

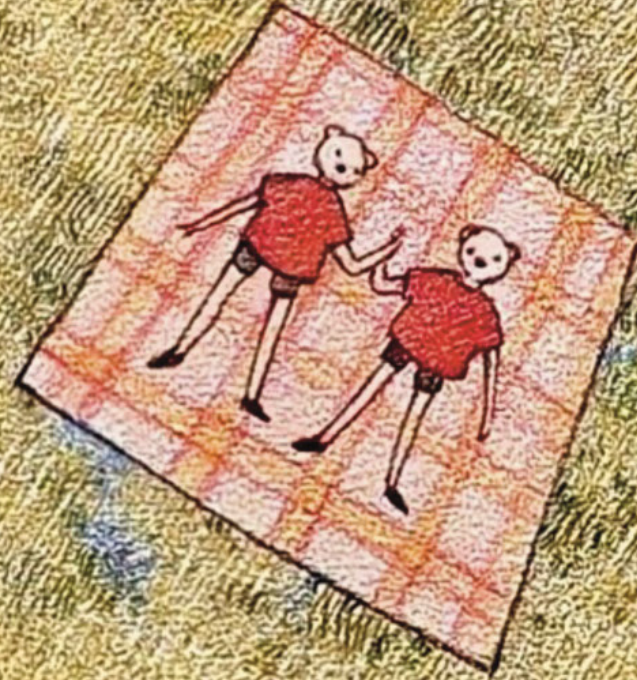
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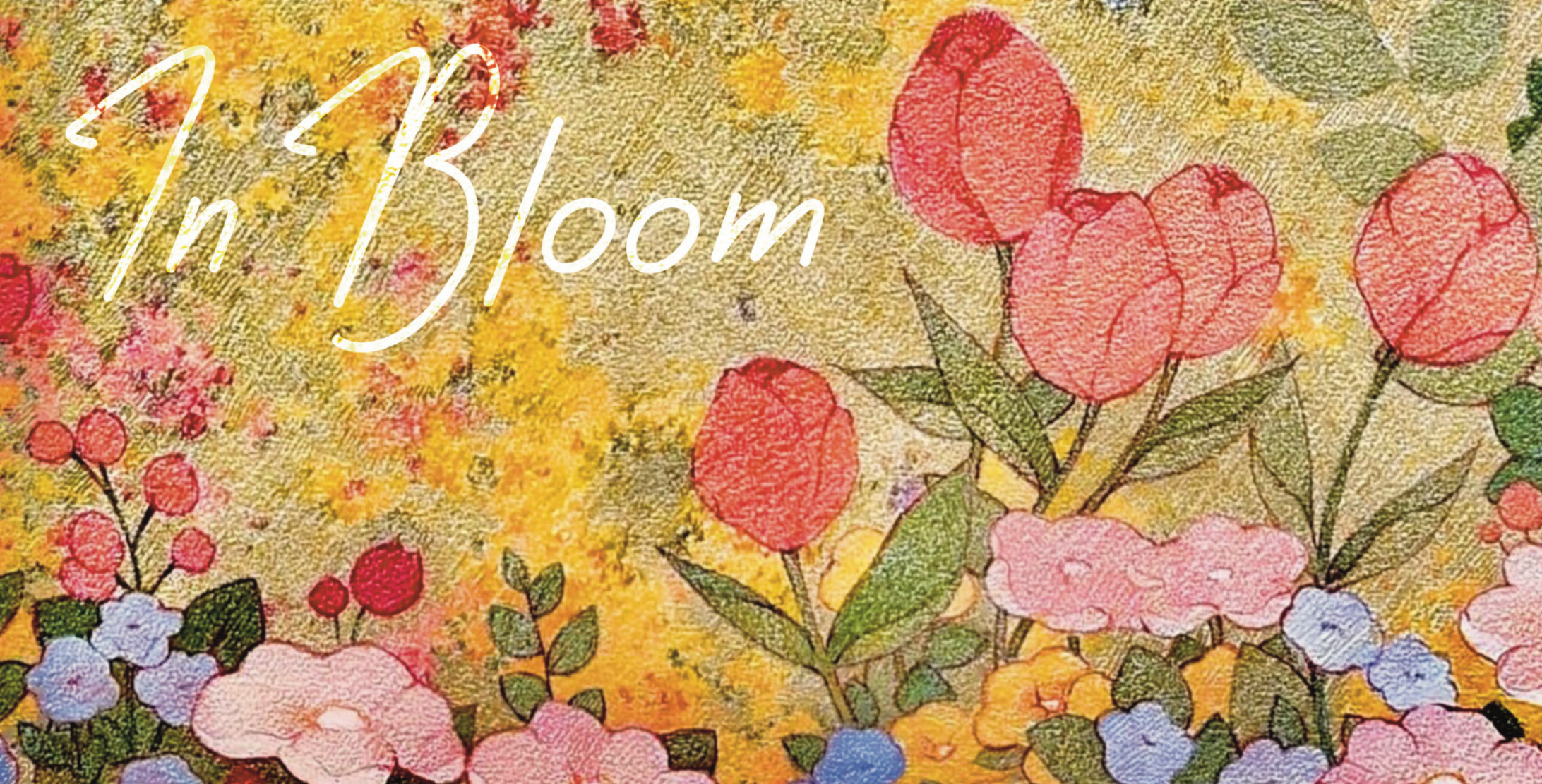
VOL LVII ISSUE 24

INDEPENDENT

THE STUDENT WEEKLY SINCE 1969



In Bloom



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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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Undergraduates React to Revisions to Harvard College's Proposal and Postponement of the "20% +4" A-Grading Cap

Grading policy update.

BY SONIA SINGH '29 AND JULIA BOUCHUT '29

On Monday, March 30, in an email to Harvard faculty, Dean of Undergraduate Education Amanda Claybaugh announced changes to the grading policy proposal she shared in February. The amendments included factoring in students taking a class pass/fail when calculating the 20% +4 grading cap, adding SAT+ to the existing SAT/UNSAT scale, and waiting to implement the policy until the fall of 2027. Faculty members will consider the new proposal at their April Faculty of Arts and Sciences meeting to vote on these modifications.

"In the course of these discussions, faculty and students raised questions around how to calculate the number of students in a course, dissatisfaction with the existing SAT/UNSAT system, and concerns that the Registrar would need sufficient time for implementation," Claybaugh wrote in the email. "A consensus emerged in support of three changes."

According to Claybaugh, these adjustments were made after considering feedback from the community. She cited the Faculty Council, the March FAS Faculty meeting, town halls, newspaper articles, and other discussions with faculty and students as outlets through which community members expressed their thoughts on the proposal.

In the email, Claybaugh urged faculty to read the updated proposal, as well as the Proposal for Updating Grading Policies, the initial policy suggestion seeking to address problems in the University's grading policy, and the Update on Grading and Workload, which identified these issues. "The latter demonstrates why our current grading practices are a problem, while the former explains why this is a problem that can be solved by nothing short of a cap," she wrote.

These revisions build on an initial grading proposal released on Feb. 6, 2026, which sought to address "grade compression" across Harvard College. The February proposal recommended that instructors in letter-graded courses "award A grades to at most 20% of the course enrollment plus 4," while allowing courses to opt out of the cap by adopting SAT/UNSAT grading. It also proposed replacing GPA with average percentile rank for "internal purposes ... such as honors, prizes, and awards," and encouraging instructors to submit additional scoring or ranking information to help calculate percentile distinctions within courses.

On March 30, the student body was informed of the revisions in an email from HUA Academic Officer Hyunsoo Lee titled "HUA: Grading Policy Update." In the email, Lee summarized the changes and referenced that 94% of students opposed the policy, according to an HUA survey from earlier this year. For students who want to be more involved, Lee attached an email template for students to send to professors to encourage them to vote either in favor

of or against the policy. The email also included an overview of the HUA survey on the grading proposal, as well as a one-page summary with important information and statistics.

Student opinions, however, remain mixed. While Yassin Mohamedy '29 supports neither the current nor former grading proposal, he does believe that the College has incorporated student feedback into the revisions. "A lot of students are unsure as to whether or not the administration will actually take student feedback into account when making these huge institutional changes," he explained. "So I'm glad that it seems like they at least are for the time being."

Still, Mohamedy does not see the updated policy as addressing key concerns, including increasing competition and missing the goal of recentering academics. By basing the cap on the total number of students taking the class, the policy increases the number of As awarded, but still artificially lowers grades. "It will bring grades down, naturally, but I think it's an artificial way that will end up hurting students, and especially in the short term, without really making classes harder, which I think is the more organic solution to the problem," he noted.

"It's a good change to the policy, but as I said, I think it's just making the policy less worse."

Mohamedy also opposes the addition of SAT+ to the SAT/UNSAT scale, he said. "You take a class SAT/UNSAT because you don't want to have a grade reflected for the class," he noted. "I feel like by creating a SAT+, it almost starts to make it feel like a grading spectrum, which I think is very counterintuitive to the point of SAT/UNSAT."

Meanwhile, Peyton White '29 expressed similar views on the proposed grading policy changes, particularly the new timeline. "I think the most obvious issue is that, in many ways, it's just kicking the can down the road. I don't think delaying this by one year necessarily resolves any of the existing conflicts with the original proposal," White said.

"Naturally, I tend to think about [grades] all the time. It's a big determinant... for post-grad opportunities and the workforce," he explained. While White acknowledged that the policy could create downsides, including "this cultivation of an even more competitive environment," he also identified potential

benefits. "In many ways, I do think it pivots academics and Harvard in general, away from that over-emphasis upon extracurriculars and back towards academics," he added.

Not all students, however, will experience the policy. A junior from Adams House described feeling personally relieved by the postponement, even while maintaining concerns about the proposal overall. "Now that the grading cap is re-proposed to be moved after I graduate, it feels like a sense of relief. Like dodging a bullet," the undergraduate said.

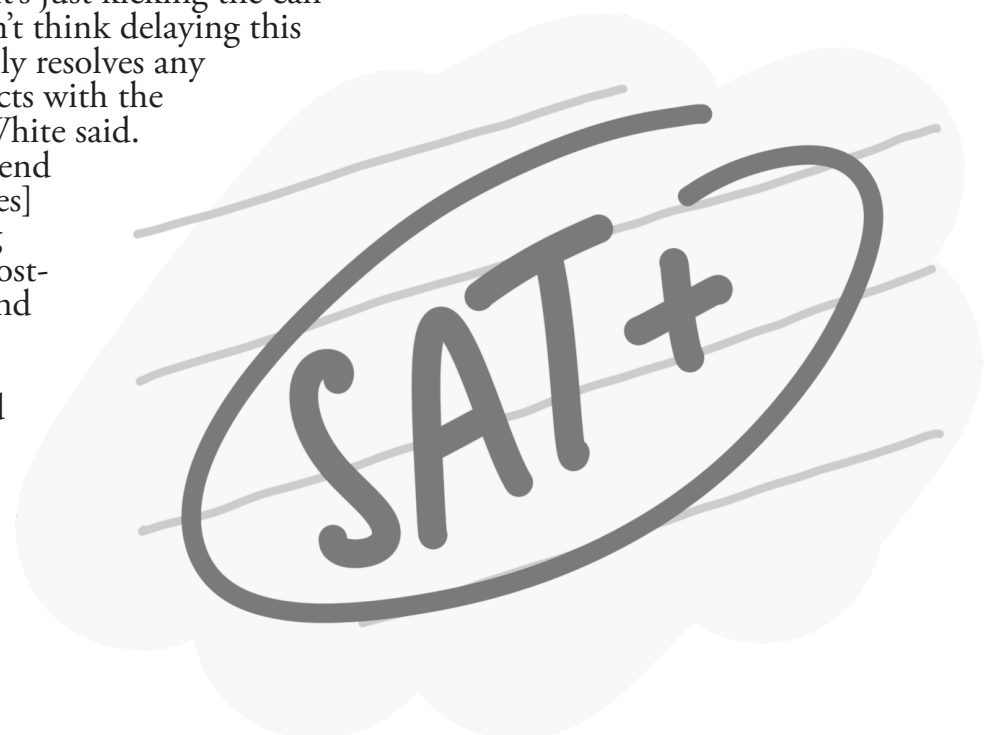
Still, the student expressed concern about how the policy could affect academic exploration, particularly for first-year students. "If this grading policy was put in place during my freshman year, I feel like I'd be less likely to take risks ... for freshmen, I feel like it wouldn't be helpful, it would be counterintuitive to them exploring different classes," the student stated.

As the debate continues, some students remain unconvinced. "A clean-cut cap on grades isn't the solution to this," the junior concluded.

As Harvard faculty prepare to vote on April 7, the revised grading proposal continues to spark debate across campus. While student opinions remain mixed, in an April 1 email to the student body, Lee urged students: "Now is the time to get your voice heard."

SONIA SINGH '29 (SONIASINGH@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND JULIA BOUCHUT '29 (JULIA_BOUCHUT@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) ARE INTERESTED TO SEE HOW THE POLICY WILL UNFOLD.

GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28



In Full Bloom

How two Harvard Square flower shops bring color, community, and continuity to Cambridge.

BY CINDION HUANG '29

Harvard Square has always been a place of constant motion—students rushing to class, tourists pausing at storefronts, and locals weaving through the familiar maze of brick and cobblestone. Amidst the churn of coffee shops and bookstores, two flower shops have quietly bloomed. Petali Flowers and Brattle Square Florist have each carved out a small, fragrant corner in the Square, offering a personalized experience centered on human connection—something that neither large retail chains nor online services can widely replicate.

Cambridge is home to just over 121,000 residents, with nearly 30,000 enrolled in local college or graduate school and more than 40,000 students attending schools across the city, shaping its daily rhythms and filling its streets. By daytime, the population rises closer to 200,000 as workers and visitors flow in and out, compressing the Square into a steady circulation of faces, errands, and quick encounters.

Flowers account for a significant portion of residents' spending: Americans spend nearly \$69 billion annually on flowers and plants, with average spending exceeding \$260 per person, and about 65% of consumers purchasing flowers at least occasionally. In a bustling place like Harvard Square, Petali founder John Selletto saw a clear opportunity to start a business that would likely take root—and founded the store on an impulse with almost no prior experience.

Selletto, who opened Petali in June of 1989, didn't always dream of becoming a florist. He and his brother had been traveling throughout the American Southwest, sourcing goods to sell, before landing in Smith Campus Center, which was then called the Holyoke Center. "There was a big open space there [in the Holyoke Center]. So I just ran upstairs, and I asked him if I could have that space. And [he] said, 'What do you want to do?' I said, 'We've got a flower shop [and] zero experience.' We've been winging it ever since," Selletto recounted to the "Independent," smiling.

That improvised spirit has carried Petali through 35 years of business. "We've never had a meeting," he said. "There's no plan for this business." Instead of strategy, Selletto maintains a commitment to authenticity: no advertising, ever, and no corporate structure. Just good flowers, Pinyon incense burning somewhere in the back, and calm music playing on loop. "We take [the flower shoppers] out of their space and into this space," he explained. "They get absorbed in it and forget about all their problems."

