F Period's

Creative Nonfiction Anthology

A Class Collection



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Hi there!

EDITOR'S NOTE

Welcome to the Asheville School 2026-27 First Trimester anthology from our F Period Creative Nonfiction class! Each entry offers a little piece of who we are; together, they make a portrait of our class. Come on in, make yourself at home, and see if you find a little of yourself here, too.

This anthology is dedicated to the confused, those who are funnier than they get credit for, those who can't quite say goodbye to childhood, and those who are a little afraid to love.

So, really, this one's for all of us.



Jerry Jiao '27, Shiloh Mukendi '27, Rocket Pan '27,
Sara Wan '27, Ky Foalima-Squirrell '28, JR Riddell '28,
Olivia Wong '28, Miranda Zhang '28,
& Mr. John Gregory
(Let's say circa '87… Why? Read on!)



COME ON IN. MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME.

MEET THE WRITER

Olivia Wong

'28 / A PLACE AT THE TABLE



ON THESE PAGES

Olivia writes about the distance between belonging somewhere and feeling that you belong. In "The Round Table," a family dinner becomes a test of identity. "Who Are You?" turns toward the stubborn necessity of writing itself.

IN THIS ISSUE

The Round Table
Who Are You?

"These are the moments where you stand out like the two round tables."

01 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

The Round Table



Olivia Wong

You enter a private dining room in the back of a Chinese restaurant with your parents in the heart of London. You've been to countless Chinese restaurants that look exactly the same throughout your life, yet this is the first time you've been here. The warmly lit room is already filled by your grandparents that you're staying with, your favorite older cousins, nine old unfamiliar faces, and two big round tables that are pressed against each other creating a figure eight. The table is draped in a bright red cloth with mahogany detailing and unfamiliar dialect. It stands out from the plain white walls, used carpet, and peeling cushioned seats.

Your family members greet the waiters with big hugs and jokes as you stand around with an awkward smile behind your father, who later explains that this restaurant is owned by a guy called your Uncle Ming. This isn't the first time you hear of Ming; he is a frequent visitor at your grandparents' house while he drops off plastic containers filled with leftover noodles or ribs. Ming's hair is black, spiked up with splotches of grey. He's an energetic soul with a strange accent that's in between being British and Chinese.

As you join the two round tables, your nose is flooded by the smell of soy sauce and duck pancakes. You notice that laughter breaks out after a comment was made by somebody looking at you. Your older cousin Kira laughs and turns to you:

"Don't worry, they are just talking about how big your eyes are. That's the American in you." You smile and nod.

Looking around the table, you notice each person. Full heads of hair and perfect skin, even at 70 years old. Impressive. You think about the comment made. In their defense, their eyes are pretty small compared to yours.

Conversation keeps flowing in different languages (none of which you understand), simultaneously moving from Mandarin to Cantonese, to a smaller Chinese dialect from the village that your grandparents grew up in. These are the moments where you resent your father for not teaching you Chinese.

These are the moments where you stand out like the two round tables.

Eventually, the conversation turns to you.

"So, how did your school celebrate Chinese New Year?" says an older face with poor English skills.

You reply, "Well, most of the Chinese students got together and celebrated in the library. It was lots of fun. Thanks for asking."

Deep down, you know you did not actually attend this celebration.

Little do they know, the Chinese students don't even consider you as one of them.

Your dad breaks into the conversation; he notices your shaky voice and nail picking and decides to divert the topic into something you find interesting. You've spoken to him about how the dinners have made you feel over your lifetime and how you wish for change.

"Olivia's been working really hard in school this year. You'd be happy to hear that she's found a love of poetry."

Nobody even hears his attempt at involving you in the conversation. You sit back in your chair feeling pounds of anxiety. You're not sure where exactly it's from, but you know it's there.

You're grateful that your dad decided to choose sympathy instead of the usual,

"You'll get used to it. This is what I had to deal with growing up too."

As conversation flies around the table, you try to eat your food, which you do, just to be offered more.

And more.

And more.

Don't get it twisted. You love food; they just don't eat this many courses in America. You secretly were full after the first.

You politely decline and share that you aren't hungry only to be shamed by your grandmom who you notice is wearing a tacky YSL bag that clashes with her animal-print shirt:

"You barely ate anything! Ah, should've known. Don't worry, this is how she's always been. As skinny as a twig and always wasting food!"

Suddenly, the whole table of unknown faces joins in telling you to just try a bite. People never realize that there is nowhere to hide at a circular table until a moment like this.

You feel your face grow red and your eyes start to tear. Why are you about to cry over food? You're 16 years old. This is embarrassing. And why was rejecting food suddenly such an inconvenience to everyone else sitting?

She speaks again in a passive-aggressive tone. "Don't worry, we won't pressure you to eat. Sorry. I just don't get it. I guess I never will."

You don't understand why she is apologizing or why this is a bigger deal than it needs to be. You're just not hungry.

