

normal noise*

at arizona state university

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spring 2025

indulgence

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literary magazine







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Normal Noise is a semesterly magazine supported by Barrett, The Honors College at ASU. Each issue provokes conversation about the complexities of everyday life through long-form journalism and art.

Normal Noise is student run. Views expressed in the magazine do not reflect those of the administration. You can reach the editorial board at normalnoisemag@gmail.com.

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Dear Reader,

We couldn't be more excited to share the Spring 2025 issue of Normal Noise with you: *Indulgence*.

Well... what is indulgence?

There are many possible interpretations — both laudable and condemnable — of the word indulgence. To indulge is to entertain, to gratify, to fulfill, to give in, to abandon oneself. There are both individual and societal contexts to consider. This issue not only explores a variety of conceptions of indulgence, but introduces new perspectives on this phenomenon.

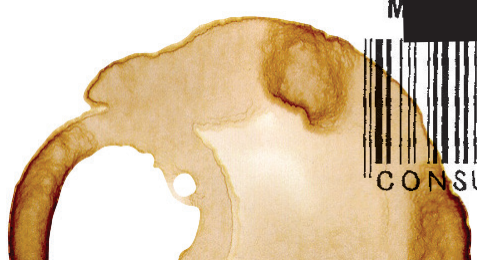
While indulgence takes countless forms, we invite you to pause and ask yourself the following: what does it mean to indulge? When does indulgence become overindulgence? How does indulgence play out historically? Environmentally? Is indulgence something to limit or something to praise? From poetry that explores loss, to art that celebrates precision, to fiction that embraces authenticity, we hope to reimagine indulgence far beyond its initial connotations and conventional understanding.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to Barrett, The Honors College, for providing us, the student body, with a creative platform to share our thoughts and ideas. We are especially grateful to Dean Tara Williams, Vice Dean Kristen Hermann, and our faculty advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Meloy, for their unwavering support and commitment to making this publication possible. Additionally, we thank our incredible contributors and editorial board, whose countless hours of effort and dedication have brought *Indulgence* to life. Lastly, we thank you, our reader, for indulging us and immersing yourself in the stories and ideas that follow.

Sincerely,
Sara Bojczuk and Anaís Mahal

Co-Editors in Chief





MOTHER

Emerson Amaya

In the absence of touch,
I remember her fingers—**barely there**,
an echo of a lullaby
smooth as river depths
flowing through the emptiness of my room.

Her voice hums in the gaps
where nothing and something blur,
a warmth that cradles
even as the weight of quiet hours
pulls me into a dream half-formed.

Emerson Amaya is a third-year ASU student majoring in poetry and fiction with a minor in film and media studies. They create work that explores grief in all its forms, offering space for pain and healing to coexist. Currently, they are collecting an army of miniatures from all sorts of silly brands!





If I Had 2 Throats,

Nonfiction by **Ayla Kessary**

I've indulged in my self-perception so much that there isn't much left for me to chew up and spit out anymore. Whether I'm half dead or half naked, I'm shoving more impressions down my gullet until I get bloated on observations of myself. Indulgence hasn't given me free rein; it's trapped me in my own head. Everything is so really, very extremely extra elevated.

I have a crush? It's limerence.
I have an epiphany? It's nirvana.
I have a failure? It's apocalyptic.

Do you know how exhausting it is to be such an exaggerated human being? I fear my soul will tear; it's not made of the right material to wrap itself around my head.

Relaxation and indifference mix in my stomach like cigarette ash and healthy lungs. It's as if I'm allergic to them; the possibility of relinquishing control of my emotions causes my throat to swell and my eyes to tear up. My heart can't help but beat faster when a friend texts and says they're going to be a few minutes late—the text must mean that they hate me. When I'm waiting for something, I have no choice but to pace around the room, consumed by my crippling anxiety.

I tie my hair up, then release it again, comb it out, stare at myself in the mirror a few times, ensuring the makeup I put on way too early still looks good. Everything needs to be perfect for my next indulgent experience; I have to be prepared. I check my phone every millisecond for a text that hasn't arrived. What am I supposed to do?

I'd Swallow Myself



Pretend like something I've been looking forward to, that I've been waiting to indulge in, isn't happening? Subtlety is a foreign drug that my system rejects.

The irony of my involvement with indulgence is how miserable its free rein makes me. Humans weren't meant to know or think about everything. The limited knowledge I have already makes me feel as if I might spontaneously combust. The more I consume, the more I crave. If I knew everything, I wouldn't be at peace. I'd be less satisfied than ever. Yet here I am, dissociating in class because I'm assessing the way I answered the question fifteen minutes after I spoke. Here I am, the Chief Executive Officer of post-socializing anxiety, taking hours (if not days) to debrief my interactions with others.

The worst part about this is that I don't even have much of an ego to begin with. After all that contemplation, concentration, and contamination of my mind, I've discovered only false hope, less-than-desirable qualities, and questions upon questions.

It's this self-indulgence that keeps me going. This self-indulgence allows me to improve, to change, and to stay curious and open about how human beings can change. This self-indulgence, when I hit a dead end, can be extended to another person or event. I obsess over them, which is what I believe other people call 'love' or 'passion'. This self-indulgence pushes me more than anything. While I'm exhausted, I can't stop it. Instead, I'll just lay down for a few minutes and get right back to analyzing my reflection.

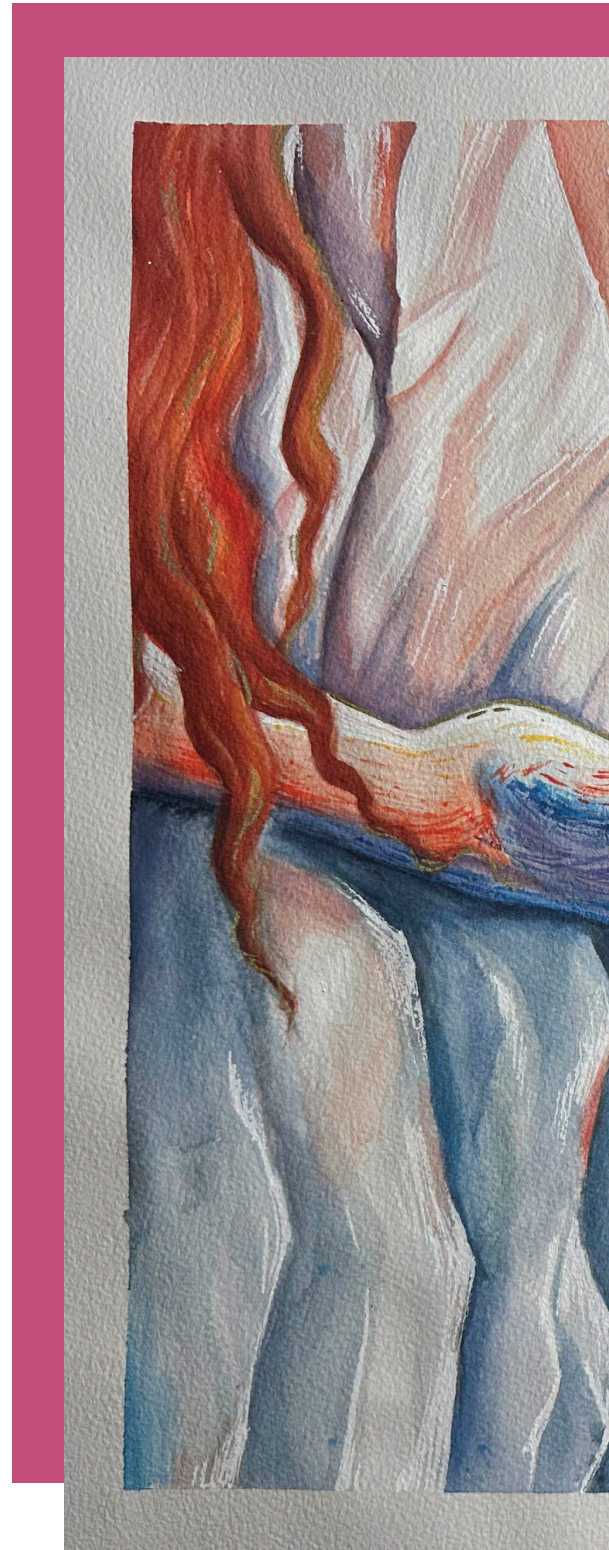
Ayla Kessary is a freshman studying creative writing. She enjoys writing, fashion, watching horror movies, and going to concerts.

Five More Minutes

art by **Sedona Sturgeon**

This painting captures the quiet and loving intimacy of indulging in five more minutes of sleep with my girlfriend before beginning the day, inviting viewers to explore a feeling they may relate to—indulging in the beauty of little moments between those they love.

Sedona Sturgeon is a junior majoring in animation; she has a minor in architecture and a certificate in computer gaming. She was born and raised in Sedona, Arizona, and she enjoys painting, drawing, and reading in her free time.







wild berries

fiction by **Sabrina Bell**

Today, I am going to eat berries like never before. I'm going to puncture this blueberry's thin flesh, tearing the tiny fruit's skin apart until it releases its sweet, beige-colored insides. I'm going to suck each seed of this blackberry with the meticulous attention of a devoted lover. I am going to strip this strawberry of all its meat until its complexion transforms from porous red to pink to ghastly white, until only its bare leaves remain and all of its rich desirability has been given to me — wedged between my canines like dental floss.

I won't feel ashamed for saying what I want to do to the berries in elaborate, provocative detail, and seeing it through. Or for enjoying their cries of self preservation as their juices burst from the inside out. For siphoning their natural syrups and crushing their forms, knowing how long it has taken them to grow this whole, just to be atomized and dispersed again from the force of my bite.

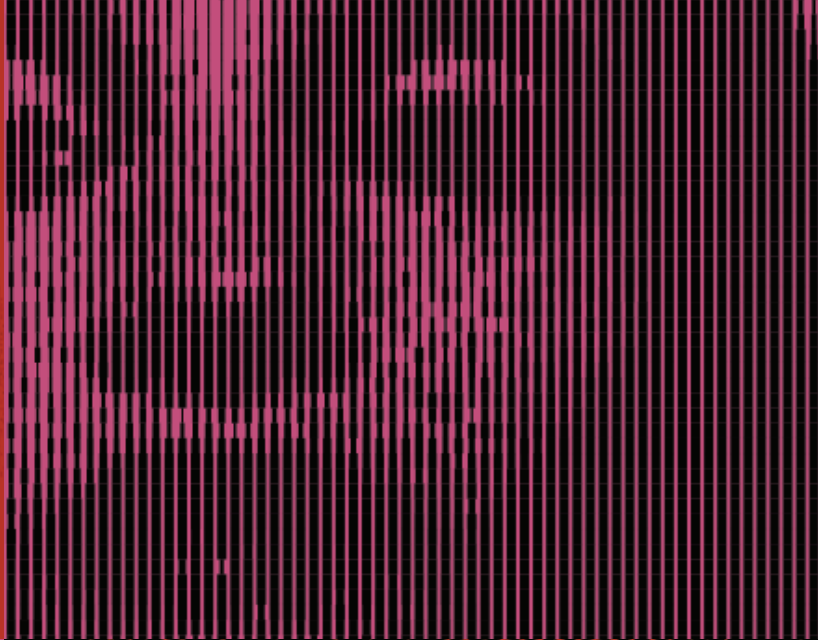
I'm going to be a wild woman. I won't get the blues. I will skinny dip under a full moon and not feel ashamed of the way my nipples harden in the cold night's water. My teeth won't chatter and I won't wrap my arms around myself like a mother comforting an anxious child in her arms. Rubbing the exposed skin on my shoulders, rocking from side to side, singing that kinesthetic lullaby — *everything's okay, you are not in danger*. I will love my unadorned flesh and hair and skin and I won't hide from the sight of it. I will open my palms just above the water's surface and ingratiate those infinitesimal white dots above so they will keep writing me as beautiful and wild and free.

I won't apologize for teasing the constellations. Or for reading the stories they wrote for me and chuckling at their misguided devotion. For knowing I will never give them what they want. It is not my fault that the stars, despite all their intricacy, can't understand the needs of a wild woman. Needs which are much more nuanced than being desired from afar and being revered as if mythical. I am a wild woman who is made of crushed little stars. So those stars up there? They only want me because they see themselves inside me. But ever since all the stars

inside me decayed, I have only been just a woman. These days my body is made of very different stuff than cosmic dust. The stars could never quench my thirst or caress the ridges on my tongue. They don't know the ways of a fleshly body. They can write me, and they can write me well. They can make me beautiful and desirable and otherworldly. But the berries. God, those berries. With them, I'm a real woman. They enliven me; they reveal to me the ripeness of their want and the succulence pooling just beneath their surface. They explode, melt, and combust for me at the lightest touch of my lips. They understand a woman's needs. They teach me that it's okay to be pulpified and crushed and be reduced to nothing but little seeds and squirting juices and high-pitched cries of self-preservation. They teach me that being alive isn't about being beautiful and desirable. No, living is about letting yourself be gnawed apart, hollowed out, and opened up by someone else's teeth and about being grateful that they're there to experience you dying that little death — la petite mort. The way the berries let me gnaw them apart and hollow them out and taste their dying breaths. They show me it's more important to be wanted for my complexity, all those ripening secrets within, than to be wanted because someone sees themselves inside of me.