Selletto believes the shop's staying power comes down to something

deceptively simple. "We're really nice to people," he said. "We say 'hi' to them. We say 'thanks for coming in,' even if they don't buy anything."

Across Brattle Street, Stephen Zedros has spent even longer in the business. He started coming into Brattle Square Florist as a child, helping his parents and grandparents close up the shop. After attending Boston University, Zedros came back to help out on one busy weekend and never really left. "They weren't answering the phones properly, putting people on hold for five minutes. It was crazy," he recalled. That was 55 years ago.



The Brattle Square Florist has been in the Square for over a century, occupying three different locations until finally making its way to its current home next to L.A. Burdick Chocolates. "[It] used to be where Lovestruck was way back 100, 105 years ago. And then it was 31 Bradley Street ... And we came here about 44 years ago."

Both men know the rhythms of the Square better than almost anyone. July and August bring quiet; students leave, faculty disperses, and Cambridge empties. For Petali, the steady drumbeat of walk-in customers—particularly on Fridays, Selletto noted, when people come in looking for ways to make things right with a significant other—keeps the shop afloat across the lean months. "That's all year round," he said. "Somehow, people think flowers will get them out of being in trouble."

For Brattle Square, weddings and summer parties carry July and August, while spring—with its cascade of Easter, Passover, Mother's Day, proms, and graduations—is the most active season. "This is when we go really crazy," Zedros said. "All the colors, pinks, yellows, pinks, yellows, purples. This is our busy season. So all [events] combined ... we do a lot of centerpiece work, and it's creatively inspiring, but also a lot of volume."

By the time spring arrives, both shops fill with the same flowers: tulips, hyacinths, daffodils, cherry blossoms, and the lush, jewel-toned ranunculus that Selletto immediately named as his favorite for the season. "Cloni

ranunculus—it's an Italian flower," he said. "All different colors. Really beautiful, weird flowers." Besides his distinct love for ranunculus, Selletto tends to resist picking favorites at all, preferring to let the season decide. "In May, everybody is looking for the peony," he said. "Each season, the flowers shift—what's here now won't be here in a couple of weeks."

In the quieter months, however, the flower shoppers walk in with a different tone—less celebratory, more reflective—and the shop adapts accordingly. "So you may do some weddings in July and August and keep yourself busy," Zedros explained.

"And in January, January actually [has] a lot of funerals ... It's very busy." The shift, he noted, feels almost intangible, shaped as much by emotion as by season. "I think [one] gets through the holidays of December and maybe Thanksgiving, and you get to January ... It's funny how it happens. It's very interesting ... a psychological thing too."

For Harvard students, the Square can feel like an extension of campus—another backdrop for p-sets, quick meals, and passing conversations—rather than a place with its own cycles of care and memory. But both Selletto and Zedros see students as part of that flow, whether they realize it or not. And the impact of flowers on people is deeply significant. "We definitely make people smile. I mean, flowers do something," Selletto said.

Inside the shops, the Pinyon incense and calming music coalesce into something larger as the days get warmer. "Because everybody's cooped up in the wintertime, and you get a couple sunny days and warm days, and everybody comes out. Everybody wants flowers in their life," Selletto added. The business has grown through something less visible but more vibrant: people returning to "have some kind of color and springtime in their life," he noted.

Zedros, too, returns to the people behind each purchase when asked about his favorite part of being a florist. "Everybody's got really nice stories," he said. "Really nice stories."

**CINDION HUANG '29
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PAYING MORE VISITS TO
THESE SHOPS AS SPRING
(AND FLOWERS!) CONTINUE
TO BLOOM.**

**GRAPHIC BY MIA STEWART
'29**

Decisions, Decisions

How first-years navigate course registration while keeping in mind concentration declaration.

BY KATHERINE LAM '29 AND MIRIAM TSEGAY '29

During the high of Harvard College Housing Day, first-year students have quickly been confronted with another pivotal College milestone: course registration. On Wednesday, April 1, the course registration portal opened for first-years, sophomores, and juniors to select their fall 2026 classes. For first-years, these choices carry added weight, with the October concentration declaration deadline looming.

As they build their schedules, students face a fundamental decision: spend one final semester exploring potential fields of study or double down on the requirements of an intended concentration—a challenging choice in a College that offers more than 50 concentration options.

Before formally enrolling for fall semester classes, first-years must meet with their pre-concentration advisors to discuss academic options and interests. This is a requirement to lift the advisory hold placed on each student's portal before registration. Students work with their academic advisor to plan their schedule for the upcoming semester—and sometimes tentatively for the next three years. After meeting with their advisors, first-years have until April 15 to register for classes.

Academic advisors guide students through the process of selecting a concentration and fulfilling its specific requirements with the classes they will take in the fall.

Many students have already decided on their intended concentrations. “I want to do a double [concentration] in Government and Philosophy with a secondary in Global Health and Health Policy,” Noor Ali '29 said to the “Independent.”

“I’m going to try to knock out my requirements first,” added Ali. For her, the choice to double-concentrate with a secondary limited her ability to take classes unrelated to her chosen fields of study. Students who try to balance multiple fields of study have less flexibility to use course selection to explore. In addition to the average 10 to 14 courses required per concentration, undergraduates must fulfill Expository Writing, General Education, Divisional Distribution, Language, and Quantitative Reasoning with Data requirements. As a result, students with more concentration requirements must focus on efficiently selecting their classes.

Some students knew exactly what classes they would be taking, well before the beginning of the class registration period. “I’m going to look through the courses that relate with [Molecular and Cellular Biology], but also things like GenEd requirements,” Ava Rae Moss '29 said. This sentiment was shared by many who aim to balance requirements for their intended field with broader College curriculum demands.

Some students, on the other hand, remain unsure of both their intended concentration and fall class selections. “Right now, I’m a bit undecided. I’m thinking either Econ [and] Stats, Econ [and] Computer Science, or maybe Applied Math,” Emily Jing '29 said. She, however, is not using her classes to help her decide which concentration to pursue. “I’ll look at all the requirements, and then I’ll choose my classes based on that,” said Jing. Even without a clear intended concentration, Jing’s focus on fulfilling her requirements early on echoed the sentiments of other first-years.

Across both students with clear plans and those still exploring, fall registration is also focused on how each student’s schedule will fit together in terms of workload, weekly in-person time commitments, and content.

All these considerations lead to the fall semester when Concentration

Declaration Day arrives. All Harvard students come in undeclared, allowing first-years to explore all that Harvard College has to offer. Students may enter the College with the intention of studying a specific concentration, but formal declaration does not happen until sophomore year. This past year, the deadline to declare was Oct. 10. After the deadline, students are still able to change their concentration, and about one-third of undergraduates end up switching concentrations. Students who want to change their concentration can do so by working with their respective department advisor.

The Harvard Undergraduate Association usually hosts Concentration Declaration Day festivities, which it has organized since 2023, providing Joe’s Pizza and signs bearing the names of each concentration for students to take pictures with. This upcoming October, current first-years will flood the steps of Widener Library as eager sophomores, ready to officially take on their concentrations.

At the same time, these decisions are influenced by other shifts in student life. As course registration approaches, other changes in student life begin to unfold. Students adapt to new social dynamics following Housing Day, while summer plans such as internships, research, or travel come into consideration.

For many students, decisions about what to study become tied to these wider considerations, as academic interests are weighed against future career opportunities. “Because I’m doing Social Studies, a lot of my summer plans revolve around exploring that,” Timmy Tran '29 said.

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DECIDING WHAT TO TAKE
NEXT FALL.**

**GRAPHIC BY TRISCHELLE
AFIHENE '27**



The New “Summer Body”: How Weight Loss Drugs Are Reshaping Body Image

How GLP-1 drugs, influencer culture, and algorithm-driven platforms are redefining body standards.

BY ADIN HOOTNICK '29

As the weather becomes warmer and students swap out their puffer jackets for tank tops, the usual conversations and internal pressures around the “summer body” have reemerged. But this year, the discourse feels different. Instead of the usual diet culture and gym routine talks, a whole new set of tools has entered the conversation: GLP-1 (glucagon-like peptide-1 agonist) drugs like Ozempic, along with peptide injections and “looksmaxxing” trends, have reshaped how young people think about their bodies and have created new expectations. These shifts have even reached Harvard’s student body and are quietly influencing how undergraduates perceive themselves.

Over the past year, weight loss has become increasingly medicalized and accessible, with pharmaceuticals reshaping questions of body image. These drugs are a class of medications originally developed to treat type 2 diabetes and, more recently, obesity, by regulating blood sugar and suppressing appetite. Drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy work by mimicking a hormone that helps control insulin levels and signals fullness to the brain. This leads to reduced food intake and weight loss. Over the past year, their use has expanded rapidly beyond clinical settings, as people outside the medication’s original target population have sought it out for weight management. Recent polling suggests that roughly one in eight American adults reports having used a GLP-1 drug.

While these drugs have proven effective in clinical settings, medical professionals caution that they are not without risks. “GLP-1 medications have many potential side effects, including gastrointestinal issues (pancreatitis, gastroparesis, bowel obstructions), nutrient deficiencies, and muscle loss,” a primary care physician explained in a statement to the “Independent.” “In addition to these potential side effects, in persons where the medication is not indicated, they can increase risk of disordered eating,” the physician added.

The cultural influence of these drugs has expanded far beyond medical prescriptions, with brands and influencers capitalizing on it. For instance, Kourtney Kardashian’s company Lemme has released a series of weight loss support supplements, such as Lemme Reset and Lemme GLP-1 Daily, both of which claim to “promote your body’s GLP-1 production, reduce hunger & cravings, promote fat reduction and support healthy weight management.” Similarly, as a globally recognized athlete and cultural figure, Serena Williams partnered with the telehealth company Ro as a spokesperson and investor, publicly promoting its weight-loss programs and GLP-1-related treatments to a broad audience. Both Kardashian’s and Williams’ visibility and credibility extend far beyond their origin stories—whether that be sports or television—and their association with

GLP-1 may encourage their fans to view these medications as both accessible and desirable.

At Harvard, conversations around wellness and self-care have carried a particular weight, shaped by a student body whose drive and determination can extend beyond academics and into physical self-optimization. In this environment, conversations about dieting and gym culture have become increasingly accompanied by references to GLP-1 drugs, peptide supplements, and other forms of physical adjustment strategies. Much like the rest of the country, Harvard students have begun to speak more casually about appetite suppression, caloric restriction, and medicalized approaches to weight loss.

“I’ve definitely noticed a shift in what feels normal. When I see people losing weight so quickly, it changes your expectations of what bodies are supposed to look like—even if you know it’s not realistic,” Riley Plante ’29 told the “Independent.”

Algorithm-driven environments where students come into contact with this content most frequently are part of the problem. Platforms such as TikTok are designed to rapidly personalize feeds, meaning that even minimal engagement with weight-loss content can quickly turn into inescapable exposure. “I see stuff about it all the time on TikTok. Honestly, even if you don’t go looking for it, once you see one or two videos, it just continues popping up,” student-athlete Henry Anthony ’29 said to the “Independent.” “A lot of the videos don’t even feel like ads. They’re just people talking about their experiences or showing results. So it feels more realistic, but I think that it also makes it more influential, just because it doesn’t feel like you’re being sold something.”

Anthony notes that while his own priorities are tied to athletic performance rather than appearance, the growing visibility of drugs like Ozempic contributes to a broader cultural pressure. “I can imagine, with all the influence online and with the rise in popularity of Ozempic, it would force a lot of people into thinking that they might need to meet some unrealistic beauty standard or some sort of higher standard for a summer body,” he said.

As teenagers and young adults, Harvard students are navigating the same insecurities and social pressures from which weight loss brands profit. As students described, the growing presence of these drugs on social media, often marketed toward younger audiences through influencers, has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between medical treatment and lifestyle choice.

The same drive that fuels such successes can also make students more susceptible to pressures around body image, as the idea of constantly improving oneself can easily extend beyond the academic realm. For many students, weight loss is

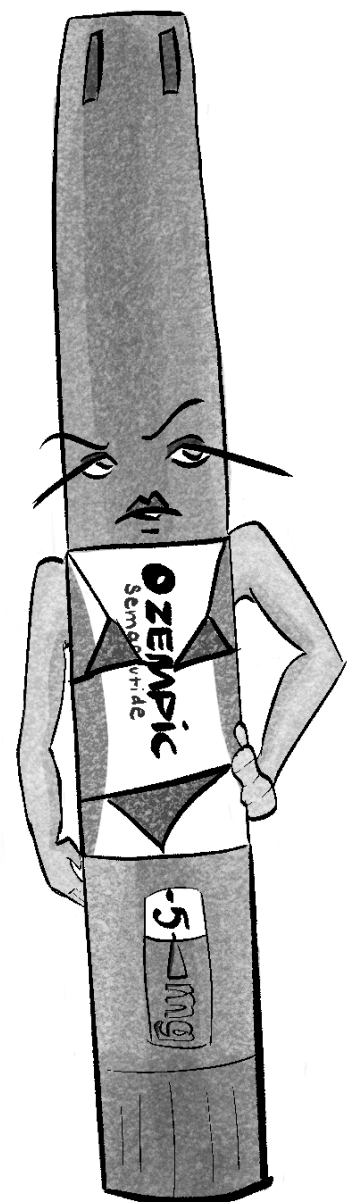
no longer solely about appearance. With easily accessible GLP-1 drugs, it becomes tied to ideas of efficiency, productivity, and optimization.

As these drugs and trends continue to gain popularity, the question is no longer about whether students will pursue a “summer body” or not, but how much the definition of that body has changed, and what is shaping it. For many, what makes this moment different is not just the presence of these drugs, but also how seamlessly they have been folded into everyday life. When such expectations are reinforced not just socially, but financially, and algorithmically, they become much harder to recognize—and even harder to resist. The result, as students express, is not a louder pressure, but a much quieter and more dangerous one: a new version of a “summer body” that feels increasingly defined not by individual choice, but by a system designed to shape it.

“People talk about it way more casually now. It’s not shocking anymore to hear that someone’s on Ozempic or taking peptides—it just feels like another option, like going on a diet,” Plante said.

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**GRAPHIC BY MADISON KRUG
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FORUM

Harming Harvard, Harvesting Harvard

Harvard's struggles and the fragility of soft power.

BY RAJESH TALWAR

More than a thousand years ago, sometime in the 12th century, a destructive invader by the name of Muhammad Bakhtiar Khilji destroyed one of the great Indian universities of the time: Nalanda University, located in present-day Bihar. But whereas Nalanda was destroyed by a foreign invader, Harvard University continues to be under siege by forces within its own country.

