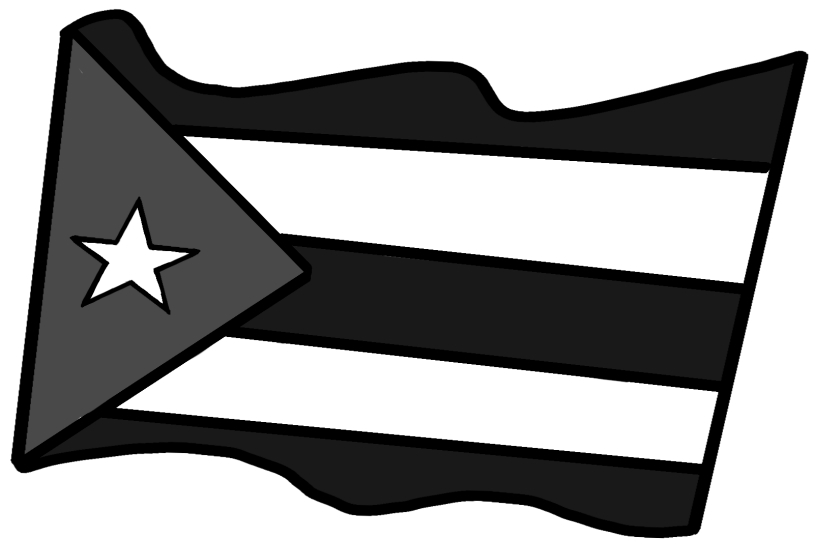
U.S. dollars are valuable not only as a means for leaving, as approximately 2.75 million Cubans have left since 2020, but also for purchasing food at “MiPyMEs,” private grocery stores which are better stocked than the state-run bodegas. Last spring, on a separate run down the *malecón*, a couple stopped my friends and me, asking for euros or USD. The bodega didn't carry baby formula, they said.

Now, of course, the situation is far worse. No oil has entered Cuba since January, and the country only produces 40% of the oil it needs. Rolling blackouts have made it impossible for citizens to keep food cold, caused schools to close, and forced surgeries to be cancelled. Tourist infrastructure, however, is shielded from the worst of it. “We were sheltered in one of the few hotels where they accommodate all of the tourists, so our lights were on the entire time,” said Drew Collier, one of the two teachers who led the trip Broughton and Li were on.

The regime has traditionally diverted its limited resources to hotels because tourism was seen as an economic lifeline. But after COVID, visitors have not returned to the levels that party leadership expected. With the blockade and tensions between the American and Cuban governments, hotels have only further emptied.

This decline explains some Cubans' frustration. “[The University of Havana student] did say that a few years ago Cuba was a nice place, but right after COVID, it began to decline because of the embargo,” Li said.

Many citizens outside the hospitality industry would question this view. With Cuba's finite resources, well-lit hotels filled with well-fed guests have always meant that someone nearby went without. This inequality predates the revolution—government officials in Havana used to take bribes from American tourists while rural Cubans suffered the effects of the declining price of sugar.



In Collier's view, the Cuban people are fed up. “The atmosphere is noticeably different—at least to me—from years past,” he said. “People seemed frustrated, exhausted, and almost at a breaking point. They are still Cubans, famously upbeat, happy, and positive, but there seemed to be a heavier weight than usual on their shoulders.”

He even noticed “abajo la dictadura,” or “down with the dictatorship,” graffiti on a building in Havana. These kinds of anti-regime messages are traditionally rare because the government has the authority to make arrests on the vague charge of “dangerousness.”

I felt the anger Collier described last spring. One of my last evenings in Cuba, a friend and I were walking back to the hotel when a man struck up a conversation, asking for a few dollars. We gave him what we had, but the conversation continued as he pointed to the crumbling soccer stadium nearby and compared it to the paved embassy row and the towering Selection La Habana—a brand-new skyscraper hotel.

Whether Cuba is on the cusp of meaningful change remains to be seen, but as long as everything from freedom of expression to electricity is reserved for an elite few, Cubans' anger can only continue to grow, leaving the island in the darkness that afflicts its people today.

MORGAN JAY '29 (MJAY@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) LEFT HAVANA WITH MORE QUESTIONS THAN HE HAD WHEN HE ARRIVED.

GRAPHIC BY CHRISTIANA ZEMBROWSKI '28

I Was Good at Loving Her, Not at Being Loved

On devotion, self-erasure, and the ache of being the second choice.

BY VIVIAN YE '27

The first time I met her, she sat next to our mutual friend, shy and quiet. People called her “Mali,” Thai for a small, delicate jasmine flower. She was 30, ten years older than me—yet every part of her body emitted an innocent desire to be loved, to be hugged, to be protected. I wanted to be her protector. The Thai expression *เป็นห่วง* (*bpen huang*) defined our relationship from start to finish. *Huang* isn't just about worry or care, but encompasses a quiet concern and attunement to well-being. It is tender, constant, natural.

Mali couldn't consume any seafood, fried food, desserts, or sugary drinks; even minor indulgences resulted in intense stomach pain. She was underweight at 95 lbs. Alcohol triggered her Asian flush, but five shades redder than average. She was sick three times in our first month of dating: influenza, heatstroke, and food poisoning.



During the third instance, I was in London and couldn't be by her side. We were long-distance half of the time because I traveled internationally for work and school, while she was based in Thailand. She sent me a voice message—“V, I feel so weak, and I am all alone. Wish you were here with me,” she whimpered in a sweet, affectionate tone, as Thai people capture in the word *อ่อน* (*on*). I wanted to take the next flight to Bangkok. To bring her medicine, stroke her hair, and cook her warm, nourishing congee. I felt useless 6,000 miles away from her. Given a choice, I would have willingly been sick in her place.

I became increasingly fretful about her health, worried whether she was eating enough, staying active, and sleeping well. On days when air pollution exceeded $50 \mu\text{g}/\text{m}^3$, I urged her to wear a mask to protect her immunocompromised lungs from Bangkok's smog-laden air. Before she met me, she never had the habit of putting on sunscreen, despite the scorching rays of Thailand's sun. When we were physically together, I always remembered to apply sunscreen for her—her soft cheeks cupped between

my palms as my thumb gently rubbed the cream in small circles.

Like a transdermal drug entering the body through a patch, she slowly seeped into my skin until the capillaries underneath absorbed her into my bloodstream. Soon, she was in the blood that pulsed through me a hundred thousand times a day. “Babe, how'd you sleep last night?” “What do you want for breakfast?” “Do you need a hug?” “Are you okay?” I wanted to know, and she wanted me to want to know.

The spring I went to Shanghai for work—we had been dating for around a year by then—I hadn't seen her for three months, longer than we had ever been apart. By that point, I missed her deeply and wanted to make sure that she missed me too. So when, over the course of a few days, she stopped texting “kittung” (miss you) and didn't call me *Tirak*, a common way to address a lover, I began to feel uneasy. Perhaps she did not mean to make me feel insecure and was simply not in the mood to be verbally affectionate, but I am nothing if not attentive to detail.

I asked her in a coaxing, affectionate tone—one that she often used with me, one I would never dare use with anyone unless I felt completely comfortable with them—“Babe, do you still miss me? Why don't you call me *Tirak* anymore?” I naively thought she would find it endearing, that she would tell me “so sorry, *Tirak*,” that she'd soothe my insecurity.

Instead, she became angry. “I don't understand why you pay attention to such trivial details. I am not the type to say something just because you want me to. If you want a girlfriend who is there to please you and sweet-talk you, I am not that girl,” she said before hanging up.

Later, I tried to call her, hoping to explain that I was only asking for reassurance, not to be dramatic. I wanted to apologize if I was asking for too much. She refused to pick up, nor did she address our conflict in subsequent texts for three days: “You always put your own needs first and prioritize what you want.”

That afternoon, Myanmar suffered from a devastating 7.7-magnitude earthquake. Bangkok felt the tremors: rooftop pools turned buildings into waterfalls, a skyscraper collapsed, and mass evacuations. Mali told me she sprinted down 25 flights of stairs as her condo swayed, her body in a state of panic the entire time. She then walked five miles with heavy bags until she reached her friend's one-story house. I wanted to hold her in my arms, cuddle her, and whisper in her ear. It's okay, dear, you are safe with me.

In the midst of it all, Mali's ex-girlfriend had reappeared, checking in on her a few hours after the earthquake. For the next few weeks, the ex made multiple advances—a note, flowers, a request to meet. Mali told me not to worry as she would ignore her. Yet, despite early misgivings in our relationship that already revealed an asymmetry in care, the possibility that there was someone else, that she could be with someone else, terrified me.

When I was in elementary school, my friends liked to play this game where two people would face each other, hold hands, lean backwards, and spin in a circle. The spinning worked because we held each other's weight in tension, leaning back just enough to keep the circle in motion. If either of us loosened our grip or lost our balance, the game would end. While for some, this game was exhilarating—the

counterforce stabilized their balance, allowing for a speed they could never reach spinning alone—I found it absolutely frightening. At any given moment, my partner could let go, unconcerned that I might be flung to the side, my body hitting the hard, concrete floor of the school gym.

I coped with my insecurity about Mali's ex by doubling down on *huang*—learning to cook new dishes, buying her small gifts, checking her data on the Apple Health app. The more useful I was, the more she would love me. As long as she depended on me, she wouldn't leave me. She would need me, and I wanted to be needed.

It wasn't until a month after the first attempt at contact—when the ex tried to call Mali during one of our dates—that Mali finally explained their history. She told me their relationship had been toxic: her ex liked “Toms” (Thai slang for tomboy/masc/butch) and often insisted, “Don't come see me on the days you are a girl.”

Mali, who identified as femme but was occasionally boyish, felt compelled to make herself into a “Tom” to be with her ex. In that relationship, Mali paid for everything, managed all their affairs, and did everything she could to please her. All she asked for in return was love, but her ex did not love her.

I asked my girlfriend two questions. “Do you still have feelings for her?” A pause. “I don't know.” “If she came back today, promising to love you, to appreciate you, would you go back to her?” Another pause. “I don't know.”

What she did not know told me everything I needed to know.

Phototropism is the growth or movement of a plant in response to directional light. When phototropins, light receptors at the tip of the shoot, detect light, they trigger the redistribution of auxin, a growth hormone, causing those cells to elongate and the stem to bend toward the light.

A plant doesn't lean toward the hand that tends it.

Know is pronounced like “No.” No, I will not be staying.

Know is a variant of now. Now is the time. Now I leave.

VIVIAN YE '27 (VIVIAN_YE@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) TEXTED MALI TO CONFIRM A FEW DETAILS BEFORE WRITING THIS PIECE, ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT SHE WAS BACK TOGETHER WITH THE EX THAT TRIGGERED THE BREAKUP.

GRAPHIC BY AMELIE LIMA '27

The Indy's Guide to River Run Shots

For those over 21 years of age, naturally!

BY ROHAN TYAGI '29

This week, the Charles River gods return for their annual appearance, manifested in cheap hard liquor on Harvard College's Housing Day Eve: River Run. The following shots, some suggestions for a uniquely memorable River Run, may appear along your journey to appease them. My advice is as reliable as any college freshman's, stitched together from secondhand wisdom and the selective memories of those who are, of course, all over 21. We are not here to encourage anything legally, spiritually, or otherwise. Hosts, we are here because if this is happening, you might as well do it well—and preferably in a shotski.

Vodka

For the hosts, regardless of whether it's Grey Goose or the boof seven-dollar handle you picked up at a grocery store that could have checked your ID a little more closely, vodka shots will get the job done. Pour them straight, don't apologize for the bottle, and move on. The vodka shot does not care about your choices, and neither should your guests. It tastes bad, everyone knows it tastes bad, and they're hoping to make it to all nine houses in just one night, and this is not the moment for discernment. If you're feeling really kind, throw it in the freezer a few hours before, but if not, life goes on, and the River Runners can cope.

For the runners, somewhere, sometime, when the cold has set in, and you've lost track of who's in your group and gained two people you don't remember meeting, someone is going to hand you a straight vodka shot. Take it. It asks nothing of you and delivers exactly what it promises. However, if Dunster is still ahead of you on the list, maybe save it for after. Scaling that fence is (allegedly) a lot more manageable before the vodka than after it.

Tequila

Whatever tequila you're pouring tonight is not good tequila. College-priced tequila is a category of its own, sitting somewhere between technically drinkable and a hangover to deeply reflect upon. The shot itself is not really the point. The point is the ceremony surrounding tequila, with salt on the hand, lime at the ready, and a room full of people who have just realized they are actually doing this. That part will be genuinely fun, and the cheap tequila is just the mediator.

If you really want to commit to the bit, teach your runners the toast you picked up from the bartender at your all-inclusive in Cancún, Puerto Rico, or other spring break destination: arriba, abajo, al centro, pa' dentro—up, down, to the center, and in. The chant sounds better than it translates, and by the third time the room is yelling it in unison, it won't matter that half of them have no idea what they're saying. Those shared thirty seconds are worth more than whatever is actually in the glass, amigo. Very Important! Do not skip the lime, nor the salt.

Jell-O Shots

Hosts, if you're going to contribute something to River Run, look no further than Jell-O shots. You will have to make them the night before to accommodate the long setting time, which makes them one of the few parts of Housing Day that rewards forethought. The recipe is simple: one box of Jell-O, a cup of boiling water to dissolve it, and then, instead of the cold water the box calls for, you add in a cup of vodka. Pour into little plastic cups, refrigerate, and done. One box makes about 20 shots, so do the math on how many freshmen you're hosting and scale accordingly.

This is also the correct place to deploy your \$7.49 vodka handle. The Jell-O does most of the heavy lifting flavor-wise, so the difference between Tito's and whatever was easiest to procure is genuinely undetectable. People will show up to your room, see a tray of little cups in the fridge, and feel a warmth toward you that has nothing to do with the low alcohol content of each cup and everything to do with the fact that you made something. Bring them out on a tray, let people grab as many as they want, and enjoy being the most popular stop on the run. Please note that it is better to overestimate than underestimate your Jell-O shot count—let's be honest, if they don't finish them, you will in a week anyway.

Lemon Drop

The lemon drop requires more effort than anything else on this list, and the people who make them should know it. A lemon drop needs fresh lemon juice, triple sec, vodka, and the presence of mind to rim your shot glasses with sugar right before the night—and your vodka-splashed floors—get away from you.

The shot itself is bright and clean, tart enough that you feel it in your jaw on the way down. It also photographs well, which is perfect at the start of the night, before people lose their phones. What the lemon drop won't do is hide what it is. Unlike the green tea shot, it tastes like alcohol, and the vodka is strong enough that nobody will walk away confused about what they just drank. By house four, most River Runners will want something that keeps everyone calibrated, and a properly made lemon drop can guarantee that.