In your head, you repeat what your dad tells you after every annual family dinner:

This is their culture.

They are just looking out for you.

Nothing that's been said is mean, but purely out of love.

If this is their culture, shouldn't it be yours too? Aren't you one of them?

You don't know.

You sit at the table listening to people who are meant to be your family, yet they don't sound or look anything like you. What's supposed to be closest to you feels the most foreign.

You don't speak Mandarin and you can't tell when the conversation switches to Cantonese. You don't catch the jokes they make, understand the stories they share, nor is your skin even close to being thick enough to have another one of these dinners. You are Asian American.

So, you sit and wait for the next course, wondering if you're sitting at the round table because you belong there, or only because there is nowhere else for you to sit.

Who Are You?

Olivia Wong

I am a writer,
though I dislike writing.

Some may say I choose to sit down at my desk,
dim lights surrounding me with a flickering candle suffocating my lungs
willingly taking painful blisters on my delicate fingers.
If I could choose, I'd stay away from the hungry unfilled pages for the rest of my life.
It is not a choice to be a writer, but a punishment.

If I didn't claim the title, I would disgrace my functioning life.
I would offend the factory lines of thoughts that are so strictly wound up,
I would be dishonoring the countless amount of snapped pencil lead due to the pressure.
If I didn't claim the title of a writer, I would put shame to the sleepless nights
where the empty pages were the only thing reaching to save me.

I've never written for comfort, or leisure,
I find myself writing when I'm ready to let go.
Never have I picked up a filled journal.
Never would I try to relive the impossible moments of my life.
As soon as my words hit the thirsty pages
they are lost in the flood of white and black lines.

The significance of turning the page in my book is how it offers me a clean slate.
It offers the physical ability to push my troubles against each other
in the tight space of a closed book,
Never to escape.



So technically, yes.
I am a writer,
though I dislike writing.

MEET THE WRITER

Sara Wan

'27 / REMEMBERING FOR TWO



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sara Wan is a senior at Asheville School who spends a little too much time in her head, often thinking of ducks, Pluto, and a lady she met at church three years ago. One of her favorite writers is Rumi, but she would rather grow up to be J. D. Salinger.

Written by Sara Wan

ON THESE PAGES

Sara brings irreverence and tenderness to a portrait of a family friend whose memory is changing. "Please Don't Say It, Fred" lets an awkward Thanksgiving joke open into questions of patience and what it means to remember someone who can no longer remember you.

IN THIS ISSUE

Please Don't Say It, Fred

"I remember enough for both of us now."

03 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Please Don't Say It, Fred



Sara Wan

"*I wonder when the last time I got laid*" was the one sentence I carried home from Thanksgiving.

My Gruncle Fred said it somewhere between the stuffing and the sweet potatoes, in front of the pre-K twins and most of my dad's side of the family. For a second, everyone stared at him, but soon half the table covered their mouths and started laughing. Nobody wanted to picture old Fred—beer stomach and the Velcro sneakers—in the same sentence as the word sex.

"Why's everyone so antiquated?" he asked.

I laughed into my napkin. *Fred, not now. Fred, my baby brother is here. Fred, save it for your therapist.* Instead, the question stayed there between the cranberry sauce and my grandmother's china.

We call him Gruncle Fred, although he isn't actually my great-uncle. He isn't related to us at all, nor is he of Chinese heritage. He is an old friend of my dad's who's been around long enough that "family friend" stopped sounding right. Somehow, he became Gruncle; I don't remember exactly when.

Fred remembers Yale very well, almost as if everything was back to normal again. When he thinks of Yale, he can remember everything. He remembers his fraternity brothers. He remembers being, as he likes to remind us, a Yale man. Most importantly, he remembers the Vassar girls. There are apparently a lot of them.

"Don't say it, Fred," I tell him whenever I can see another story coming.

He says it anyway.

I have heard some of them enough times that I know where he will pause and where my dad will roll his eyes. I'd do that thing on TV where a character, obviously frustrated, mouths the story while the other is oblivious to the repetition and says it again and again. Sometimes the details of his story change. Sometimes a girl gets prettier. Sometimes there are two girls where I could have sworn there used to be one.

My cousin laughed at Thanksgiving and said Fred probably couldn't remember the last time he got laid anyway.

"No kids of his own," she added.

I gave her a look.

"What?" she said. "It's not like he's going to remember I said that."

Lately, the old stories have become strangely reliable. Yesterday disappears, but Yale rarely does. Ask him what he had for breakfast and you might

get a shrug, but mention Vassar, I tell you—the room will fill up with beautiful women.

For a while, I found this funny, but it soon became too repetitive. He repeats himself. In his head, he thinks he is telling the story for the first time because that's how Alzheimer's wants to remember it. There are afternoons when patience feels less noble than people make it sound, and I catch irritation rising before I have time to stop it. Then I feel guilty for the rest of the day.