Can Nalanda be compared with Harvard? In the ancient world, no global ranking system existed to measure and compare the attainment of different higher education institutions. Had such a system existed, India would surely have stood out as a land where some of the world's finest universities flourished. Besides Nalanda, prominent universities in that bygone era included Takshashila (Taxila), Vikramshila, Valabhi, Pushpagiri, Odantapuri, and Sumapura.

Eight U.S. presidents have graduated from Harvard, most recently, Barack Obama. Beyond presidents, Harvard has produced more Fortune 500 CEOs than any other university, along with Nobel Prize winners, leading scientists, and political figures. Similarly, in ancient times, famous Indian thinkers such as Chanakya, the author of the classic economic treatise Arthashastra, studied at Taxila alongside the Ayurvedic physician and master Charaka. Taxila and Nalanda were indeed the Harvard and Oxford of their time.

In the contemporary era, Harvard has attracted students from across the world; the same was true of Nalanda. Possibly the greatest global university of its time, it attracted visitors and scholars across Asia, stretching as far as China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia.

Unfortunately, efforts are being made to control Harvard, but the university continues to push back. It has become all too clear that to control Harvard is to kill it. For what is a university without an untrammelled creative urge and spirit of inquiry? To apply the immortal words of Tagore, education can progress only "where the mind is without fear," the head is held high, and there is no policing of the freedom to think and to express. When Nalanda was destroyed, the world lost centuries of accumulated wisdom. That episode is a reminder for all of us that even the most celebrated universities are vulnerable—a lesson that resonates with Harvard's current struggles.

There is no question that policing by the government can affect the quality of education, even if it is not driven by ideology. Americans have long harvested the benefits of excellent educational institutions for centuries—the world, too, has advanced in manifold ways. The scholars of Nalanda returned home with fresh ideas, just as students from Harvard do. Millions across the globe have benefited because of its students' breakthrough discoveries in science and medicine. Consider, for instance, the invention of the smallpox vaccine in 1799, anesthesia in 1846, the electrocardiograph in 1914, and insulin in 1922—all of which came out of Harvard Medical School. In economics, too, Harvard scholars such as Joseph Schumpeter and Michael Porter reshaped global thinking on competitive strategy and innovation. These are but a few examples.

Is all of this now set to change? Under the Trump administration, international students find it increasingly difficult to study there. Their thoughts and opinions, even those expressed on social media platforms, will be examined by federal authorities before they are permitted to study at elite American institutions. As a matter of fact, a student who is bold enough to support Harvard against the administration may, as a consequence, find it difficult to secure a visa even were he to be granted admission, rendering the admission itself irrelevant. Indeed, the author of the present article, though a Harvard alumnus, might himself find it difficult to secure a visa were he applying as a student. "Big Brother is watching you," as George Orwell presciently wrote.

Billions of dollars flow in every year to American universities like Harvard. All of that is set to change with tighter immigration rules and greater political scrutiny now. Students from across the world have already started to look elsewhere; the loss of these candidates will slowly but surely affect Harvard's reputation built up over centuries.

Last year, on May 6, beloved Harvard professor Joseph Nye passed away. Professor Nye, a political scientist renowned in the field of geopolitics, taught many eminent people, including former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Many of us may not realize it, but the term "soft power" is one of his creations that has entered the global vocabulary.

Attempts are afoot to harm Harvard by cutting its funding,



stringently examining its donors to see if they are pushing any nefarious agenda, halting the admission of international students, and so on. Such attempts will not only damage Harvard, but they will also affect, possibly irrevocably, the soft power of the United States all across the world—that is, its ability to influence the world through education, culture, and ideas rather than force.

For decades, American universities such as Harvard have drawn in talent from across the world, producing Nobel laureates, pioneering economists, and global leaders whose ideas shaped policy from Europe to Asia and Africa. If Harvard's role diminishes, the United States risks losing one of its most strategic and effective instruments of soft power, just as India once did when Nalanda and Taxila—the great centers of learning of their age—fell into decline.

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GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28

Cystic Stories and the Need for Faith

A reflection on my *annus horribilis*.

BY NOAH BASDEN '29

Describing my gap year as an “*annus horribilis*” is cruelly ironic, but given the circumstances surrounding it, it is an accurate reflection of what was the most tumultuous year of my life.

The phrase “*annus horribilis*” itself was brought to prominence by Queen Elizabeth II in her own reflections on the year 1992, which she described as a year that she wouldn’t “look back [on] with undiluted pleasure.” Similarly, 2024 was not a year that I will look back on with “undiluted pleasure,” and yet, I rediscovered something within myself that almost made the months of pain worth it. As much as my journey of faith has been transformative for me, I would rather have done anything other than two major surgeries and months of recovery to get to my current point.

I like to think doctors work very hard on their poker faces, not allowing themselves to reveal the emotional weight of the news they are about to present to their patients. So, imagine my surprise when, following a routine check-up the week before I was to begin my freshman year, I wasn’t met with the typical doctor’s poker face. I will say, there’s nothing like being diagnosed with an extremely rare congenital cyst that’ll get you to sit up straight in your chair—a luxury I wouldn’t be afforded for eight months following my first surgery.

This isn’t meant to be a sob story, but a story of what was gained, not lost, over my leave of absence.

After four official days on campus, I was back in the hospital. I like to think that for my short time at the College, I—like Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg—should be able to claim the illustrious title of a “Harvard Dropout”... or maybe not. Humor aside, I want to illuminate something more serious in this piece: an investigation into the case for belief in oneself and in the higher power during trying times.

I grew up around faith from a very young age.

Before I really knew what Christianity was, I knew that at my dining table, before we could eat, there would be a few seconds of silence. You can imagine that, as a child, those few seconds preventing me from scarfing down whatever was in front of me were excruciating—yet I waited. I didn’t understand why, but it was just what we did. It wasn’t until I was in my roughest moments that the “why” was revealed to me.

My “why” was faith, and if I’ve learnt anything from this experience, there’s no need to go out and seek it. Faith finds you.

Not Christian faith, nor that of Judaism or Islam, nor any other specific religious group, but the belief in something greater than yourself. It finds you in your weakest moments, when you are on your knees, about to wave the white flag. It is in these moments of near surrender that its invisible hands reach out and lift you from the depths of despair.

I distinctly remember the day its hands came and lifted me. They did not find me in the pews of my local church, but alone in the early morning hours at Mount Auburn Hospital. At this point in my recovery, I was practically bedridden, unable to walk without intense pain or the assistance of a walker, and generally hating life. To add insult to injury, I was woken up nightly at 1 a.m. for pain management medication, and by 3 a.m., the elderly man I shared a wall with would begin the ritualistic swear-filled bellows of his discontent with his treatment. Suffice it to say, I was not sleeping a lot or doing a lot of anything for that matter.

It was during one of these sleepless nights that faith found me. I describe it as my “get up and go” because it literally was. I decided, midway through one of my neighbor’s rants, that I had to get better so I could walk out of this hospital and finally get some rest.

I had to believe
I would get
better for
it to

happen, and it worked. I prayed to have the strength to get up the next morning for my walk and walk just one more step than the day prior, and every day, I would. There were nights when I’d already hit my maximum pain medication limit, and at that time would, unashamedly, cry my eyes out. Nevertheless, by the next morning, I’d be up getting my steps in.

I eventually did leave the hospital on my own strength—albeit with a cane replacing my walker and about 30 pounds lighter than I had been before I got sick—by believing in something greater than myself that got me there. Perhaps I just tell myself that it was faith that did it, whereas the reality could very well have been the sheer exhaustion of hearing my resident geriatric scream for the umpteenth night in a row (I am convinced that he decided that nobody was sleeping if he wasn’t, and every night I’d lie awake—not communicating with God, but with the better part of my conscience that resisted getting up and giving him a piece of my mind). I choose to think it was the former rather than the latter.

The Bible speaks of the power of faith in Matthew 17:20 when Jesus said to his disciples: “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move; and nothing will be impossible to you.” The essential message I take from this is that you don’t need a lot of faith to do a lot with it. Belief in anything can result in changing everything.

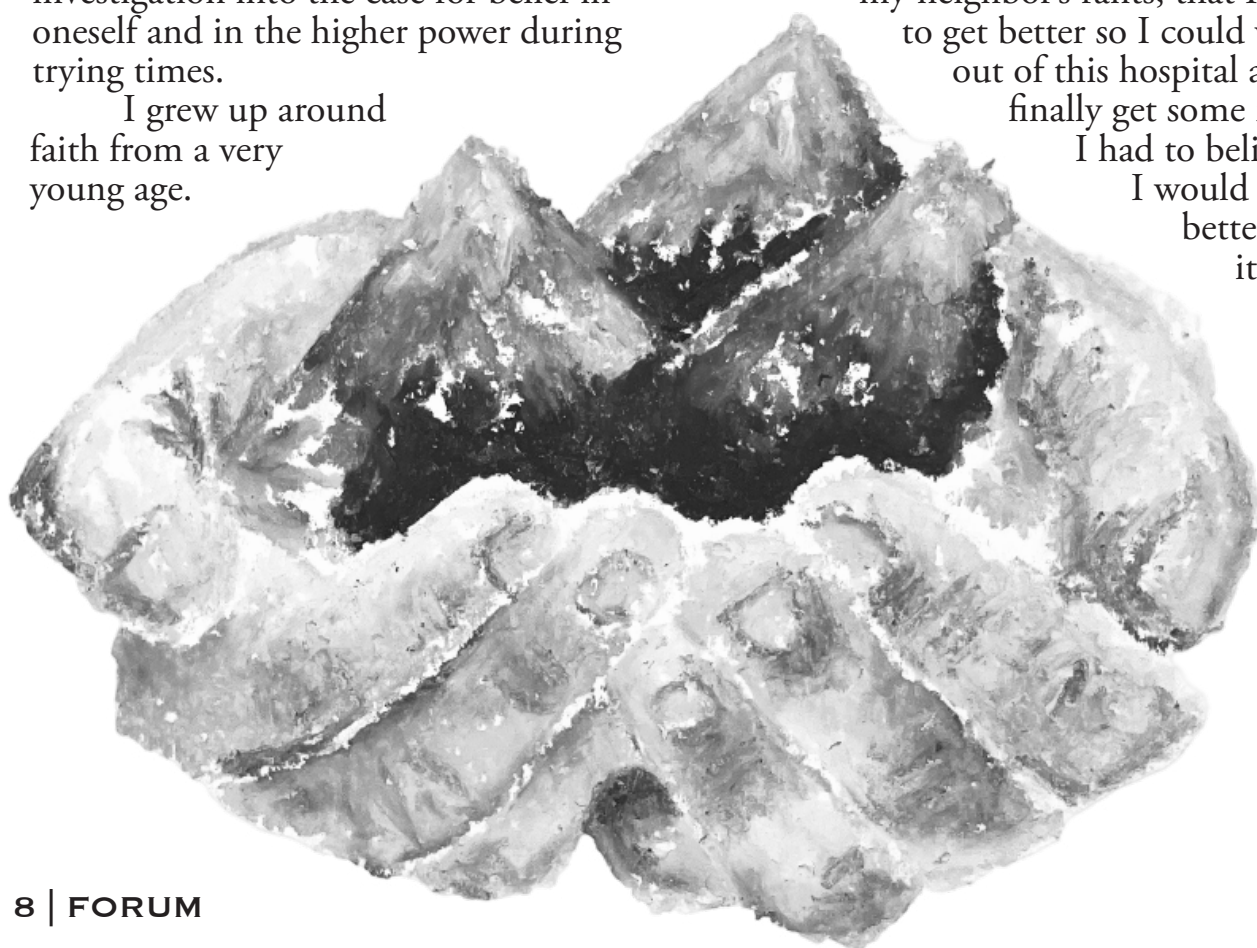
So, I implore you to plant your mustard seed and tend to it. Grow a garden of faith in whatever you believe in and then show up for it. Champion the causes that are near to you, be the first mover, and others will follow. What you believe in matters far less than the fact that you believe in something at all.

I left the hospital and left behind the most traumatic moment of my life so far, with no particular wisdom gained but this: a mustard seed is enough. It was enough to get me back on my feet, out of the hospital, and to college within a year, and it will be enough for you, too.

One additional piece of essential wisdom: catheters are not your friend ... just saying.

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THANK HIS CAMBRIDGE
FAMILY FOR ALL THE
SUPPORT THROUGHOUT HIS
ILLNESS.**

**GRAPHIC BY SARAH LUNA
SASSINE '29**



In Defense of the Detour Destination

A spring break travel story to El Salvador.

BY KALVIN FRANK '28

In discussing spring break this year, I found that pretty much everyone goes to the same places—“Flah-dah,” “Cali,” “the D.R.,” “P.R.,” “Spain”—you get the point. I heard about these locations over and over—that’s not to say they aren’t great trips. However, in looking for a good, unique, yet still budget-friendly trip, my friends and I decided to take a chance on an alternative route: El Salvador.

El Salvador is not what first comes to mind when people hear “paradise.” In fact, it is unfavorably viewed by many Americans. My peers and I received significant pushback when we talked about our chosen destination. Harvard students would often warn us about the “dictator” President Nayib Bukele, who abuses human rights and jails many of the country’s citizens. My family even sent me newspaper articles from 2015 when El Salvador was considered “the homicide capital of the world.”

But despite others’ anxiety, we were well-researched for the trip—and well-assured. Once ruled by street gangs, the country is now considered one of the safest in the Western Hemisphere. The U.S. State Department has issued a Level 1 travel advisory for El Salvador, ranking it above countries such as France and the United Kingdom. Since 2015, there has been just under a 99 percent reduction in murders. While we were aware of the controversies surrounding Bukele, as short-term visitors, we primarily experienced the increased public safety rather than the political consequences.

Outside of the safety of the country, El Salvador is often considered to be one of Central America’s best-kept secrets, boasting tall volcanic mountains along the warm waters of the Pacific. The coast is dotted with black-sand beaches, each surrounded by towering black cliffs.

So, all things considered, our group, which had now grown to 14 people, went ahead with our plans.

After arriving Sunday evening and settling into the Airbnb, moods about our decision were high—especially since online photos of the country did not do it justice. Our “random” lodging was positioned on a small 1,000-yard beach nestled between two large black cliffs, overlooking a vast horizon. The water sat at a heavenly 85 degrees. On the drive to the city, the road wound up and down the mountainous coast, with cliffs overlooking beaches. The landscape was nothing short of magnificent.

Strung along the road into town were hilltop seafood restaurants overlooking the beach thousands of feet below—the ambiance was too alluring for our group not to frequently stop at these vendors for lunch. Also, further inland along the road were small stands. The majority of these

places sold pupusas—the country’s national dish—best described as a corn or rice cake filled with cheese, meat, and beans. They were delicious, and a full lunch of pupusas cost about \$3. A full plate of seafood at the restaurant would cost about \$15, which, although not as well priced as the pupusas, was still a great deal.