Green Tea

Alongside the lemon drop, the green tea shot is one of the more beautifully deceptive things you can set out for a first-year who

wanders into your dorm. Equal parts Jameson (or any whiskey), peach schnapps, and sour mix, shaken and poured. There is no tea in it. There has never been any tea in it. Nobody knows why it's called that, and asking is a waste of everyone's time.

What makes a green tea shot dangerous is that it genuinely doesn't taste like much. The peach schnapps rounds out the whiskey, the sour mix brightens the whole thing, and the result is something that goes down so smoothly that you will absolutely hear someone say, "This doesn't taste like anything," right before they have a second one. This is fine, except that it is still a whiskey shot, and whiskey shots announce themselves about thirty minutes after the fact. Pour generously, but maybe mention what's in it to anyone who looks like they're treating it as a palate cleanser.

Jägerbomb

Somewhere between house six and house seven, your River Runners are going to hit a wall. This is where the Jägerbomb earns its place on the list. Drop a shot of Jägermeister into a glass of Red Bull, and you have a drink that was invented in 1997 somewhere in the Lake Tahoe party scene (shout out Bay Area skiers!) and has been keeping people on their feet at the wrong hours ever since.

Researchers have noted that mixing a stimulant (Red Bull) with a depressant (Jäger) produces an effect not entirely unlike skiing on a mind-altering substance that starts with a C. To that, we say that if your group is flagging at house six and someone produces a Red Bull and a handle of Jäger, the night is not over; it is still young. Proceed accordingly, and note that this drink requires shared locations and the buddy system.

By the end of the night, the River gods are less interested in being appeased and more interested in seeing what you'll do next. Some stops will blur together, and one will become the story you tell as if it happened exactly the way you remember it. Drink water, enjoy a slightly buzzed Housing Day, and drag your hangover to your 10:30 a.m. section of "Biotech Ethics."

ROHAN TYAGI '29
(ROHANTYAGI@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU)'S FAVORITE GATORADE FLAVOR IS GLACIER FREEZE.

GRAPHIC BY SOPHIA RASCOFF '27



Serving Face and Serving Time: The Trials of Oscar Wilde

How Oscar Wilde condemned himself and created his legacy.

BY ELLIE GUO '29

It is difficult to discern whether Oscar Wilde is better known for his literary works or for his homosexuality; the two were often intertwined. As queer historian Kaz Rowe put it in their YouTube video essay titled “The Unhinged Trials of Oscar Wilde,” which inspired this article, Wilde is the “premier homosexual.” His likeness lives on in 21st-century culture—the effeminate, crop-top-wearing, theater-loving stereotype we know today is a direct descendant of Wilde.

The most famous photographs of Wilde depict him lounging in lavish furs and clothes. The Oscar Wilde Memorial Sculpture in Dublin, Ireland, depicts him reclining on a rock with one knee propped up, smirking at park passersby. Through a modern lens, any viewer will immediately recognize his style of dress and posture as “gay-presenting.” But it is important to remember that Oscar Wilde does not merely match the social cues we associate with a gay man; he is the definition of how a stereotypically gay man looks and behaves.

For most of human history, “homosexuality” was something one did, not an identity label. There was no way to identify a gay man based on stereotypes or collective imagination. However, this would change with the infamous, highly publicized trials of Oscar Wilde.

The story begins in 1891, when Wilde met Lord Alfred Douglas, better known by his nickname “Bosie.” They were both involved in literary circles and soon began a tumultuous, on-and-off relationship. In 1895, Bosie’s father, the Marquess of Queensberry, discovered that their relationship was more than platonic and sent Wilde a note calling him a “posing sodomite.”

Instead of ignoring the blackmail, Wilde sued Queensberry for libel. This doomed Wilde from the start, as a libel case requires the spread of *false* information—and the note had not even been made public, nor was Wilde particularly careful about covering up his relationship history. Queensberry was able to acquire an overwhelming amount of evidence proving that his accusation against Wilde was true.

Interestingly, Wilde himself was not particularly interested in defending himself against the accusations of sodomy. While being cross-examined by Queensberry’s attorney, he seemed to prioritize coming up with the funniest witticisms. Wilde ended up condemning himself, as many of his responses insinuated that he was homosexual.

The cross-examination on April 3, 1895, began with Oscar Wilde lying about his age for laughs, immediately stripping him of what remained of his credibility. Edward Carson, Queensberry’s lawyer, questioned Wilde about his age, as he stated he was 39, though he was almost 41 at the time. Wilde responded, “I have no wish to pose as being young. I am thirty-nine or forty.”

Then, unprompted, Wilde brought up Bosie’s exceedingly beautiful poems, “In Praise of Shame,” and “Two Loves.” The latter contains the famous line, “I am the love that dare not speak its name,” an obvious metaphor for forbidden love. Carson asked if the poem was about “two boys,” to which Wilde agreed, creating suspicion about the true nature of his relationship with Bosie.

Carson continued to question Wilde

about depictions of homosexuality in his writings, becoming increasingly frustrated by Wilde’s paradoxical and confusing responses. He cited a passage from “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” a novel widely understood to contain homoerotic undertones. In particular, he questioned Wilde on a line spoken by the character Basil Hallward, a painter infatuated with Dorian Gray, which reads: “I quite admit that I adored you madly, extravagantly, absurdly.”

“What do you say to that? Have you ever adored a young man madly?” Carson asked.

“No, not madly; I prefer love that is a higher form,” Wilde replied.

“Never mind about that. Let us keep down to the level we are at now?” Carson questioned.

“I have never given adoration to anybody except myself,” Wilde remarked. The transcript notes that the courtroom laughed loudly after this witty line.

Wilde maintained this sassy, evasive demeanor for the rest of the interrogation. When Carson brought out letters from Wilde to Bosie as evidence, his only defense was to claim that the letters were “poems” and could not be taken at face value.

After Wilde blatantly admitted that he had “always been fond” of Bosie, Carson seemingly got confused about which side he was supposed to defend. He suggested that some parts of the poems could be read in a non-romantic way, depending on how literally it was interpreted.

But Wilde responded, “A great deal depends on the way it is read ... Not as you read it, Mr. Carson. You read it very badly.”

In a separate interrogation the following day, Wilde dug himself into an even bigger hole. Carson questioned him on his alleged romantic and sexual relationships with other men.

“Did you ever kiss him?” Carson asked about Walter Grainger, a young boy.

“Oh, dear no. He was a peculiarly plain boy. He was, unfortunately, extremely ugly. I pitied him for it,” Wilde replied.

Many other similar, forehead-slapping instances exist in the transcript. Though these seem like reckless moments completely devoid of self-preservation, some interpret Wilde’s behavior as a refusal to feel ashamed of his homosexuality. Either way, at the advice of his lawyers, Wilde dropped the case that he started. However, he was arrested around a month later under charges of gross indecency and sodomy. In the case that followed, Wilde was sentenced to two years of hard labor, which led to health problems that made him vulnerable to the meningitis that ultimately killed him.

The media attention that the trials received solidified the image of a gay man in the public consciousness. His personality—foppish, artistic, feminine, witty—was easy to caricaturize and reproduce as a symbol of homosexuality. It also sparked the movement for other queer people to openly push back against homophobia. Wilde became a martyr-like figure for gay communities, transforming homosexuality into an identity for which one could express pride.

The modern stereotype of gay men resulted from the coincidence that Oscar Wilde had his particular personality—and was gay, a writer,



and part of the larger aestheticism movement of the late 19th century. Had he not had any one of these attributes, our idea of a gay man would be drastically different. Mitch and Cam, the gay couple from the television series “Modern Family,” would be completely different characters.

Once Wilde’s personality entered the public consciousness, gay men began adopting his traits as a signal to others like them, and the archetype was born. After decades of increased LGBTQ+ visibility in public life, as well as popular media reinforcing the image, Oscar Wilde’s unique personality gradually became a reductive stereotype. What was once an expression of individuality came to harm the gay community. The markers of homosexuality became known to homophobes, enabling them to easily identify and generalize about gay men.

Today, many of our slang words come from the LGBTQ+ community and are often associated with being flamboyant and effeminate—two trademarks of Wilde’s character. What began as an unthinkable countercultural move—outing himself as a homosexual to the entire world—is now mainstream. The tragically hilarious trials of Oscar Wilde demonstrate the domino effect of history and how much one man influenced how we view an entire demographic today. History often seems coincidental, the unlikely intersection of a person at a specific time and place, yet it has the power to define how we perceive reality.

ELLIE GUO '29 (EGUO@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) THINKS ABOUT OSCAR WILDE EVERY TIME SOMEONE SAYS “SLAY.”

GRAPHIC BY EMMA CRAGO '28

Kitchen Sink No. 8

BY LUKE WAGNER '26 AND JONAH KARAFIOL '26

The bitter wind had been blowing against my face for so long that I had stopped feeling it. My teeth ached. The collar of my coat was wet and was chafing a raw line along the back of my neck. I walked on.

I had been in my room reading Henley. Then I was on the street. Then, before the door. Like a dog's meander back towards its former home.

The oak door was at the bottom of three stone steps and had no handle on the outside. A man on each side of it, both large enough that the steps looked undersized, architectural errors. The one on the left had a mark tattooed on his neck in a script I did not recognise. He looked at me, and I could not tell whether I had been assessed and permitted or simply not worth the effort of stopping.

Inside, the heat sat on my skin. Candles on every surface, the flames leaning in a draft, and the whole room lit the color of old brandy.

I sat at the bar. The wood was dark and scarred, stained and restrained. Behind the barman, a row of bottles with no labels and above them a sign in Cyrillic, the letters angular and crowded. The barman set a glass in front of me without being asked. I drank.

The vodka arrived clear and cold and went down without asking permission. I drank again.

She was sitting two stools from me. I became aware of her before I looked. Something in the air had shifted. She was not looking at me. She was looking at her glass, or at the middle distance behind her glass—I could not tell which.

She had dark hair cut shorter than was customary, and on the inside of her left wrist, at the place where the pulse sits closest to the surface, something was tattooed in the same script as the sign. I left it alone.

Without looking up, she said, You have been here before. I said I had not.

She looked at me then. Her eyes were the color of river water, grey-green, indeterminate, the kind of colour that changes with the light. She said, Perhaps not you.

I turned back to my glass. She slid one stool closer, and I felt the warmth of her before I registered the motion, which was an odd order for things to happen in.

Her name was Vera, though she offered it uncertainly, as if she had not used it in some time and was checking whether it still fit. She poured us both more vodka from a bottle she had produced from somewhere, and she said, Drink this and stop thinking so hard. I can see it from across the room.

I wanted to tell her she was wrong. But she was exactly the kind of person you could only tell true things to. So we drank. I asked how long she had been in England, and she

said long enough. I asked, long enough for what, and she said long enough to know that everyone here is sorry and no one will tell you what for.

I laughed. It came out strange, like I hadn't used the muscles in a while.

She was watching me when I stopped. Not the usual watching—no arrangement behind her eyes, no sentence being

prepared. She was studying me. Something about her expression reminded me of a person trying to recall where they had seen a face before.

You do that, she said. Do what I said. Leave, she responded. She made a small gesture with her glass, a circle. You were here, and then you were not, and now you are again. Where do you go?

I lied. She knew it, and she let me keep the lie, the way you let a child keep a secret that barely qualifies, and this was worse than if she had pressed.

We talked about other things, or she talked, and I filled in what I could. I told her I was at the University and she said Yes, I can tell. I asked how. She said, You have the posture of someone who has been told to sit still for a very long time. And then she said, Who is the other one?

I said, what other one.

She shrugged. The one who came in before you did. He sat where you are sitting, and he drank three glasses, and he did not speak to anyone, and then you arrived.

I told her I had no idea what she meant. This was true. She looked at me, and I think she believed it, which seemed worse, although I wasn't quite sure.

...

We left. We were inside, and then we were in the cold, and then her arm was through mine. She walked quickly, and I followed because following was easier than deciding.

Her room was on the third floor of a building that smelled of damp stone and something resinous I could not name. A lamp, a bed, a table with things on it. On the wall, a piece of paper with a few lines of Cyrillic pinned without a frame; the paper yellowed at the edges.

She undressed without performance, absent-mindedly, each motion practical and unhurried, her attention already somewhere else in the room. Her body was lean and



unhurried, and she moved through the small room with the ease of someone who has made peace with the dimensions of her life. Across her left shoulder and down over her breast, a dragon had been drawn in ink so dark it was almost black, its tail curling under her ribs and ending somewhere at her hip, I could not yet see. It moved when she moved. When she came to me, she put both hands on my face and held me there, steady, and I had the feeling of being read.

She went to the table and opened the small tin. A glass vial, a length of rubber tubing, and a needle that caught the lamplight along its edge. She prepared it without hurry, her hands steady and familiar with the sequence—the rubber around my arm, the tap of two fingers against the vein, the small necessary violence of it—and I understood that she had done this many times, that this was a thing she carried with her the way other women carried a comb or a letter they meant to post.

I should have said no. I opened my mouth to say it, and what came out was, what is it. She said, It will stop the noise. I said what noise. She looked at me, and there was something in her face that was not quite pity and not quite recognition, and she said, the noise you make when you think. I can hear it from here. You have been making it all night.

She came to me and took my arm and turned it so the inside faced up, and I let her. The rubber went around my bicep, and she pulled it tight with her teeth, and her free hand found the vein in the crook of my elbow with a sureness that made my stomach turn, not from disgust but from the intimacy of it, the way she knew exactly where the blood ran close. The needle went in, and I watched it go and felt almost nothing—a sharpness, then a give, then her thumb on the plunger, slow and even.

For a moment, nothing. I was aware of her withdrawing the needle, of her pressing something soft against the puncture, of her fingers loosening the tubing. I was aware of the lamp. Then the lamp was not the lamp.

It began in my hands. A warmth that had no origin, that simply arrived the way a blush arrives, from inside, all at once, flooding outward through the wrists and up through the arms and into the chest where it sat and opened like something unfolding. My jaw loosened. I had not known it was clenched. My shoulders dropped an inch, perhaps two, and muscles I had carried tight for so long I had mistaken them for bone began to let go, one by one, a series of small surrenders I had not authorised and could not stop.

The room softened. The edges of things became less insistent, and somewhere between one breath and the next, a tightness I had carried so long I had mistaken it for my own shape simply fell away.

I heard myself make a sound. Not a word. Something from further back than words. Vera touched the side of my face, and I felt her fingers individually, each one a separate point of heat, and the sensation travelled through me slowly, too slowly, arriving in stages, and I thought: so this is what it is like when the mind stops outrunning the body. This is what other people feel.