Fred is the ultimate uncle someone will have. Even with the crutches now, he still seems unmistakably Fred. Just that sometimes he doesn't see me as unmistakably Sara. He doesn't remember me anymore.

See, Fred isn't this uncanny guy who says inappropriate jokes whenever he wants to. I think it's mostly because he doesn't remember any other time in his life that he can share, nor does he realize it has been more than thirty years.

I smile back.

"Who are you?" he asks, blankly. I don't see anything in his eyes. It's scary sometimes.

I remind him again and again. Sometimes, a few minutes later, we talk normally again. Maybe Yale will come up.

I used to think remembering somebody was very mutual. I know you; you know me. One of the fundamental rules of human interaction. But no, that's not the truth. And no, I don't feel the connection anymore. I remember enough for both of us now.

A LINE TO KEEP

"I remember enough for both of us now."



SARA WAN

MEET THE WRITER

Miranda Zhang

'28 / THE THINGS HANDED DOWN



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Miranda Zhang is a junior at Asheville School who finds comfort in classical music, the stories of her family, and immersing herself in the white sea and black lines of a page. She reads and writes to conduct an ongoing investigation into her own mood swings, with inconclusive results so far.

Written by Miranda Zhang

ON THESE PAGES

Miranda gathers family stories and a faded toy into a portrait of a memory that reaches beyond a single lifetime. "I Will Tell Them" asks what we carry from the people before us, and what we might one day pass on.

IN THIS ISSUE

I Will Tell Them

"I am memories I don't remember."

04 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

I Will Tell Them



Miranda Zhang

I am memories I don't remember.

In my grandparents' house sits a toy tiger whose stripes have softened and faded with each summer and winter. I was told that I played with this toy tiger when I stayed here for a month at one year old, and that thirty years ago, my dad played with it too.

I am memories I don't remember.

I roamed along the sidewalk of this street. I see houses on the sides of the road, barbershops with neon signs and the smoky scent of barbecue from bustling food stalls. I see young couples embracing each other, and none of these scenes feel remarkable to my eyes. But I was told that Grandpa used to take me here every weekend.

I am memories I don't remember.

People say I am very much like my dad. My height, my nose, and my personality. I have other traits as well, and they live inside my body: the brown birthmark at my right underarm, the shape of my nose that I inherited from my dad, the black line on my index finger, the uneven round scar of a childhood vaccine shot, and the slight northern accent I have when speaking my native language.

I cannot remember the look of my dad when he was in middle school. Dad sometimes tells me stories of how he used to only eat meat or eggs once a week, and how he would pretend to finish his food quickly, letting his sister eat her portion first. Then, he would reveal the hidden piece of meat tucked beneath his rice, eating it slowly and deliberately to show off while she watched. I cannot remember the static crackling sound of those old black-and-white TVs. I cannot remember the extreme coldness of the winter of 1977 in Shanxi.

I am memories I don't remember.

I was told that, at one year old, I drank five hundred milliliters of formula each day and would bang on the table afterwards, demanding water to rinse out my mouth. I was told that, at four years old, I used to be the most outgoing little figure in the playground. I assembled all the strangers to start playing hide-and-seek. I was told that I fought with a boy who lived next door over a stack of cards. The fight ended with him scratching my face with his nails, and the scar lasted for two years.

I am memories I don't remember.

But I am also the person who has been told these stories, has walked these streets, has inherited these features, and has begun to ask what will happen to these fragments when the people who remember them are gone.

One day, I will tell my children about the boy who hid meat beneath his rice. I will tell them about a

home filled with cardboard boxes and the people whose sacrifices built the bridge I walked across. I will tell them about a faded toy tiger that belonged to their grandfather before it belonged to me. I will explain that I cannot remember playing with it, but that I remember the story of the hands that held it before mine.

And perhaps one day, when the stripes have faded a little more, I will place the tiger in my child's hands.

They may not remember where it came from, either. But I will tell them.

A LINE TO KEEP

"I am memories I don't remember."



MIRANDA ZHANG

MEET THE WRITER

Jerry Jiao

'27 / FINDING A ROAD OF HIS OWN



ON THE PAGES

He says, and one quotes: "climbing, a sport that resonates with my soul." Jerry follows the routes that shape a life: a brother's familiar path and a friendship that changes direction. "Find X" traces the difficult, sometimes accidental work of finding a way forward.

IN THIS ISSUE

Find X

"For the first time, I felt like I had found a road of my own."

05 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Find X



Jerry Jiao

I used to think that roads were supposed to lead somewhere.

For most of my childhood, I simply followed my brother's road. We went to the same kindergarten and the same elementary school. He played badminton, so I played badminton. He swam, so I swam. He played tennis, so I played tennis. I never hated any of those sports. I just never felt that any of them truly belonged to me.