Throughout the week, our daily activities included touring a local coffee plantation, surfing in the newly developed surf city in Playa El Tunco, or exploring the busy streets and cathedrals of San Salvador. There were certainly an endless number of experiences that could not possibly fit into a one-page article—and one travel itinerary.

One of the coolest places to visit was Plaza Gerardo Barrios in the city center. The Plaza is anchored by the national palace and the metropolitan cathedral, among other shopping and dining areas. We all found the square pristine; what we didn’t realize was the development it had gone through in the years leading up to our trip. Following our trip to the city center, Bukele posted a before-and-after of the square on his Instagram—as an advertisement for what his administration has accomplished. Though we were likely not the designated audience as non-voters for Salvadoran politics, our group nonetheless took particular note of the changes, comparing the structure’s past state to our present understanding of the location.

Now, my optimistic portrayal of our experiences does not mean our group experienced a week free of hiccups. Because of the windy and hilly roads, semi-truck drivers had to take painfully slow turns, as slow as 20 kilometers per hour. At first, I was cursing them out, waiting for my turn to pass. But on day three, we were met with a jarring explanation for such steady driving: on our way back to the house, we got caught in a traffic standstill after an oil tanker flipped, leaving the two-lane road unusable for six hours. Although the country has many strengths, it’s continuing to develop, including expanding a section of this coastal road to four lanes.

The other factor we may have underestimated was the lack of English proficiency among people in the country, even in touristy areas. Obviously, when traveling to Central America, you shouldn’t expect English to dominate conversations with locals. However, in many countries with American tourists, some hospitality-oriented locations offer bilingual services. This was not the case, though it turned out to be good practice for my Spanish 20



midterm—even if my language skills were a bit too broken to match the country’s vernacular.

In terms of the budget, the trip was a dream for my wallet. The highest cost was my flight—\$350 round trip. Next, the beautiful oceanside house with a pool, split between the group, was \$177 per person, or just over \$25 a day. The final big-ticket cost was transportation, running us \$120 per person for three cars (a sedan, a seven-seater crossover, and a truck). While there were certainly costs for food, groceries, and experiences, the base trip cost came to \$647, which barely covers the cost of a flight to many other spring break destinations.

I have endless great things to say about El Salvador as a country and destination, but the point of this article is not to do the job of the country’s tourism industry—although if Bukele is reading this, call me, I would consider it. This is a testament to the importance of not judging a place based on others’ reactions. Doing your research is important, but if my group had listened to the naysayers, we would not have had this experience. For a week, we traded the typical college spring break for something uncertain. It turns out that the detour brought us to one of the coolest places I have ever been to.

**KALVIN FRANK '28
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INTENSE DOPAMINE DROP
COMING OFF OF BREAK.**

**GRAPHIC BY AMELIE LIMA
'27**

ARTS

“The Shift” Comes to Harvard, Honoring Women’s Leadership

The Shift hosts its first Shiftmakers Gala and Women’s Forum at Harvard Art Museums.

BY LAYLA CHAARAOUI '26 AND MEENA BEHRINGER '27

On Friday, March 27, the Shiftmakers Gala & Women’s Forum took place at Harvard, bringing together female leaders in celebration of their success and empowerment. Organized by The Shift and its nonprofit arm, The Startup Girl Foundation, the event celebrated female trailblazers across fields, a powerful conclusion to Women’s History Month.

Launched in 2025, The Shift is “an impact and innovation platform” that publishes a biannual magazine in print and digital formats, dedicated to female changemakers and leaders. The Gala and the Forum served as its inaugural event and offered a promising preview of what the platform will continue to contribute. Harvard was an ideal setting, as it has long been a place where powerful female leaders emerge, making it a fitting space to celebrate and honor that legacy.

The day began at the Loeb House in Harvard Yard for a Brunch and Forum from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., with the red carpet and Gala at the Harvard Art Museums later that evening at 7 p.m. Following the welcome remarks by Cassandra Pinto, the event moved into the Startup Girl Brunch before transitioning into the Women’s Forum. Guests were encouraged to mingle and network with one another, sharing their expertise across industries ranging from business and media to fashion. The Startup Girl Foundation—a nonprofit dedicated to investing in female-founded companies through seed grants and mentorship—kicked off the official programming by announcing its grant recipients, honoring Saerom for Tearoom by Calmplex, Melinda for Sol Health, and Larz May for Ginkgo.

The event then transitioned to the Forum, comprising three panels—“On Creating Entertainment that Resonates”; “On Transforming Women’s Health”; “On Shifting the Glass Ceiling”—broken up with two Fireside Chats with marine biologist and oceanographer Dr. Sylvia Earle and actress Olivia Munn.

The first panel, moderated by Pinto, brought together Archana Sawjani, Trisha Goyal, and Priscilla Tsai for a conversation on the panelists’ work in the entertainment field and what that work looks like across talent, product, and platform management.

Emma Hinchliffe, journalist and writer of the Fortune Most Powerful Women Daily newsletter, moderated the next panel, “On Transforming Women’s Health,” for a timely and pointed conversation with Raluca Dinu, CEO of QT Imaging Holdings, Jamie LaMontague, CMO of Astrin Biosciences, and Kriti Lall '20, Principal at Perceptive Advisors.

Following a small break for continued chatter, Earle took the floor to address the room in a chat moderated by journalist and director Sophia Li, sharing her experience as a trailblazing marine biologist and oceanographer, one of the first people to walk the sea floor and make groundbreaking discoveries that have deepened our understanding of the unknown ocean depths.

Earle is the founder of Mission Blue, an organization dedicated to protecting our oceans, and a fierce advocate against



damaging human exploitation of our natural resources. Reflecting on what purpose the ocean has served in Earth’s history and evolution, Earle made clear that the ocean remains underexplored and underappreciated—and now serves as a timely point in human history to conserve its resources. In a call to action, Earle urged the audience to make the choice of maintaining the miracle of life on Earth.

“Twenty-first-century humans really have the power of choice ... There is no treaty to protect at least 30% of the ocean, and about 3% of the ocean is currently protected. We just have to do 10 times that, at least. We need to stop killing the ocean,” she emphasized. “You have to rethink how you feel.”

In a male-dominated field, Earle has had to continually prove herself, even after major achievements like leading the first all-female team of aquanauts during the 1970 Tektite II mission. In an interview with the “Independent,” she reflected on how she navigated gender biases and doubts about her leadership. “Having a good sense of humor,” she said, has been key in managing to overcome such obstacles.

Munn spoke about her personal story of discovering and fighting her breast cancer diagnosis at the age of 43. In an intimate chat moderated by Peloton’s Aditi Shah, Munn explained how it was the uncommonly used Breast Cancer Risk Assessment Tool that detected her breast cancer early on when other available screens did not. Her diagnosis led to a double mastectomy and ultimately five surgeries in total. For Munn, her diagnosis went beyond her own identity. Yes, it altered her perspective on how she spends her time, but it also impressed the importance of speaking out to help other women learn about the risk tool that saved her life. Munn requested that the Forum audience take the time to go through the screening process, and later led a toast at the Gala to “good health.”

Munn described her decision to speak out and be vulnerable after her diagnosis, which led to a 4,000% increase in usage of the BCRAT. “I knew that if I had done all the things I was supposed to do and I thought that I was good, but yet had cancer growing, then there had to be so many other women who were experiencing the same thing. And if telling my story and telling women about the lifetime risk assessment test could save a life, then I knew it was my responsibility to do so,” she told the “Independent.” “The amount of women who I’ve heard from and have come up to

me all the time has been truly incredible.”

A standing ovation reverberated across the room following both Earle and Munn’s speeches, a testament to the courage and legacy these women have built and the inspiration they have given to others. The afternoon concluded with the final panel, “On Shifting the Glass Ceiling,” with Ginny Wright, CEO at Orveon Global.

The Forum and Brunch were followed by the first-ever Shiftmakers Gala, hosted at the Harvard Art Museums, where the organization honored four women: Earle received the Legacy Award, Munn received the Equity Shiftmaker Award, actress and singer Lola Tung received the Emerging Shiftmaker Award, and freestyle skier and model Eileen Gu received the Sport Shiftmaker Award.

The Gala was hosted by model Lauren Chan, the first plus-size “Sports Illustrated” rookie and first lesbian to solo cover a “Sports Illustrated Swimsuit” issue. Li kicked off the award presentation, honoring her friend Tung. “The Emerging Shiftmaker award is given to a woman at the beginning of something transformative, a woman whose presence already signals a shift in culture and storytelling and what it means to be seen. Lola Tung is that woman,” she said while presenting the award.

Tung is a strong advocate for female representation, social justice, Asian American rights, and environmental causes. “Find those people that you do look up to—those you enjoy working with and who inspire you. And honestly, you are going to be the person to, I think, be that mentor for someone else,” she said in an interview with the “Independent,” speaking to women seeking greater representation in their own fields.

“Keep pushing towards something that you’re passionate about, and don’t let anybody tell you that you’re not supposed to be there, or you’re not supposed to be in that space, or you’re not supposed to be taking up space,” she added.

In her acceptance speech, Gu described the courage to try, citing her feat in being the first-ever women’s double cork 1620 in competition at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, a highly advanced freestyle skiing jump. “If there was just one little girl sitting at home in front of her TV at that moment—seeing for the first time someone who looks like her, who speaks like her—she will never doubt her place in the sport, and she too will be willing to try,” Gu concluded.

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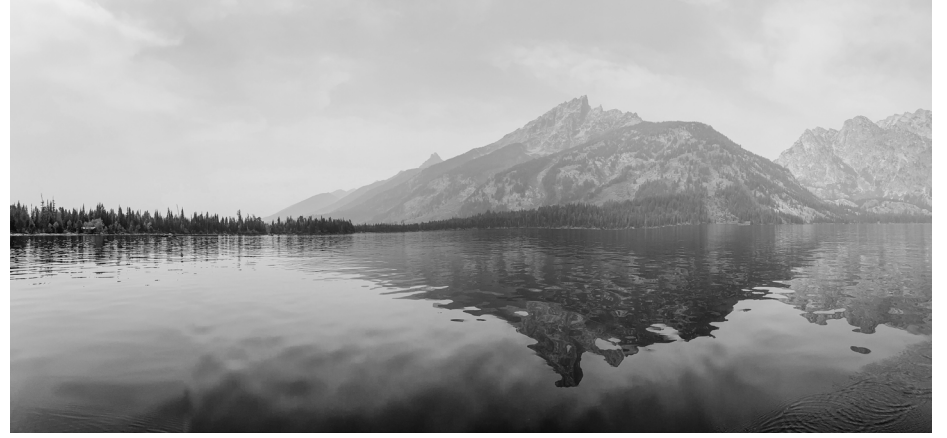
PHOTO COURTESY OF HUY
LUONG

A Blossoming World from 12 Arrow Street

BY JORDAN WASSERBERGER '27



Baker Beach, San Diego



Grand Tetons, WY



Marshall's Beach, San Francisco



Cambridge, MA



Swiss Alps



Romsdalen, Norway



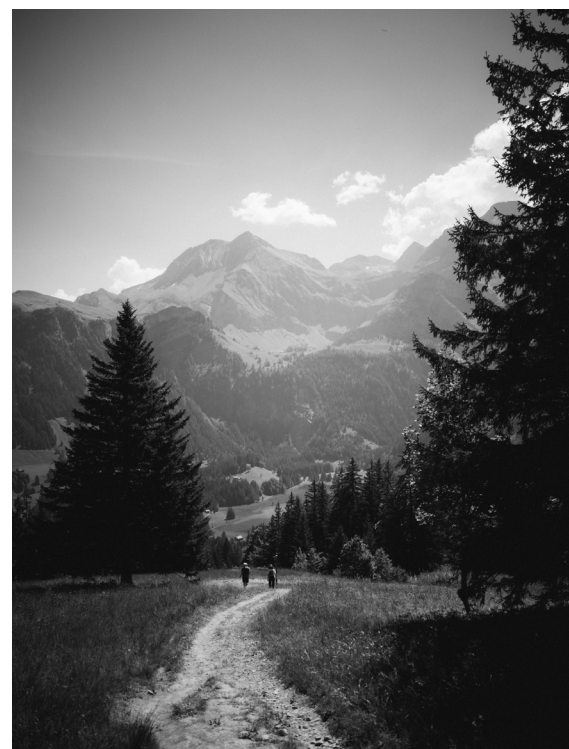
Bergen, Norway



Stockholm, Sweden



Trollstigen, Norway



Swiss Alps





“Asian Women I Know”

A conversation with director Crystal Manyoun on an original, student-written show discussing the struggle of being an Asian woman in America.

BY COURTNEY HINES '28 AND ELLIE GUO '29

From March 25 to 29, the Harvard Asian Student Arts Program presented “Asian Women I Know,” a one-hour play written by Mira Jiang '26 and directed by Crystal Manyoun '26. Inspired by a real dim sum dinner between Jiang, Manyoun, and their friends, the two transformed a meaningful conversation into a fully realized production.

“Having both of us create the play together, we were able to bounce ideas back and forth with each other, add specific details from our own experiences, and try to capture the essence of the original dinner conversation to the best of our ability,” Manyoun shared in a post-production interview with the “Independent.”

The lights come up on a vacant table in a dim sum restaurant in Boston Chinatown with a classic white silk tablecloth and red chairs. A round paper lantern hangs above the table. In the foreground of Harvard University’s Agassiz Theater, three more tables seat a few audience members, immersing them in the play as if they were fellow patrons of the dim sum restaurant.

“I really wanted the audience to feel like they were at the restaurant with us. I wanted the audience to feel like they were invited into the conversation and not just eavesdropping,” Manyoun detailed.

A waiter, played by Michael Xiang '26, walks among the tables, dressed in a typical Chinese-style black and red waistcoat. He hums “Mo Li Hua,” or “Jasmine Flower,” a popular Chinese folk song, embodying the oftentimes aloof waiters of Asian restaurants who show little concern for ingratiating American customer-service standards.

The five women enter the restaurant excitedly. Anna (Maggie Peng '28), who is likely based on Jiang herself, sets the scene. They are seniors at Harvard, and it is their first time exploring Chinatown. Already, the friction between their Asian and American identities is alluded to—the girls are going to dim sum for dinner, despite the fact that it is traditionally a brunch meal. Anna calls out “wu wei!” meaning “table for five,” in American-accented Mandarin, to which the waiter hardly reacts.

As they take their seats, Anna introduces her friends to us, as the paper lantern lights up in a different color for each woman. Jasmine (Phoebe Zhang '26) lights the stage purple—she wears bold makeup and a leather miniskirt, fitting the “Asian Baby Girl” stereotype (an Asian woman with a Westernized style), and is an aspiring singer-songwriter. Vivien (Grace Liu '26) is represented by a blue hue, and Anna describes her as “the smartest girl I know,” a math genius. The next color is pink for Kitty (Kaitlyn Mady '29), a bubbly cheerleader. Star (Grace Zhou '28) is teal, a kind-hearted and gentle woman with a secret passion for creative writing. Finally, the lantern turns red for Anna, but her introduction is interrupted, obscuring her

backstory and motivations.