Then the thinking itself began to come apart. A thought would begin, and I would lose the end of it. I would reach for a word and find it had moved. Vera said something, and by the time the sound reached me, it had shed its meaning somewhere in transit and arrived as only a warm shape, and I welcomed it.

The room had become very large, or I had become very small within it. The ceiling was a great distance above me. Vera's body beside me was the only thing still solid, still specific, and I pressed against her because she was the last fixed point and everything else was adrift.

We lay together on the narrow bed, and for a while nothing happened, and I thought, this is nothing, and then her mouth was on my throat, and something gave. The ceiling was very far away and also very close, and her body was warm against the length of mine, and the lamp made the room the colour of old amber, and I was not afraid. I turned my head, and the dragon on her shoulder seemed to shift in the low light, incrementally, as though it had moved while I wasn't paying attention and had no intention of being caught at it.

Then the other things came. Not visions—they weren't as organised. More like memories that did not belong to me, pressing through from somewhere adjacent—seeping,

uninvited, the kind of damp you discover only when the plaster has already darkened. A field. The particular flatness of it, the grey sky above it sitting low and heavy. Cold ground under my hands. The smell of something burning and the sound of it too, the specific sound of a fire that is not contained, that crackles as it decides to spread into something pervasive.

And yet my hands knew the temperature of that ground. My lungs knew the smoke. Somewhere in my chest, a feeling was assembling itself—heavy, certain, old—of having done something that could never be taken back.

Vera's hand was on my arm. I did not know how long it had been there.

The room came back wrong. The lamp was on the table, but I could not remember which side of the bed the table was on. The ceiling was the ceiling. I was breathing as though I had been running.

Where did you go?

I said I don't know. She did not ask again. She put her hand flat on my chest, over the sternum, and held it there until my breathing matched the pressure of her palm, and neither of us spoke, and I understood that she had done this before, not for me, but for someone, that this was a thing she knew how to do.

Later, slow and heavy from whatever she had given me, I pressed my face against her neck and heard her breath catch.

I said something. I heard myself say it. She turned her head and looked at me, and I could not retrieve what I had said because by the time I had finished saying it, the words were gone, not faded but actually gone, as if they had been said by someone standing very close behind me, someone whose mouth was almost at my ear.

What did you call me? I said I did not know.

She propped herself on one elbow. The dragon shifted on her shoulder. She looked at me for a long time—not the measuring look from before but something else, something closer to recognition, and I felt a coldness in my chest that had nothing to do with the room.

You called me a name, she said. Not my name.

I said nothing. I could feel the shape of where the word had been in my mouth, the ghost of it, but the word itself was gone.

She reached out and touched the side of my face. Not gently. Precisely. Then she lay

back down and looked at the ceiling and did not speak, and her silence had the quality of a decision being made, and I was afraid of every possibility it contained.

Something like sleep came. When I surfaced, the lamp was lower, and she was breathing slowly beside me, and

I was sitting upright at the edge of the bed, dressed, both boots laced, as though I had been about to leave and had simply stopped somewhere in the middle of the decision. I did not remember standing. I did not remember the boots. I looked at my hands. They could have been anyone's. I turned them over slowly, examining them for evidence.

They told me nothing.

I undressed again and lay back down. Outside the window, the city was silent. Not the silence of late hours. The silence that follows something.

...

In the morning, she gave me tea without asking, and I drank it standing at the window. The fog had not moved. Through it, the rooftops were suggestions only, the chimneys, the angles of slates.

On the table beside the tin, there was a piece of paper—it had appeared in the night, or I had failed to see it before. A few lines in English, the handwriting almost mine but wrong in the slant, as though my hand had been held at an unfamiliar angle. A name, an address perhaps. I looked at my right hand. Ink on the side of my smallest finger. I folded the paper into my pocket before she could see it.

Vera came to stand beside me at the window. For a moment, neither of us spoke. You talked in your sleep, she said. Quite a lot, actually.

I asked what I had said.

She picked up her tea. Things that did not make sense, she said. Something about a field. And a name—the same one you called me.

I set my cup down because my hand was not steady. She watched me do this. She said, You were very upset. I said I did not remember dreaming.

She nodded and looked out at the fog. I searched her profile for some indication of what she intended to do with all of this, and her face gave me nothing. She drank her tea.

You are looking for something, she said.

Yes. But I do not know what.

I let myself out. On the stairs, a man coming up nodded at me as though we had met before. I nodded back. Perhaps we had.

I walked home. The cold had settled into me somewhere during the night, and I could not tell anymore where it ended, and where I began. The street ran west and widened, and the lamps had gone out. My footsteps on the stone were the only sound. Between each step a silence that lasted slightly too long.

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GRAPHICS BY EMMA CRAGO '28







The Price of Becoming an Alpha Male

How British-American journalist Louis Theroux's documentary exposes the monetization of masculinity in the digital age.

BY ELLA RICKETTS '28

Instead of spending my Wednesday evening of Spring Recess lying on the beach clutching a piña colada in one hand and my faith in humanity in the other, I watched Louis Theroux's new documentary titled "Inside the Manosphere."

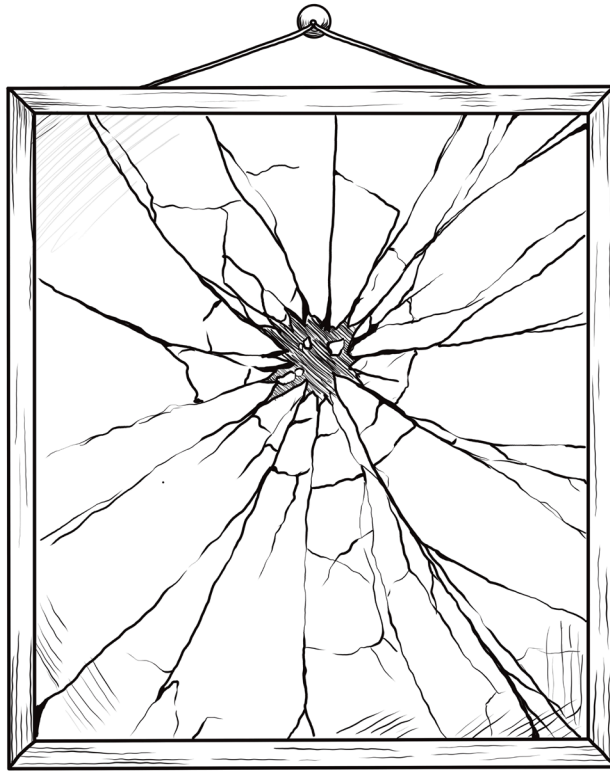
For 91 minutes, I witnessed Theroux try to disentangle the bizarre nature of the "manosphere"—a vaguely connected network of misogynistic male influencers. Using his wildly calm demeanor and ability to coax a cat into water, Theroux baits his subjects into volunteering shockingly egregious convictions. In almost a greater torture than walking on a trail of Legos, I forced myself to suffer through the cartoonish bravado and painful immorality of self-proclaimed alpha males in an attempt to decipher how this "manosphere" operates. At some point during my oscillation between amusement and terror, the film helped to unravel a realization: the manosphere is not simply an ideology, but also a dangerous business model.

Anyone familiar with red pill content understands its focus on hegemonic masculinity, in which the "formula" for success is extraordinarily superficial. Own a fleet of flashy cars. Flex a set of six-pack abs. Keep at least one attractive woman hooked on each arm. But Theroux ventures to explore exactly how this mentality constructs profitable "careers," exposing the digital chameleons that manufacture a narrative for their personal gain.

Consider Harrison Sullivan, a British chauvinistic content creator known online as HSTikkyTokky, who meets with Theroux early in the documentary. During his interview, Sullivan maintains a shallow definition of building this alleged manhood, equating masculinity with financial gain and being "outside" the mainstream.

"I teach guys how to be proper guys, not these little soy boys," Sullivan tells Theroux, while sizing up his stature like a peacock checking out another's plume. Of course, his rhetoric perfectly pairs with the financial services he sells, which claim to help men escape the supposedly ghastly nine-to-five. Later, Theroux's own investigation reveals that Sullivan takes a cut of any money invested—even if his advice fails.

Along eerily identical lines is influencer Justin Waller—a known associate of charged rapists Andrew and Tristan Tate—who often spouts the argument, as shown in the documentary, that a man "has to create value in the world," while women are "already born with their value through beauty." Like a sleazy salesman who sells you a broken car that he owns the repair shop for, Waller pushes a laughable, unaccredited online course designed by the Tate brothers that



allegedly teaches men how to become "money makers." Both men copy the same playbook: convince young men they have little worth, and then push the solution to a problem they helped create.

The final element sustaining the allure of the manosphere is instructing men how to "possess" one last status symbol: women. Crucial is the word "possess" as these influencers weaponize virulent language associated with domination and control. At one point in the documentary, Theroux confronts "Fresh and Fit" podcaster Myron Gaines about past comments in which he frames relationships with women in hierarchical and controlling terms. Immediately, Gaines doubles down, asserting that he champions this patriarchal power dynamic because he "knows what's best for them." He justifies his cesspit of misogynistic remarks by pushing half-baked pseudoscience that men are the natural leaders. To illustrate his point, Gaines carefully selects OnlyFans models willing to risk humiliation for views, which he uses to make faulty generalizations about the nature of women to his gaggle of subscribers.

Bemusingly, it becomes apparent that their advice is more hypocritical than a vegan opening a taxidermy enterprise. Gaines is quick to criticize the women for their high body counts, yet proudly states that he plans to have multiple wives, under "one-way monogamy." In a similar display of "rules for thee and not for me," influencer Justin Waller presents a relationship that Theroux describes off-camera as "founded on a Darwinian view of alpha supremacy." Using an overtly defensive tone, Waller explains that it's acceptable for him to have multiple girlfriends while with his wife, but she must continue her devotion to him.

As the film progresses, we see that the men's walking contradictions funnel directly into their wallets. Sullivan reveals that he profits heavily from his OnlyFans

promotion agency, but simultaneously describes their behavior as "disgusting." Most ironically, this is the same man who grinned like a Cheshire cat, bragging to Theroux about how he recorded a sex act being performed on him to post as content. If he were stuck in 1949, Sullivan would evidently star as the doctor in a Camel cigarettes commercial.

Although Theroux's documentary does not fully address why young men are so easily buying into their product, a few of the influencers' followers are featured throughout. One insists that "as a man, no one is going to give you a handout," demonstrating a dangerously isolationist mindset. His response, when taken in conjunction with the "male loneliness" epidemic, offers a tangible explanation for the magnetism of the manosphere.

According to Gallup, 25% of U.S. men aged 15 to 34 report feeling lonely "a lot of the previous day," compared to 18% of women in the same age group. Their alienation is made worse by the lack of emotional intimacy in their relationships, with 30% of Gen Z men believing they should not say "I love you" to their friends. Rather than encourage community-building, the manosphere acts as if commodities can substitute for connections. They provide a mirage of financial success so encapsulating that, when followers drink the water, they scarcely notice they are being asphyxiated by the sand of their own despair and insecurity.

Alas, "Inside the Manosphere" reveals that what could be regarded as a countermovement to feminism is also a subscription-based trap. These influencers craft their own venomous ideology that preys on the self-loathing of young men so they can offer the antidote. Their business model depends entirely on their audience remaining isolated and insecure enough to keep lapping up their fraudulent services. Sullivan's admission to Theroux—"I don't give a fuck, I'm doing it for the money"—is the only candid moment in the 91 minutes of red pill conspiracies and aggressive masculinity.

While they laugh all the way to the bank, they leave young men stranded in an oasis that was never actually there.

**ELLA RICKETTS '28
(ERICKETTS@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) SINCERELY
WISHES SHE HAD TAKEN
THE BLUE PILL INSTEAD.**

**GRAPHIC BY NESHAMA
RYMAN '28**

Exploring American Hometowns: Irvine, California

Growing up in a sunny suburb.

BY CLORIS SHI '29

Live long enough in Irvine, California, and you might begin to think you are living in “The Truman Show.”

Sunny during all seasons, days blur into years under blue skies, white clouds, trimmed hedges, and asphalt streets. For 18 years, I grew up in Irvine, one of three babies born on a sunny December day in Irvine Regional Hospital. The city seems to sit at a constant 80 degrees, suspended in a glow, sun-dappled by palm trees. Except for a few new housing developments, Irvine is the same as it was the day I was born.

Irvine prides itself as one of the most meticulously designed cities in America. In the 1960s, as families streamed south from Los Angeles to settle open rangeland, architect William Pereira envisioned the Irvine Master Plan—“carefully wrought for a totally new city.”

“We call it the City of Irvine.”

Built with sustainability in mind, Irvine reflects its Scottish etymology: “green” or “fresh river.” Irvine is home to 310,000 residents, located just inland of Newport Beach and halfway between Los Angeles and San Diego. The town unfolds as a series of 22 “villages,” self-contained mini-suburbs each complete with its own shopping center, park, playground, and elementary school. Most people live in single-family homes or condos, designed to mimic Mediterranean-style villas—beige stucco walls, terracotta tiles, arched doorways, and pools lined with mosaics. Streets are wide and curve around houses,

threading the city together.

I can begin anywhere in Irvine and end sprawled on a patch of grass. As one of the nation’s largest planned urban communities, Irvine preserves nearly a third of its area as green space; every home lies within a mile of a park or a duck-filled lake. If I walk along any street, it will lead to concrete, then open onto a trail that winds through village after village. My first house sat just off the Jeffrey Trail, a five-mile path that led to my middle school. With trails always circling back to the start, the city always seemed to usher me home.

Irvine is also famous for its delicious restaurants. As a toddler, I chased dim sum carts at the Cantonese restaurant China Garden, loading the table with egg tarts, shrimp har gao, and mango pudding until my family became regulars, proudly brandishing our secret 10% discount. I remember fashioning myself into a serious food critic at Taiko, where my family faithfully ate every Friday at the sushi bar across from our favorite itamae-san, who introduced me to uni, salmon roe, and takoyaki. I remember Yu’s Garden—open since before I was born and at all hours of the day—where tubs of piping hot sweet potato porridge accompany side dishes like garlicky pig ear, cold tofu skin, and spicy Sichuan eggplant, which would zap the jet lag out of me after a trip away.

Nearly 50% of the city is Asian. Parents circled learning centers on Saturday mornings; kids

carried the same neon yellow-and-black tote bag the local math school handed out. Families gathered for annual Lunar New Year celebrations in the high school gymnasium and dance classes at the community center behind the local library. At the sprawling Irvine Chinese School, I attended traditional Chinese dance lessons, Math Olympiad exams, and free craft workshops. By the time I was of school age, I had gone to enough Kumon sessions, AYSO soccer practices, and Boomers parties to find myself connected by two or three degrees to nearly every other kid in town.