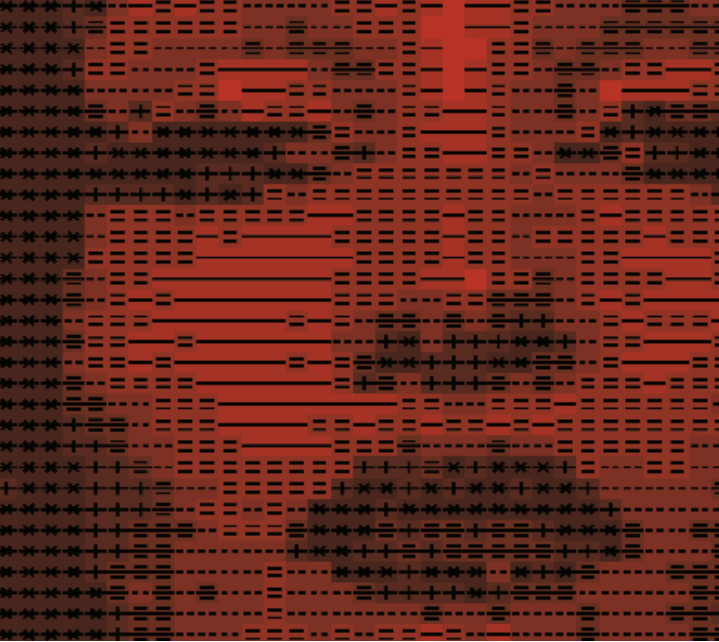
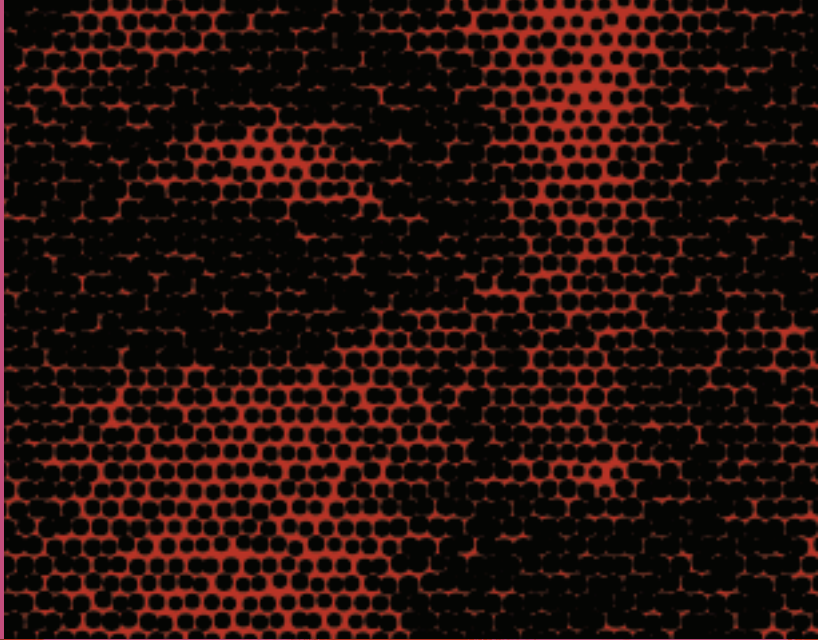
Sabrina Bell is a third-year English literature major. Though she hesitates to openly identify as a writer, she writes constantly — whether in the form of literary criticism, book annotations, occasional prose and poems, journal entries, emails, or unnecessarily ornate texts to friends.






GORGEIOUS GORGEIOUS GIRLS

poetry by **Sylva Keefer**





gorgeous girls gorge
themselves ---
on spite & spittle, on cactus
blooms & thorns, on thistles,
on a cacophony of cryptocrystalline
silicas. they swallow silence,
pile plates high with chorus
& violence, promise nothing but
effervescence, nectar-sweet,
chrust complacency between
their teeth

gorgeous girls grow gardens from
their bellies, their underarms,
their hips, tease tulips with
their soiled toes, vomit vermiculite
& toads, celebrate the triumph
that is split skin, plant gritty bulbs
beneath their chins,
cough up their vocal cords & send
them through the postal service,
still pulsing, rendered tender
& wordless

they wipe warpaint
under their eyes, flash fierce
smiles that are wicked
& wise, vivid & viscous,
sirenic, sublime. they tear
down churches, stuff
themselves with hymns
& verses, pace back & forth
over the porch of
persistence, sucking on
synonyms & summits
& their own unkind
existence

gorgeous girls crave.
gorgeous girls are sick
& brave. they'll scream
your father's name into
your mother's grave & bring you
to court & make you pay.
gorgrous girls won't take
your pains. gorgeous girls make
daisy chains, exhale & exude
as they chew at the sinewy
stems

gorging gorgeous girls devour delight,
laugh as they lick the last little bits
of incandescence from their lips

& they don't say sorry

Sylva Keefer is a
sophomore studying
mechanical engineering and
creative writing. She enjoys
examining the intersection
between science and
literature, passing time in
libraries, and yelling "there's
a cat!" every time she sees
a cat.

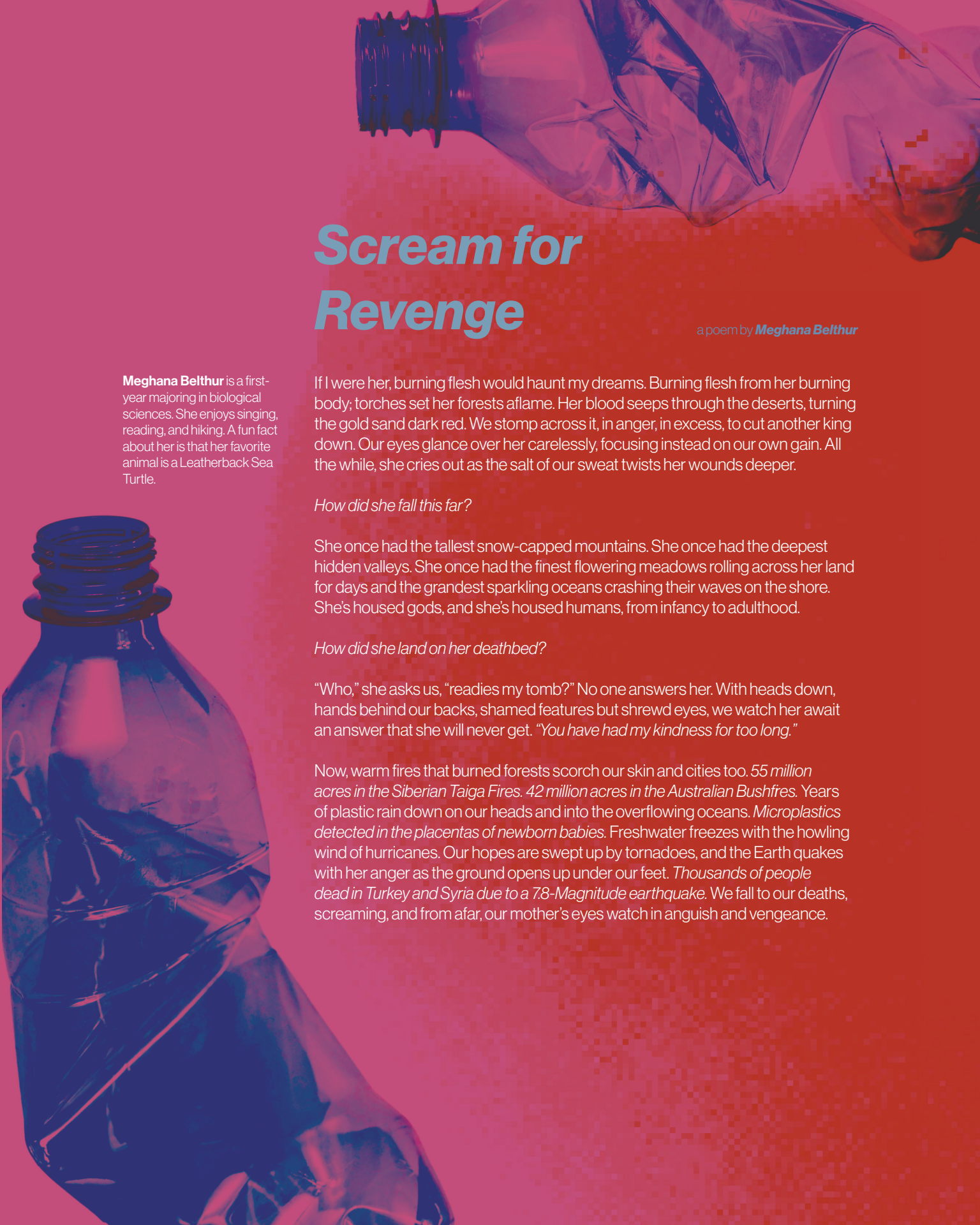


Dip Into Paradise

art by **Emily Houlihan**

Often, life can be stressful and busy. It is easy to get sucked into the chaos. This painting reflects the dream state in my mind when I want to indulge in a moment of calm, peace, and awareness of the present.

Emily Houlihan is a junior in Barrett, The Honors College. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in art studies and a minor in art history. Emily is a visual artist who uses skills in painting, drawing, and 3D mediums to express her feelings and ideas.



Scream for Revenge

a poem by **Meghana Belthur**

Meghana Belthur is a first-year majoring in biological sciences. She enjoys singing, reading, and hiking. A fun fact about her is that her favorite animal is a Leatherback Sea Turtle.

If I were her, burning flesh would haunt my dreams. Burning flesh from her burning body; torches set her forests aflame. Her blood seeps through the deserts, turning the gold sand dark red. We stomp across it, in anger, in excess, to cut another king down. Our eyes glance over her carelessly, focusing instead on our own gain. All the while, she cries out as the salt of our sweat twists her wounds deeper.

How did she fall this far?

She once had the tallest snow-capped mountains. She once had the deepest hidden valleys. She once had the finest flowering meadows rolling across her land for days and the grandest sparkling oceans crashing their waves on the shore. She's housed gods, and she's housed humans, from infancy to adulthood.

How did she land on her deathbed?

"Who," she asks us, "readies my tomb?" No one answers her. With heads down, hands behind our backs, shamed features but shrewd eyes, we watch her await an answer that she will never get. *"You have had my kindness for too long."*

Now, warm fires that burned forests scorch our skin and cities too. *55 million acres in the Siberian Taiga Fires. 42 million acres in the Australian Bushfires.* Years of plastic rain down on our heads and into the overflowing oceans. *Microplastics detected in the placentas of newborn babies.* Freshwater freezes with the howling wind of hurricanes. Our hopes are swept up by tornadoes, and the Earth quakes with her anger as the ground opens up under our feet. *Thousands of people dead in Turkey and Syria due to a 7.8-Magnitude earthquake.* We fall to our deaths, screaming, and from afar, our mother's eyes watch in anguish and vengeance.

On Parched Earth: Israel's Sustainable Water System

non-fiction by **Aaron Walker**

Aaron Walker is a first-year student studying earth and environmental sciences. He works as a copy editor for the Normal Noise team. In his free time, he enjoys playing the oboe and watching films. Music is one of his passions—you can find him listening to the Beths and Chappell Roan.

With scorched terrain and limited natural reserves, Israel stands as one of the most water-stressed countries on Earth (OECD, 2023). The region faces harsh conditions that necessitate a strong water management system: droughts occur with frequency, the distribution of water is unequally spread, and rapid population growth is creating further demand for water (Bar-Nahum et al., 2022; Marin et al., 2017). To make matters more urgent, regional climate models predict that the duration and frequency of droughts in Israel will increase as a result of climate change, impacting the government's capacity to provision water effectively (Katz & Nagabhatla, 2023; Weinthal et al., 2015). In arid climates, water is the most precious resource—without it, no life is possible. Consequently, the stakes have never been higher.

Similarly, Arizona is experiencing population growth in the midst of a historic drought. Groundwater reserves are rapidly decreasing across the state, and climate change will only further reduce the availability of surface water. Consumers are using water without restraint knowing that if they don't, others will. In order to avoid a future where sufficient water is unavailable for future generations, reforms are needed on both the state and national levels. Fortunately, while the need for institutional change stands, governments across the world are finding success in water conservation.

Israel is at the forefront of sustainable water management in arid climates. To combat the challenges of thriving in an arid and rapidly changing region, the Israeli government has implemented centralized water supply policies, regulatory reforms, and infrastructure investments: these ensure a sustainable future and reduce uncertainties about the quality and quantity of water supplies (Adams et al., 2023; Katz & Nagabhatla, 2023; Marin et al., 2017).

One of the most pressing issues in water conservation is aquifer depletion—aquifers are areas of rock that contain groundwater. In Arizona, groundwater is being depleted quicker than it is being replenished. Aquifer overuse, seawater intrusion, and pollution can threaten the local ecology and aquifer quality, reducing groundwater usability and availability (Melloul & Collin, 2003). As aquifers are emptied, the land above them undergoes subsidence. The ground compresses and loses its capacity to absorb water.

Israel has taken measures to reduce groundwater contamination and seawater intrusion by allowing aquifers to recharge and discouraging over-pumpage. In some cases, imported water is spread over aquifers or injected into local wells. Surface water runoff is intercepted with dams and retention walls and directed into aquifers (Marin et al., 2017). By preserving its groundwater, Israel has been able to utilize aquifers as reservoirs in low-demand months. When other water resources are unable to fulfill the country's needs, its aquifers act as buffers. This has the added benefit of minimizing evaporation more effectively than traditional reservoirs (Marin et al., 2017).

Without unlimited groundwater, it is necessary to procure drinking water through other means. It is through advances in seawater desalination that groundwater conservation is possible in arid regions. Desalination is often perceived as a last resort in cases where every other water management option has been exhausted (Bar-Nahum et al., 2022). In Israel, water deficiency warrants the high public expense of desalination, and the country has operated desalination plants since 2005 (Bar-Nahum et al., 2022). Energy costs account for the price of desalination, so control over energy costs is crucial to keep prices low (Marin et al., 2017).

Israel has five desalination plants, all of which convert seawater into drinking water using advanced reverse osmosis technologies (OECD, 2023). Together, they provide over 80% of Israel's domestic urban water supply (Adams et al., 2023; Marin et al., 2017; OECD, 2023). It is worth noting that desalination can have negative effects on the environment: the process is energy intensive, and the brine produced as a byproduct can be toxic if it is discharged into the sea (OECD, 2023). However, desalination could prove to be a game changer in Arizona, and the benefits are likely to outweigh the costs. Arizona and Mexico are currently discussing the possibility of importing desalinated water from the Sea of Cortés (Leggatte, 2022).