At the end of eighth grade, my mother asked me whether I wanted to study in China or America. I chose America partly because my brother was already there. I also wanted to prove that I could succeed in a foreign school without being the weaker brother following behind him. I got what I wanted, but not exactly in the way I imagined. The high school I entered was the same school he had graduated from.

I had crossed an ocean and somehow ended up on the same road.

When I arrived at Asheville School, I found myself at the beginning of a road I did not recognize. My English was poor, my vocabulary was small, and I was afraid that every sentence I spoke would expose how much I could not express. I ate almost every meal with the same small group of Chinese students and rarely talked to anyone else. Even when I wanted to say something, I often kept it inside because I was afraid of saying it wrong. So, when the afternoon activity selection came, I had no idea what I wanted to choose.

I stared at the list, my mind almost blank. One word stood out because I did not even know what it meant: mountaineering.

I chose it.

It was probably the most accidental decision I had ever made.

At my first practice, I was surrounded by unfamiliar faces and unfamiliar equipment. We stood in a circle while the team talked about goals, community, and what we wanted from the season. I barely listened. I only wanted to know what it felt like to climb the wall.

Then I tried a V2 (the climbing difficulty ranges from V0 to V17, from easier to harder). I failed easily.

Our captain, Sam, climbed a V3 as if the holds had been placed there for her. I watched her, then looked back at the wall. Somehow, failing did not make me want to leave. It made me want to try again.

When I finally pulled myself off the ground, my feet left the floor without knowing where they would land next. They searched for something solid,

pressing against small holds and moving from one to another as I climbed higher. Every few seconds, I had to decide where to put my foot, where to reach next, and how to move my body without knowing whether the next hold would actually work.

It was difficult. I was bad at it. But I loved it.

For those few feet above the ground, I was not thinking about my English, my brother, or whether I belonged at this school. I was simply trying to find the next stable place to stand. There was no path painted on the wall telling me where to go. I had to find one myself.

For the first time, I felt like I had found a road of my own.

Also, on that road, I finally met her.

I had walked into the dining hall alone for dinner. The afternoon sunlight came through the blinds and caught her hair, turning it gold. I stopped walking. For a second, I forgot why I had come there. My attention narrowed until there was almost nothing else in front of me. I held my breath without realizing it.

I wanted to ask her name.

I didn't.

She was talking to a teacher, and I was already nervous enough around teachers. More importantly, she was a stranger. What if I talked to her and she laughed at my English? What if I knew exactly what I wanted to say but could not get the words out? At that time, that possibility was enough to make me walk away.

Then, months later, I joined the climbing team.

She was there.

She was the captain, and I was her teammate. We talked about climbing, traded ideas about routes, worked out together, and sat beside each other at dinner for hours. Somewhere along the way, she became my best friend.

For two years, Asheville felt completely different.

The dining hall was no longer a place where I sat quietly because I had nowhere else to go. Climbing was no longer just a sport. There was someone beside me, someone who made the school feel smaller and the world feel less lonely.

* * *

Then she told me she had a boyfriend at another school.

I congratulated her because that was what a friend was supposed to do.

But that night, I could not stop thinking about it, about the chances I gave up myself, about some imagined futures.

What if I had talked to her the first time I saw her? What if I had climbed better? What if I had entered the school in the same year as her? What if… I had expressed my love during those two years?

I had wanted our roads to become one road. I had assumed that because we had found each other, we would keep moving in the same direction.

But things never happen that way.

There was no contradiction between caring about her and accepting that she did not feel the same way. The harder lesson was accepting that something could be important without lasting forever.

Then came my junior year, her final year.

At first, I did not understand why things suddenly felt so different. She joined cross country and made new friends. The dinner table that had once been filled with our conversations became quieter. She sat with other people. I sat with mine.

Nothing dramatic happened.

We simply began walking on different parts of the same road.

I had once imagined three years as an enormous amount of time. Standing near the end of them, I

realized how little it actually was. The years I had thought would stretch endlessly had already passed. The person who had once sat beside me every day was slowly becoming a familiar stranger.

Maybe that is what roads are really like.

Two roads can begin in completely different places. They can travel for miles without ever touching. Then, somewhere you could never have predicted, they intersect. For a while, you walk beside someone, sharing the same turns, the same view, believing the road might continue like that forever.

Then, almost without noticing, the road bends again.

She went one way. I went another. My brother's road was still somewhere behind me, familiar enough that I could recognize its shape, but it no longer felt like the only road I knew.

I still think about that first day in the dining hall sometimes, when I stopped beneath the sunset and said nothing. I think about the wall too, about my feet searching for a hold before I even knew where the route was taking me. There was never a line telling me exactly where to place them. I just kept looking for somewhere solid enough to move forward.

I don't know what comes next.

I only know that I am still moving, and she is too. We move like two straight lines: we intersect and then fade away into an unknown future.

A LINE TO KEEP

"For the first time, I felt like I had found a road of my own."