Being outdoors was central to Irvine. In elementary school, birthday parties were held—splashing around Woodbury Pool or playing freeze tag on Castle Park, on top of a true-to-size cinder-block castle that stands tall in the middle of a sandbox. As I got older, hangouts shifted to the Irvine Spectrum, where I shopped with my friends until our feet ached on the warm, clay-colored pavement beneath our feet. We skated on a half-melted ice rink in winter and rode the slow Ferris wheel on summer nights. A farm right off the highway sold the sweetest strawberries during the summer, pumpkins and pony rides during Halloween, and evergreen firs at Christmas. Every year, the local community college hosted the Baroque period piano festival, the Turkey Trot 5K on Thanksgiving, and the citywide Chemistry Olympiad.



Yet, amid the placid calm of its greenery, Irvine is deeply ambitious. A third of Fortune 500 companies have a presence in the city. Irvine is nestled along the Tech Coast, a major hub for technology, aerospace, biotech, and software companies. Elementary schools are named for landscapes grander than anything in the old ranchland: Canyon View, Santiago Hills, and Portola Springs. Streets borrow the names of elite universities—Harvard Avenue leads to a butterfly garden; Yale Avenue takes us to my mother’s favorite Korean grocery store.

Naturally, when high school ended, I felt an urgency to leave. I was bored with the city, annoyed by the predictability—Irvine seemed unable to grow up with me, suspended in a sheen of artificiality. Like Truman, I sought to find where the sea ended, to break out the dome of Seahaven. I itched for Harvard to be more than a street, to be a campus of history and purpose.

And so, I arrived at Cambridge, Massachusetts—a city that changes so unexpectedly with each season. In the fall, the leaves change colors the way one falls in love—slowly, slowly, then all at once. One morning in December, I woke up to find the campus covered in white. Another day in March, I found the lawn was suddenly a hopeful shade of green. I constantly refresh the weather app, quickly learning the difference between 10 and 20 degrees Fahrenheit.

Further, Cambridge wears its history openly, priding itself on preserving its memory. Here, the past is baked into crimson walls, uneven cobblestone roads, and Victorian townhouses. One of the oldest American cities, Cambridge arose organically—the natural green space is the Charles River, meandering, scattered with goose droppings. Most parks have slides made of tarnished metal; statues and plaques commemorate figures and landmarks dating back a couple of centuries.

But there is a precious quality to a hometown that is cheerily forgetful, finitely knowable. I am finding increasing value in Irvine’s planned nature, in the fake bright green turf in Irvine Great Park, over the sorry mushy grass in the winter months in Cambridge Common. In Irvine, I can lose track of the

neighborhood while cruising down open streets, with local roads wide enough to fit four cars side by side. In Cambridge, I find myself hypervigilant for the whizzing e-biker cutting corners or the power-walking office worker hustling for the T station. It’s different, the way I interact with Cambridge, gripping my backpack straps, walking fast, triple-checking my phone for the right directions back to my dorm. In Irvine, I can remain a child: wide-eyed, light-hearted, wandering along well-paved streets that will always loop around, guiding me home before dark.

That is what makes Irvine honestly difficult to depict fairly. I can easily mock a place designed to be pristine and perfect, a city so ahistorical, so eager to fill shoes bigger than itself. When the sun rises each morning, the sky unnaturally blue, the city seems to have reset itself overnight, eerily unchanged, a utopia I can’t blame for its memorylessness—it is “master-planned” as such. Irvine is so safe, ranked for sixteen years as the safest in America, and the eighth happiest city in the country. Weather—a polite sun and calm wind—does no damage—ruffles feathers, stirs the water. Change, if any happens, is gentle, not brutal, and real, as I have now seen the ways a city can change.

It took some distance away to realize that Irvine had cared for me the way Ada Limón describes maternal love in her poem “The Raincoat.”

“My god, I thought, my whole life I’ve been under her raincoat thinking it was somehow a marvel that I never got wet,” she wrote.

Irvine is my raincoat. I had to leave—namely, fight through two blizzards this past winter—to recognize the shawl my sunny city drapes over me. In Irvine, so consistently shielded, I could move through childhood unaware of snow boots, black ice, and whips of wind. What more could I ask for from my hometown? A place where I can turn a corner and find a friendly face—the mayor who gave me a Korean name in elementary school, or my hairdresser who gave me my first haircut and also curled my hair for my prom up-do. A place where everywhere I go, there’s something beautiful: the big tire

swing, cinnamon donuts at a local bakery, and second-hand books. A place where even a street named Harvard could, one day, become real.

I am grateful for the shelter Irvine has given me, but also restless for a world that is not so carefully arranged. Irvine has held me long enough for me to grow up, long enough to leave. Irvine has protected me—even if, under Southern California’s constant sun, there was never much rain to begin with.

So, like Truman, I bid Irvine farewell: “Good morning, and in case I don’t see ya, good afternoon, good evening, and good night!”

**CLORIS SHI '29
(CLORISSHI@COLLEGE.
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GIVE ANYTHING TO SIT
DOWN AGAIN AT 101
NOODLE EXPRESS.**

**GRAPHICS BY ANGIE LI
'28**



Boots, Beats, and Blue Jeans: The Fashion of Country's Streaming Boom

How a once-niche sound and style became popularized in Gen Z.

BY AURORA CHARBONNEAU '29 AND BRENDA LI '29

Over the past six years, country music streaming has surged by nearly 287%, driven largely by Gen Z and millennials. Artists like Morgan Wallen, Zach Bryan, and Megan Moroney now dominate charts and playlists once reserved for pop and hip-hop. What was once perceived as regional and niche has evolved into a defining sound of the mainstream.

This shift is evident even in the way companies define music genres. Listeners who never intentionally select the country genre on Spotify increasingly find country tracks woven into their pop playlists. This crossover is more than a quirk of the algorithm; it signals a broader transformation in the musical landscape. Country music's growing presence within traditional pop spaces reflects its role in redefining what "popular" music sounds like today.

Even on Harvard's urban campus—surrounded by Cambridge coffee shops and the hum of public transportation rather than farms and pickup trucks—country music has found a devoted following among students who blast Morgan Wallen in the gym or sing along to Zach Bryan's "Something in the Orange" at tailgates. This surge feels fresh, yet Harvard has long been tangled in country music's story. Tracy Chapman, who busked in Harvard Square and performed at Club Passim in the 1980s, wrote "Fast Car," which became a defining anthem of this new country wave after Luke Combs's 2022 cover rocketed it back to No. 1.

For Combs, the track was a childhood staple spinning in his father's truck—a "perfect" song worth honoring—and its journey from country stadiums to Cambridge streets shows how the genre has burst free from rural borders, thriving just as fiercely in Ivy League dorms as it does down on rural backroads.

Country music is no longer the exclusive domain of Nashville insiders. We can even look back to the late 2010s to examine the early moments of country and hip-hop fusion that set the stage for this crossover wave, from the breakout success of Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" to Lady Gaga's country-inflected "Million Reasons." In an unexpected cultural shift, artists from entirely different genres are stepping into the country spotlight. Lana Del Rey, long associated with dreamy, melancholic pop, performed last year at Stagecoach—the world's largest country music festival—debuting country-inspired songs. Beyoncé, one of the most influential pop and R&B artists of all time, embraced country sounds in her recent work, "Cowboy Carter." Even Cyndi Lauper and Snoop Dogg—artists who sit on opposite ends of the musical spectrum—have signaled interest in country, from Lauper's country album "Detour" to Snoop Dogg's recent collaborations with country artists.

When musicians who have already

mastered other genres pivot toward country, it suggests something deeper than trend-chasing. It points to country becoming the "it" genre—one that nearly every artist now wants a piece of.

The genre traces its roots to the early 20th century and grew out of a fusion of Appalachian folk, British and Irish ballads, gospel, blues, and Black musical traditions in the American South and along the Appalachian Mountains. Early "hillbilly" music blended English and Scots-Irish fiddle tunes with African-American blues and banjo, eventually becoming the commercial "country" industry centered in Nashville.

This musical resurgence isn't confined to sound—it's influencing fashion trends as well. Today, that complexity is re-emerging in new ways, spilling over into wardrobes across campuses and cities.

Cowboy boots, once used mainly in the South, are now a staple of the modern going-out outfit in many East Coast cities. For many young women, no club or party ensemble feels complete without them. Ironically, while these boots were originally designed for rural outdoor work, they now serve a new purpose: protecting wearers from spilled drinks and sticky floors in frat basements and crowded dance spaces.

Then there's the sundress. As a lyrical fixture in country songs—alongside jeans, tractors, and cold beer—the sundress has become a cultural uniform. Short, flowy, and effortlessly styled, it's more popular than ever, even extending into unexpected spaces like prom, where "Easter dress" aesthetics are beginning to redefine formalwear.

In many cases, popular retailers have adopted the visual elements of traditional country clothing while ignoring the original function and craftsmanship behind them. Garments that were once made from durable materials for practical labor are now produced with lighter fabrics and designed primarily for appearance rather than use. Retailers have followed suit. Brands like Hollister, PacSun, and Brandy Melville have leaned into Western Americana, popularizing gingham button-down shirts and emphasizing belts with oversized metal buckles. These pieces echo traditional country style but are repackaged for a Gen Z audience—less utility, more aesthetic.

Hailey Bieber and Bella Hadid, two of the most visible fashion barometers for younger consumers, have helped normalize this mashup of runways and ranches. Hadid in

particular has been described by fashion media as a model who "truly lives that cowgirl life." She is often photographed alongside her partner, professional horse trainer and equestrian Adan Banuelos, wearing her uniform of leather matching sets with mid-calf cowboy boots, hats, and denim mini-skirts with Western belts.

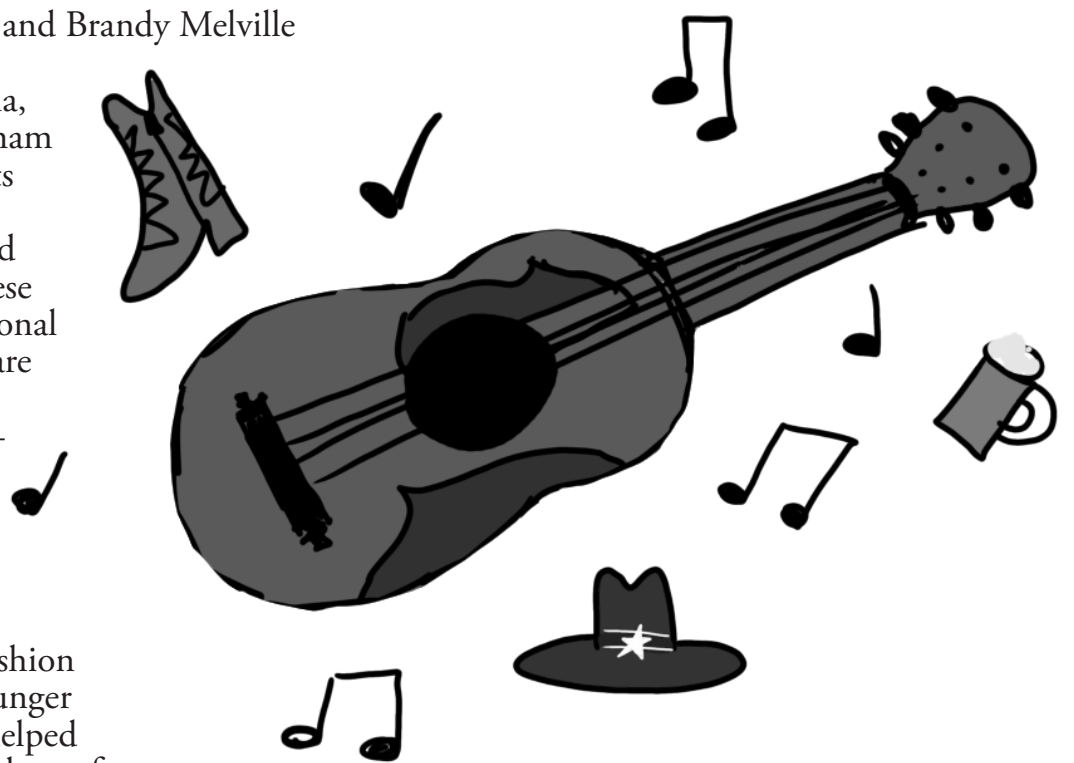
Although it may seem like an overreach to attribute this trend solely to the genre's rise, it is important to recognize that country music has always been about more than just music. At its core, it reflects a set of values—faith, family, hard work, and an idealized vision of rural life. Its recent surge in popularity, paired with the rise of country fashion, may point to something larger: a generational shift in what young people are drawn to.

In a world defined by digital overload and cultural fragmentation, the aesthetics of country offer something that feels grounded, even nostalgic. The boots, the dresses, the belts—they signal a longing for simplicity and authenticity. Whether that longing reflects lived experience is another question.

This, too, is a kind of counterculture—not one that rejects the mainstream, but one that reshapes it, pulling symbols of rural identity into urban spaces, streaming platforms, and fast-fashion racks.

AURORA CHARBONNEAU '29 (AURORACHARBONNEAU@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND BRENDA LI '29 (BRENDALI@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) ARE COMPING THE "INDEPENDENT."

GRAPHIC BY MIA STEWART '29



Do-it-Yourself Shotski

An artistic or engineering project in honor of the best day of the year: River Run.

BY THE 4X BLACK DIAMOND

Some may crown sliced bread or the internet as humanity's greatest invention, but that title belongs elsewhere.

Instead, mankind should be lauded for the shotski.

This beautiful device features four shot glasses attached to a ski; that's it. Simple, yet it elevates the experience of taking a shot to a whole new level. What better way for you and three of your best friends to engage in debauchery than with an old ski?

I realized this past semester that my old ways of shot-taking were basic and uninspiring. People try so hard to spice it up—intertwining arms, saying *arriba, abajo, al centro, pa' dentro*, giving big speeches. I needed a change, and what better way than to build my very own shotski. The upcoming Harvard College Housing Day tradition, River Run, was the perfect excuse—I mean, inspiration—to make this contraption. Join me as I walk through my process (the good, the bad, and the ugly) in crafting my very own shotski.

Friday, Feb. 27

I began my journey to make this device, but the only problem was that I didn't have my base material: skis. I sure as heck wasn't going to cut into my Vokls. So I did a nice scroll of Facebook Marketplace and found a pair for \$25. I messaged the seller and set up a time in the next week to pick them up.

Tuesday, March 3

The day of the pickup. Transport was the first hurdle since I wasn't going to pay \$30 there and back for an Uber to Brighton. Luckily for me (or as you'll soon learn, unluckily), I have a scooter. But my 10-minute scooter ride after class quickly turned into a 20-minute slog because of a nasty ice storm. Though I can't say I recommend the journey, I toughed it out and texted the seller that I was five minutes out from our agreed-upon pick-up spot. I was met by a dismaying response. "Crap, I forgot them, I don't even know how, but they're not in my car," they wrote—with an important follow-up: "I'm so sorry, I left them in Maine."