Additionally, Israel uses sewage collection systems and wastewater treatment plants to reclaim water for irrigation, agriculture, and industry (Adams et al., 2023; Bar-Nahum et al., 2022; Melloul & Collin, 2003). These plants use tertiary treatment to transform municipal effluents into clean water for non-potable needs (Adams et al., 2023; Melloul & Collin, 2003). Though wastewater reuse can be disconcerting for some, there is a high degree of confidence in the safety and quality of recycled water through continuous monitoring (Adams et al., 2023).

Fortunately, Arizona already uses recycled water in inventive ways: the Palo Verde Nuclear Plant, which supplies over a third of Arizona's power needs, operates its water-intensive cooling systems with recycled water (Peltier, 2015). The state can improve its water conservation efforts by encouraging wastewater reuse for agriculture.

Because water is arguably Earth's most vital resource, it is crucial not to overuse it for the sake of future generations. Israel's innovative approach to water technologies has been integral to its water security. Through strict water management, aquifer protection, desalination, and wastewater reuse, Israel has developed an efficient and resilient water sector. With similarly innovative technology and a dedication to sustainability, Arizona can become a global leader in water management for the arid regions of the world.

Portions of this text were originally written for the Decision Theater at Arizona State University
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Into the Unknown

art by **Nandana Shibu Elizabeth**

More than the theme of indulgence applying to the painting's subject, I was focused on indulging myself in the process of creating this piece. Just as the jellyfish floating freely in the vast waters, I let go as I painted this piece.

Nandana Shibu Elizabeth is a junior in Barrett, The Honors College majoring in computer science with a minor in media arts and sciences. She developed a passion for art at a young age and continues to explore it as a creative outlet alongside her technical pursuits. In her free time, she enjoys experimenting with different styles and mediums.

Inkwell Full of Trouble

fiction by **Sareena Bajpai**

Black ink bubbled around Tamrin's feet as she waded through the pools. She hated the way it covered her skin in sinful desecration. She hated the way it smelled like dead, rotting things. She hated the way it sounded in the waves, gurgling strange secrets, enticing poor creatures to their doom. She hated the way it looked—a poisonous evil trespassing on the sunny paradise she called home.

On the left side of the bay, a collection of tide pools formed a colony of pioneers staking their claim on the shore. Tamrin didn't mind.

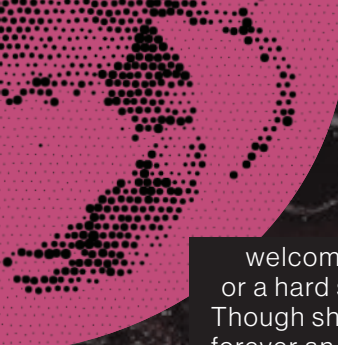
She was happy to share her space with them.

She clawed the ink off a rock to sit down, her bright eyes scanning the pools for life. Scallops, limpets, crabs, clams, and

their brethren huddled in a secret society of shallow waters. Their meetings were visible from the window of her bedroom in the loosely held together bungalow, just meters up the sloping green hill that separated sand from soil. But she much preferred observing them up close.

She trudged back to the bungalow as the sun dipped lazily into the sea. The wind brought up a chill that floated in through her open window, unable to be closed now, its salted rims stuck in place. Tamrin remained blissfully unaware, having never thought to close it.

Instead, she squeezed her lanky body onto her ever-shrinking cot. As she drifted off to sleep, images flooded her brain, spreading warmth to her tired limbs. She ate fish from the water, soaked up rays on the coast, and danced in the shallows. She was a creature of the bay, same as the rest. The only thing that kept her apart from the society of creatures she long wished to be



welcomed by, other than her lack of fins or a hard shell, was her inability to swim. Though she loved the water, she was forever an observer to what took place in its depths.

She had tried to swim only once before. The water, at first welcoming and patient, had raised itself in an attempt to swallow her. She splashed frantically, fighting tooth and nail to keep her sinking body afloat.

The memory formed a nightmare in her unconscious mind. She sprang up from the cot. Her lungs burned with salt. After a few deep breaths, she laid back down and buried the memory in inky blackness.

It was perhaps because of this that she took such keen interest in the tide pools, where she was equally as much a participant as the animal residents. The tide pools were her television, her comic books, her theatrical plays, her everything. For years, her daily routine consisted of skipping down to the circles of entertainment and selecting whichever story caught her interest.

The next morning, on her usual walks along the shoreline, she leaned down and picked up a seashell. Its smooth curves were outlined with a thin layer of black ink.

Soon the whole place will be tainted. She sighed, her breath sinking into the ocean with her spirits. Around her, golden sand glimmered in the sun's heartwarming rays. Splashes of crystal seafoam formed clouds on the shore. The aqua waters of the bay stood in picturesque tranquility, hiding a flourishing community beneath.

If Tamrin took her heart from her chest and opened it, this scene would spill out in vibrant colors. The magic was solely hers. And no one loved it as much as she did.

Spotting a black stain on the shoreline ahead of her, the magic evaporated. In her distractions, the enemy

had grown near once more. Her hands curled into fists at the ink's brazenness.

Ink first appeared in the bay; wisps of black left films of vandalism on the sanded shore. Tamrin learned of the trespasser when its reach grew to covering whole patches of sand. Ugly scorch marks traversed the beach: a sign that hell was upon her.

Tamrin walked among them, analyzing the threat. She fetched a bucket and shovel from the bungalow, and with motherly care, carved out the debasement from her haven. As the sun's rays retreated from the bay, she dug out a hole in the soil beyond the bungalow and deposited the ink in its jail.

She kept this up for a while, taking joy in her new task. Protector of peace, owner of the oasis, Tamrin even waded into the shallows of the bay, taunting death knowing that one big wave would send her to doom.

Unfortunately, the ink was equally dauntless. It grew to patches several feet wide over the water. She struggled to remember her paradise untouched by the devil's fingers. She feared the image in her chest was becoming nothing more than a memory, never to be seen again. Her memory was drowning in ink. Salt licked at her lungs as a panic rose in her throat. She sucked in a gulp of air to remind herself she was alive and well, and she had a job to do.

Her body had taken on a new countenance. The weight of being a protector rested heavily on her skinny shoulders. The fish began to fear her strides when she walked in the shallows. Her focused eyes didn't notice them, only the ink.

Her arms grew stronger, small muscles forming the outline of a warrior. She dug around in her tiny room for an accessory to embody her new role. A bottlecap, shiny silver, signified her devotion as peacekeeper. It glimmered in the sun against her skin.



Scanning the tide pools that afternoon, Tamrin shook her head. The ink always returned, lately with mocking swiftness. Its reach was growing.

You think you've won, don't you? She sneered at it. The ink glared back in murky discontent.

She scrubbed till her fingers bled. The pain invigorated her, pushing her forward in the fight. As she sealed away the perpetrator in its prison that night, her blood mixed with the ink in foreboding darkness. Prepared for another long day of fighting, Tamrin was shocked when she reached her post. Hidden among the tide pools lay one sanctuary devoid of ink. Her face lit up with ecstasy. Such a rare sight this had become in her endless days of battle.

She fell to her knees, gazing into the pool with childlike awe. The image from long ago, of diamond waters encasing creatures in their natural habitat, beat against her chest. Tears jumped from her eyes, uniting themselves with the crystalline waters below.

After drinking it all in, something struck her. Though delightfully alluring, the pool was missing a key factor of its appeal. Not a trace of life inhabited it.

Joy of her triumph rapidly subsided. With only so much space left for her refugees, certainly such prime habitat as this wouldn't be ignored. There should be limitless life flocking to this safe haven.

She glanced nervously at neighboring pools and found those empty too. Her heart beat quicker, anticipating battle. She expected the ink to jump out any moment now and overtake her. She could feel it watching her, carefully planning when to strike.

A shiver trickled down her spine.

Thinking maybe the pool's water could restore her warmth, she thrust her hand in. The

typically warm water chilled her skin, and a trail of goosebumps spiked up her arm.

A frightening thought seized her. Perhaps her opponent had buried itself into the pool's depths in an attempt to ambush her. Her eyes darted across the pool, desperately searching for movement. There was nothing. Tamrin couldn't be placated. Perhaps her eyes were failing her. Perhaps even the sun had switched sides, and it now shielded the ink from view. She reached her arm further into the water and swished the sand around, hoping to uncover some clue that would at last ease her troubled mind.


The opposite occurred, as black tendrils emerged from the bed of the pool. They snaked around her fingers, slowly encircling her wrist. Tamrin couldn't see through the clouded water, but she felt a sickening sensation run across her arm.

A mysterious force dragged her into the pool. Her head was submerged while her body thrashed violently against the sand. Her arm disappeared into the bottom. The silver badge which signified her status as protector snapped off, clanging against the rocks.

Her mind raced to find an explanation, seeking to counterattack before the fight was lost completely. The tide pools were all shallow, to her knowledge. There was nothing beneath them but sand, dirt, and limestone. Where had the ink come from, and what had it done with her arm?

She thought back to the prison. Each night she filled it with the day's captures, yet had it ever grown? She couldn't recall. The tide pools weren't far, and escape was possible without a guard to secure the area. Tamrin cursed her foolishness.

She struggled to pull herself out of the seemingly black hole that had replaced the



pool's basin. To her horror, she felt something slimy tug her arm further in. She grimaced at its touch. There was a feeling of malicious joy that permeated the slickness clinging to her skin. The ink had solidified into a much more formidable enemy.

Tamrin was running out of time. Her throat burned with saltwater. How long had she been under? A coughing fit shot fire into her lungs. She was reminded once more of her place in the bay's hierarchy. No amount of badges could change the fact she was an outsider. She needed air.

Her lungs begged for it as her heart pumped blood into her limbs, save for her missing arm. Devastating images of it being ripped from her body and devoured by the beast played in her head.



Her free arm pushed against the rocks, harnessing the strength she had worked hard to build in the previous weeks. Her nails scratched the rough surface of the rocks like a bird breaking a mollusk's shell. The calluses on her hands scraped off, sending blood into the water. The ink lapped it up as if sipping wine at a victory banquet.

In her final attempt to break free, Tamrin sent all her remaining strength into her muscles and shoved with desperation. She could only use half her upper body. The other had been lost to her rival. She couldn't feel from her right shoulder down.

Part of her skull bobbed on the surface of the pool, giving her hope of escaping, but it slipped back in with mournful surrender. The slippery ink had traveled up her now missing arm and made contact with her face. A cold substance scratched her neck, then cheeks. Her head never made it above water.

As her vision faded, she was reminded of everything she hated about the ink. Its clammy touch made her shrivel inward. Its foul stench flooded her nose. Its gurgling oozed into her ears. Its shadowy murk clouded her vision. In the end, all that she sensed was black.

Sareena Bajpai is an undergraduate creative writing student. When she isn't feverishly writing out her latest idea, she can be found with her family and friends, likely with a sweet treat in hand.



The Dining, The Dying

a poem by **Roya Ghahreman**

Roya Ghahreman is a freshman majoring in English literature. She enjoys reading, writing, and listening to Adrianne Lenker in her free time. If she is not exploring a new shop or event on the weekends, she is most likely tucked away somewhere and reading peacefully.

the marrow you sip gently, intently, from my
trembling arm
the bone you thought had
embraced you, beckoned you,
but regardless of this known falsity,
you take tastelessly
you are not unlike
the many calloused hands
of the cynical masses,

bony and pallid, plucking another thing
from the land, from the shelves,
and all the while you are hooking your nails around
the vulnerable inner curve of my exposed left rib
I am willingly reduced to
another being, another flesh, for a wanting body to
consume
gleaming teeth sink in soundlessly
until there rises this ringing note, this shrill cry, and
I peer
awed, horrified,
downwards
to find that

I have been set to decompose,
gutted and disoriented
there is an inability for wholeness to bloom
with this debilitating
irritating ache to be
reinstalled with meaning
meaning which has been drawn from me
through my senseless giving of my innards
my parts have forsaken me,
and I have unwittingly chosen the rule of the
carnivorous
over having a warmth in my veins

meanwhile
the substance,
The world's rich worth,
is surely drained
the trees suppress their cries,
and ponder
if they sit still enough, if the wind realizes
that their branches must not move
that then the whirl of the teeth of their killers will
halt
the machinery meant to dispose of their greenery
the mechanized cruel chewing mandibles
will rust over with remorse

It is the sincere hope
that they will forget to cause grief
if they do not hear the forest's very existence
the blissful thought hangs, hopefully,
nonetheless
the silence is swallowed with striking,
morbidly sharp jaws
for the metal does not care for
the purposeful, funeral-like silence
of all it seeks to end

the animals will never shuffle neatly in order
to sit and watch each other's grim, crumbling
expressions
as the axe falls
small, barely formed hooves pad,
scared,
at the ground
the aged fur of the weary elders curls upwards
and there is this blissful acceptance of the stark
absence of humanity
the flickers of virtue that remain unseen

how is it possible for there not to exist within this
love
a similar absence of any
shreds of graciousness,
as the sun slips into the stomach
of the mountains
(as the day refuses to relent its lengthiness)
there is,
steadfastly,
a selfishness that sits and grins,
that tailors humanity in its image

stomachs never fill
jars will never fill
they drag their expensive knuckles across their
lips and
say with their dishonest chests:
what else can we do but feed
what else can you do but agree to be fed





Crafted with Care

art by **Claire Bixby**

This piece reflects both the indulgent gratification and the meticulous effort involved in honing one's craft. Through the lens of a baker crafting a display of desserts, the piece explores how the pursuit of a skill can be both a personal indulgence and a selfless investment.

Claire Bixby is a freshman studying English (literature). Her hobbies include reading, hiking, and painting.