JERRY JIAO

MEET THE WRITER

Rocket Pan

'27 / FROM THE SIDELINES



ON THESE PAGES

Rocket watches Jerry and Sam grow close through climbing and shared lunches, and especially the school dance. In "Where May I Find Her Again?" his gaming metaphors and dry humor gradually give way to tenderness. He follows a friend's search for someone who has left, while tracing his own place in their story.

IN THIS ISSUE

Where May I Find Her Again?

"I had simply been promoted from Jerry's companion to audience, and the show was good."

06 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Where May I Find Her Again?



Rocket Pan

"Where may I find her again, Rocket?"

Jerry asked me in our school's auditorium while the harsh southern winter brushed against the glass windows. Outside, snow was drifting like falling leaves from an autumn branch across our campus, covering our sidewalks and trees in white. In the auditorium the room was warm and cozy, with the orange stage light casting a shimmering glow over the rows of red seats below. Sitting beside me was Jerry, my longtime friend for three years who finally looked up from his journal to talk, and Gary, who chuckled with me after hearing the statement; Jerry glared back at us, enraged.

"Okay, okay, we're sorry." Sensing the emerging tension amidst my peers, I decided to back off, yet my wish to resolve this conflict was superseded by my immense curiosity toward what Jerry was doodling in his journal and a desperate attempt to escape the dread of Bluescore.

I set my eyes on Jerry's closely guarded journal. An egregious thought formed.

"Jerry, check out what's on stage," I said while eyeing Jerry's hand. The moment Jerry looked up, I leapt forward and snatched the journal out of his hands.

Ignoring the enraged Jerry, I moved two seats to the left and flipped the journal open. On the greasy paper were characters scribbled in Mandarin. I gazed attentively and I was able to recognize:

Where…May I…find…her… again.

Dude.

Life is too short.

This time, however, experiencing a similar crusade for love as Jerry myself, I did not turn to Gary or giggle. With a knowing sigh and a gentle pat on the shoulder, I returned the journal to Jerry. Jerry didn't even notice what I put in his lap, as he gazed upwards absentmindedly.

How the heck did we get here?

November 2023

Still recovering from the rigorous work we had done in theatre the previous trimester, Jerry and I had decided to sign up for something easier together. Swimming? We don't do any of that. Basketball? Of course not. If there had been a video gaming or DoorDashing activity, then I would have excelled at that.

"What about mountaineering, Rocket?"

"Sure, let's give it a go."

I immediately started regretting the decision after I got down to the lodge. The persistent insects,

half-broken benches, and the poison ivy did not help.

The lodge smelled of wet boots and bug spray. Ms. Manickam stood at the center of a circle we had formed and quietly took attendance while the rest of us arranged ourselves onto the benches. In the middle sat a pile of cookies. A pile: stacked like firewood from bottom to top.

Jerry's hand moved before his brain did. I watched it travel across the table in slow motion, like watching the replay of a dead NPC in my newly bought game.

"These are for Jim's birthday!" Ms. Manickam yelled.

Oh, so that's why they were stacked. It's supposed to be a birthday cake.

"Who?" Jerry asked with his hand still hovering above the cookies.

"Jim." Ms. Manickam pointed with her phone toward the corner of the lodge, where a kid in a grey hoodie stood with three other kids in hoodies, all of them studying the ground as if it owed them money.

Jerry's hand retreated. "Happy birthday, Jim."

Jim did not turn around. One of his clique members gave us a small wave on his behalf, like a press secretary.

Then somebody started singing. "Happy birthday to you." A second voice joined in the wrong key. Ms. Manickam conducted with her arms wide and eyes closed. Jerry and I looked at each other and mouthed the words without sound.

Through all of this, Jim hung by his clique in the corner, shoulders up near his ears, and acknowledged the celebration with a nod and some handshakes. The song ended. Ms. Manickam gestured for everybody to grab a cookie. The clique dissolved, and Jim took a cookie. Maybe.

"Who was that?" Jerry whispered.

"Jim," I said. "Obviously."

The rest of the meeting was Ms. Manickam reading out the groups. Varsity this, varsity that. The new kids had a choice, Ms. Manickam said: paddling, jogging, or climbing. Those were the ones still open.

Paddling meant going in a river in November. Jogging meant jogging. I looked at Jerry and Jerry looked at me, and we held the silent deliberation of two kids who wanted to do nothing.

"Climbing?" he said.

"So be it," I responded.

That was the moment we met her. Or rather, when Jerry met her, which would matter more.

Ms. Manickam pointed us toward a girl standing by the bouldering shed. "Sam. JV captain. She'll take the new climbers."

Sam had slick blond hair that went down to her neck. She wasn't tall, but her posture was firm, and she wore a stern yet slightly amused look, like she had already judged us and decided to keep us anyway. She looked me up and down, then Jerry up and down.