Throughout the play, the lantern changes color for each character’s flashbacks, a consistent symbol that tracks how their stories shape their perceptions of their Asian-American identities, thanks to Lighting Designers Ethan Li '28 and Alex Nugent '28. The similar color of their outfits also reflects these motifs, designed by Kacy Bao '26. Furthermore, the characters represent a diverse range of Asian ethnicities—Jasmine is from Laos, Kitty is Vietnamese, Star is Korean, while Vivien and Anna are both Chinese.

Importantly, food was placed at the very center of the play. Each showing, the dim sum table was filled with full meals for the cast to eat throughout the act. “Many people came up to me and the actors after the show, asking: ‘Is that real food on stage?’ which I found really funny. Yes! It was real food,” Manyoun explained.

“The order of food eaten by each cast member was very specific, especially since we wanted to end scene 15 with only one piece in each dish for the girls to take that final bite,” she continued. The food choreography included five portions of noodles, six egg tart halves, four sesame balls, five red bean mochi, three strawberry mochi, and three rice rolls.

Their conversation starts with any friend group’s favorite topic—recent romantic interests. The scrutiny turns on Star, as her friends, especially Kitty, disapprove of her on-and-off relationship with her white boyfriend. Star tells a story about one of their dates, and we are whisked into a flashback in which she directly addresses the audience, a teal lantern shining overhead.

Xiang plays Star’s boyfriend, dressed in a basketball jersey and a backward baseball cap, a complete transformation from a tired, Chinese dim sum waiter. Star tells us that she was wearing uncomfortable shoes that night, trying to convince her boyfriend to sit down on a bench. However, she never directly asks to sit, constantly repeating, “only if you want to,” demonstrating how Asian women are often conditioned into taking up less space.

Returning to the restaurant, the characters’ conversation turns towards the greater phenomenon of white men dating Asian women, mentioning terms like “yellow fever” and citing ideas like the “Oxford study.” They discuss the story trope of an American military man going to Asian countries and falling in love with a docile, exotic Asian woman. Examples of this trope can be found as early as the 1904 opera “Madama Butterfly.” The characters call into question the ethics of interracial relationships and whether they are inherently flawed, especially when white men pursue a fetishized idea of

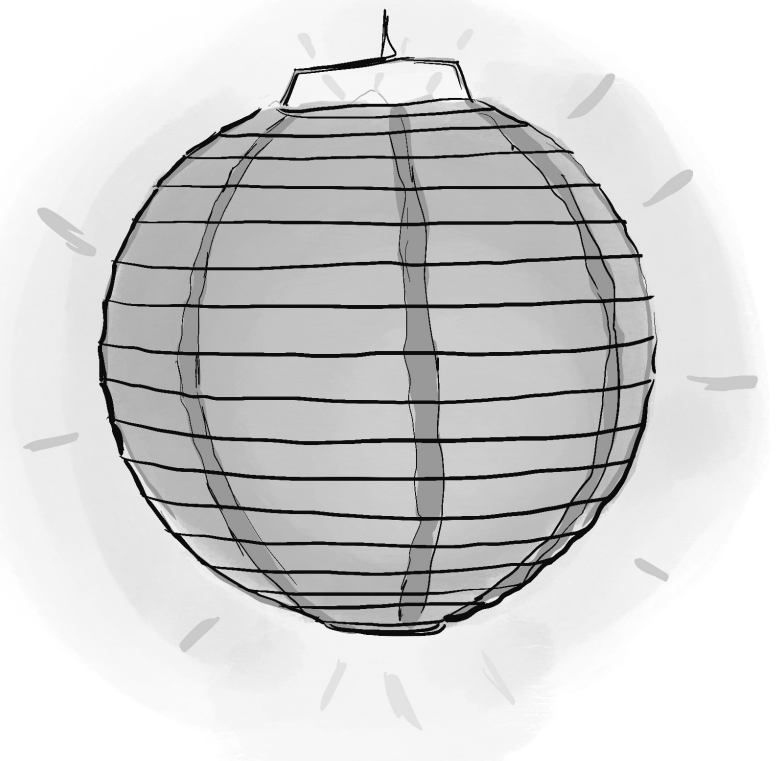
an Asian woman.

The following scenes detail the experiences of Vivien, Kitty, and Jasmine. Vivien tells the story of how she was known as “BMV” among her peers in the high school Science Olympiad, an acronym for “Ballistic Missile Vivien.” The nickname came from one particularly difficult Science Olympiad tournament, during which Vivien confidently solved a problem like a missile.

The triumph and pride of Vivien’s nickname is contrasted by telling the origin of Kitty’s nickname at the same time. She tells us that “Kitty” is short for “Katherine,” which was bestowed upon her by her strict and unforgiving cheerleading coach. The other students on the cheer team would call her “Hello Kitty” in mockery, but Kitty never realized they were bullying her for her race in high school, instead believing they were making her feel included.

Jasmine then gives a lecture on the “ABG,” or “Asian Baby Girl,” stereotype. She explains that the name originally stood for “Asian Baby Gangster,” referring to Asian women in metropolitan areas who participated in gang activities in the 1980s. They diverged from the stereotype of quiet and submissive Asian women, but eventually became a stereotype of their own—now associated with being the equivalent of “dumb blonde” of Asian women and fetishized once again. Jasmine sings a song about how the ABG aesthetic empowers her, while expressing frustration with the white male gaze and sexualization of Asian women.

Each scene evoked both an understanding of the diversity of experiences Asian women may have while also offering points of connection for the audience. Even if viewers could not directly relate to the stories of each woman, they nonetheless could see themselves in the traumas each person held and shared—whether it be the ever-present fetishization of Asian women or choosing to ignore bullying for the sake of finding belonging.



“In creating the characters and structure together, there were many moments in our creative process where we found ourselves learning from each other’s experiences and perspectives,” Manyloun shared. “For example, the ABG stereotype and history was a topic that Mira was less familiar with, but I was more familiar with, especially since I grew up discussing these topics with my Laotian family.”

The conversation shifts towards the well-known stereotype of Asian “tiger parents” and how Asian children are pitted against each other for their academic achievements from a young age. Star’s experiences with being compared to her cousin Cici, played by Liu, are depicted as a game show. The hosts of the show, played by Peng and Xiang, make the two compete for a crown by testing their multiplication tables, piano playing, and college acceptance results. In a twist of events, Star, who failed both the multiplication and piano competitions, is accepted to an Ivy League school and earns the crown, while her cousin attends a state university. However, when the game show ends, the cousins discuss their post-graduation plans. Cici takes back the crown as she lands a comfortable consulting job, while Star must attend medical school for several more years.

With a cast of only five members, each actor showed an incredible range of talent and character, from Asian parents to game show hosts to cheer captains. In particular, Xiang, who mentioned that it was his first time acting in his program’s biography, transformed from a waiter

to a boring boyfriend to a father.

Finally, the show reaches a climax when Anna’s story is revealed. She desires to connect with her Chinese heritage, as she can only speak broken Mandarin and knows nothing about the country, deciding to travel to China after college. However, her mother opposes the idea, as she feels that Anna is ungrateful for the sacrifices she made to immigrate to the United States. As a scientist, Anna’s mother was questioned in 2018 during the “China Initiative,” an operation by the Department of Justice to counter Chinese espionage in academic circles, which relied heavily on racial profiling and intimidating interrogation techniques.

In a flashback, Peng plays Anna’s mother as she is questioned, then returns to playing Anna, who is being scrutinized by non-Asian people around her. The scene grows ominous as her friends slam their fists on the dim sum table, making the dishware rattle loudly. The women approach Anna and begin to tug on her arms in opposite directions, shouting insults about not being American or Asian “enough.” Anna collapses in exhaustion, and the red lantern above her fades to black.

Perhaps the reason for obscuring Anna’s story when the other women are introduced is to demonstrate that her narrative does not fit into any of the existing Asian archetypes. Jasmine represents the “ABG,” Vivien the successful student, Kitty expresses being “whitewashed,” Star is socially conditioned into staying quiet—Anna is none of these, a more realistic portrayal

of an Asian woman.

When the lights come up again, the waiter is ready to settle their bill. During the show, he had not forgotten to attend to his other tables, passing us menus and fortune cookies. Anna invites us to break our fortune cookies together. She counts down from three to read our fortunes out loud.

The choice to center the show around a dinner conversation and a genuine meal was intentional. “I started thinking about how, as a meal progresses, people start to get more comfortable with each other and more full,” Manyloun said. “This naturally led Mira and I to develop the structure of the play, specifically the sequence of vignettes, to become more and more ‘full’ as the play progresses.”

That feeling of welcome, of communion, is one that each person remembers too well. Each of us has shared stories at the dinner table and listened to the stories of loved ones in turn. This play marks another meal to be remembered. It was a gift to be welcomed to the meal of Asian women we’ve now come to know.

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HARVARD.EDU) AND ELLIE
GUO ’29 (EGUO@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) KNOW A LOT OF
ASIAN WOMEN.

GRAPHIC BY CLARA LAKE ’27

Grandma’s Advice

WRITTEN AND DESIGNED
BY ELLIE GUO ’29 AND
SAM PARK ’29



“Remember kids, everyone should have at least one hobby that gives them carpal tunnel.”

Kitchen Sink No. 9

BY LUKE WAGNER '26 AND JONAH KARAFIOL '26

The paper was in my pocket when I woke. I had not put it there—or I had put it there and forgotten, which amounts to the same confession. I unfolded it at the desk in the grey light and read it again: a name, an address, the handwriting almost mine but tilted slightly and with letters pressed harder into the page as though the hand that wrote them had more certainty to spare. The ink had bled into crinkled waves at the edges where the paper had been damp. I turned my right hand over. A faint smear along the side of my smallest finger, the inklings of a sentence I did not remember composing.

I went to the sink. The hot water—one, two, three—came through in its usual thin stream, reddish and then clear. I washed the ink away. It went easily, which felt wrong; things that matter should be harder to remove. I dried my hands on my trousers and looked at the paper on the desk.

The address was south of the river. I knew the area only by reputation—lodging houses, public houses with no signs, the kind of streets that didn't appear on the maps the university distributed to new students. The kind of streets a person like me would have no reason to visit, which was precisely why I was going to visit them, because the person who had written the address was not entirely me, and following him was the closest thing I had to a plan.

I put on my coat. I checked the mirror. The face in it looked like mine, though slightly thinner than I remembered, the eyes carrying a tiredness that had moved past fatigue into something more structural. I held my own gaze for a moment, testing it for signs of the other, and found nothing conclusive. He did not announce himself in mirrors. He announced himself in bootlaces, in marginal notes, in addresses written on scraps of paper during hours I could not account for.

...

The walk took the better part of an hour. The morning was cold and damp, the kind of English cold that does not assault you but simply waits, settling into the coat, the collar, the space between the scarf and the neck, until you realise you have been shivering for some time without noticing. The streets narrowed as I went south. The buildings darkened by decades of coal smoke, the gutters running with something that was not entirely rain.

I found the street. It was short and did not connect to anything obvious—it began at a coal merchant's yard and ended at a wall, as though the city had started a thought then abandoned it. The number on the paper corresponded to a building at the far end, three stories tall, the windows dark. At the ground level, an oak door at the bottom of three stone

steps, and no handle on the outside.

I stood across the street and looked at it. A cart passed behind me, the horse's hooves stomping on the wet stone. I counted the windows. I counted the steps. I was stalling, and I knew I was stalling, and knowing it did not make me stop.

The door opened. A woman came out, pulling her shawl around her shoulders against the cold. She moved with the heaviness of someone who had been awake for a long time, and she did not look at me as she turned up the street and walked away. The door remained open behind her—not an invitation, exactly, but the absence of a refusal, which was close enough.

I crossed the street, went down the steps, and through the door.

Inside, the air was warm and close, carrying a smell I could not name but that my nose recognised before my mind did—something resinous, close, almost sweet—a tightening in the stomach, a quickening that had no obvious cause. The room was dim. Candles on the bar, candles on the tables, candles in wall sconces—the flames leaned in a draft that came from a vent I could not locate. Behind the bar was a row of bottles with no labels, and above them a sign in Cyrillic, the letters angular and crowded against one another. The barman was wiping a glass. He looked at me, said nothing, set the glass down, and picked up another.

I sat at the bar because sitting gave me a chance to think about what to do next, if anything. The stool was wooden, scarred, the surface worn smooth by use. The barman set a glass in front of me without being asked. I looked at it. Vodka, clear, the surface trembling slightly from some vibration in the building's structure. I drank it because not drinking it would have required an explanation I did not have.

The room behind me was mostly empty. Two men at a table in the far corner, speaking in a language I did not understand. A woman was sleeping or pretending to sleep in a chair by the cold fireplace. The orange hue of the candles tinted everything the color of old brandy, and the shadows they threw were unsteady, shifting when the draft shifted, so that the walls seemed to breathe.

I set the glass down and reached for my coat.

Then the door at the back of the room opened, and she came through it.

...

She was carrying a cup of tea in one hand and a cigarette in the other. She moved through the room as a trail of tobacco smoke spiraled from her mouth to her back and



lingered on the ends of her hair—I had ceased to notice the furniture. Her hair was dark and cut until it lay resting on her shoulders. On the inside of her left wrist, at the place where the pulse sits closest to the surface, a tattoo in the same script as the sign above the bar. She sat two stools from me and set her tea down and drew on her cigarette and looked at the wall behind the bar with an expression of settled, unhurried boredom.

Then she looked at me. Her eyes were the color of river water, grey-green, and they moved across my face with a slowness that felt practiced, the look of someone who had learned to read faces the way other people read newsprint.

You are back, she said.

I said I had not been here before. She studied me for a moment. Then something in her expression changed—not surprise, not confusion, but a slight recalibration.

She said, No. You are the other one.

The room was very quiet. The two men in the corner had stopped talking. The barman wiped the same glass. I heard my own breathing, which sounded too loud, and beneath it the low hiss of the candle nearest to me, a pressure in my ears like the room had sealed itself shut.

I said, What do you mean, the other one.

She tapped her cigarette against the edge of an ashtray and did not answer immediately. She was deciding something. I could see it in the way her attention withdrew and then returned, the brief internal conference of a person choosing how much to say.

You came two nights ago, she said. Late. You sat where you are sitting and drank three glasses and did not speak. Then you left, and then you came back, and you were different. She paused. The second time, you spoke. The second time, you laughed. The second time, you told me your name.

She nodded. Yes, she said. She drew on her cigarette and exhaled slowly, the smoke drifting toward the ceiling in a thin, purposeful line. You hold yourself differently, she said. Your shoulders. Your hands. He is—she searched for the word—loser. She said it with a slight accent that turned the word into something more precise than it usually was.