Feeding the Nothing

by **Mason Dodds**

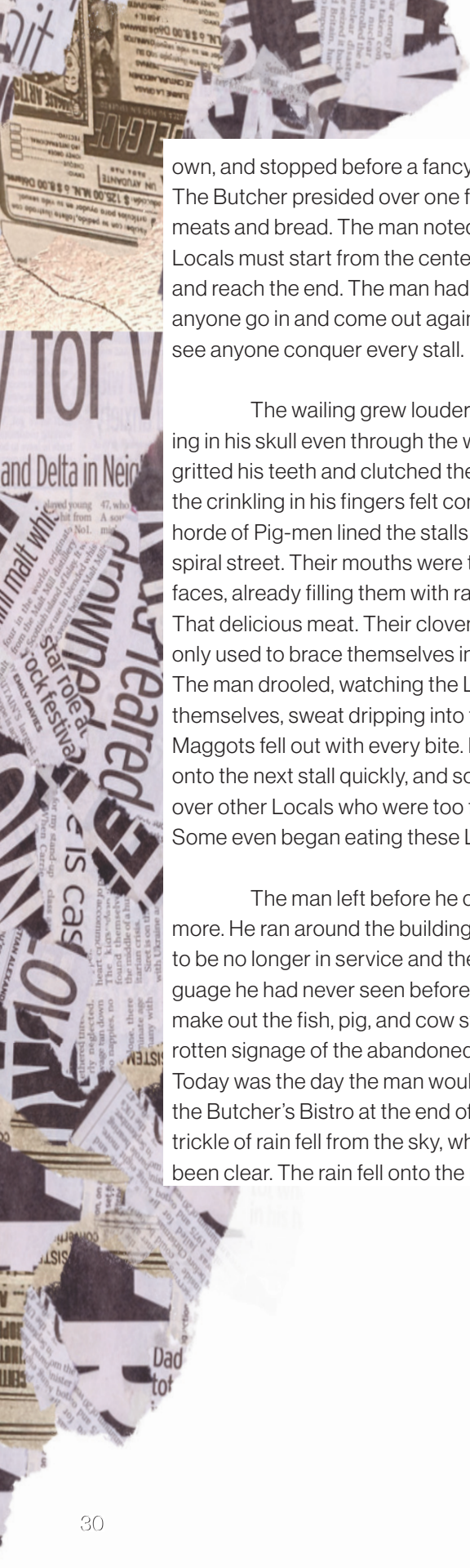
"Day 217—or is it 230? I am not sure anymore. Does it even matter anymore? Is it Tuesday? Thursday? Does this place even have a Tuesday? I have completely lost track when I first fell here, into the Nothing," a young man wrote down in his journal. His clothing was torn asunder and filthy, hanging on by haphazardly weaved threads. Wailing and groaning could be heard, almost inhuman, as the man stuffed his notebook into his back pocket. He grabbed his half-empty crinkled water bottle and ran from behind a food stall.

Wooden-framed food stalls lined the spiral street. Each stall was slick with mold and decay, and they sold rotten food filled with maggots and worms. The stalls stood just a bit taller than the man was used to back home. Their stench clung to the air, churning the man's stomach and hunger. The wailing

grew louder as the street shook beneath him. "It must be noon now," the man said, making his way to an alleyway. "Noon is when they feed." This was more of his own assurance, more to keep him grounded, more to fend off the thoughts in his own head persuading him to partake in the meat. Oh, the meat was so full of blood and fat! The chunked meat called to him as a pie on a windowsill would. To ease his cravings, the man plugged his nose and stuffed his ears with wrappers he found on the floor to drown out the chanting of the Locals.

Multiple clouds fell from the sky, not breaching any sunlight above the blanket of grey. They hovered over each stall and rumbled with thunder. Suddenly, more food fell out from the cloud and onto the stalls. The clouds stayed over the stalls, manning their





own, and stopped before a fancy restaurant. The Butcher presided over one filled with fresh meats and bread. The man noted that daily, the Locals must start from the center of the spiral and reach the end. The man had not seen anyone go in and come out again. Rarely did he see anyone conquer every stall.

The wailing grew louder, reverberating in his skull even through the wrappers. He gritted his teeth and clutched the water bottle; the crinkling in his fingers felt comforting. The horde of Pig-men lined the stalls in the inner spiral street. Their mouths were too big for their faces, already filling them with rancid meat. That delicious meat. Their cloven hands were only used to brace themselves in their feed. The man drooled, watching the Locals gorge themselves, sweat dripping into their meals. Maggots fell out with every bite. Locals moved onto the next stall quickly, and some passed over other Locals who were too full to move. Some even began eating these Locals.

The man left before he could see more. He ran around the buildings that seemed to be no longer in service and the signs in a language he had never seen before, but he could make out the fish, pig, and cow symbols on the rotten signage of the abandoned buildings. Today was the day the man would make it to the Butcher's Bistro at the end of the spiral. A trickle of rain fell from the sky, which had never been clear. The rain fell onto the man's face,

and the smell of oil and bacon grease caused him to gag quietly. He wiped his face down with the wrappers he stuffed into his ears, smearing the sauce of the wrappers onto his cheeks. He walks past the Locals eating from their troughs, many not breathing between breaths.

The smell of vomit and waste filled the air closer to the Butcher's Bistro. The Locals seemed not to notice him; how could they? They towered over him in unnatural ways. They slumped over their food, and still, they would need to look down at him to see him. He stuck close to the buildings and waited for the shifting of Locals between stalls. He reached the end and stood outside the Butcher's Bistro, the doors larger than any he had seen. The smell of the food from the inside knocked him to his knees. It smelled like Mother's cooking. He reached for the door handle, but it would not turn. He peered inside, and only one person was sitting at the bar counter in the middle. The person ate his steak with a fork and knife, cleaned his face with a napkin, and sipped wine redder than when Jesus performed his miracle.

The man stood outside and waited, waiting for the doors to open for another Local. The person on the inside turned to look at him and smiled.

Mason Dodds is a creative writing major graduating in 2026. They love to write stories that appeal to the senses of others. They have always wanted to tell stories, but they could not write them down until they were six because no one in the family was left-handed.

The Bad The Bad The

by **Adarshini Pattnaik**

it is a random evening on a random night,
and the only human contact i've had in the past days—
or is it hours, minutes?—is the silent shudder of my phone,
lighting up with inane notifications;

it always emerges on the worst days,
this perverse desire to be bad;
i shift, trying to unbunch myself from my cramped position,
but my muscles are too tense, too coiled;

another vibration in my hand—a text, a friend—
an enemy, a disturbance;
a scream erupts in my mind;
i want to text back, if only to say something mean,
if only to prove some control over my sorry state,
if only to spout dumb lies and faux empathy,
if only to indulge in the act of impacting someone,
if only to act at all;
the thought of being manipulative is sickening
in a far-away sense,
but not to me, as i am now,
not to the Bad;
only the immorality is left,
in moments such as these;

Adarshini Pattnaik is a sophomore at ASU majoring in Biomedical Sciences. She spends most of her free time with her friends and family, reading, or watching movies.

my chest rises and falls,
i am not sure i am breathing, but i must be;
it's been a terrible day;
the air feels stale and smells of nothing,
my skin is numb,
my mind is jumbled, craving that gasp of breath,
that break in this painful monotony, like revival after death,
like ripping out a woman's heart,
like fighting a man until exhaustion;

i'm almost carnivorous for it,
hungry for that sweet release—
a person walks past me, a family member,
an innocent question;
i snap back, their eyes widen, body curling,
and for a moment i relish that luxury, that indulgence,
that thrill of feeling alive—
the moment passes, the person is gone,
the guilt does not rush into me like i wish it would;

another day, another hour, another second, another text; i mute
my notifications;
i squeeze tighter into myself,
wrapping my limbs around each other uncomfortably;

today **the Bad** has won



Mountains Made of Steam

fiction by **Laika Ulman**

Blinding LED lights beamed against the ruinous urban landscape, their decay all seeming to revolve around one building. It stood tall, above all else, adorned with billboards advertising unattainable necessities. This towering pleasure dome was known to all as “Pure Comedy,” and it was the most exclusive and high-quality club in the Apprentice States. Beyond its doors lay the largest dance floor in the largest part of the largest city in the largest country in the entire world. At all times, this renowned dance floor never failed to be covered with hundreds upon hundreds of revelers. They all coagulated within the center, writhing in a sweaty mass of ritual. Each body swirled around in endless spirals paired with others to whom they had seen perhaps a hundred times before, and yet they never recalled each other’s names. They clung to each other, swaying back and forth like pendulums, sneaking looks over the shoulders of their perpetually anonymous partners and gazing forlornly—yet foolishly—at the exit.

For the six months that it had been open, the club never played the same song twice, but no one seemed to notice, as it was all equally designed to distract. Noise blasted from the speakers at such an intensity that it was impossible to truly hear the details of the composition, but as long as there was *something* to move to, some semblance of rhythm, the dancers would be content. From the edge of the undulating multitude, two arms came clawing out from the bodies like an infant struggling to be born. The arms latched onto the shoulders of two dancers and separated them, creating a temporary orifice for the sweating man to stumble through. With his newly liberated hand, he let go of the beautiful, inebriated woman he had been with. With the other, he wiped a nameless fluid from his beard—something that may have been saliva, vomit, or even blood. Either way, it made no difference. As he staggered his way to the bar, the man’s face was overflowing with intoxicated glee, but no expression could ever

hope to conceal the thin film of distress over his eyes; *nihil habet*.

The bearded man slammed his palms onto the bar's counter, catching the attention of the bartender. The same bartender as always, with the crude figure and misanthropic demeanor more reminiscent of a bouncer than a service worker. He had been bestowed with none of the charisma and geniality required for the job.

"Another glass of cognac, my good friend. Hors d'age—please."

The bartender muttered, and in record time he poured the drink and hurled the glass toward him before he stormed off to the next customer. With his newfound solitude, the man stared into his glass in silence, thinking of nothing in particular. His mind swirled, and all he knew to do was cherish his drunken bliss—which lasted for quite some time. The pulses of music were deafening, and the strobe lights seizure inducing, depriving him of all sense until he was but a speck of dust floating amongst a void of abstract colors and shapes.

And then, like the sounding of an alarm, there was a voice. Loud enough to overpower the music, yet still amiable in its intonation. A voice the man did not recognize. It came from his left, a simple and direct, "Hey."

The first thing that captured his attention was her eyes, which had a shine like sunlight against varnished wood. He had not realized he had been longing to see such a shine again for god knows how long. A shine that had long been extinct since the advent of the new regime. Despite being imprisoned within this horrid orgy, this woman still fostered a hope that no adversity could stomp out of her. The man stared at her, stunned and too drunk to formulate a response. She took his silence as an opportunity to begin her interrogation. Her entire body swayed from side to side as she raised her arm toward him, her pointer finger just an inch away from his nose, "You! I know you from somewhere, don't I?" She

began to lose her train of thought and shook her head to refocus, "You seem so . . . familiar."

The man raised his eyebrow at the woman. Compared to her, he felt sober. "No, ma'am. I'm not sure I recognize you."

"No, no. I'm sure of it. Do you know Peter Horridge? Were you at one of his parties before—y'know. Rockland."

"I'm not much of a *partier*. What's Rockland supposed to mean?"

"It's just what I call *this* place. Can't remember why anymore. Doesn't matter. Pure c comedy's too corny, anyway. Now where was I? Oh—if it's not a party, then where the hell do I know you from . . ." She scrutinized the man's figure until her eyes lit even brighter than before, "You! The newspaper! I saw you in the newspaper! You . . . **helped** lead that war protest, yeah? What was **your name** . . . Started with an H . . . Harper? Harry? Henry! You're Henry Turner, no?"

Her drunken rambling continued, something about how much they had slandered him on the news and how she "never believed their lies," but he did not hear it. His once buried memories now rushed to the forefront of his mind, stealing him away from the conversation. He had forgotten he had any reason to be recognized by a stranger, but now it all came up at once like vomit. How could he have forgotten? His reply came like muscle memory; he barely even registered that he said it.

"There was no war to protest. It's not a war if your opponent has no way to fight back. That's a slaughter." *And really, "I" wasn't only "protesting" the "war." All four of us were fighting back against so much more than that; the genocide was just the final straw that got the general populace disgusted enough to attempt revolution.* His lips quivered. His mouth opened. No words. His head began to ache—a throbbing pain right in the back of his skull.

The woman raised her arms in sarcastic apprehension and said, "Sorry. Slaughter. You were protesting a slaughter." She lowered her right hand and held it out to Henry, "Guess I got it, then. Henry Turner, huh? I'm Carolyn Solomon. I'd say it was nice to meet you, but I think you might've been the *last* person I wanted to see cloistered up here."

Henry reached out to shake Carolyn's hand with slow deliberation—still, he managed to miss her palm, nearly seizing her shoulder. No connection was made whatsoever. *Man, I'm drunk*, Henry thought, reconfiguring himself and finally trying again. This time there was success. He nodded and grunted in acknowledgement. Henry Turner. He was Henry Turner. And he was drinking in Pure Comedy. He was Henry Turner and he was sitting at a bar with Carolyn at *Rockland*.

"And why the hell are you here anyway?" Carolyn said, letting go of Henry's hand. She looked like she couldn't even remember why their hands were touching in the first place, "I thought they killed you guys—execution type'a thing, no?"

Everything was spinning. How the hell did he get here? What was he doing? Henry picked up his glass of cognac and took an immense swig from it, which softened his anxieties enough to make them bearable, but it was still not enough.

"The others are dead, yeah. But the guards, they let me go. I don't know why... Maybe they knew I wasn't a threat alone... Some kind of—nevermind." No, the spinning, the confusion, was still there. The cognac felt like it was already gone. Why so suddenly? What was happening to him? "In the end, I signed up for *this*. And I guess I got..."

"Lucky."

In an instant, it was as if Henry was right back in that bitter, hopeless prison cell, standing in a line beside his three closest companions. He remembered his uniform being two sizes

too small, the exposed skin on his back almost retracting in pain when it pressed against the frigid stone wall. Two prison guards with darkened eyes and dry lips faced the four of them, one armed with an assault rifle and heavy body armor, standing near the door. The other was bare except for one small handgun. His shriveled lips curled at the ends into a horrible grin.