"Ever climbed before?" she asked.

"No," Jerry and I said at the same time.

"Well, you guys can give that V0 a shot."

Jerry took matters into his own hands and began his ascent. I watched Jerry's confidence leave his body in real time, like a health bar draining. I decided to look away from the destined downfall of my friend and look around.

The bouldering shed was behind the lodge and down a path of frozen mud. It was colder on the inside than outside, somehow, and it smelled of chalk dust. Crash pads lay across the floor in uneven rows patched with duct tape.

ROCKET PAN

When is this disaster going to end…

February 2024

Over the last trimester, Jerry really bonded with Sam: they climbed together; they ate together afterwards at the lodge; they ate from the same bag of chips prior to practice. They chalked up side by side like two employees at the same company. I would get to the shed and they were already there, mid-conversation.

Was I hurt? No. I am a generous person. I had simply been promoted from Jerry's companion to audience, and the show was good. Meanwhile, I made my own friends. Deeya and Nina, a senior and a junior who were also on the team.

Then Gym Day came around, and we saw the Valentine's Day partner challenge on the climbing gym's wall. Dual climbing. Two people on the wall at once, tied to the same rope, and you only topped out if both of you did.

I did not sign up. I know my limits, which is still a gift. But Jerry's name was next to Sam's before we even took a glance at the challenge. I swear he was already standing by the wall when he saw "Valentine's" and "Dual Challenge."

Jerry and Sam went up together. And here is the thing I did not expect: they were good. Not Jerry-good. Actually good. They moved in sync. Sam would call "left foot, up," and Jerry's foot was already going there. Jerry would say "help" and she grabbed him before he fell. It was like watching two people play a co-op game on one controller. I didn't know climbing could look like that.

Halfway up, Jerry slipped. His foot popped off and he swung out, and everyone made the noise crowds make, but Sam had already braced against a ledge and pulled him back to the wall with one arm. Jerry grabbed a hold and looked at her in astonishment.

"That's devotion," Nina said.

"That's cardio," Deeya said.

"That's Jerry," I said, and we left it there.

Jerry, on the other hand, came down glowing.

November 2024

By November 2024, both Deeya and Nina had left. Thus, I switched from rock climbing to mountain biking. Since I left, Jerry became ever more attached to Sam. I watched them sit at the same table for over three weeks continuously. I thought, well, maybe they are just really good friends. Who knows?

Deeya's goodbye took eleven seconds. She untied her climbing shoes at the bench, announced she had gotten into college early and intended to never exert herself again, and shook my hand like we had just closed a deal. She hugged Nina for longer. She waved at the far wall, where Jerry and Sam were roped up and not watching.

Nina took the rest of the hour. She was off to cross-country season and had apologized for the betrayal twice. She cried once and blamed the chalk dust, which was fair; there was a lot of it. Then she made me promise to water Jerry twice a week. I told her Jerry was self-watering now. She threw her chalk bag at me. I kept it. It sat in my locker for months.

On their way out, the three of us stopped at the door because Sam had just caught Jerry's elbow off a bad foothold, one arm, casual, like catching a falling water bottle. Then they started up again.

Then my friends were gone, and it was me at a table with an empty chair on each side.

Climbing without Deeya and Nina felt off, especially with Jerry and Sam being incredibly tight. So, I did the reasonable thing and picked the activity farthest from the climbing wall: mountain biking that met behind the mountaineering lodge.

ROCKET PAN

December 2024

The watching started because their table was on my way to the lunch line.

Week one, Jerry saved her seat with his backpack and then moved it when she arrived, like the bag had made the decision on its own. He bought two bags of chips now. One he ate. One opened around the time Sam sat down. Friends share, I told myself. That must be why.

Eventually, I grew tired of observing Jerry and Sam's interactions as I watched them behave more and more intimately. After all, I have my own thing to do. Must be friends, I murmured to myself.

April 2025

By April, I had lost enough weight that my dress pants no longer trusted me. I tightened my belt before leaving for Jazz Night and checked myself in the mirror.

"Rocket, come on," Gary yelled from the hallway. Apparently, my transformation had not made me any more punctual.

The music was playing when we arrived by bus. Warm light spread across the floor, and a cluster of students stood near the band waiting for somebody else to embarrass themselves first. Teachers occupied the edges of the room to prevent anybody from escaping the ballroom.

Gary and I found our friends near the refreshments; Aiden was silently eating the chicken meal, and Frank was listening to music—not the music being played. He had headphones on. As we were complaining about BC Calculus, American literature, and so forth, Gary gestured toward the center of the room as if he had discovered some hidden treasure under the lagoon.

"Look."

Jerry stood on the dance floor with Sam.

He had dressed up. For the first time in centuries. His shirt was tucked in, and his hair looked deliberately arranged.

Sam said something. Jerry leaned closer to hear her, and she took his hand.

"Damn," Gary said. Frank looked up from his phone.