So there I was, pelted by hail and discouraged from my travels, turning my scooter around and heading home. It's safe to say my first experience with buying skis was not a great one.

Monday, March 9

Knowing my recent Facebook Marketplace experience was not going to deter my final objective, I messaged yet another seller and quickly set up a pickup time. This seller lived a five-minute walk from the Somerville Porter Square T stop, so neither a scooter nor an Uber was necessary. Pickup was easy; they left them on their front porch, and I left \$30 cash. I proceeded to order the materials for the rest of

the production: magnets, epoxy, washers, and shot glasses—this isn't just any old shotski. Now for the actual fun part: the engineering.

Thursday, March 12

It was the day before Spring Recess, and I had minimal homework, so I said to myself, "Let's craft this shotski." After scooting one of the skis to the Science and Engineering Complex Makerspace, consulting with Makerspace Manager Joe Kile, and removing the ski hardware, I began cutting 1 1/8-inch holes. I quickly realized that the drilling might be the hardest part of the project. Though the skis had wood cores, they were layered with metal and fiberglass. Metal trying to drill through metal ... not a fun task; breathing in fiberglass ... not good. I made it partway through my first hole, lost motivation, and decided to call it a night.

Friday, March 13

Revitalized by spring break energy, I returned to the makerspace. With assistance from Kile, I discovered how to cut through two holes. With a pulsing motion, the drill was able to push through. Though I was hoping to finish the cutting portion of the project on this day, I was interrupted by the five o'clock Makerspace closure—an unavoidable roadblock.

Sunday, March 15

Since my flight to El Salvador departed at 4:45 p.m., I had a few hours to kill before I needed to leave for the airport. Feeling like the biggest nerd for being in the almost empty SEC building during the weekend of break, I finished the last two holes. I now had four 1 1/8-inch holes ready for my secret sauce.

I decided I was not going to cut four shot-sized holes into a ski; that would be too easy.

I cooked up a plan to epoxy magnets into the holes. Though this goes beyond the traditional call of duty, I wanted to be able to clean the shot glasses, while ensuring a strong bond for safe (even drunken) use. Before catching my flight, I laid the ski out on my dorm room floor and left it to cure for eight days—note that I also taped over the backside of the holes and placed the entire project on top of a ripped garbage bag.

I rolled my suitcase out the door and caught a final glimpse of the window I had

left cracked before praying that nothing would go wrong.

Monday, March 23

When I returned from my trip, I found the shotski lying right where I left it with solid, dry epoxy. But upon further inspection, I found that the magnets, which had successfully set at the bottom of the ski, were not strong enough to hold the shot glasses—this was tested by supergluing washers to the bottom of the shot glasses and finding that they would not hold. I told myself that this was ok; engineering is about making mistakes. Just like my "Mechanics of Solids" mid-

term, sometimes you fail. I decided to sleep on it and solve the problem the next morning.

Tuesday, March 24

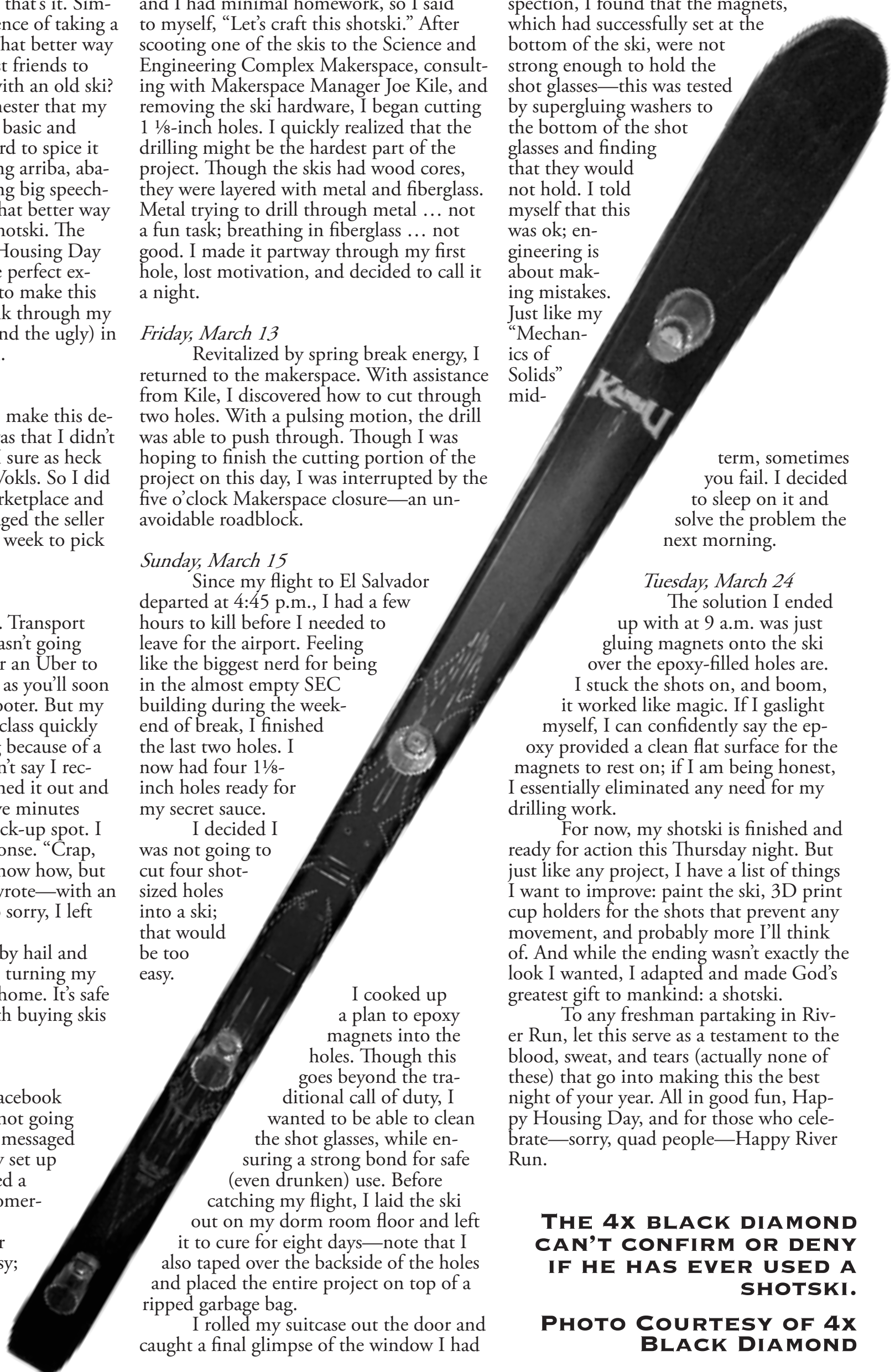
The solution I ended up with at 9 a.m. was just gluing magnets onto the ski over the epoxy-filled holes. I stuck the shots on, and boom, it worked like magic. If I gaslight myself, I can confidently say the epoxy provided a clean flat surface for the magnets to rest on; if I am being honest, I essentially eliminated any need for my drilling work.

For now, my shotski is finished and ready for action this Thursday night. But just like any project, I have a list of things I want to improve: paint the ski, 3D print cup holders for the shots that prevent any movement, and probably more I'll think of. And while the ending wasn't exactly the look I wanted, I adapted and made God's greatest gift to mankind: a shotski.

To any freshman partaking in River Run, let this serve as a testament to the blood, sweat, and tears (actually none of these) that go into making this the best night of your year. All in good fun, Happy Housing Day, and for those who celebrate—sorry, quad people—Happy River Run.

THE 4X BLACK DIAMOND CAN'T CONFIRM OR DENY IF HE HAS EVER USED A SHOTSKI.

PHOTO COURTESY OF 4X BLACK DIAMOND



Comic Collection

BY ELLIE GUO '29, KALVIN FRANK '28, AND MIA TAVARES '27

Housing Day: Back in My Day



WRITTEN BY KALVIN FRANK '28

GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28

Socratic Seminar



Socrates: "There are only two things in life that are decided entirely by Fate—who you are born as... and your Harvard House."

WRITTEN BY ELLIE GUO '29

GRAPHIC BY SAM PARK '29

"Yes, I did the readings for today."

WRITTEN BY MIA TAVARES '27

GRAPHIC BY AMELIE LIMA '27



A Winning Mindset or Winning the Mind?

The rise of sports psychology and my personal experience with it.

BY CAROLINE STOHRER '28

At the highest levels of sport, athletes generate massive attention, whether in professional leagues or national and world championships. However, nothing quite captures the public's fascination with competition like the Olympic Games. Success stories catapult athletes to permanent cultural fame—think Usain Bolt, who broke world records and cemented the start of his legacy as the fastest man in the world at the 2008 Beijing Olympics, or the “Miracle on Ice,” when a young, amateur U.S. ice hockey team upset the professional Soviet Union team for the gold medal at the 1980 Lake Placid Games.

But what about the athletes who miss the mark? What do they get? Disappointment, and sometimes, vitriol from their own fans. In the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, Simone Biles—who many consider to be the “greatest of all time” in the artistic gymnastics community—stunned the world when she decided to pull out of most of her events after difficulties with a mental block known as the “twisties.” Social media blew up, claiming that Biles was “weak” or that she “failed her country.” More recently, the Australian middle-distance track team faced a swarm of online hate after they failed to qualify for the final.

How do athletes get past this constant fixation on “win” or “lose”? Over the past few years, sports psychology has become the answer. Sports psychology helps athletes improve both their mental and physical game at every competitive level and has been shown to reduce anxiety and improve competitive advantage.

“Your cortisol levels go up, and your entire body is now hypervigilant to the point where you're actually making mistakes because you're hyper-focused on things,” Harvard psychologist Michael Hollander told the “Harvard Gazette.” “And trying to do two things at once rarely, rarely works. Your focus is gone, and you stumble.”

Nowadays, athletic trainers focus on regulating the prefrontal cortex and amygdala, which are responsible for decision-making and emotions, respectively.

It is no wonder that sports psychologists are in high demand. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates that from 2021 to 2031, psychologist employment will grow by 14%, with an 8% increase in demand for sports psychologists. To put that in perspective, the Bureau projects employment in computer and information technology occupations to grow by 14.6%.

As a high-performance athlete in synchronized figure skating, I've been lucky to be backed by a federation that prioritizes the mental health of its skaters. U.S. Figure Skating's sport psychology team is run by Dr. Caroline Silby, a former competitive figure skater.

In every discipline, Team USA skaters and coaches have access to one-on-one counseling, workshops, and therapy sessions, among other offerings.

My team, the Haydenettes, has regular psych sessions with Dr. Lauren McHenry throughout the season to improve our pre-competition prep, teamwork, and effectiveness during practice. The content and format of our sessions vary. Sometimes,

we sit in a circle and discuss issues the team has been having or anxieties about a certain element or upcoming competition. Other times, we break into groups to debate our goals for the next training block or write personal, anonymous notes in response to a given prompt.

What I've found extremely effective is the policy of “what is said in the bubble, stays in the bubble.” In other words, we, along with McHenry, keep the specifics of our discussions and what individuals have shared during the sessions private. We feel empowered to be honest during the sessions. We can bridge the occasional communication gap with our coaching staff, as it can be hard or awkward for skaters (or any athlete on a team) to voice concerns or comments about how practices are run.

Another positive impact sports psychology has had on our performance is our consistency and stress management on competition day. Earlier in the season, we reviewed how anxiety manifests in the body and ways to regulate our nervous system. Personally, I've adopted visualization and breathing exercises to help calm my nerves before I take the ice. Through our psychology sessions, we've also improved how we practice on and off the ice, leading to more reps, greater confidence, and, finally, successful performances.

This mental tenacity has paid off—my team has won a medal at every single competition this season, domestically and internationally. And if you want to see the success of sports psychology from other U.S. Figure Skating athletes, look no further than Amber Glenn and Alysa Liu.

Glenn, a three-time U.S. national champion, an Olympian, and one of the few U.S. women to ever land a triple axel in international competition, has been open about her mental health journey. After struggling with depression and self-comparison, Glenn began seeing results when she worked with sports psychologists to manage her anxiety instead of simply medicating it. Alysa Liu, the 2026 Olympic gold medalist, has spoken out about how changing her intrinsic motivation—a key component of sports psych sessions—helped her view skating as something she could enjoy, not a job she had to perform.

Nevertheless, some athletes

discount the importance of sports psychology or resist even the notion of seeking psychological treatment. A 2000 survey by Long Island psychologists found that only 10% of subjects had seen a sports psychologist, despite 100% of respondents feeling they would benefit from doing so. The authors noted that many athletes have coping mechanisms they prefer over seeking professional help, such as superstitious behaviors, performance-enhancing drugs, or conditions like eating disorders or exercise bulimia. Additionally, a 2021 paper discovered that individuals in team sports found it more difficult to participate in counseling and showed increased “stigma tolerance,” the belief that they will be perceived negatively if seeking sports psychology.

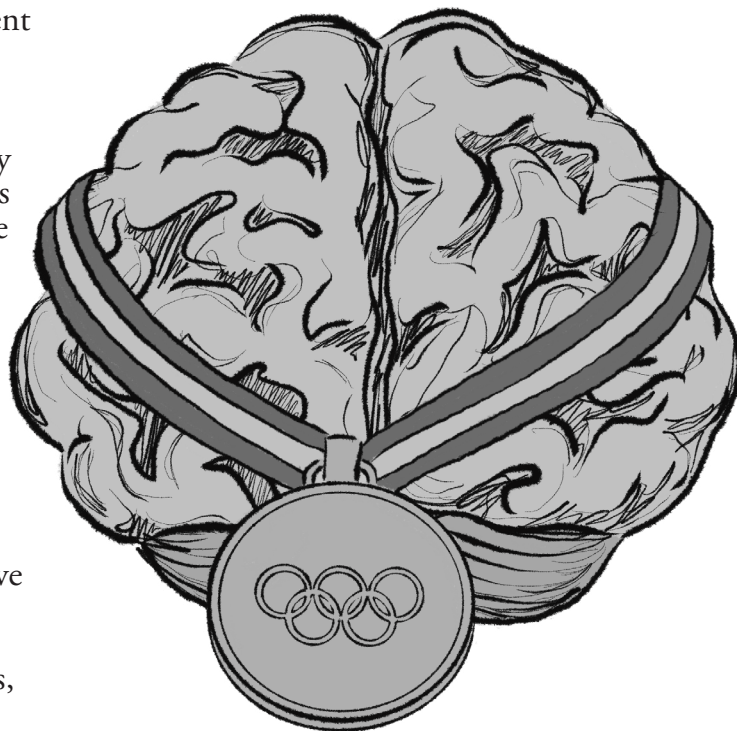
Athletes can deal with fear of failure, high expectations, fragile self-confidence, and breakdowns in trust when it matters most. Sound familiar? A 2025 survey by Healthy Minds discovered that 23% of Harvard students reported experiencing anxiety, and 22% reported signs of depression. “Mental health on this campus sometimes feels very invisible,” a member of Active Minds commented to the “Independent” last year. “It's something that a lot of people struggle with, but not many people are willing to talk about.” Just as athletes do, students face mental challenges that can constrain us from fulfilling our potential.