The whole ordeal was silent. Not a single word exchanged the entire time. The only sound came from the bare guard's shoes clacking against the concrete as he walked up and down the line of prisoners, poking and prodding at them like lab rats. He leaned his face only a few inches away from Henry's comrade, Allen. In response, Allen spat at him. That act of defiance ended up being the catalyst for the execution to really begin. Time's awful crawl suddenly accelerated. All at once, like seconds overlapped one another into one clear, terrifying picture. The guard grabbed him, turned him around so he faced Henry, placed the handgun to the back of his head and—gone. At one moment there was a person in the room. Someone filled with aspirations, levels of empathy for his fellow man that Henry had never seen in anyone else before. And then he was nothing but a lump of rotten meat festering on the floor. A dream shattered.

The scene repeated two more times. Murrieta—gone. Toussaint—gone. It all happened so fast. In what could not have been more than five minutes, the entire foundation of a revolution was blasted to rubble and only Henry was left. The carnage-covered guard now motioned for Henry to come forward. Henry kept his face straight, opting to die with at least some semblance of dignity. Just as the others did. If he was strong enough. He walked forward, and turned his back to the guard. The warm metal of the smoking handgun pressed against his neck's nape. Anxiety overtook him like blood to the head. A dizzying rush, as sudden as it was uncontrollable. It took incredible strength not to hyperventilate, not to break into tears and scream for his mother.

Do it! Do it already! He wanted to yell, ***Just make it all stop!*** Without warning, the guard pulled the gun back and smashed it into the back of Henry's head, knocking him onto the floor.

The next thing Henry knew, he was on his back. He was alive. Why was he alive? All he could see was the gleam of the moon, half-obscured by smog. Stars were a rarity now. Just one gigantic light domineering the sky, surrounded by black. After some deliberation, he gathered the strength to lift himself up and gauge his surroundings. He was in the middle of an alleyway, his head right next to an overflowing dumpster. A heavy trash bag sagged down its edge, leaking fluids onto Henry. Festering. He recognized the area now, it was about thirty minutes from the prison.

Henry didn't stand up. Every part of his body ached, and he found any excuse to defer his eventual leaving of the alley. ***Let the sewage drown me. Let the rats feed upon me. There is nothing left for me here.*** And he fell back to sleep.

What was there for him? The next two weeks were spent on the verge of monomania. He wandered the city, scavenging for the remnants of his hope. A starting point—some way to rebuild what was lost. His days repeated the same mindless cycle, spent eating only when needed, sleeping amongst the alley rats, and hiking through the streets for miles upon miles in search of an imagined conviction. Completely alone. He told himself his state was temporary, he just needed something—*anything* and he would be himself again. Something that could save him like a god from the machine that could repair all of the pain he had suffered. If he could just figure out what it was he needed, he would be okay again. And yet it was already too late. To Henry, misery had become a religion and isolation a prayer.

It came as an advertisement torn from a newspaper. A piece of crumpled paper on the floor, propelled through the air by a strong gust of wind; the same wind which seemed

to hegemonize Henry's every decision. Henry leaned against the wall of a building, a cigarette between his lips, watching the crowds of people before him ambulate through the maze of streets. Before his arrest, Henry found himself doing this a lot. Smoking and people-watching. It often filled him with a profound hope, imagining what these people were doing. Some to work, some to their children, each person trying to find a way to keep themselves and the ones they cared about alive. Despite how dire these times are, they did all they could. He always saw a sibling in the faces of every silhouette that passed him, no matter how big the crowd, no matter how different they may have been from him.

Now he found no inspiration in the world of the everyman. Instead he felt nothing, only an inexplicable sense of mundanity—disappointment. From the crowd, a figure separated and began to approach Henry, standing across from him like a dance partner. He was a disheveled old man with grey-black hair. His white tank top was stained with splotches of what seemed to be beer and other assorted smears of food. His voice was raspy from years of smoking, and as soon as he caught Henry's attention, he spoke to him with utter disdain, "Henry Turner! Git out of 'ere, ye damned murderer!" He held up his middle finger towards Henry before turning around and returning to the crowd, spitting out a glob of wet tobacco on the sidewalk.

Of course, Henry knew his history better than anyone, better than any of these state-sponsored journalists could ever know it! He knew especially that there was not a single chapter—not even a footnote—of his biography that would be dedicated to *murder*. No, he was not a perfect person, and he knew he had partaken in his fair share of immoral and sometimes even deplorable things in his quest for liberation, but taking another life was something off the table under any circumstance. And how had public opinion swayed against him so quickly? Only months before then, he and the others were leading armies of protestors down this same street,

and now his supporters called him a murderer!

The paper was creased in such a way as to resemble a dove soaring across the street, until it slammed into the side of Henry's face, disrupting his despairing contemplation. With a displaced vehemence, he pried the paper off, uncrumpled it and scanned through the advertisement, if only to indulge his cynicism.

Forget Your Worries at PURE COMEDY!

Sign up now for the chance to win PERMANENT access to the most luxury nightclub in the world! All expenses paid; housing included.

Henry's curiosity grew as he began to skim the paragraph of impossibly-small-to-read text hidden in the corner of the advertisement. "Ah." Henry mumbled to himself, as the full picture began to paint itself. Before his arrest, Henry would have laughed at this. He was not stupid; he knew exactly what this advertisement was: nothing but a transparent, shameless way to silence the resistance. It wasn't free access to some bourgeois club, it was an invitation to be locked into nothing more than a fancy prison. Feeling disillusioned with the world? Don't know where to go? Come on in, drink all you want, but there's one catch: you can never leave.

Now, however, Henry was not laughing. He saw the truth; he saw how obvious the trap was, but it tempted him in a way that he had never felt tempted before. He looked up from the newspaper, and in an attempt to avoid its seduction, looked back to the crowd. His breathing grew heavy with terror as he felt a sense of finality, as if this were to be the last time he ever looked to the masses for hope. Now, he felt less than nothing. All he could see in the crowd was a rising torrent of hatred, proof of an unmendable fracture between him and his fellow man. Perhaps there never was a true bond in the first place, and it was all just a hopeful bit of hallucination that propelled him through this life.

He thought of his friends, their corpses likely

thrown into a mass grave and forgotten. He thought of how long it had been since he had seen someone truly smile—was it the guard? Had he not seen a single smile since he was released? He thought of the way his mind constantly raced, the way he kept thinking himself into circles until he was nothing but an angry, powerless, scared child. He loathed his brain. He wanted it all to be over. There was nothing for him here but a cannibalistic dynamo that he could never disrupt. *Nihil habet.*


...

"No. It wasn't luck. They ... put me here on purpose." Henry said. He couldn't remember how long he had sat in silence. Carolyn might have said something while his mind wandered, but if she did, he did not hear it. For the first time in ages he felt sober—despondently sober. It felt as if all the world around him had been tinted with a dreadful gray.

"Welcome back. I thought you might've died on me—had a stroke or somethin'." Carolyn said, her voice dominated by hesitance, "What do you mean *on purpose*? Didn't you come here on your own like everyone else?"

"On my own?" Henry asked. He felt himself shaking, a familiar terror building within him. He wanted this. He wanted to be here. But why? Henry finished off his cognac and stood, holding his hand out to Carolyn. This time his arm was still, unusually well-coordinated. He forced himself to affect a distorted smile and said, "No, that doesn't matter now, does it? No point in discussing it. How about you join me for a dance instead?"

Carolyn looked at him, her eyes still full of light, disoriented yet drunk enough to ignore Henry's sudden shift in mood. As she took his hand, Henry wondered what her story was. What pain has led her here? Was she proud of her decision? He bit his tongue—the pain distracting him—and guided her back into the hive mind. As they traversed the cramped corridors of bodies, they held onto each



other's hands. He wanted to pierce as deep into the crowd as possible, to be completely surrounded by movement. The horrible, genreless music hurt his ears as he finally found a spot perfectly at the crowd's center.

Once, Henry was a good dancer, but if he was dancing with any technique that night, he would not have realized. No thought went into his movement; all he could comprehend was an impossibly long series of convulsions and twirls backtracked by this static reverberating around him. Worst of all was this nauseating feeling that his head was too heavy for his neck, that at any moment it would swing back and his spine would break and his skull would come undone and go rolling around on the floor, and Carolyn and everybody else would burst into wails of horror and they would all lose that precious haze that they so worshipped, and in one moment they would be sober again and they would be afraid again, all of these vagrants so lost and afraid and hopeless and wanting to *forget* would suddenly be thrust back into their pasts and realize the horrible mistake they had made ever coming here and not only would they scream in fear of the ever-growing skull too heavy for its body, no longer able to carry the burden of the worms flowing through it, but they would scream because there was nothing else for them to do, because there was no going back, because maybe outside was unbearable, but there was still hope, even if it felt invisible at times, it was still there and no matter how hard it was to find it would be found eventually and it could have been wonderful, but in Rockland, in this hedonistic purgatory, the only hope they had was the hope that maybe when they died they would be too drunk to notice and they would drift off into oblivion, ignorant like children, lost as they always had been, but blissfully lost, here in Rockland isolation truly was a prayer, yes they were screaming together yes they were surrounded but really they were alone, the exact same as everyone else but too different, and as the skull stopped rolling and as the music stopped and the strobelights slowed and dimmed all they had to steep in

was their own thoughts and these thoughts were coming back in multitudes as a hairy, uncaring and all too clear arm slamming their heads against a concrete wall and no amount of alcohol no amount of dancing no amount of dementiatic ignorance would ever truly numb the pain and yes they could scream *make it end make it end* all they wanted but they were trapped in Rockland alone in Rockland all too aware of Rockland and it was their faults because they did exactly what the Apprentice States wanted: they lowered their arms in defeat.

Why won't it go away? Henry thought, unaware that he was no longer dancing, unaware that Carolyn had wandered off long ago, and unaware that his thoughts were being vocalized in the form of a shriek. He was on his knees, curled into a ball with his head to the ground, screaming and sobbing until his vocal chords were on the verge of shredding. Blood was beginning to build in his mouth, but he could not taste it. He could no longer feel anything. In that moment, the loose thread between Henry's thoughts and his untethering reality was, at long last, severed. Alone with nothing but his thoughts, he could do nothing but succumb to madness. This deep into the dancefloor, the music was far too loud, and nobody could hear Henry scream. He went largely unnoticed for weeks, until somebody complained to the bartender about the smell of the lump of rotten meat festering on the floor. A dream deferred.

March 7th, 2025

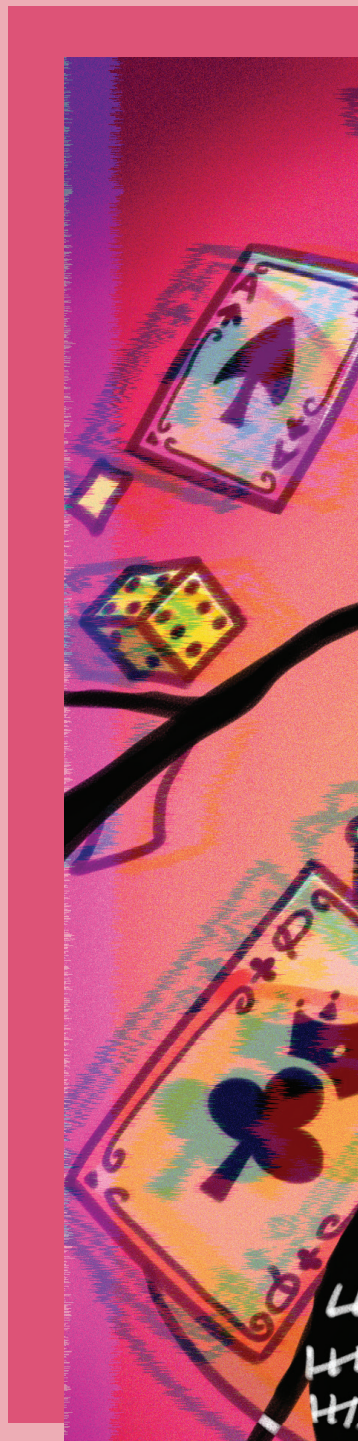
Laika Ulman is a freshman majoring in literature and minoring in philosophy. She has been writing novels as a hobby since she was seven years old.



High Roller

art by **Taylor Wojkiewicz**

This piece highlights the messy brightness of indulgence. It draws people in before revealing a harsher reality—a crack in the illusion. While indulging may seem good, there are always undesired effects that people ignore until they cannot ignore them any further.





Taylor Wojtkiewicz is a first year computer science major who enjoys making art, playing games, and pursuing new experiences.

THE DEATH OF SISYPHUS

non-fiction by **Samuel Ferguson**

"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."

— Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*

What is the prevailing stereotype of the modern consumer? He is large, rosy-cheeked, and full. He pats his stomach with a satisfied laugh, secure in the knowledge of his next ten meals. A cigar juts from his grin, and with each puff, he sends his ego skyward, his head lost in the clouds of indulgence. At the height of his consumption, he believes himself to be invincible. Yet, he is blind—to the world, to himself, to the introspection that fades as his focus shifts ever outward, seeking the next object of pleasure.

Enter Sisyphus, Albert Camus's boulder-heaving hero of absurdity. The consumer, in his blindness, has crushed Sisyphus beneath his own excess. He no longer sees past his own appetite, oblivious to the rock that lies before him. Camus's challenge—to imagine Sisyphus happy—is lost on him, for he is too intoxicated by worldly indulgence to grasp the joy in struggle.

Consider a situation that has become frighteningly common: the bacchanal. The young consumer living in cosmopolitan circles loves to drink. The young consumer, thriving in cosmopolitan circles, lives to drink. Clubbing, partying, chasing the good life—this is his creed.