We watched Jerry follow her onto the floor.

I cannot tell you what kind of dance they were doing. I suspect neither could they. Jerry bounced on his heels while Sam pulled him around. Then, Jerry finally noticed us; I have never seen the man so happy in my three years of high school with him.

September 2026

"Are you all right, Jerry?"

It's been almost half a year since Sam graduated, and ever since, Jerry seemed like a different man. The usually vibrant, confident, and lively Jerry became quiet. He stopped going to mountaineering and avoided the program as if there were a ghost below the lodge.

"I'm fine, Rocket. Despite me being like this right now, I am actually feeling just fine."

"Well, if you need me at any time, just tell me, all right?"

Then this happened:

One afternoon, I walked into Jerry's room and saw him researching. Across the top of his screen, he had typed: *GPA needed to get into Stanford.*

"Stanford?" I asked.

He opened another tab.

Average SAT score of Stanford-admitted students.

Oh yeah, Sam is going to Stanford.

ROCKET PAN

Over the next few weeks, I caught him researching the place with a dedication I had never seen in him before. At lunch, he looked up admission requirements. During study hall, he read discussions about test scores. Once, when I leaned over to see what he was doing, he quickly switched to a blank Google Doc.

“What are you writing?”

“Nothing.”

He waited until I walked away before switching back.

“I can’t get in,” Jerry told me one evening.

Finally, I thought. You regained your sanity. You should think about other places, like CMU or UCLA. Then Jerry turned his laptop toward me.

“How far do you think this is from Stanford?”

“What is that?”

“A community college.”

I looked at him and said, “You are insane, Jerry.”

Soon, the Stanford admission tabs were replaced by community colleges near Stanford. Jerry compared their locations in neighborhoods none of us had ever heard of.

“Where may I find her again?” Jerry said after sighing again and again.

A LINE TO KEEP

“Where may I find her again?”



MEET THE WRITER

Abby Bakelaar

'28 / AN ISLAND, REMEMBERED



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abby Bakelaar is a junior from Memphis, Tennessee. She spends most of her time with her friends and laughing with them. Her idol is Katie Ledecky because she brings so much awareness to women in sports.

Written by Abby Bakelaar

ON THESE PAGES

Abby used to hate posing for family photos in Nantucket. Now she looks at them to remember what it was like when everyone was together. "More Than an Island" returns to those summers.

In "Even When the Rain Starts to Pour," she remembers staying quiet while a friend was being cruel and wishes she had spoken up.

IN THIS ISSUE

More Than an Island

Even When the Rain Starts to Pour

"Nantucket is tied to a version of my family that no longer exists."

07 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

More Than an Island



Abby Bakelaar

I long to return to the island of Nantucket. It seems like I have forgotten the island, but when I look at pictures, all the memories come flooding back in. I used to go to Nantucket every summer with my mom and dad. We would pack up our Volvo station wagon and pack a Thule on top with all the necessities for the long 22-hour car drive, followed by a ferry ride to the island of Nantucket, which was my favorite part of the trip. The ferry was my favorite because it was a transition I felt that was so surreal. As you would round the Brant Point Lighthouse, you would toss a penny overboard. This tradition was meant to guarantee your eventual return to Nantucket.

As soon as we got to our destination, we would go to the house we rented each year. I don't know if it was the same one, but it always had hydrangeas around it and the same vibe. After getting settled in, we would spend time at the beach where we would build a sandcastle. After building sandcastles, we would body surf or boogie board. I found my love for boogie boarding on the island. Something about catching the waves and picking up speed, feeling untouchable, was the best feeling. Mom always made us take family photos, which I hated. But looking back, the photos make me smile: all of us in our Patagonia fleeces, smiling, the whole family together.

I remember clearly one summer when it changed from Mom and Dad and me to just Mom and me. That was the year my parents got divorced. I didn't understand what that really meant at the time, but I didn't care; at least I still got to go to Nantucket. Being on the island distracted me from the life at home. I never had to think about arguing parents when I was there. I first remember this vividly when we would go to the beach. Side by side, not talking, just sitting and building sandcastles with a moat and seashells decorating the exterior. Laughing with Dad's absence quietly in the background.

Even though it was just Mom and me, I still got to do my favorite things, which included the touch tank at the aquarium and going to Millie's ice cream after a long beach day. My favorite event in Nantucket was the 4th of July. The island did 4th of July better than anyone. On Main Street, they would have a huge fire truck come and spray us all with water after the watermelon- and pie-eating contests, of course. Then a water gun fight between the local children would break out. I remember being soaking wet in my Fourth of July smock dress that my mom had picked out for me.

Although I used Nantucket as a dream escape, it was not all paradise; it had its hard times. I used to love oysters, specifically raw ones. I think I was the only 6-year-old you could find who would eat them.