I wanted to leave. I wanted to stand up and walk out of the door and back across the river and up the stairs to room fourteen and sit at the desk and wash my hands and pretend that the address on the paper led nowhere, that the woman with the grey-green eyes was mistaken or mad or lying. But she was not lying. I knew she was not lying because she had described him perfectly—the looseness, the laughter, the ease that I did not possess and that arrived only when I was not present to prevent it.

I asked her what he had done—what Edward had done, on the night he came.

She crushed the cigarette in the ashtray. The room waited. I waited. The candles bent and straightened. She said, He talked. She stopped. She put down her tea but still held the glass, and I understood that she was deciding what to leave out, and that what she left out would be the thing that mattered most.

He talked about many things, she said. The university. A professor. She waved her hand, dismissing these. Then she said, He talked about the Greeks. A play. A man who killed his mother and was not sorry, or was sorry but would do it again. She paused. He said this as though he was proud of it, and then he said it again as though he was afraid of it. I could not tell which was true. Perhaps both.

My stomach turned. Not from disgust. From recognition. The argument was the one in the essay, the one Hendricks had laid on his desk beside mine, the one written in handwriting that was almost my handwriting but pressed harder into the page. The argument that lucidity and horror are not opposites. It was his argument—Edward's argument—and he had been sitting on this stool, in this room, delivering it to a woman with a dragon tattooed across her shoulder, while I slept in room fourteen with no memory of having left.

What else, I said.

She looked at me for a long time. Then she said, He asked me about a girl. A girl at the university, in the library. He did not say her

name. He said she was the only person who could see him, and he was not sure whether this was a comfort or a danger.

The room tightened around me. I could feel my pulse in my throat, in my wrists, in the place behind my eyes where headaches begin. The candle nearest to me guttered and recovered. The barman set down his glass and picked up another.

She said, He also asked about a field. Whether I knew of a field, outside the city, where something had burned. He said he could smell it on his hands. He said the smell would not come off.

I looked down at my hands. They were clean. The cleanliness meant nothing because the smell she was describing was the same smell I had been trying to wash away for weeks—not on the skin, deeper, in the memory of the skin, in whatever place the body stores the things the mind refuses to hold.

Did he tell you what burned I said.

She shook her head. But he was afraid of it, she said. Not of the fire; Of the fact that he was not sorry.

...

I walked back across the river in the late morning light. The fog had lifted enough to show the city in its ordinary shape—the spires, the rooftops, the slow brown water below the bridge, a barge moving east without urgency. Students passed me on the path, gowns over their shoulders, books under their arms, and I watched them and could not remember whether I had ever moved through a morning like that, with that kind of ordinary direction, or whether I was only remembering someone else's memory of having done so.

The facts, as I understood them, were these. There was a man who used my body when I was not using it. He called himself Edward. He had been to a field where something burned, and he was not sorry, and the not-being-sorry was the thing that frightened me most, because I had been to that field too—or my body had—and the soot was under my nails to prove it, and I did not know whether the absence of guilt I felt when I looked at it was mine or his.

I wanted to walk faster, and I walked faster, and the river did not care. I was living in the interval.

I crossed the quad. The oak tree stood where it always stood. I stopped beneath it. The

bark was rough under my hand—I had not decided to touch it; the hand had moved on its own, reaching for the trunk the way it reaches for the hot tap in the morning, out of habit, out of a routine I did not remember establishing. My hand. His hand. Same hand.

A student crossed the quad behind me and called out, good morning. I turned and nodded. He paused, tilting his head, and

said, Were you out here again last night? I saw someone under the tree quite late. I said I had not been. He shrugged and went on.

I climbed the stairs to room fourteen. The door was closed, as I had left it. Inside, the Oresteia was on the desk, open to a page I had not opened it to. In the margin, in the handwriting that was almost mine, two words had been underlined and then underlined again, the pen pressed so hard it had nearly cut the page. Beside them, a small drawing—not a word, not a sentence, something closer to a mark, the kind a person makes when they are thinking about something they cannot say. I stood there looking at it for a long time.

I read it twice. Then I went to the sink and turned on the hot water—one, two, three—and held my hands under it and scrubbed until the skin reddened and tightened, and the pain gave me something to hold. I scrubbed until my knuckles ached. The water ran clear. It always ran clear. There was nothing on my hands except the memory of things my hands had done without me, and no amount of water was going to reach that deep.

I turned off the tap and stood there, dripping, listening to the pipes settle in the wall, and somewhere beneath the sound of the pipes I heard it again—the second rhythm, faint, misaligned, the breath of someone who was not me and was not elsewhere, who was here, in the room, in the body, waiting with the kind of patience that does not need to announce itself because it already knows what is going to happen next.

I dried my hands, sat at the desk, and picked up the pen. I do not know what I intended to write. What came out was this: I went to the bar. I met the woman. She knows you. And the handwriting was mine, but the words were addressed to someone I had never met who lived behind my eyes, and I did not know whether writing to him was an act of war or an act of surrender, and I sat there looking at the sentence until the chapel bell struck and I lost count of the strokes, the way I always lose count now, as though that part of my mind had been given over to someone who had a different use for it.

I asked what name I had given her. She looked at me with an expression I could not read—not pity, not amusement, something closer to the careful attention of a person handling a thing that might break. She said, Edward.

The name landed in the room like a stone dropped into a well. I waited for the echo, and there was none, only the silence that follows a sound that has been completely absorbed, and my own knuckles wrapped around the bar, which I was gripping because my hands needed something to grip.

My name is Thomas.

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

GRAPHICS BY SAGE WILEY '29



Exploring American Hometowns: New Albany, Ohio

An ode to my Ohioan home. Yes, I used to think it was terrible, too.

BY PAIGE CORNELIUS '28



Dear Sudbrook Sq.,

You sounded like “Hawaii Five-0” on a Friday night and smelled like monkey bread on Christmas morning. You felt like rollerblading where cars never passed and juggling a soccer ball until the soles of my feet stained black. You were my childhood home, a place of refuge and familiarity. But now painted white, with new shutters and a Chevy truck parked where a Mazda 6 once sat, I’m not sure if this place made me or if I made it.

I moved in when I was five; it’s the only home I remember. From a preschooler to a teenager, the house adapted to my shapeshifting. The beanbags, once used as a landing mat for somersaults, turned into seating for movie nights with friends. The blinds that I used to shut tight for an irrational childhood fear of an intruder stayed open as I grew older, sunlight peeking through as I got ready for school. The closet, once used for dress-up and playing “house,” turned into a space for homecoming dresses when my sister left for college.

Beyond the memories it contained, objectively, it was a child’s dream home. There was a huge granite island large enough for pizza making, slippery brown hardwood floors that I could slide around on, and four whole garages!

Eventually, it became just a place where I lived. The novelty of such a beautiful home wore off, and I backed out of the driveway or flew up the stairs with little appreciation.

I ran in to grab a snack before practice and wouldn’t return until nighttime.

As teenage daughters do, I thought myself too ambitious for suburban life. I felt like the broader community, teachers, and family watched my every move, leaving no room for failure. The white picket fences our town was known for began to suffocate me, less charming and more confining. Conversations that once felt effortless started to become monotonous, while academic and athletic pressure quietly built.

Although I felt larger than the town, the house outgrew my family all too quickly.

Sister by sister, we moved away in pursuit of something greater, leaving behind memories for my parents to live in. Rooms once consumed by joyful laughter could not be replaced by television echoes.

New Albany is a suburb of Columbus. It has a small “downtown” area, consisting of a Starbucks where middle schoolers would walk to every Friday after school; a library; and a Rusty Bucket, known among my friends as the restaurant with the best ranch dressing. Since 1971, Eagles Pizza has sat five minutes away from the public high school, with slices that easily rival Joe’s. Over time, the town expanded, now including a Target, Playa Bowls, and endless trails for walking the dogs. It has all four seasons, making

both pool days and snow days feel out of a movie. Actually, “Business Insider” named New Albany America’s number one suburb due to crime rates, education, and other factors, leading me to believe the quote, “You don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone.”

I arrived in Cambridge,

Massachusetts, ready to embark on a “new life.” When I admitted I was from Ohio, I was met with laughter and judgment—the state flattened into a TikTok punchline of cornfields and Jake Paul. Faced with these inaccurate perceptions, I found myself growing defensive, quickly realizing just how much New Albany meant to me.

Walking the same paths is peaceful, not mundane. Seeing the same smiling faces in grocery stores is comforting, not repetitive. The stillness I once resisted is now something I search for, but I come up empty-handed in the chaos of the city.

But with every beautiful childhood home comes the inevitable: downsizing.

I returned from an overwhelming freshman year to a house in a new suburb, Bexley, with creaky

floors and one fewer bedroom, signaling that our family had moved on.

It wasn’t all bad, though. There was a pool in the backyard, and the neighborhood was closer to Columbus, but farther away from the version of home I had known and from the friends that made my town special.

I used to judge those who returned home after college. I couldn’t fathom raising my kids on the same streets where I learned to ride a bike. To me, staying meant settling—choosing comfort over ambition. But somewhere between semesters in Cambridge, that narrative unraveled.

Sick of my complaining about driving more than five minutes to see my best friend, after a year in Bexley, my parents moved back behind the white fences—back to New Albany, the town I had once been so eager to escape. And yet, when I return, it no longer feels simple.

It’s impossible to feel like I fully belong. I am an entirely different person from who I was in high school, and Cambridge now holds the version of me that has changed. But leaving didn’t make my Ohio town smaller—it made my perspective larger.

The predictability, the quiet, the familiarity—these are not limitations, but anchors that keep me grounded.

I was mistaken. I tried so desperately to outgrow my home, and for a while, maybe I did. But home is not something to challenge or escape. It is something to return to—changed, but still there.

New Albany, Ohio, you were never just the backdrop of my childhood. You were the constant I pushed against, and now, the place I measure everything else against.

So I don’t know if you made me, or if I made this image of you.

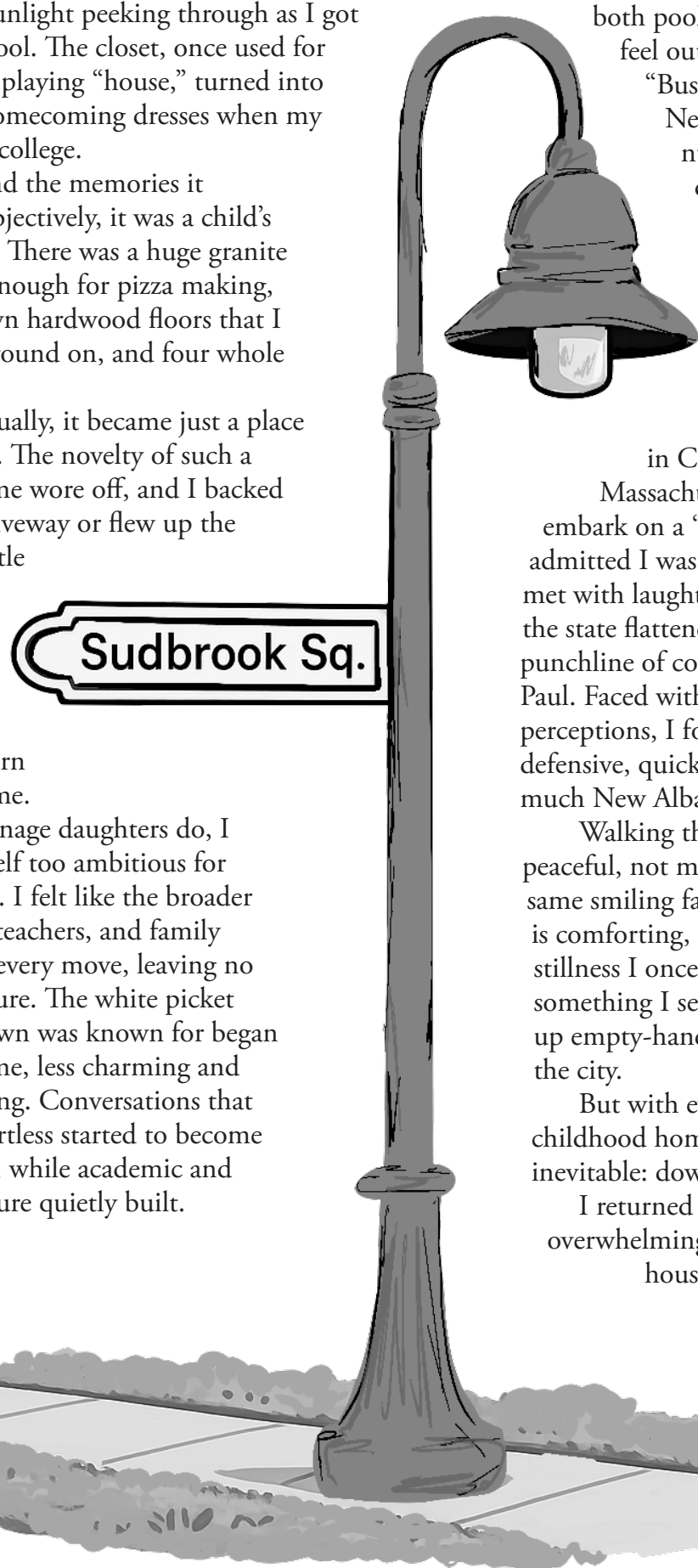
But I do know this:

My big-city dreams and go-getter lifestyle haven’t disappeared—but neither has the quiet pull of home when Harvard becomes overwhelming. Cambridge may be where I am becoming someone new, and New York City or Washington, D.C. may be where this growth continues.

But you are where I learned what friendship, love, heartbreak, ambition, and everything deeply human are. When I leave now, I don’t feel like I’m escaping. I feel like I’m leaving a part of me that I hope to hold close no matter where I am in the world.

**PAIGE CORNELIUS '28
(PAIGECORNELIUS@COLLEGE.
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EVERYONE SHOULD COME VISIT
OHIO.**

**GRAPHIC BY ANNELISE
FISCHER '26**



After the Bloom

On the art of buying flowers.

BY AUDREY WU '29

At the start of each month, I make my way down the familiar roads of Harvard Square to the glass windows of Brattle Square Florist. It has become a ritual of sorts ever since my grandmother died, an attempt to fill the gaps of sadness in my life with the vibrant oranges of nasturtiums and the subtle pinks of freckled lilies.

Lucky to grow up just a short walk from my local florist, I have been going to a flower shop for as long as I can remember, and continuing this tradition in college only felt right. As soon as I enter the store, I am met with the comforting, sweet scent of the flowers and the memories the place has held for me. Stephen Zedros, the florist who has watched me grow up, greets me with his usual cheerfulness and a hug as I ask for my usual \$10 bouquet. No matter what kind of day it is, Stephen always curates the perfect arrangement, swiftly picking between the seasonal flowers and bringing them together into a beautiful bunch wrapped in brown packaging. Something about the ritual has become therapeutic and almost instinctual—no matter where I am or whatever mood I'm in, I can rely on the habitual comfort of returning to Stephen's store and leaving with a little more brightness than I arrived with.