"How can I work the least and revel the most?" he wonders. "How can I avoid responsibility completely and instead dedicate myself to drunken raving? How can I get the most out of an evening?" In this the young consumer has murdered Sisyphus because they have ceased to *experience*.

When one takes the n th shot of liquor, when the world fades to black and they come back into consciousness the next day, they stop experiencing. The night dissolves into blackness, and consciousness returns only with the morning light. What occurs in those lost hours? The body moves, but the self is submerged beneath the tides of intoxication. There is no *experience*—only the absence of it. The absurdist seeks to *feel*, no matter the nature of the sensation. Yet when one indulges beyond their capacity, they abandon experience altogether.

We have become so deluded by indulgence that we have lost our ability to embrace the absurd—the very incomprehensibility of existence. Instead, consumption has become our narcotic, a distraction from the absurdist's true calling: to experience. This is Sisyphus's task—not to escape struggle, but to engage with it fully, to feel its weight, and to find contentment in effort.

Camus originally posited that suicide is the antithesis to embracing the absurd—that killing oneself is the social statement one makes when they have given up on the personal quest to embrace the struggle. In this light, a life of unchecked indulgence is a slow suicide. To lose oneself in excess, to surrender consciousness to pleasure, is to cease truly *living*.

One might argue that this is melodramatic. The Dionysian reveler may protest, "I am living life to the fullest—who are you to say otherwise?" To which I respond, "To embrace one's struggle, to *experience*, one must be aware of it. Without consciousness, one is not a thinking being but a mere beast, lost in the cycle of desire and gratification."

Sisyphus, burdened yet aware, continues to push his boulder up the hill. And in that struggle, he finds happiness. Can the modern consumer say the same?

Samuel Ferguson is a second-year student majoring in philosophy (morality, politics and law) at ASU. Originally from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Samuel enjoys his rainy days spent with a book by the fire.



Market Maze

art by **Halle Pickett**

Brimming with chaos and packed with an overwhelming array of goods, this market is a vivid display of human indulgence. The sensory overload created by vibrant displays and overflowing racks of dazzling items encourages consumerism and thrives on society's desire for affluence.

Halle Pickett is a freshman at Barrett, The Honors College. Halle is pursuing a degree in biological sciences and a minor in studio arts. Originally from Salt Lake City, she enjoys combining her love of adventure with her passion for photography.



When Reflections Were No More

by **Jacqueline Gionet**

It was barely perceptible at first. The change crept in silently, like a shadow at dusk. Mirrors still hung in bathrooms, and shop windows still shimmered, but something was off. They would look into the gleaming surface of a car window or a quiet puddle on the sidewalk, expecting to see themselves, only to find nothing staring back. No face, no form of a body, no reassurance of existence.

Some rejoiced. Those who had spent their whole lives scrutinizing their flaws under the stronghold of insecurity felt an unfamiliar relief. For the first time since the blissful ignorance of early childhood, they could breathe. Freed from their own reflections, they were unshackled from self-consciousness. Those who linked their sense of self-worth to being seen felt their foundations start to crumble under the weight of irrelevance. Cosmetic empires withered; their promises of flawlessness were rendered meaningless in a world where no one could see their own face.

With reflections gone, priorities shifted. People dressed for comfort rather than style, and fashion trends evaporated overnight. Social media, once a curated showcase of self, fell silent. Computer and cell phone screens filled with empty frames as video calls became eerie voids. And for a time, society paused. People spoke face-to-face and listened more carefully, as if searching for something deeper, now that the superficial no longer mattered. They reconsidered the adage that "it's what's on the inside that counts," not because they suddenly believed it, but because there was nothing left to measure the outside. At first, life seemed easier. The

sun neither bounced off windshields nor created a blinding glare on glasses. Without the distraction of their own appearances in their phones and rear-view mirrors, drivers became more present, their attention fully on the road. Then, something else began to change.

Slowly, the very nature of light began to falter. Colors lost their clarity. The rich green of the trees and the crisp cerulean of the sky dulled and then greyed. Within a week, the world flattened into an indistinct blur. Without reflections, without light bending and bouncing as it once had, everything dissolved into shadow. Shapes blurred together until objects became indistinguishable from people. The moon, once luminous, became a void. Faces of family and friends vanished into blackness, existing only in memory.

People adapted, but they did not adapt as humans had before. In the absence of vision, they relied on touch, groping through the darkness like insects with their antennae. Hands learned to recognize textures rather than features — calloused palms, soft cotton sleeves, the jagged ridges of a familiar ring. Some carved marks into their skin to make themselves identifiable, some branding their bodies with desperate distinction.

The world no longer belonged to the admired, the envied, the beautiful. It belonged to those who could navigate the dark.

And so they crept. Wriggling. Darting. Squirming.

Until the second coming.

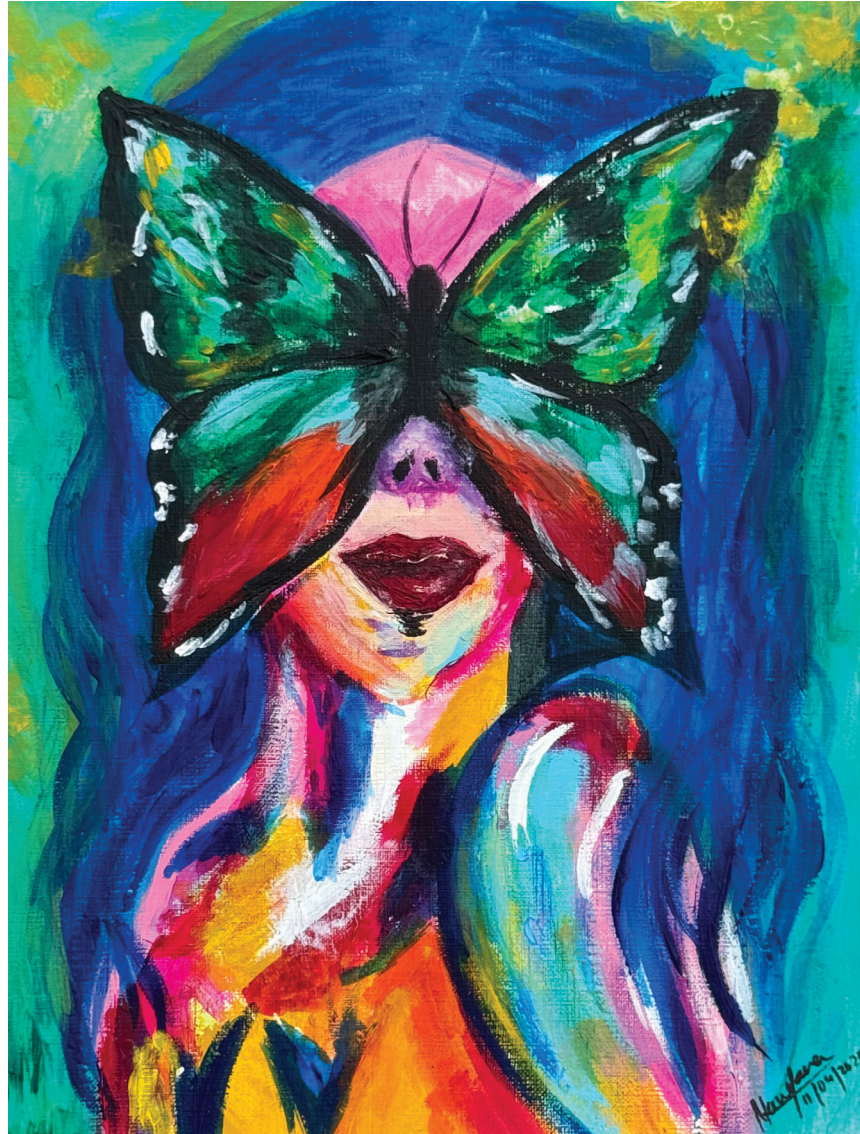
Jacqueline Gionet

is a senior majoring in psychology. She is considering pursuing a graduate degree in clinical psychology. As a former professional ballet dancer, she now enjoys swing dancing and collecting anything with dinosaurs. For better or for worse, she thrives in environments ripe with entropy.

Metamorphosis

This piece reflects the possibility that when we fully embrace change, we transform into better versions of ourselves. The butterfly symbolizes this metamorphosis. Indulgence isn't merely giving in, but allowing ourselves to improve and grow.

Nandana Shibu Elizabeth is a junior in Barrett, The Honors College majoring in computer science with a minor in media arts and sciences. She developed a passion for art at a young age and continues to explore it as a creative outlet alongside her technical pursuits. In her free time, she enjoys experimenting with different styles and mediums.



History has never been kind to him—
not to his skin, not to the way light bends to him.

The sea is patient. I tell him, wait—don't go.
But he steps into the shallows; salt clings to him.

I tell myself I am the anchor, the weight that keeps him here.
But grief is a tide—each warning drags me nearer to him.

Bluebells rest in my palm, their stems pressed flat.
He says, they're flowers, not graves; don't bring them to me.

Icarus flew too far, I remind him, too close to the sun.
He laughs. That's the point, isn't it?—to singe the skin.

He tells me life isn't meant to be carried; it's meant to burn.
As if freedom's a wave, not the drowning it brings with him.

But I ask—who is the sea kind to? Who survives the leap?
He shrugs. Some of us are meant to sink before we're swallowed.

I reach for his hand, but my fingers close on salt and air.
He lets the waves take him; I sink, too, beneath his will.

The blue unfolds, a hymn that swallows his breath whole.
He doesn't hear the tide, only the air it promises him.

Do you think the sea is kind? That it gives and doesn't take?
He doesn't answer. He only lets the current pull him.

He says, what's a life without risk, without the leap?
I say, what's a leap when the sea is already brimming?

History has never been kind to us; it waits to devour.
He says, but look at it now—so still, so forgiving.

Blue drags him deeper. I can't tell if it's love or loss
that fills his lungs, as if the ocean has given wings to him.

I stay at the shore, naming the currents that swallowed him whole.
Each one pulls my breath tighter; each name becomes my own.

The light above falters; the water swells, a dark bloom.
He's somewhere beneath it now—where bluebells won't reach him.

Do you see him there, in the blue, still burning?
History will never call him back, won't unbind him.

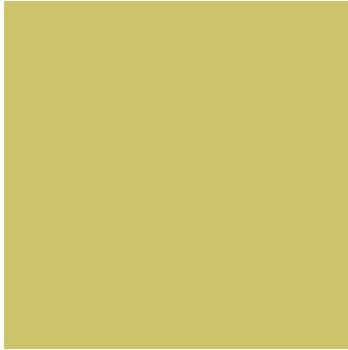
He smiles in the dark, his body carried, weightless.
I carry the rest—the silence the sea has left for him.

History has never been kind to him—
not to his skin, never to brothers like him.

The Story He Didn't Listen To

poetry by **Emerson Amaya**

Emerson Amaya is a third-year ASU student majoring in poetry and fiction with a minor in film and media studies. They create work that explores grief in all its forms, offering space for pain and healing to coexist. Currently, they are collecting an army of miniatures from all sorts of silly brands!



I watched

by YaminiJain

I remember going to a party
Where or when or why, nevermind
But by the Gods, my gown itched
I remember that first
My gown itched
And I scratched and scratched

And watched
Staring past polished window panes
As preening aunties peacocked
Dressed in their finest jewelry and saris
Looked straight ahead
Kept drifting past
The form huddled next to the streetlight
It shivered once
And looked straight at me

I met her gaze
The first time she'd met anyone's gaze
If her surprise was anything to go by
She sat up straighter
Kept her head bowed towards me
And I wondered if she hated me
Perhaps I wished she hated me
I wish she'd come inside the banquet hall and
Make us look her in the eye

But my eyes never left hers
And despite her hunched shoulders
She never looked away from me
Her kurta was covered in dirt stains
There was so much food in the trash cans
I wondered if I imagined her eyes on me instead of
them
I wondered if she knew the aunties starved
themselves



her *Eyes*

So they could look like her
I wanted to bring her inside
Maybe she'd mock them with me

But I knew she wouldn't
If anyone dropped even a cent in front of her
She'd recite blessings on them
More heartfelt than any priest
Would she tell me about her if I asked
Would I be able to stomach listening to her
Perhaps I am terrified to see the worst of humanity
And through her eyes
I know it would be me
It should be me but
She dreams of a life in which her soul was as
rotted as ours

I wish she could've known
Me
And my intentions before an auntie
Came up to me and started fawning over me
I was just so beautiful
I turned to look at her
And I blushed as I thanked her
Willed sincerity into my eyes
Struggled not to giggle as I noticed lipstick on her
teeth

When she left I looked outside again
And saw no one underneath the streetlight
As I began to itch all over again
And spent the rest of the night
Wishing



Yamini Jain is a freshman majoring in marketing with a minor in psychology. She was the Youth Poet Laureate of Alameda County and a Finalist for the California State Youth Poet Laureate title. She works as a literary editor for Normal Noise Magazine and plays sports in her spare time.



HONEY

a poem by **Sanjana Ramakrishnan**

I grew up on whispered warnings and careful censorship,
on love as thick as honey—
heavy, cloying, meant to preserve,
but poured so full it left no room to breathe.

The bravest I've ever been was at three years old, with
scraped knees and a laugh that drowned out all worry. I
ran, I climbed, I fell—
each cut and bruise, proof of a life lived freely, a map of
courage on my skin.

But every time I came home,
I felt the weight of a familiar gaze,
the shadow of worry, as if I'd danced too close to the
edge. And my mother's words echoed softly:
This is what happens when you have too much fun. So, I
learned that the hurt was something


to be afraid of.


Sanjana Ramakrishnan is a senior majoring in biomedical sciences and global health and minoring in Spanish. Passionate about healthcare, she seeks to advocate for vulnerable populations and promote holistic well-being. In her free time, she enjoys creating music, going to concerts, trying new foods, and visiting local coffee shops!

They warned me to keep to myself, so I did.
To behave, so I did.
To stay safe
so I stepped lightly,
pulled back my hands,
held my breath.