“Athletes must find pleasure in ‘being’ versus ‘achieving,’” Silby said in a 2023 interview.

Sports are so much more than winning a medal or making a team; they are the experience and joy we feel while preparing and competing. It's not every day that you get to be healthy enough to train with your teammates and friends, and I think sports psychology has put that into perspective.

The same goes for attending Harvard: for most students, attending the College has been our dream for many years, and the resources we have here to fulfill our academic goals are unparalleled. Sports psychology and therapy can help us focus our plans and appreciate the process of achieving them. So why not work towards enjoying every second of your time as an athlete—or student?

I'll finish with this quote from the 2026 Norwegian biathlete Vetle Sjaastad Christiansen: “That's what we're going to remember when we get old. It's not necessarily the physical gold medal, but it's the gold medal of memories. And we had thousands and thousands of them these past weeks and months.”



**CAROLINE STOHRER '28
(CAROLINESTOHRER@
COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU)
THINKS EVERYONE SHOULD
TRY THERAPY AT LEAST
ONCE—EVEN IF THEY'RE A
NARP.**

**GRAPHIC BY NESHAMA
RYMAN '28**

We Just Don't Care: U.S. Baseball

On why the United States cannot seem to win the World Baseball Classic.

BY TYLER DANG '28

While many Major League Baseball players are returning to form during spring training, countries from around the world united to compete in the World Baseball Classic. As a nearly two-week tournament, the Classic features Hall of Fame locks, top prospects, and some players who aren't even professional ballplayers. With the chance to represent their country on a big stage separate from the MLB, players take the Classic with the utmost seriousness. And yet, the country that hosts the largest professional league doesn't seem to want any part of it—why?

The World Baseball Classic is still a relatively new tournament. Beginning in 2006, the Classic was not the first major baseball tournament, but more of a revival; Olympic Baseball existed but was declining in popularity. Like the Olympics, the WBC would occur every four years. Even though the tournament was founded by the MLB, an American sports league, the U.S. team has only won once in 2017. The 2023 finals featured a showdown between the United States and Japan, who ended up taking it all.

Fast forward to today, and the United States has a dangerous lineup, yet many doubted the depth of the pitching talent. While Team USA made a deep push to the finals, they were defeated by Venezuela. And though critics were right to have concerns about the pitching, the issue

was larger than that. Restrictions on when pitchers could play, and leadership that failed to show up resulted in the United States coming up short.

What in the World is Insurance?

March 26 marks the start of the MLB regular season. Few teams are eager to have their players risk wear and tear in a tournament that doesn't help the team. Pitchers especially face extreme restrictions on how much they can throw per game and how many games they can play.

But the biggest restriction MLB players face is obtaining insurance for the team. The insurance guarantees that an MLB team's investment won't be wasted if a player is injured. Pitchers have the highest requirement for insurance, with their salaries guaranteed for four years as opposed to the two for position players. But once a pitcher is guaranteed insurance, they aren't given full autonomy. Teams still limit when a pitcher can actually play, and because games occur back-to-back, there is little time for a pitcher to fully recover.

Team USA had arguably the two best pitchers in the world with Paul Skenes and Tarik Skubal, both of whom won the Cy Young Award last season for their respective leagues. Yet, neither of these players pitched in the championship game; granted, Skenes pitched in the semi-finals against a monster Dominican Republic team.

Logan Webb, the star pitcher from the Giants, also sat out, having played in the

quarterfinals. Instead, Nolan McLean, a top prospect for the Mets, started against Venezuela. McLean is a great pitcher, but he's young, having made his MLB debut only last year. Of the U.S.'s two losses in the Classic, McLean started both.

However, Webb could—and should—have started. There were seven days of rest between the game against Canada and the match against Venezuela, plenty for a pitcher. So why didn't he start? This was because the Giants only lent him for two games, nothing more.

A similar case occurred for relief pitchers. To start the ninth inning, Garrett Whitlock entered the game tied at 2-2. Whitlock is a phenomenal relief pitcher—there's no doubt, but Mason Miller, an all-star, who many tout as the top relief pitcher in the league, remained inactive. It's easy to say in hindsight that Whitlock was not the answer, as he gave up the winning run off a double, but still, anyone would have preferred Miller. Why didn't he close the game? Because the Padres only allowed him to be used in a save situation.

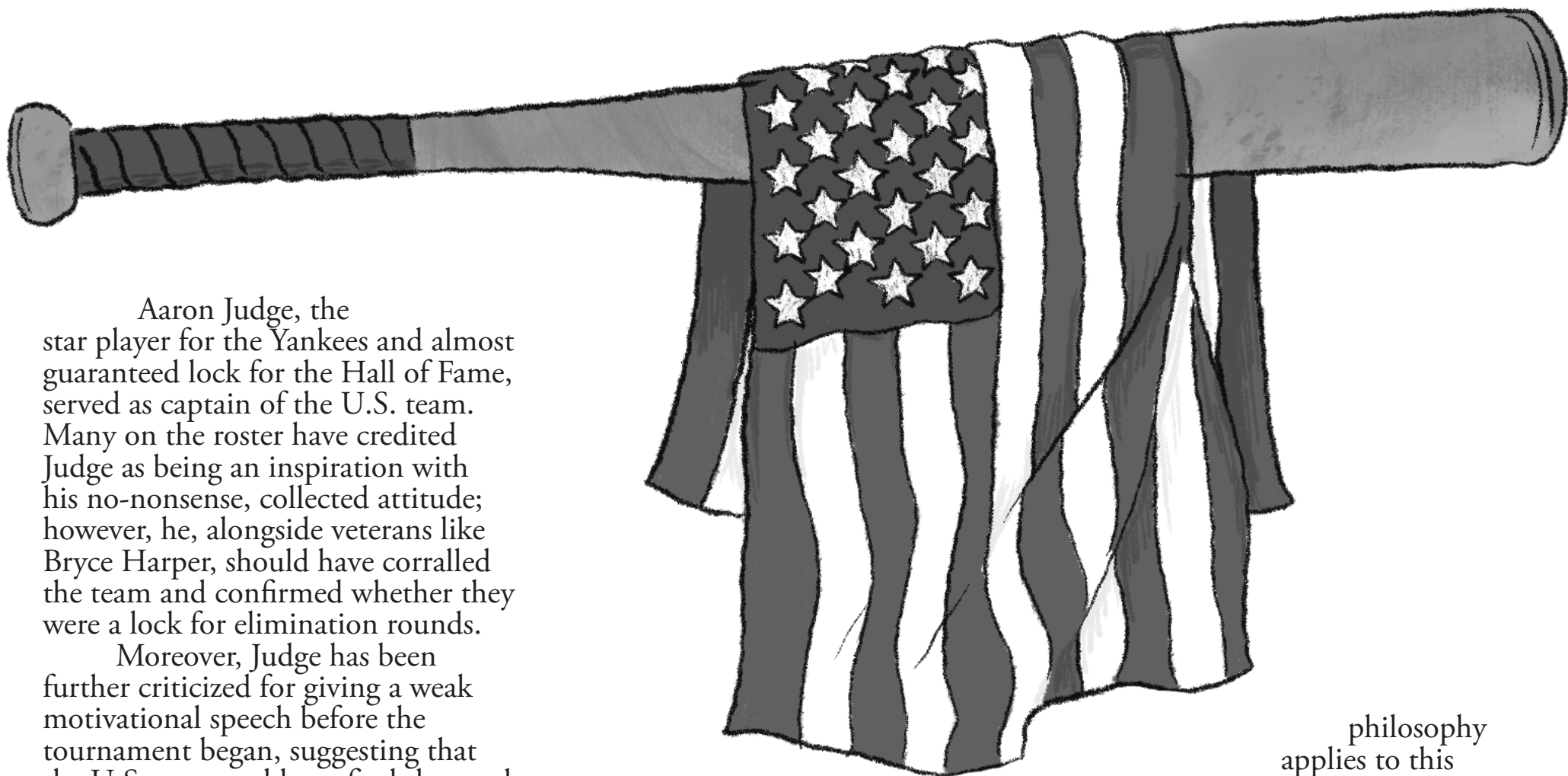
“O Captain! My Captain!”

The tournament follows a pool format, where all teams compete in separate groups before a few are selected based on record to advance to the elimination stages. Before their final pool game against Italy, the U.S. team believed they had already clinched a spot, but they had not. They lost to Italy and risked being knocked out if Mexico were to beat Italy in a low-scoring game.

Following the loss, team manager Mark DeRosa said he had misspoken about their spot in the tournament. He also admitted that a few players had been up late the night before the match against Italy, partying after a win against Mexico. How do players representing their country manage to make this mistake? Poor leadership.

Blame easily fell on DeRosa, who is not a professional manager but rather a studio analyst for the MLB. DeRosa displayed an arrogant, blasé attitude and made many disagreeable choices, but he is not the only one who fell short. Where was the captain to keep the United States team in line?





Aaron Judge, the star player for the Yankees and almost guaranteed lock for the Hall of Fame, served as captain of the U.S. team. Many on the roster have credited Judge as being an inspiration with his no-nonsense, collected attitude; however, he, alongside veterans like Bryce Harper, should have corralled the team and confirmed whether they were a lock for elimination rounds.

Moreover, Judge has been further criticized for giving a weak motivational speech before the tournament began, suggesting that the U.S. stars could not find the spark necessary to mount a comeback. Instead, Team USA was too busy listening to an ex-Navy SEAL, dedicating their performances to honor U.S. troops, and creating a too-tough attitude.

In a tournament designed for friendly competition and appreciation of talent from around the world, the United States opted for a no-fraternization policy to “stay locked in.” Cal Raleigh received backlash for refusing to acknowledge his Mexican teammate in the MLB after just making a deep postseason run. But where was this “lock in” when the U.S.’s place in the tournament was at risk? Or in the championship game?

If You Ain’t First, You’re Last

Talking about the many restrictions imposed by teams, two-time NL MVP Bryce Harper admitted that the Classic is “not the Olympics.” While many misunderstood him, he (unfortunately) is correct. As a country, the United States does not care about the tournament.

While players and fans alike in countries such as Japan, Korea, or Venezuela cancel all work or see huge economic gains from the tournament, the United States’ stance is one of apathy. As such, there is no pressure on team managers to make exceptions for players to participate, nor on players to go through the process of obtaining eligibility and insurance. I don’t expect MLB teams, which are more concerned with profits and their chances of winning the World Series, to care about the tournament, but Team USA and its players could have done more.

Gold medal-winning Venezuela and their manager Omar López defied teams’ instructions for pitchers. For them, given the recent political strife

and the lack of sporting wins on the global stage, this victory superseded the team’s wishes. A former National League MVP and star for the Atlanta Braves, Ronald Acuña Jr., was on the roster, though injured, when the Braves won the World Series in 2021. Despite having that championship ring, he admitted that winning the World Baseball Classic was the “number one [achievement] in his career.”

I’m not advocating for DeRosa or any other team to blatantly ignore the teams’ wishes; I use these examples to show that other countries care more about the tournament than the United States. They are representing their country on the grand stage, something they couldn’t do outside of individual success on an MLB team. Perhaps U.S. players don’t have the same perspective serving as motivation, given their position as members of the nation that operates the league.

Tarik Skubal, now a back-to-back American League Cy Young winner, pitched one game. A singular pool game against Great Britain. Skubal, who will enter free agency in 2027, is expected to sign a huge offer, so the pitcher wants to preserve his health for when payday comes. However, the pitcher still took up a roster spot that could have gone to many other players.

Silver is great, but it isn’t enough for a team of this caliber. The flaws are multifaceted, stemming from both fans and players. As fans, the United States needs to give a damn. Care about this tournament. Why celebrate a sport you’ve never heard of in the Olympics? Because you’re American. So what if you’ve never played, heard of, or cared about the sport? Those are your countrymen. The same

philosophy applies to this tournament: these are the world’s greatest baseball players; we should hope to prove that we have the better players.

The players, on the other hand, need to recognize what the honor means. I cannot advocate against sound financial decisions, but there comes a time when legacy is on the line: step up and make your country proud. If you’re going to be unfriendly and disrespectful to the competition, back it up. If you’re going to bring in an ex-Navy SEAL to motivate his team through a retelling of his supposed killing of Osama Bin Laden, back it up. If you’re going to wear the jerseys from the U.S. men’s gold-medal game, back it up. Otherwise, these displays of valor transform into displays of blatant arrogance and offense.

One can only hope that this loss in the finals—as well as the one in 2023—will inspire players to return and dominate the tournament. So many elite pitchers were left off the roster. Hopefully, next time they will be able, or maybe more importantly, want to compete.

**TYLER DANG ’28
(TYLERDANG@
COLLEGE.HARVARD.
EDU) CONGRATULATES
VENEZUELA ON A WELL-
DESERVED VICTORY
WITHOUT ANY AID FROM A
U.S. PRESIDENT.**

**GRAPHICS BY NESHAMA
RYMAN ’28**

Team USA Beats Canada in Every Possible Olympic Hockey Event

Maybe I spoke too soon.

BY JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27

On Feb. 5, I reacted to Team USA's Men's Hockey roster construction decisions, lamenting the exclusion of certain star players and worrying about America's chances at securing gold. But on Feb. 22, the U.S. Men's Hockey Team triumphed over Canada in the finals, earning the top Olympic prize for the first time in 46 years and, more importantly, proving me wrong.

I would like to cut myself a little bit of slack. Hindsight is 20/20, of course, but the United States' victory doesn't disprove any of the issues I raised around Team USA's roster selection. If anything, they won in spite of those roster errors. The important part, though, is that they won.

If you didn't watch the game, or if you're not a particularly passionate sports or hockey fan, it's hard to put into words how meaningful this moment was for the tens of millions of us glued to our televisions at 8 a.m. that Monday morning. I'm Jewish, but racing down to the Dunster House basement at the crack of dawn to claim the communal TV felt like my version of Christmas morning. One of my close friends was supposed to join me, but he decided to be lame and stay in bed. I figured that meant I'd be alone for the game. Instead, I was unexpectedly joined by about 30 other Americans and a scattered group of Canadian students whom I had never met before.