Cut flowers have always held a presence in my life; the kitchen of my childhood home was usually filled with them. My mom and sister have always hated having flowers because, in their eyes, the effort of maintaining them outweighed their beauty. Despite this, my dad has always loved flowers of all types and colors. He taught me how to cut the stems at an angle so the plant's pores and stomata can absorb water properly and how to care for the plants so their freshness lasts longer. In learning to love and tend to these flowers, he taught me to become a caregiver—to value the blooming states of these living things and cherish them at every stage.

I inherited his love for flowers

partially because there is something so lovely about how flowers serve no functional purpose—how they are simply meant to be pretty and sit around as an indicator that someone thought of you, went to the store, and picked out a bunch because they love you. Each time I pass by the tulips in my kitchen or the roses on my dorm room desk, I am reminded of how someone went out of their way just to bring a smile to my face.

Weeks after they have turned brown from sitting in their respective corners, I somehow can't bear the idea of throwing them out. We tend to love flowers only in their most fleeting state, at the height of their bloom, only to discard them as soon as that beauty begins to fade. To me, flowers should be appreciated for more than just their brief moments of brilliance. When the flowers have decayed, slouched at the edges of their vases, I dry and press each petal from the bunch, hanging them from our kitchen light to preserve the memory each one gave me. My kitchen has become a makeshift graveyard for the skeletons of wilted flowers, the ghosts of those who love me, and the versions of myself I've been when I received those petals.

Each time I revisit Stephen on Brattle Street, I am reminded of the role that flowers have had at different times in

my life. I am reminded of two years ago, when I couldn't bear to visit Stephen's shop to pick out white flowers for my grandmother's grave. I am reminded of how I hope never to have to buy white flowers again or think of flowers as a sign of loss. I think of the flowers that have been with me for every milestone: the ones I receive from my best friend every birthday; the Valentine's flowers from ex-boyfriends; the yellow floral corsage I wore at prom; and the flowers my father brings home for every small occasion as an excuse to celebrate.

When I first started buying flowers each month, I used the occasion as a tally of how many months it had been since my grandmother's passing. This month, the anniversary of her death came and went without me remembering, and I feel guilty for having forgotten the day that remains so important to me. In the excitement of spring break, Harvard College Housing Day, and the warmer weather, I had forgotten to grieve and make time for the bittersweetness of the day. Somehow, many bouquets later, I was able to hold onto my grandmother's memory while still allowing myself to live my life unconsumed by sadness.

This week, it is uncharacteristically sunny when I go for my monthly flower walk to Brattle Square Florists. Stephen tells me that peonies, my dad's favorite, are back in season as he picks out a bunch of them for me to admire. He hands me an extra orange rose as he wraps my bouquet in a brown paper bundle. And even if it's just a small gesture, I leave Brattle Square each time feeling like flowers are not just flowers—they are excuses to find beauty in the simple things.

AUDREY WU '29 (AUDREYWU@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS LOOKING FORWARD TO MAY FLOWERS.

GRAPHIC BY JUSTIN MA '29



10 Ways to Get Outdoors This Spring

Ways to cure your vitamin D deficiency near Cambridge, Massachusetts.

BY AUDREY ADAM '27

It's been months of gray slush and never-ending wind in Cambridge—one storm, followed by another, followed by another. For the past few weeks, the occasional 60-degree day felt like an apology from the universe. But after months of watching the sunset at 4 p.m. longingly through the Lamont windows, spring has finally sprung, and it's time to take advantage of the outdoors.

Here are ten ideas to get active outside before the summer humidity turns every walk into a full-body sweat:

1. Appreciate the Charles River

Yes, this may seem basic since the Charles is essentially in Harvard's backyard—often forgotten in the colder months, especially since Cambridge is practically a popsicle starting in November. But by April, the path along the river becomes a great place to stroll, run, or bike, with bridges and loops that let you adjust your route midway when your calves start to burn. Try crossing the bridge into Boston if you are looking for an extra-long journey. Even if the winter slump has slowed down your mile time, you can still post your Strava with the caption “Easy Run” to make your pace look intentional.

2. Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University

In Jamaica Plain, Harvard has a 281-acre museum of trees that most students spend four years without visiting (or even knowing it exists). It's well worth the trek on the Orange Line, and as part of the University, admission is free! The arboretum is home to over 15,000 plants, with thousands of species from around the world. Take a guided tour, ranging from 0.25 miles to 2.5 miles, during which experts will show you trees with “snake bark,” colorful petals that guide pollination, and much more. If you prefer self-exploration, aimlessly roam the trails yourself and let the colorful leaves do for you what no amount of fluorescent lighting ever could.

3. Fresh Pond Reservoir

The Fresh Pond Reservoir in West Cambridge has a 2.25-mile loop around a gorgeous lake—perfect for a run, walk, or a view to accompany a good book. You can even rent a Bluebike and take it around for a spin. When the sun is out, you can admire the glistening lake and the trotting dogs basking in the warm air. For those in the Quad, it's within walking distance. If not, it's worth the short bus ride. Plus, you can make a quick pit stop at Trader Joe's for Scandinavian Swimmers—fuel for your next lab report?

4. Pickleball at North Point Park

Cambridge has embraced the pickleball craze with open arms. North Point Park has two

public courts with regular pickup games. The sport requires more reflexes than athleticism, making it extremely beginner-friendly. It's a great way to socialize while getting in the sun—or get an excuse to trash-talk your friend who's had it coming for a while. If you want more opportunities to get some touches, Harvard's Pickleball Club meets weekly in the MAC and has open play opportunities for non-members—in addition to great merchandise for those wanting to boast their newfound athleticism.

5. Piers Park

A short walk from the Blue Line's Maverick stop, Piers Park across the harbor in East Boston offers an easy trail with what some say is the greatest view of the Boston skyline. You'll see the Financial District, Logan planes flying in overhead, and the harbor all at once. Bring that friend you've been meaning to catch up with since January, grab a coffee, and enjoy some sun while walking. Watch your Sunday Scaries melt away while gazing at the harbor view.

6. Castle Island

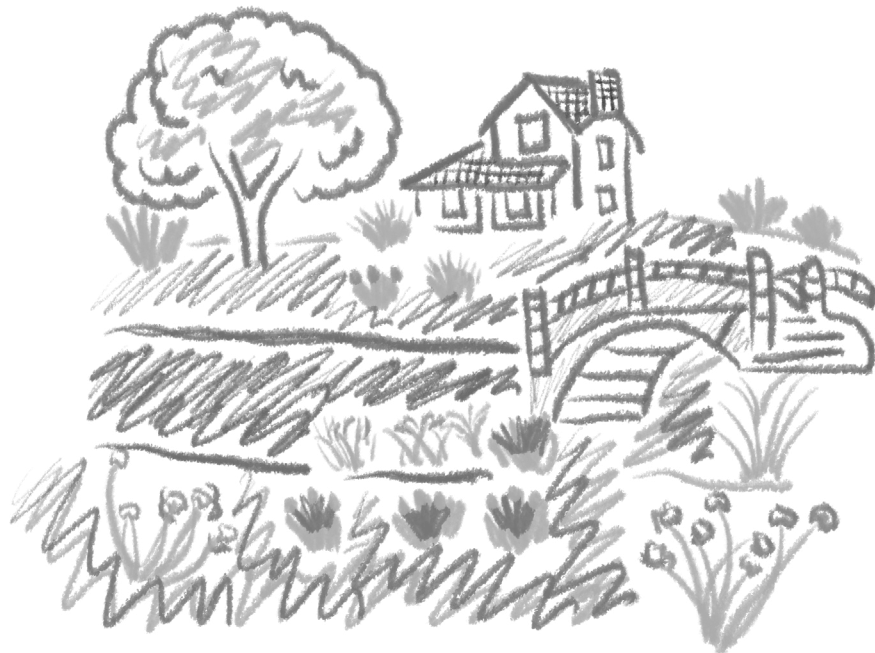
A peninsula in South Boston on the shore of the Harbor, Castle Island has been a spot for fortifications since 1634, and is currently home to Fort Independence, which hosts free weekend tours if you feel historically inclined. The Castle Island loop around the structure is about 2.2 miles and is made even better by Sullivan's, an institution that has offered concessions since 1951. If it's warm enough, consider bringing a swimsuit and taking a dip in the nearby Pleasure Bay Beach, which is said to warm up earlier than the open ocean.

7. Harvard Square Chocolate Tour

The “bean to bar” Boston chocolate tour is a four-stop, mile-long tour through Harvard Square's dessert scene. As you walk, you'll learn about the history of the square and of cacao, and sample numerous chocolate treats. Past stops include chocolate ice cream from Lizzy's, cacao juice samples from the rainforest, Flour Bakery's hot chocolate, and chocolate gelato-covered waffles from Amorino. The ticket price is \$50 per person, which may seem steep until you remember that it includes all the chocolate ... and then it sounds like a bargain. After all, chocolate does seem to make everything better.

8. Open Nights at the Harvard Observatory

The Harvard University Observatory, located on Garden Street, holds public open nights every last Wednesday of the month for anyone interested in looking through telescopes



and learning about what they see. The evenings include guest speaker presentations, and afterwards, guests are brought to the observatory rooftop, where astronomers walk visitors through the night sky. Past events have centered around topics such as black holes, stardust, and comets. These free nights are open to everyone and very popular, so check the HCO website and sign up when dates drop.

9. Take a Boston Ghost Tour

If you're more of a night owl, take a guided walking tour following haunted houses and Revolutionary War-era locations across downtown Boston, including places such as the Boston Common, the Old State House, and the King's Chapel Burial Ground. Most tours run about 90 minutes and cover roughly two miles, so you're getting steps in as you learn. Even if you're a skeptic, the stories are sure to entertain you and provide a new perspective on the city of Boston.

10. Cop Slide

You may have seen the viral video of a cop tumbling down a treacherous playground slide. This slide and its associated risks are very real and are located about 20 minutes away from Harvard Square by public transit. The landmark is located in the City Hall Plaza at 5 Congress St., Boston, MA 02203. See the slide in all its glory, but make sure to practice caution—maybe bring a helmet?

Spring is short. The window between sub-zero winters and the impending armpit stains of summer is narrower than you think. Enjoy it while you can.

**AUDREY ADAM '27
(AUDREYADAM@COLLEGE.
HARVARD.EDU) GOT
SUNBURNED ON THE FIRST DAY
OF FOOL'S SPRING.**

GRAPHIC BY AMELIE LIMA '27

SPORTS

Building a March Madness Bracket for Dummies

A beginner's guide to March Madness from someone who has no f—ing idea what they're talking about.

BY JULIA BOUCHUT '29

If you're anything like me, you associate March with the month's simple pleasures: the first day the sun breaks through the thick blanket of clouds, switching your coffee order from a hot latte to an iced one, or just taking the long way to class to soak up a little sun. But a true American staple of March is the college basketball playoffs, more commonly known as March Madness.

While my main source of basketball news comes from the occasional TikTok rabbit holes or flashy edits when the underdog upsets the No. 1 seed, the buzz around March Madness and the potential fame of a successful bracket beckon participation in the month's tradition. So, to broaden my horizons, I am writing a reflection piece on this year's storied basketball tournament and offering the key insights I gleaned from watching a total of zero games. And for those of you who are less athletically inclined (or perhaps you find James Naismith's magnum opus less than tantalizing), I hope this (almost) post-scriptum analysis can help you make chit-chat with those around you just a little better.

First, I would like to address the elephant in the room: my qualifications.

As you may have astutely inferred, I have not spent extensive time following college basketball. I watched Caitlin Clark and Paige Bueckers play when they were all the rage in 2024. My betting experiences amount to losing \$25 playing baccarat. I'm proud of my 0-1 nonetheless.

Still, I am always excited to try something new and have fun in the process, so I write this advice in that same spirit. Take everything with a fistful of salt. Unless you do well. Then, you should attribute all your success to me.

First, let's start with what you need to participate: an empty bracket with each team's seed numbers (rankings) and this handy dandy guide. Empowered with my insights, you'll be sure to beat the odds for the 2027 tournament. And if not, at least you'll have a great time watching your predictions come to fruition.

Before you build your bracket, it's also helpful to be aware of common misconceptions.

1. The most researched brackets are the best ones.

False. You'll often see basketball followers on a high horse flexing their ball knowledge and how closely they've followed this season: "Cameron Boozer" this and "AJ Dybantsa" that (I Googled

"Top Players March Madness 2025" and put some names that were high up); reflections on obscure games *nobody* cares about; obvious statements such as "Defense wins championships" delivered in an overconfident tone.

The worst "March Madness Messiahs" are the ones who ask you to name five players of the team you declare is your favorite. Naturally, you fail. But knowing anything about this sport has zero correlation (totally real stat) with a winning bracket. The most ardent fans pour hours into research and confidently fill out their brackets. Yet their lack of humility means that biases will necessarily seep in. Others will attempt to be clever and subversive, penciling in obscure upsets. Both will miss the mark. Your indifference is your superpower.

2. You should only choose a winner based on basketball-related knowledge.

Now, the people who believe this misconception *really* suck the fun out of March Madness. They mistake the art of building a bracket for deterministic science. In bracket construction, they discount the value of palatable team colors, promiscuous school names (Oral Roberts in 2021!), or the power of friendship. You may just want to go with your gut or "suss out" a team's vibes. Or maybe you'll let chance take the wheel and flip a coin. If you're really struggling, I'd suggest looking up the head coach and making a visual determination about a team's success. Superficial? Yes. Likely to make a winning bracket? I'm too busy ogling Duke's head coach to be sure.

Now, here's the moment you have all been waiting for: my secret weapon, which will guarantee your success.

Remember the acronym ABOI: always bet on Iowa.

This advice applies to both the University of Iowa and Iowa State. In the last four years of men's basketball, a team related to Iowa has made it to the Sweet Sixteen round all but once. The same goes for women's basketball, though Iowa women's players have an even more impressive track record, making it to the championship game in 2024, with Caitlin Clark breaking records left and right along the way. Sports analysts, quantum physicists, third-grade boys, and I have all tried to determine if this is a coincidence or a trend.

Answer: It's something in the water. Literally.