They called it good,
this stillness, this silence,
grateful but never greedy.

But, they never warned me about hunger—
how it lingers within the body,
a deep ache from withheld joy.
How it thrives in places you never knew
were empty. How each bruise, each cut,
begged me to want more,
but I swallowed my voice instead,
letting it burn beneath my ribs.





And when they say,
Aren't you afraid?
I shake my head.

Because the real fear was never pain,
never pleasure nor love.

They never warned me about passion.
How it is not a quiet thing,
nor a slow and careful drift.
How it rushes in like warm hands on bare skin,
like mouths meeting in dark rooms,
like prayers echoing through a small temple.

The real fear was wasting a life
too afraid to taste it.

And when another voice, small and unsure,
asks if it's okay to want more,
to run fast, to fall hard,
to live without waiting for permission,

They taught me that pleasure was dangerous,
that sweetness had a cost,
that the indulgence of it all would break me. As
if starving for joy, for touch, for love, would not
break me all the same.

I will let the honey spill into her hands,
now fluid and free,
and say,
Savor it.
It was always yours.

So, I unlearn their lessons.

I let my feet outrun my fear.
I fill my hands with what was never offered.
I laugh with my mouth open,
and feel with my whole body.

Blooming Heart

art by **Nandana Shibu Elizabeth**



The thought process behind this piece was to paint the connection between humans and nature. When one receives flowers, our hearts are filled with joy. This painting is a visual representation of how our hearts bloom when we indulge in acts that make us happy.

Nandana Shibu Elizabeth is a junior in Barrett, The Honors College majoring in computer science with a minor in media arts and sciences. She developed a passion for art at a young age and continues to explore it as a creative outlet alongside her technical pursuits. In her free time, she enjoys experimenting with different styles and mediums.

SCARED

TO

Scared To Indulge in You Again

poem by **Sofie Wycklendy**

INDULGE

i.

I anticipate the arrival of a new lover, yet it is
my weakness
I coordinate my wardrobe to match his favorite
color
So I lay my clothes out on the bed, and I run a
warm bath full with lavender soap
I relax all the tension that he once gave me as I
sip on a glass of wine on the side of the tub
The sips of the delicate red mirror the fire
inside of me, as it relates to the power of my
sanity that I openly gave him
After thinking about the lost love for him, I real-
ize I must get out of the tub I eventually do
I step out of the tub, and my mind feels like a
blank canvas for everything a new guy could
plan with me
Tonight I will be waiting for him by candlelight
Leaving a bit of water and self reflection to rub
in with shea butter, as I think about the indul-
gence of the love I once spent

ii.

I realized I do not fully look at you in conver-
sations because I am scared to indulge in you
again I respond to your unkind words, shaking
them off like they mean nothing to me
I am scared if I indulge in you again, I will not be
able to climb back out of this trauma bond with
you
I am scared that if I look into your eyes, I will fall
back in love with the best parts of you
By giving you my attention it will not protect
my heart
It will only protect you from seeing right
through me and all the love I once had
If you saw right through me, you would see my
eyes longing for more than a short conversa-
tion
Unfortunately a small glance is all I can give
now
If I did not look into your eyes for more than
one take, I would love more of myself and my
life without you

AGAIN

Forsaking Indulgence: **A Path To Priesthood**

Nonfiction by **George Headley and Reilly Marty**

God called for him to become a priest, but he wasn't sure.

24-year-old Bobby Balser knew the weight of navigating life in the priesthood, and he believed men who became priests were faithful from birth. However, Balser figured that priesthood was never compatible with his inconsistent relationship with God.

At a religious event he attended, a speaker asked if anyone felt called to the priesthood—he stood up.

Balser had a more casual appreciation of Catholicism through high school, and he didn't know if he was worthy of such a commitment. He started to attend mass every week, consuming content about his religion and faith. Over time, he was able to build up his involvement with the church at a steady pace.

After continuing to pray and evaluating his arguments against the calling of priesthood, he realized he could no longer object to the calling.

"While in prayer during adoration, the Lord just pointed out all the things He was doing as He was leading me to that moment," he said. "I suddenly realized that's what He was calling me to, and my immediate reaction was 'Oh no.'"

A promise of celibacy, as well as six other promises, are the constraints Roman Catholic priests make to deepen their journey with God. As students prepare to fill these promises, they face struggles, but are supported by their brothers, community, and hobbies.

He was previously concerned about speaking the commitment to priesthood into existence.

"It [committing to a life of priesthood] could all be up here in prayer, but as soon as I tell someone, then it's actually gonna happen," he said.

He talked to Father Kurt Perrera of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix the night before he stood up, and realized that being a priest wasn't just for those with beliefs set in stone.

"I was wrong," Balser said. "That's not how it is. There's a decent amount of guys that had a similar story to me."

The diocese of Phoenix ends mass on Sunday at 12:30 a.m. in a warmly lit basilica decorated with colorful window panes and idols of religious figures. The seminary students assist Father Kurt Pererra with the ceremony.

After mass, the students attend Mary College at Arizona State University. Two seminarians, Balser and 22-year-old Ben Sanford, are juniors double majoring in philosophy and Catholic studies.

They are five years away from being ordained as priests, taking on their own challenges with celibacy and a steadfast faith in God.

Diocesan priests promise to assist the bishop's mission, preach the truth of the catholic faith, celebrate the liturgy, remain celibate, pray, emulate Jesus Christ, and obey his Bishop, according to Aleteia.

The Seminarians

Sanford said he strayed far from his faith in high school and reverted back to his involvement with Catholicism his junior year. He said that before he returned to the church, he engaged in what he described as "party culture."

When he returned to the church, he was in a year-long relationship with its own difficulties. As he strengthened his connection with God, he became a new person.

"You're dating one guy," Sanford said. "You know who that is, but then all of a sudden he's doing a completely different thing, living in a different way, thinking differently, acting differently... for any relationship, that would be really tough."

He decided to split with his girlfriend his junior year of high school and start taking his seminary studies seriously, straying away from his past lifestyle.

"I wasn't being faithful to my God or to myself," Sanford said. "I started realizing that I need to start pursuing the deeper things of life, the things I knew would bring me happiness in the long run, even though it might be painful in the short term."

He said he understands the decision to pursue a relationship, and he's seen good friends of his announce their marriages — yet, it's an aspect of life not meant for him.

"Oftentimes, people have a desire for marriage, and the Lord works with that and deepens that and makes that very beautiful," Sanford said. "He puts this desire for the priesthood on many hearts or religious life. And so with me, and throughout my senior year, this desire was slowly being cultivated."

"I feel the Lord calling me to a life of celibacy, and I know that the Lord will provide deep happiness and the strengths necessary to pursue that," Sanford said. "I feel content pursuing this life."

According to Andrew Barnes, a professor of African, European, and world history at Arizona State University, the promise of celibacy is often misunderstood.

The vow of celibacy does not only have to do with the abstinence from sex, according to Barnes. It is the abstinence from things that are "polluting", according to Barnes. It serves to aid priests in the focus of their faith in God.

Sanford said he was taught that the promise of celibacy is a gift, not a deprivation.

"In reality, it's something that's being given to the priest," Sanford said. "You have certain responsibilities as a husband and as a father that you would need to attend to and the priest, his life is opened up to totally serve the Lord."

Balser said he notices similarities between his past relationships and the brothers with whom he navigates his spiritual orientation. Sanford and Balser share a model home with ten other seminarians, in which they spend most of their time together. They've

George Headley and Reilly Marty are students studying journalism and mass communication at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication. Headley is the politics editor at The State Press, ASU's student newsroom. Marty is the news director at Blaze Radio Online, ASU's student radio station.

previously played volleyball and traveled to other churches in pairs to serve several locations, such as the Saint Benedict Catholic Church in Ahwatukee.

Balser said they also prayed together throughout the day and listened to the 2023 World Series when the Arizona Diamondbacks played against the Texas Rangers.

"The biggest help . . . is working with my fellow seminarians," Balser said. "Working with our spiritual directors, which priests that we meet, we'll talk about our spiritual life."

Balser started his path to becoming a priest a year into his education at Scottsdale Community College. He participated more in his church, coincidentally when Father Perrera was in residency.

As he progressed in his studies, he said God eased his worries and fears, and his brotherhood supported him through his journey.

"We pray together, eat together, go to school together, and we just pursue life and pursue this vocation, all as a community, as a deeply united brotherhood."

Sanford also said that he appreciates his brotherhood. It's the opportunity for him to share moments of support and communion with like-minded peers.

"To cope with the fact that you don't have a family is realizing that you do have a family," Sanford said. "You join a brotherhood, a fraternity of priests."

The preconceived notion that priests are lonely because they are celibate and without a family is completely false, according to Father Perera. Father Perera encourages his students to see that there are numerous outlets for self-expression.

"True communion with people, good friendships, having great hobbies that you can invest yourself in, in ways that are life-giving, are so important," Perera said.

Balser plays rock on his guitar — something

he can enjoy as an individual. In finding support from God, he said prayer is the dominant factor in understanding his purpose.

"If you want to know what he wants you to do, you'll have to talk to Him," Balser said. "It's like any other relationship — so not engaging in prayer, that's going to be a devastating blow to trying to follow this life."

Social media is the primary form of connection to forming communities for those ages 19–29, according to Pew Research Center.

Balser recently got a smartphone after two years without social media. He said he found his time away from social media and the internet calming.

"You suddenly gain new hope for the world," Balser said. "I'm not learning about what's going on on the other side of the world. I'm only present in my own community."

Seminary students are restricted from internet usage, finding alternatives for communication through dummy phones. Sanford still uses his dummy phone, although he is allowed to purchase a smartphone after his time of abstinence from digital media.

Balser said the time away from social media made him realize that the connections he thought he had with people he knew online weren't really as strong as he previously thought.

"I followed them, but we never spoke to each other," Balser said. "I don't know what's going on in their life. They have no idea what's going on in mine."

However, he said he now has a stronger perspective on his impact in his community, which directs him away from the constant cycle of distractions.

Balser said that before his revision to faith, it might've been difficult to approach these challenges, but God gives him the grace and courage to follow his calling as a priest.

"It's always funny telling stories," Balser said. "Because you realize looking back, 'Oh, that was really obvious.'"

The Decadent Ruins

poem by **Nechama Bar-Chaim**

This might be the gentlest torture.
No force no bruise only madness slowly consuming
me. Lead in my stomach, drip drip dropping,
Clear down my esophagus into my intestines.
He left skin in my bed,
I can't get him out of my head.

So I break down,
Shave off pieces of myself every time I do.
Leave them in his unread messages,
Where he doesn't notice I've left anything at all.
More force more bruise only to the chest.
Pull my hair out, scrape my knees
Hold me to the ground.

I am the torturess,
Simply gorgeous in my reverie,
My absolute debauchery because I've learned
Boys hurt and I can cry.
Love is pain like the cliché and
I don't care why he did it anymore.

Look me in the eyes,
Dead on, don't you dare blink.
But I'll flinch anyway,
Your gaze pierces always and mine
Is restless.

I think if I look at you too long my vision might
go black with want, My knuckles flush crimson
because I've felt your kiss.

Nechama Bar-Chaim

is a senior majoring in civic and economic thought and leadership at Barrett, the Honors College. Nechama's poetry often focuses on the theme of grief in different forms. In her free time she enjoys baking, singing, and rewatching sitcoms.

Crawling from the Embers

Marcella Fuller Alexander is a stained glass artist and fourth-year honors student majoring in art (animation). She loves creative storytelling and all things art, and she has an innate curiosity in how interdisciplinary approaches to complex and important issues can help enact positive change. Studying the intersection between artmaking and other disciplines is her passion, and she is grateful for every opportunity to share that mission with others.



My fused glass piece represents an innate desire waiting to be discovered, understood, or humored. The embers of that desire are toasty and warm, but they achieve their full glow when our desires align with our reality.

Nothing, Everything

Vera Zuch

I want to hear the sound of nothing.
Nothing but the sway of eucalyptus as it
Follows the exasperated wind. Nothing but the
Unrequited songs of mourning doves that resonate like
Memories pressed up against our door as all the
Eavesdroppers fall out. I want to baptize myself in
Nothing, I want to draw silence from our mouths like
Spring fed water from the blinding torrents of liquid energy.
I want a black hole's monologue imprinted on my veins.

But I also want to hear the sound of people.
I want to hear everyone's names, the way vowels
Wander off their lips, how they laugh like poetry, how
One of their words creates a dictionary, how their
Voices untangle my neurons. I want to hear
Our heartbeats whispering exaltation into our palms.
I want to hear the incessant hum of engines when the city
Stares at us like lost secrets. I want to hear your pulse
Against mine like a sparrow's wings taking flight
As we soften into the Earth.

I hear us not in my ears, but in my soul. In our
Confessions, in the rhythm of eternity, in every fleeting
Glance and every passing moment.
I listen to nothing, but I feel it with everything.

Vera Zuch is a freshman at Barrett, the Honors College. She is majoring in neuroscience and minoring in fashion. She loves anything to do with fashion, music, and writing.

Hungry Eyes by Gwendolyn Selfridge



Gwendolyn Selfridge is a freshman majoring in media arts and sciences (graphic information technology). Gwen loves all things art including drawing, theatre, and music. She is currently in a duo band where she sings and plays the key-board.