At 7:45 a.m., we were total strangers. By 11 a.m., we were tackling each other while screaming and crying as Jack Hughes scored the golden goal. That's the power of sports. Looking back, I am so grateful that there are a few dozen other lunatics on this campus as passionate about this as I am. They made a once-in-a-lifetime moment all the more special, and I wouldn't have had it any other way.

The game itself was, as expected, a masterpiece of hockey. By now, everyone has surely seen clips of Connor Hellebuyck's MVP-worthy performance, but I'll be honest, seeing replays doesn't do it justice. Watching that man pull off miracle save after miracle save gave

me about four heart attacks, but I was cheering through every single one.

And while the Americans might never have trailed in the game, I want to commend the Canadians on putting on a phenomenal performance. This was probably the greatest display of hockey skill in history. It might be the greatest hockey game ever played, and I'd encourage anyone remotely interested in the sport to give it a watch. I would especially encourage you to watch the 20 minutes after Team USA won.

For those unaware, the more recent National Hockey League season was preceded by a horrific tragedy: Johnny Gaudreau—who likely would've been on Team USA—and his brother Matthew were killed by a drunk driver at their sister's wedding in Nantucket. Throughout the past two seasons, the tributes for Johnny across the league have been as heartwarming as they are tear-jerking.

Heading into the Olympics, there was a lot of talk of "do it for Johnny," but nothing could have prepared us for Gaudreau's former teammates Matthew Tkachuk and Zach Werenski parading his jersey around the ice with American flags draped over their shoulders. And if that didn't bring you to tears, seeing other U.S. teammates carry Gaudreau's two children onto the ice to celebrate their dad and country absolutely should have. This was so much more than just a game. This American team demonstrated the power sports have to unite us, bring out the best of us, and, as Jack Hughes noted in his post-game speech, make us "so proud to be American."

That honor is not limited to the U.S. Men's Hockey Team. For the first time in history, a country won all three Olympic hockey gold medals, with the United States also beating Canada in Women's Hockey and Paralympic Hockey. That is an astonishing feat, and I hope it will

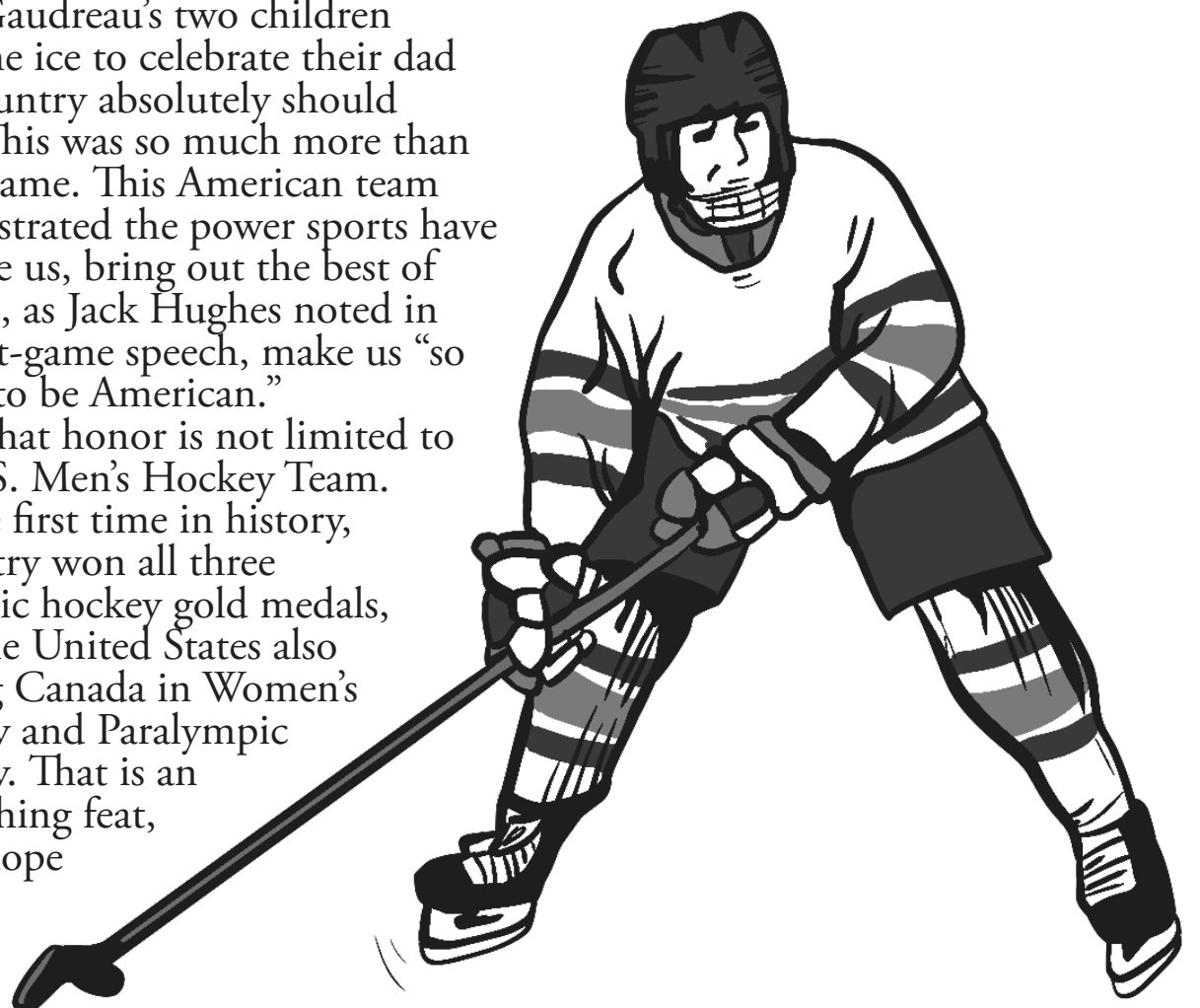
inspire generations of Americans and athletes to lace up skates and take to the ice.

That is, ultimately, what this is all for. Young boys and girls are going to grow up trying to reenact Hellebuyck's iconic stick save, or the golden goals from both Hughes and Megan Keller, the latter of which might be the greatest hockey goal I've ever seen. More than the athletic feats, they're going to be inspired by a group of players that embodied the best parts of the nation: men and women who were proud to represent their country and did so with a level of dignity, honor, and respect that we should all aspire to.

To those incredible athletes, thank you for giving your all at these Olympic Games. In my Feb. 5 article, I referenced the late Herb Brooks' iconic quote from the film "Miracle": "I'm not looking for the best players, I'm looking for the right ones." These players were, above all else, the right ones. I am so glad I was wrong.

JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27 (JWASSERBERGER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS ALREADY TRYING TO SEE IF HE CAN GO WATCH THE NEXT WINTER OLYMPICS IN PERSON.

GRAPHIC BY ANNELISE FISHER '26



Hot Take: Ethical Basketball

About a record-breaking performance.

BY TYLER DANG '28

Thunk. Swish. Throughout the evening of March 10, these were the main sounds anyone in the Miami Heat's arena could hear, along with the roar of applause with each dunk and free-throw. The Heat's home game against the Washington Wizards was expected to be a run-of-the-mill beatdown. The Wizards were battling elimination from playoff contention, while the Heat were just fighting for a higher seed. However, that night was anything but normal.

Miami center Bam Adebayo was the only "star" representing the Heat, with Tyler Herro and Norman Powell both out with injuries. Adebayo, however, met that challenge with an outstanding performance. Up to that point, his career high in points was 41; he broke that in just the first half with 43 points.

And the scoring onslaught didn't stop. Entering the final quarter, Adebayo had 62, with his eyes set on breaking Kobe Bryant's 81, the then-second-most in NBA history. Adebayo finished the game with 83 points.

Adebayo's performance has received much criticism: the Heat consistently held a double-digit lead throughout the game, so the star player did not need to continue playing to secure the win. Adebayo played 42 minutes of the 48-minute game; no other starter for the Heat played more than 30 minutes. His record-breaking performance raises two questions: is playing simply for a game record ethical, and does the way one breaks a record matter?

Ethical Minutes

At the height of the Golden State Warriors' campaign, their stars had many games where it seemed as though they would break records. Steph Curry, on many occasions, was on pace to set a record for most made three-pointers in a single game, but the guard was often pulled for rest when the score was too lopsided.

An unwritten rule in the NBA is that of "Garbage Time," when the winner is all but declared, and starters are pulled for bench players to get reps. Often, players will dribble out the clock instead of attempting to score, out of courtesy and to avoid running up the score. It is a sign of respect to one's opponents to opt not to run up the score further after a team is unlikely to make a comeback. And though it's not an official practice, breaking this pact at the end of an uncontested game can lead to controversy and raise tensions.

So, in a game where the victor is clear, is it *ethical* to keep a star in the game just to break a record?

To start, it helps to clarify that "Garbage Time" simply makes no sense. Players deep in the rotation are given fewer chances to showcase their talents and improve their skills. Many players only get in the game during "Garbage Time." Can we really expect a player who has dedicated his life to competition to abide by an arbitrary, artificial rule that prevents him from putting his hard work to the test?

No, that expectation is unfair. A game's competition should last from the starting whistle to the final whistle, regardless of who is on the court. Otherwise, players cheat themselves out of a chance to develop and cheat viewers out of a few minutes of high-level play. Thus, we can't fault a player for wanting to push for a record and test themselves throughout a game: winning

is important, but so is developing, and developing as a player requires pushing oneself to the limit. Even if the game is basically won, all parties should still compete—if not for the viewers, for the players.

Furthermore, the media sends mixed messages about playing for better personal statistics. We celebrate players who put up extraordinary stat lines, yet bash players for stat-padding. For a player trying to cement his legacy, why not go for those records?

Ethical Scoring

Last summer, I discussed foul-baiting in the NBA. While watching free throws and the horrible acting that many stars display to go to the line is frustrating to watch, foul-baiting is a skill, with players demonstrating varying levels of skill. Many consider basketball a form of art, with spin moves, pull-up jumpers, and crossovers seeming like a dance routine. Thus, many also differentiate between ethical and unethical basketball.

We can define ethical basketball as play in which players use talent and coordination to overcome their opponents. Instead of relying on niche rules or exploiting loopholes in the rules, players demonstrate their raw abilities honed for the big stage. After all, fans come to watch incredible displays of athleticism and skill rather than players who abuse the rules for an easier shot. While I do consider foul-baiting a skill, it is not "ethical."

Many criticize Adebayo's 83-point game for the unethical nature of how he got his points. Of his 83 points, 36 came from the charity stripe. The Heat center shot more free throws (43) than the entire Wizards team (29). To put that in perspective, that is four more attempts than the previous record set more than a decade ago. Furthermore, he attempted 22 three-pointers yet made only seven for 32%. Many claim that he was simply chucking up shots and foul-baiting en route to his historic performance.

Also, as Adebayo neared the record mark, many noticed that his teammates began intentionally missing their own free throws to recover the loose ball and give Adebayo more opportunities to score.

However, these arguments are unfair and do not justify characterizing Adebayo's performance as unethical. Watching the game, it becomes clear that Adebayo's trips to the free-throw line were earned from absorbing the contact of the Wizards' defenders. Only after he had reached the 70-point mark (still a wild accomplishment) can one argue that he began to bait for fouls.

Even then, the center had to *make* the free throws. Shaquille O'Neal, who many consider to be one of the greatest centers ever, struggled from the line. His weakness was so bad that teams would intentionally foul the center—even to the point of fouling out—just to force him to shoot free throws. O'Neal could have worked on the shot and become more consistent, but he never became a reliable free-throw shooter. The fact that Adebayo can make more than 80% of his free throws in a game after playing 42 minutes takes skill and endurance. The same can be said about his ability to still nail the long ball.

In regard to the help from his teammate, we must look at the game

that holds the record. On March 2, 1962, center Wilt Chamberlain scored 100 points. What did his teammates do that night? The same thing that Adebayo's teammates did: intentionally missing free throws and fouling opposing players to gain possession. Even with the help from his teammates, Chamberlain had to put in work for that score.

Similarly, Adebayo had to work for his points.

The Whining Fan

Adebayo's scoring explosion proved that fans and the media can never be happy. They spout box scores and statistics as the basis for a player's "greatness," yet when a player who is not a conventional star puts up huge numbers, fans are quick to downplay the achievement.

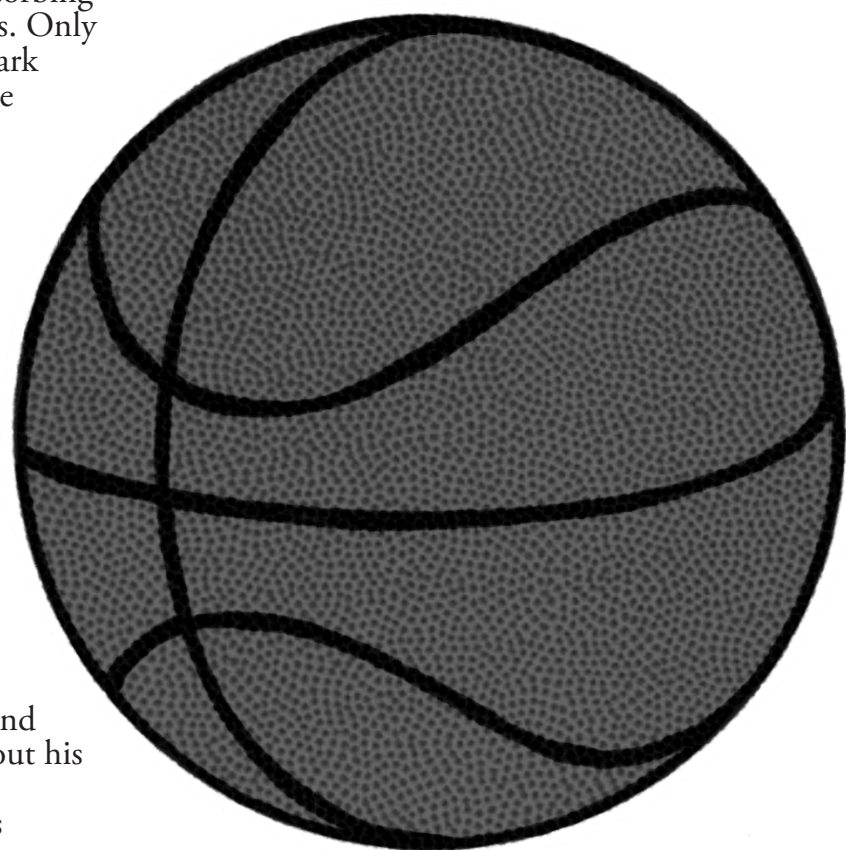
Sure, the game was sealed long before Adebayo reached 83, but can you fault someone for trying to cement themselves in the history books? Chamberlain's record game finished with a 21-point lead, yet the center played all 48 minutes. What's the difference? Did they not both have to work for the points?