Using my tremendous journalistic acumen, I have determined that Iowa's water is abnormal,

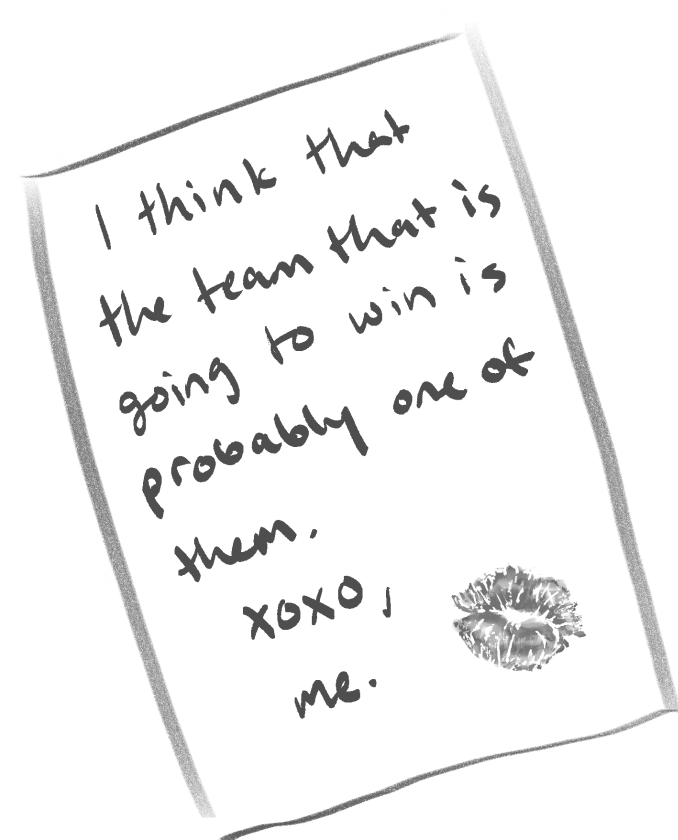
characterized by high nutrient levels and a hard quality. No wonder their players come out on top; their water is like a magic potion. And so, the only thing you have to keep up to date with is Iowa water quality reports, found here.

Taken together, the very scientific evidence I have uncovered, Iowa has my vote till the end. Or at least until the Sweet Sixteen. I mean, you have to choose a team either way, and I'm too lazy to research the other teams, so this seems just as good a reason as any.

I wish you all the best of luck on your March Madness journeys, and may the odds be ever in your favor, for you are 410 times more likely to win the lottery (Powerball, of course) than to create a perfect bracket. Armed with my infinite wisdom and remarkable feel for the game, you will very likely find no success, but I hope to see your TikTok videos overcoming the odds in a year.

JULIA BOUCHUT '29 (JULIA_BOUCHUT@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS EXCITED FOR THIS SUMMER'S WORLD CUP.

GRAPHIC BY RILEY CULLINAN '27



Harvard Rugby Football Club Takes Europe

How a tour of France and Spain revealed a world where rugby reigns.

BY LUCY DUNCAN '28

This spring break, the Harvard Rugby Football Club travelled across the pond for a tour of southern Europe. The trip—which included stops in Toulouse, France, and Barcelona, Spain—allowed the team to train and play with leading European leagues, exploring the world of rugby outside the United States.

The trip came in the midst of the club's spring "sevens" season, where they are working towards securing a bid for the Collegiate Rugby Championship nationals. Seven-a-side rugby, or "sevens," is a fast-paced version of the game involving seven players per team and two seven-minute halves for a total of 14 minutes of game time. The HRFC team plays sevens during their spring season, while the fall is dedicated to rugby union, or 15s—a version of the game featuring 15 players per team and 80-minute games.

The club is familiar with travel. "We were in Houston a couple weeks ago," HRFC president Tinaye Ngorima '27 shared. "Last year, we went down to Indiana to Notre Dame to play a tournament. We played in Bermuda as well."

What made the European trip unique, however, was that the team was not travelling solely to compete in a tournament. "We also want to go to a place where our players will be able to have that kind of cultural experience as well, and be able to experience something new," Ngorima said. A tour where games did not officially count towards the team's season standings gave the men the opportunity to try new things and build connections with rugby players from across the world.

Despite its growing popularity, rugby is still a relatively niche sport in the United States. The sport has seen a boom in popularity in the last decade, likely supported by the founding of the first North American men's professional league in 2017 and the women's equivalent in 2024. But in parts of the world like Europe, South Africa, and Oceania, rugby consistently commands the spotlight. This tour gave the team the opportunity to experience rugby in places where it is the most popular sport. In the south of France, "rugby is the number one thing there. It's in their culture, it's in their veins," Ngorima explained. The local passion for the sport made Toulouse an obvious destination for the trip. As for Barcelona, Ngorima explained, "Rugby is still very big there, but it really satisfied that kind of cultural immersion part of the tour."

Upon landing in Barcelona, the team boarded the bus to Toulouse and wasted no time getting straight to rugby. "We arrived late on Friday into Toulouse, and then Saturday we were playing," Ngorima shared. Their first game was against the University of Toulouse's rugby union team, which operates similarly to a club sport at Harvard, open to all students and staff. "It was pretty much one day on for rugby, one day off," Ngorima added.

Their arrival coincided with France's victory over England in the final of the Six Nations

Championship, one of the biggest annual European rugby tournaments. After their game against the University of Toulouse, the team watched the final with the Frenchmen in Toulouse. "It was so awesome," Ngorima recalled. "We see them all celebrating. There's really a lot of passion for it." Seeing the level of passion for rugby in this part of the world was a huge inspiration for the HRFC team members, who don't always see that same recognition in the United States.

After a day of rest and sightseeing, the HRFC joined Stade Toulousain, one of France's top 14 professional rugby teams, for a training session. "Everywhere different plays different rugby," Ngorima explained, so this training session provided insight into gameplay strategies unique to Toulouse. "What the guys really took away was that the French system is all about free-flowing, flat, fast rugby."

As opposed to many other parts of the world, where a big part of the game involves rucking—a form of contact formed between opposing teams after the player holding the ball has been tackled—Stade Toulousain attempts to keep the ball from ever touching the ground. "If you get tackled, that's a bad thing. You want to keep the ball alive," Ngorima said. The men plan to bring this strategy back to Cambridge and find ways to incorporate it into their own gameplay systems.

The team then boarded the bus to Barcelona. "We kept the same pace of one day on from training and from rugby, and then one day off to see the sights. We played our final game on Friday in a small town called Sitges, just south of Barcelona," Ngorima recalls.

The hospitality that the HRFC received from the rugby club in Sitges eased the travel for the whole team. "We played against each other, and they opened their doors super well. They put a barbecue together for us. Afterwards, we all sat around, had a barbecue, got a few drinks, and really enjoyed that kind of community amongst ourselves."

The trip concluded by backtracking to Perpignan, France, to watch professional European rugby in action. "We went to go watch one of the top 14 French rugby matches, which was, again, another great experience," Ngorima shared. Watching a neck-and-neck game between two of France's top professional teams exposed the men to an elite level of gameplay accompanied by a stadium packed with cheering fans.

Landing back in Cambridge, the team now has its sights set on qualifying for its third consecutive national sevens championship. The process of securing their nationals bid, explained Ngorima, involves competing in several tournaments across the Northeast. "The goal is to either qualify through one of those tournaments directly by winning those tournaments, or build enough of a résumé to earn an at-large bid." The session with Stade Toulousain and their games against some of Europe's best university teams have undoubtedly equipped them with new skills to ensure their success as they conclude their spring season.

"Rugby really is a beautiful game in the sense that it's so global and it's so worldwide," Ngorima concluded. "You can walk in anywhere, and they'll open the doors for you, just based off that connection, that shared passion for the game of rugby."

The trip was, without a doubt, an opportunity for the HRFC to improve their gameplay by playing with and against experienced European teams. Even more than that, though, this trip showed the team a world in which rugby is not an underground sport but a cultural phenomenon. Despite language barriers and cultural differences, the HRFC was welcomed with open arms by rugby teams across Europe. The team was able to imagine a future where rugby is elevated in the United States to a similar level to that which they witnessed on their international tour.

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GRAPHIC BY ANGIE LI '28



Beyond the Olympics: Women's Figure Skating at the World Championships

The epilogue to the Olympics is where heartbreak lingers, newcomers surprise, and legacies are made.

BY ELISA SEE '28

With the conclusion of the Winter Olympics, many assume the drama of figure skating has come to an end. However, for the skating world, the Olympics are far from the final chapter. In Prague from March 24 to March 29, the International Skating Union World Championships provided breakout skaters a chance to redeem themselves or continue their reputational climb in the international spotlight.

This year, beyond serving as a stage for redemption, Worlds offered rising skaters a chance to prove themselves on the global stage. The absence of prominent skater Alysa Liu was felt by fans who had hoped to see her free skate to Lady Gaga. Yet her withdrawal opened the door for others to step into the spotlight—most notably Nina Pinzarrone's breakthrough and Kaori Sakamoto's redemption arc.

A Japanese-Dominated Podium

Sakamoto, the renowned 25-year-old from Kobe, Japan, has established herself as one of the country's premier skaters, returning from Milan with silver medals in both the team event and women's singles. Going into her last season, Sakamoto's fourth World Championship title makes her the first woman to hold this many titles since American Michelle Kwan, who claimed her fifth in 2003.

After being edged out by Liu in the 2025 Worlds and again at the Milan Olympics by a mere 1.89 points, Sakamoto struggled with falling short of both her own expectations and those placed on her by others. Following the Olympics, Sakamoto admitted the losses left her unable to sleep. She noted her unsatisfactory performance was largely a function of the "way I practiced leading up to this point [that] played a role in how things turned out," leaving room for redemption in Prague.

At Worlds, she had the chance to redeem herself and end her career on a high, leaving it all out on the ice. In the Short Program, she hit a perfect triple Lutz, double Axel, and triple flip-triple toe loop to the fittingly chosen "Time to Say Goodbye," putting her in the lead with 79.31 points. She followed this up with the best free skate of the night, garnering 158.97 points, a personal best, securing her 1st place.

Other Japanese skaters faced similar emotions following the Olympic Games. Mone Chiba is a rising Japanese skater from Sendai who used to share a rink with the now-retired Yuzuru Hanyu. Coming off a strong Olympic debut, Chiba placed 4th in the women's single event. While many choke on Olympic ice, she drew attention for maintaining her artistry, poise, and consistency, landing a perfect triple flip-triple toe loop combination—but narrowly missed the podium by 1.28 points.

She defended her reputation as a top competitor in Prague, channeling her Olympic frustration of missing the top-three cutoff to a podium-winning performance. She trailed countrywoman Sakamoto by 0.86 points in the Short, having achieved a personal-best of 78.45 in Prague. Chiba maintained comfortable leads of 6.66 and 7.15 points over the U.S.'s Amber Glenn and Isabelle Levito in 3rd and 4th, ensuring she left Prague with the silver

medal, racking a total of 228.47 points.

Chiba is proof that Japan's future does not begin after Sakamoto leaves: it is already here. Chiba is not simply chasing Kaori, but even challenging her.

An American Upset

Amber Glenn is known for her emotional programs packed with artistry. After years of near misses following her junior success of winning the U.S. Junior Championships at 14, she finally achieved her breakthrough in 2024, winning her first senior U.S. National title and qualifying for the 2026 Olympics.

She was the only women's skater to land a triple Axel in Prague, mastering the jump with near-perfect consistency—landing 12 of her 13 attempts this season, with positive GOEs (grades of execution; the technical score on how well an element is performed) on all but three. In the short, fans celebrated Glenn's successful triple loop that eluded her in Milan during the short program, highlighting Worlds once again as an opportunity for skaters to close out their season.

Glenn was well-positioned after the short program, placing her in 3rd with 72.65 points. However, it was not meant to be, with Glenn once again experiencing heartbreak as the free skate reshuffled standings, dropping her to 6th overall—her triple loop letting her down once more.

Often the most neglected of Team USA's "Three Blade Angels," the 18-year-old Levito entered Prague as a quiet threat representing the United States. Though she is often overshadowed by Glenn and Liu, she is still one of the most technically refined skaters. She backs her technical ability with her storytelling approach, merging balletic artistry with character-driven performances, stemming from her love of reading.

The 2024 World silver medalist delivered one of her strongest short programs at Prague, landing the most difficult combination of the event, a triple Lutz-triple loop. However, in the free skate, a shaky opening triple Lutz-triple loop combination detracted from an otherwise clean skate, preventing her from medalling against the dependable Chiba and Sakamoto, leaving her in 4th. However, Levito and Glenn's skates have secured three spots for the United States in next season's Worlds in Finland.

Rising Stars and a Surprise Bronze

It is important to note that Worlds was not merely a source of disappointment for Team USA, but one of hope for rising new talent. Few skaters embody the unpredictability of post-Olympic Worlds more than Sarah Everhardt. Listed as the second alternate, Everhardt had the chance to represent the United States at Worlds after Liu withdrew and Bradie Tennell denied the offer.

In Prague, fans witnessed Everhardt's Worlds debut, where she delivered a clean short program, placing 9th with 68.74, less than 0.5 points off her personal best. In the free, she further demonstrated her ability to adapt to the high-pressure environment, maintaining her composure despite a small mistake in the free skate. In a championship defined by chances for skaters to redefine themselves, Everhardt has seized her



breakthrough opportunity to prove herself on the world stage.

The biggest surprise of the event, however, was Nina Pinzarrone. Representing Belgium, she rose from 5th in the short to the podium after the free skate, with 215.20 points. Pinzarrone's performance truly highlights the unpredictability of skating, turning what looked like a Japan-U.S. medal race into something far more exciting.

Pinzarrone's is a story of determination. During the 2024 Worlds, she underwent a blood vessel cauterization without anesthesia just before she took the ice, fighting through her performance with tissue stuck up her nose to secure two Milan Olympic spots for Belgium. She was also battling prolonged knee injuries that took her out in the 2022-23 season and persisted up to the Euros and Milan.

In Prague, Pinzarrone proved that even without huge jumps, artistry and consistent execution can win—signaling a major shift in the right direction for the sport, especially after criticism that Milan undervalued artistry in scoring.

Kaori may have left with the gold; however, hers is not the only legacy left in Prague. Chiba's consistency proves Japan's depth; Glenn and Levito's missed opportunity at the podium will hopefully push them to regroup for the next skating season; and Pinzarrone's unexpected bronze finish suggests figure skating judging may be moving in the right direction. Prague proved that drama and unexpected results are the norm in skating, not just an Olympic exception.

While many may tune in just for the Olympics and enjoy the drama, that was a mere vignette of the emotional weight behind this skating season. It was only at Worlds among fans who have been invested in skaters' journeys for the year-long season, or beyond, that heartbreaks like Glenn's and redemptions like Sakamoto's found their true resonance.

ELISA SEE '28 (ELISASEE@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WISHES IT WERE NEVER TIME TO SAY GOODBYE TO KAORI.

GRAPHIC BY SOPHIA RASCOFF '27

COVER ART BY SAM PARK '29
LAYOUT BY CAMERON BERNIER '29 AND NUALA MERNIN '29

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

DOWN:

1. Seasonal fruit with approx. 200 seeds
3. "Midsommar" director Ari _____
4. AADT's annual spring show
6. perpetuator of hay fever

ACROSS:

2. 1942 Disney movie about a deer's journey to adulthood
5. Greek goddess who crashes with her mother come spring
7. stage of life that causes body hair and acne



Mia Park Tavares

Rania Jones