Silent Prophecy

poetry by **Dakota Allred**

Oracle serpents emerge out of shrubs
on a moonless evening, revealing
what will
or won't
be

Approach a furnished porch
with a hanging light
squint
avoid the crows hugging evergreen needles
shout
demand an audience
stand in stained clothes

Ask the forked-tongue oracles
what will
or won't
be
but
they hiss
and that silent sound
is the answer

Fluffy sugar numbs their mouths
mixes with venom
injects the veins with prophecy

Sit on the bench
on that porch
hear it creak
while a ratty cat sits
and nuzzles those stained clothes
whiskers brush them there
and there and nowhere
with a rustle reminiscent
of
a
hiss

That silent sound
is the answer

Leave the porch for the river
lay in the water
feel the dirt leave the knees of the pants
but not the stains
or what world made them

Maybe the clothes
were never white
never clean

Water rushes around the ears
head deep enough the torrent is
far off
surface sound
running through the rocks
the hair
the polyester

That silent sound
is the answer

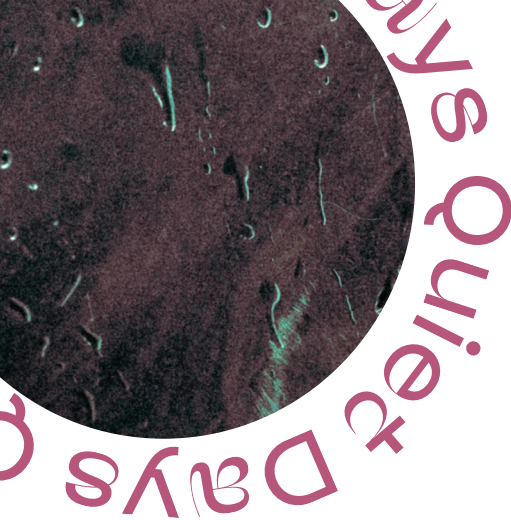
As an omen
the sun set
barely night
but in the darkness
the clothes are not stained
they do not exist

You do not exist
in the rushing of the river
mirroring
the river of air rushing
through the crow-laden trees
mirroring
the unkempt whiskers
mirroring
the shrubs against scales
mirroring
the oracles
the prophecy
easing a cacophony
into nothing

Shadowed
Sheltered
Shrouded
Shifting
Something

That silence is the answer.

Dakota Allred is a creative writing major specializing in fiction. Under the artist name "Seth Storm," he has produced two musical albums: "Prelude" and "Bardic Tales Vol. 1." Narratives in music have always fascinated him; now he works to create narratives outside of music through poems and larger written works.



Quiet Days

by **Ariana Rahman**

Amelia had a habit of collecting moments. Not the loud ones filled with laughter or music or clinking glasses, but the quiet ones. She would sit in the corner of the campus café, watching the rain slip down the window, tracing the streaks with her eyes as they raced to the bottom. It was silly, she knew, to take this time when she should be studying or working on her thesis. But the quiet felt like a luxury, and she craved it more than she cared to admit.

Her roommate, Talia, didn't understand. "How can you just sit there doing nothing?" she would ask, frowning as she tossed textbooks on her bed and filled the room with her endless monologues about group projects and deadlines. Talia was loud in a way Amelia admired but could never be. She filled every silence without noticing they needed filling.

Amelia would just shrug. "I'm thinking," she'd say, which was true. She was always thinking. About the way her grandmother's house smelled of lavender and dust. About the boy in her philosophy class who always seemed to be two steps ahead of every argument. About the days she used to spend on the roof of her childhood home, watching the sky change colors without worrying about time slipping by.

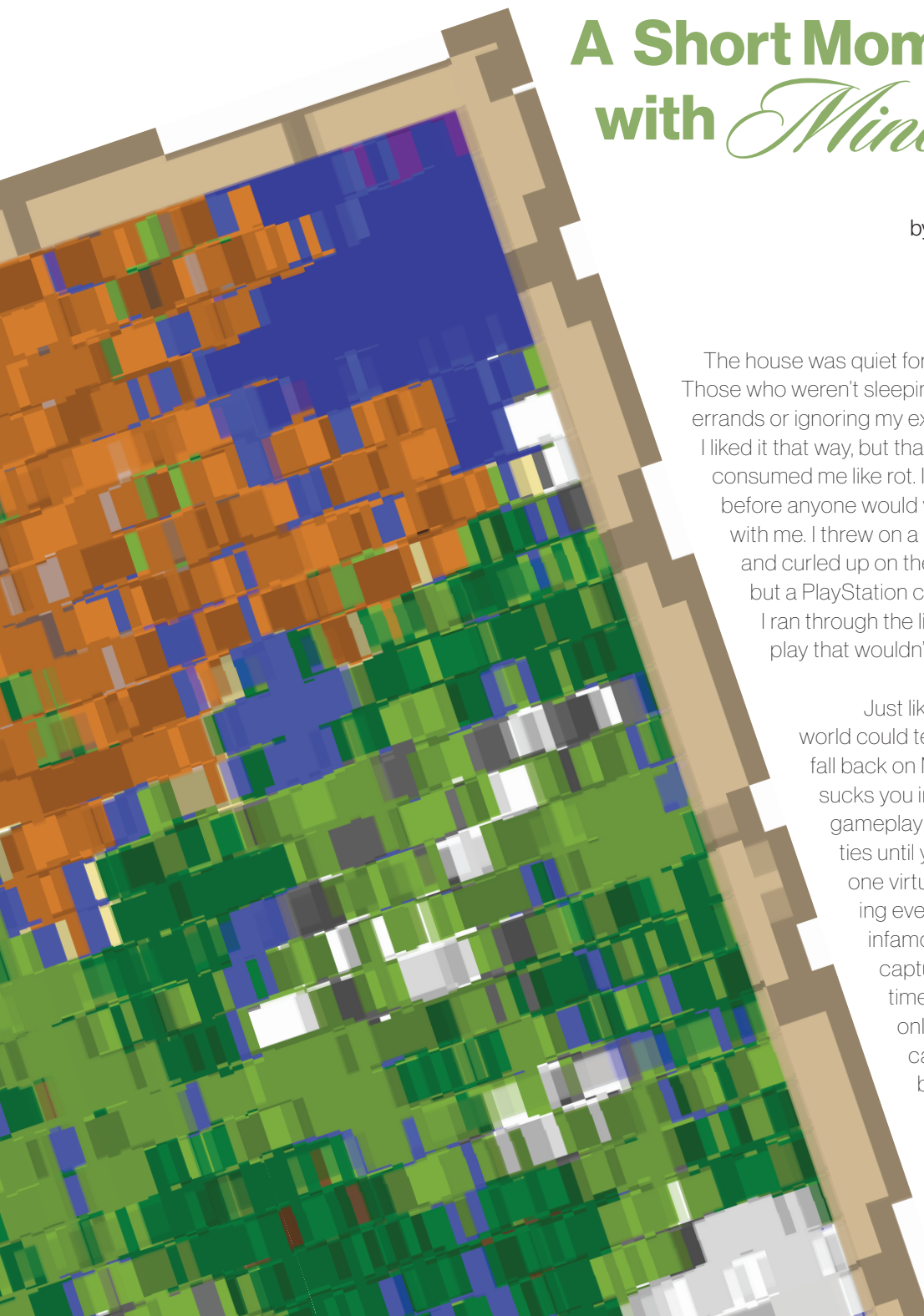
It was hard to explain to people that she needed the quiet. It wasn't just a preference; it was a hunger. When she was surrounded by noise, by chatter and notifications and the constant hum of expectation, she felt herself fading. In the quiet, she came back to herself. She could breathe. She could remember.

On Fridays, she would go to the old library on the edge of campus. It was mostly abandoned,

the kind of place only grad students and procrastinators found themselves in. The air was heavy with the smell of old paper, and dust motes danced in the afternoon sunlight. She would sit in the corner by the window, pull her knees up to her chest, and just exist. No obligations, no explanations. Sometimes she'd bring her notebook, the one where she wrote words that she liked the sound of or bits of poetry that came to her when she was walking between classes. But mostly, she just sat there, letting the world move around her without feeling the need to move with it. One day, she saw him. He was sitting across the room, hunched over a book that looked older than both of them combined. He was still, like her, immersed in something quiet and profound. She watched him for a moment, then looked away, embarrassed by the suddenness of her curiosity. But when she looked back, he was smiling; a small, knowing smile that made her cheeks flush. He didn't come over. He didn't say anything. He just smiled, then turned the page, his eyes moving back and forth in steady rhythm. Amelia felt herself relax. It was rare to find someone who understood the beauty of quiet. She didn't need to talk to him to know they were the same. They were the ones who found indulgence in silence, who could sit in stillness without feeling the weight of the world pressing down. She turned back to her notebook, feeling words stir inside her. For once, she didn't fight them. She let them flow, quietly, softly, like rain on the window.

Ariana Rahman is a freshman majoring in biomedical sciences and bioinformatics. She spends her days exploring the intersections of science and storytelling. In her free time, she enjoys capturing quiet moments through casual photography and reflecting on life through poetry.





A Short Moment with *Minecraft*

by **Ashley Cameron**

The house was quiet for a Saturday at noon. Those who weren't sleeping were running errands or ignoring my existence. Sometimes I liked it that way, but that day, boredom consumed me like rot. I likely had hours to kill before anyone would venture to socialize with me. I threw on a bunch of blankets and curled up on the couch with nothing but a PlayStation controller. In my head, I ran through the list of games I could play that wouldn't be so terrible solo.

Just like every gamer in the world could tell you, eventually you fall back on Minecraft. The game sucks you in with its simple gameplay and vast opportunities until you've spent days in one virtual universe extracting every possibility. The infamous "Minecraft Binge" captured me dozens of times, leaving me with only the thoughts of cave diving and house building for weeks at a time.

The PlayStation purred as it loaded up the game that I had not touched in months. I deliberated on what my goal should be. Would I start a new world and battle my way to The End? Would I build a legendary monument? Would I open an old world and explore my past creations? Pressing "Play" proved my predictions pitiful. What I did was stare at the screen, counting numbers and reading world names without ever opening one.

The most recent world, helpfully named "World New," could have been the start of a previous binge cut short. I imagined myself running around punching trees with no aim, and I found myself laughing. What kinds of masterpieces were I planning back then? I was unable to bring myself to delete it, even though it was costing 60.0 megabytes of storage.

The next world in the lineup was called "Lesbos," named for an inside joke I had with a friend. We spent ages in that world, and it totaled to an expensive 366.2 megabytes of storage. We built giant towers and bustling villages and picturesque log cabins and even a Grecian Parthenon. I chuckled as I remembered how long it took for us to agree on a place to build our base. What was once an empty universe became a collection of beauty that only the two of us understood fully. I didn't delete that world either.

One more world laid buried beneath all the others; lovely "Lesbos" paled beside the 953.1 megabyte world that I had kept like a secret. The title of the world was an amalgamation of the names of the three people who made their mark on its digital soil. The nostalgic smile left my face the instant I read the names.

The last day I logged in was 6/9/21. I did not dare enter the world now. I had to preserve the history of its death day, but I also did not have the strength to revisit the old home of my former best friends and I. The notes on sign posts left in my

house spoke beautiful words that were no longer true; the egotistical engravings of our names remained in the earth. Regardless, I could picture it all perfectly without clicking any button. A cottage with an archway of leaves was the elegant work of one artist. A simple wood and stone house that worked best for practicality was another's pride. A demonic temple of lava and brick was my signature. Each unique home marked a corner of our town, and they triangulated to one spot.

Using our favorite colors, I made the middle of our village look like a giant compass. I remember vibrating with excitement to show them upon its completion. We all carried handheld compasses that pointed to this centerpiece so that even in the deepest of caves, we would not lose each other.

We still lost each other.

The world was never just a place; it was a story. It was dumb teens imagining what it would be like to live on their own with the people of their choosing. It was fighting monsters to defend one another. It was sharing resources and learning to cooperate even when you could only hear their voices through laggy headphones, knowing they were miles away but still with you. It was never about the game. It was about the people.

I stared for a while. The memories filled me with warmth for only a moment before I remembered how dead that past was, and all I had left was a shiver. I didn't delete the world.

Maybe I should have.

Ashley Cameron is an English major in her fourth year. She loves writing short stories in fantasy, sci-fi, and horror with a touch of romance. She hopes to write for video games in the future.

How-to.

by **Joshua Tint**

Copy

This code poem turns a simple pathfinding algorithm into a meditation on indulgence. Instead of executing a simple breadth-first search, the function spirals into infinite recursion—hoarding computational resources like an anxious and overthinking mind. Even vulnerable and diffident moments like anxiety can paradoxically be a form of indulgence, consuming time and energy without resolution.


```

# How to Find a Way

def find_a_path(our_start, our_destination):

    # Step 1: Know where to start:

    streets_to_search = [our_start]

    # Step 2: We Search!

    while True:
        we_find_ourselves_at = streets_to_search.pop(0)

        if we_find_ourselves_at == our_destination:
            # Step 3a: We've found our destination!
            return our_destination

        # Step 3b: But that wasn't our destination.

        # Step 4: Now what we do next is simple!
        pass

        # Step 4 (cont'd): Actually, hold on for just a moment while I decide how to proceed

        pass

        pass; pass; pass

        # Step 4 (cont'd): So we just need to find a path from the start to the destination

        pass; pass; \
            pass; pass; pass; pass; pass
        pass; pass;

        # Step 5: Simply check where we can go next from here:

        streets_to_search.append(streets_next_to_where(we_find_ourselves_at))

        # Step 6: Our destination is sure to be close by

        if we_find_ourselves_at == our_destination: # Then now we're at our destination!
            return our_destination

        # Step 4 (cont'd): Except that didn't work.

        pass; pass; pass; pass
        try: pass
        except: pass
        pass; \
        pass; pass; pass; pass; pass
        pass;
        pass; pass; pass

        # Step 4 (cont'd): Something's bound to work.
        pass; pass; try: pass;
        except: pass; pass; pass; pass; \
            pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; pass
        pass; pass
        pass; pass; pass; pass; pass
        pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; pass
        pass; \
            pass; pass; pass; \
            pass; pass; pass
        pass; pass; pass
        pass; pass;
        pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; pass; \
            pass; pass; pass;

        pass

    # Step 5: quit
    break

return find_a_path(our_start, our_destination)
return None

```

Joshua Tint is in his fourth year studying computer science at ASU. He holds the second-highest recorded score in Animal Crossing Puzzle League (Time Attack, Hard Mode). He has since gotten a higher score, but the leaderboard website has been down for weeks.

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