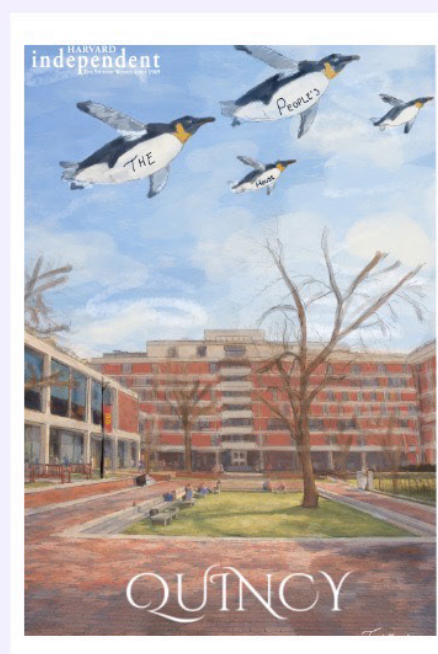
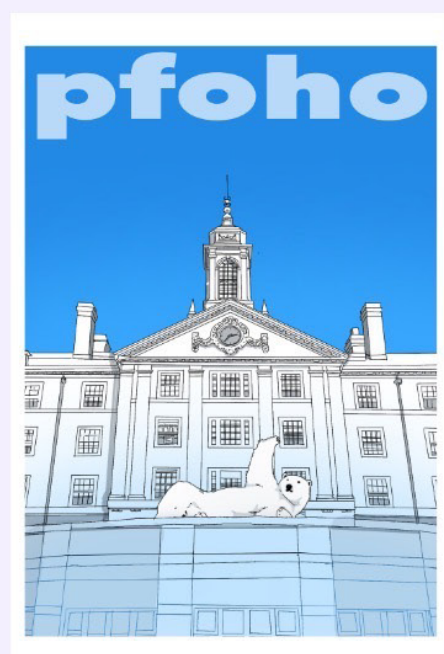
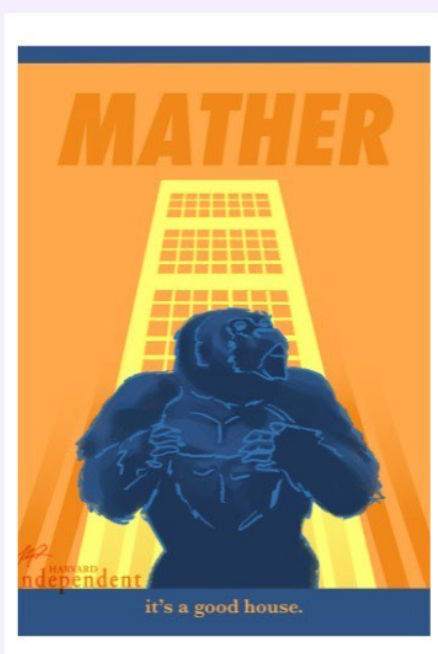
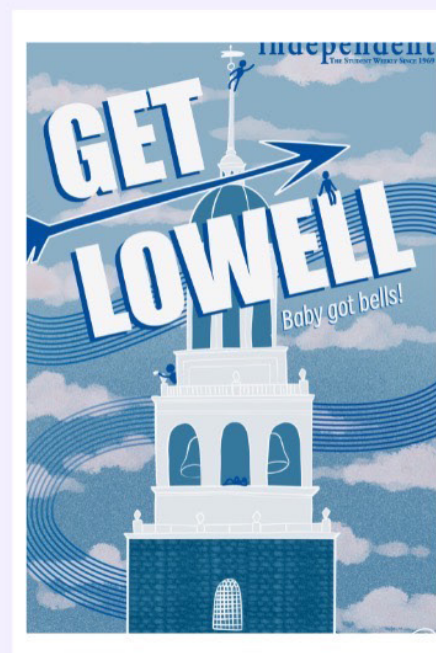
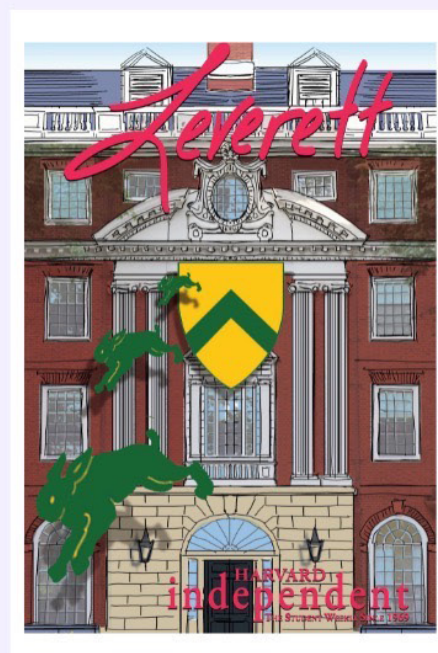
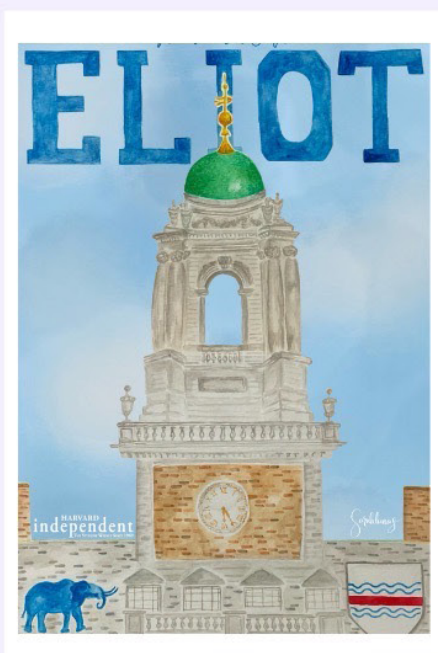
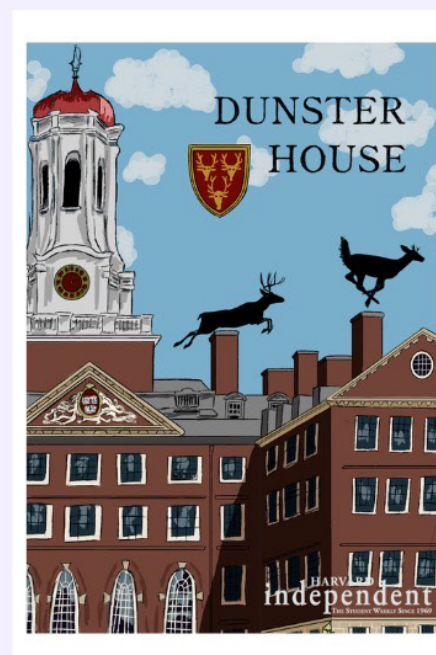
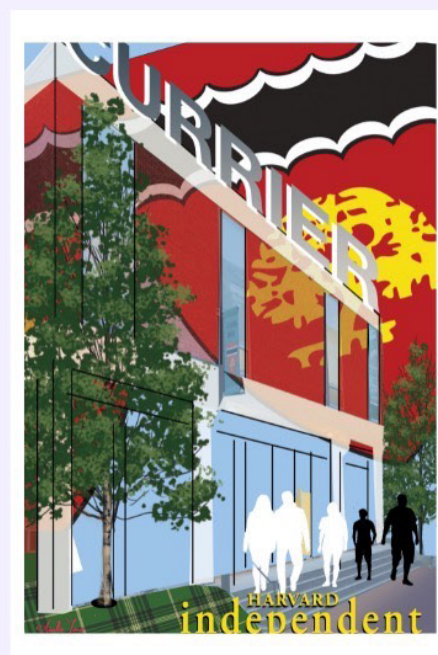
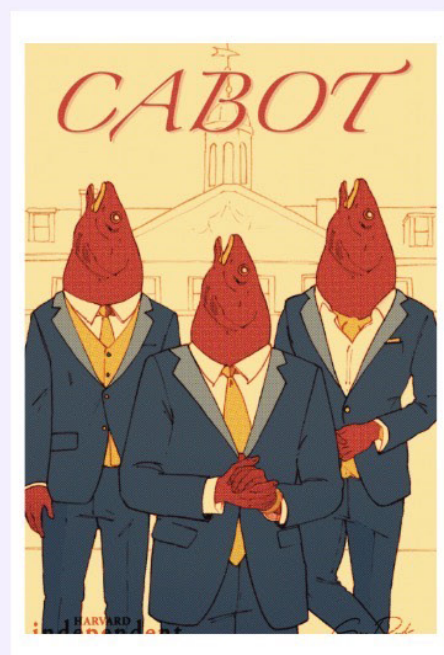
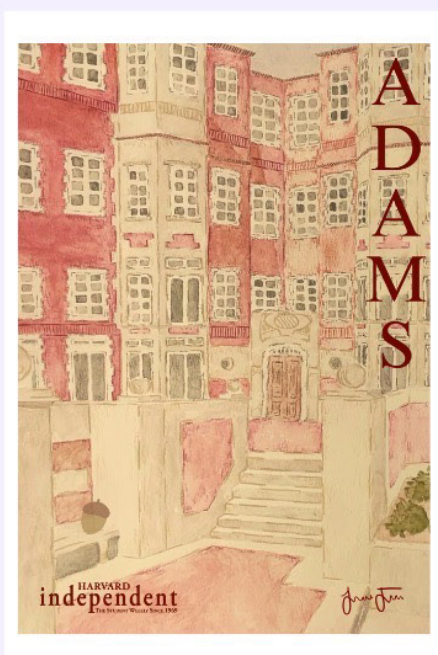
Part of the appeal of professional basketball is to admire the skill. If I wanted to watch "ethical" basketball, I'd watch a local pick-up game. But players aren't nearly as talented there. Fans should want to watch these great scoring displays where a player exploits their opponent's defense.

Hating on these achievements only serves to cheat fans and players of high-level basketball.

**TYLER DANG '28
(TYLERDANG@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) IS
BEWILDERED THAT BAM'S
NAME WILL BE UTTERED IN
THE SAME SENTENCE AS
WILT AND KOBE.**

**GRAPHIC BY LINDEN
MCCARL '28**





HOUSE POSTERS

BUY these posters in color and lifesize at the “Harvard Independent” Shop. Scan the QR code, and show your House pride!!

ACROSS

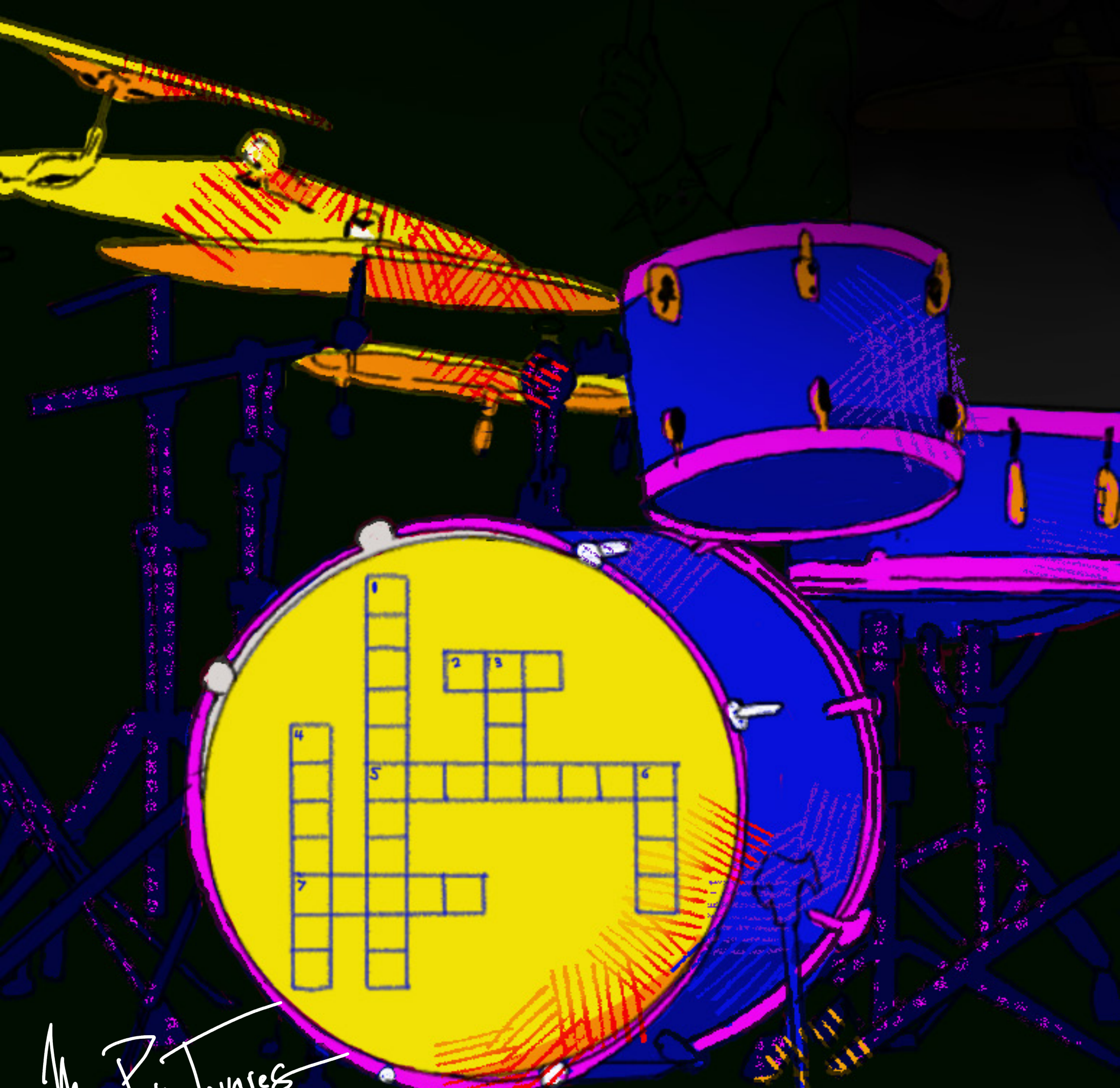
2. Protest in 2020 that took place in all fifty states in the US, abbr.
5. Second word in trio of words used to describe female accomplishment.
7. South Korean feminist movement that promoted celibacy against men

DOWN

1. Where most subway platforms are located.
3. "Make__ not war!"
4. Beatles song featured in Project Hail Mary
6. novels, mass-produced fiction printed on cheap paper popular in the 20th century

COVER ART BY KERRIE ZHU '28
LAYOUT BY CAMERON BERNIER '29 AND NUALA MERNIN '29

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