However, one night I got a bad oyster, which isn't common, but of course I got one. I was so sick and couldn't stop throwing up. My mom almost had to take me to the hospital. She said that was one of the scariest nights of her life. Since then, I refuse to eat oysters because I fear what will happen. This sounds so snobby of me, that the worst part of the trip was that my nice fresh oysters were bad.

We would be up there for so long that my mom would end up sending me to a day camp with the local kids. The camp was fun because we got to do so much like swimming, capture the flag, ice skating, finding jellyfish, and seeing the infamous Nantucket Whaling Museum. This camp made me want to live there year-round. We even got to go to the Juice Bar where they make their iconic homemade waffle bowls. I would always get a scoop of grasshopper ice cream, which is mint chocolate chip and Oreos mixed in.

Nantucket is famous for its hydrangeas, which happen to be one of my favorite flowers to this day. When I was thinking about what to write, I kept looking back at old photos with hydrangeas in the background of them. This made me think of Nantucket and brought me back to that nostalgic smell of fresh flowers and salt air which I can never forget. It made me think about my mom and how it symbolized the colors of Nantucket. It brought me back to the time where the hardest decisions were what ice cream flavor to get. Before my parents were divorced. Everyone was happy in my eyes. I didn't have to think about graduating high school because that was light years away, whereas now it is only a year away.

Nantucket is more than an island in my eyes; it is a second home. Nantucket is tied to a version of my family that no longer exists. My mom is getting remarried; my dad has moved on. I don't go there every summer anymore; in fact, I haven't been there in a very long time mainly because time has become so busy. However, I still reminisce about those good days on the island of Nantucket with my family.

A LINE TO KEEP

"Nantucket is tied to a version of my family that no longer exists."



ABBY BAKELAAR

08 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Even When the Rain Starts to Pour



Abby Bakelaar

Drama is so annoying, especially teenage drama, because it's so complicated. In high school, we are dealing with so many changes: puberty, hormones, first loves, etc. When you mix people who are all going through the same issues together, it does not go well.

For starters, you have friends who talk shit about one another. Then they are best friends the next day. That doesn't make any sense. It's like some people are afraid to have a conversation with the person who makes them mad because they don't want to be "that person."

You get into fights about the most ridiculous things, which you don't even care about. This happens because you want to have a reason to be mad and start a fight. Usually, it's about boys or a grade you got on a test.

I always find myself in the middle of something that I don't want to be a part of. It's not like I try; my friends just bring me into it, trying to make me choose a side. Why should I have to choose a side? Both sides are my friends, and I do not want to say anyone is right or wrong.

For example, one day a group of us were sitting in the dining hall when a friend of mine, Grace, found out that Lacy, another friend of mine, had gotten with a guy that Grace had talked to at the beginning of this year. She started saying such hurtful things like, "She's just trying to be me" and "She's going for all our sloppy seconds." I knew she wanted us to take sides and back her up, but instead of saying anything, I went quiet. I was scared that if I said something, she would turn on me. I regretted not saying anything because all I wanted was for Grace to think about how she would feel if someone were saying those things about her.

Later that night, I texted Lacy privately and told her that I did not agree with anything that Grace had said. No one should have to feel that guilt. Even though I was quiet, I did not want her to think that was my way of taking a side.

The worst thing about drama is rumors. Everyone has probably had a rumor spread about them, or they have been the one spreading the rumor. Either way, it is not fun. It tears people down, and I don't want anything to do with that.

Whenever someone spreads a rumor about me, I just ignore it, because why is someone taking time out of their day to try to ruin mine? For the most part, the rumor is false. I just tell myself, "They must not have a life."

Sometimes I block out everything because I don't want to listen to the nonsense; I drown it out. That's my coping mechanism: just ignore it. One thing I do

ABBY BAKELAAR

is put on my favorite show, *Friends*. I love *Friends* because it shows slightly older friends going through life together. It shows the blueprint of how I hope my friends will act.

It shows that boys don't have to be complete jerks to girls. I think there is something in a guy's mind where they think they must be mean to be cool. Trust me, it is so much better if you are kind.

My friend group has a mix of girls and guys. We are all friends and are nice to each other for the most part. We spend so much time together that sometimes it can get a little heated. But we know each other well enough to know what is normal and what is not.

The show proves how friends support one another instead of bringing each other down.

It gives insight into how relationships with friends are what matter, and how you don't want to throw those bonds away over something silly.

In high school, it's hard to realize that some of these bonds will last a lifetime, like Rachel and Monica's. They didn't realize they would connect again, but they did, picking up friends along the way.

Also, it shows that people remember a lot of things you might not expect, just like in my high school life. I don't hold grudges against anyone because I am a believer in second chances. But I always remember whether you have been mean or not. Now, I am not saying that someone will always remember the one time you didn't include them, but sometimes it is the petty things that hurt the most.

Now school is an annoying part of life, but you just have to trust the process. It will always work out in the end because the people who are your devoted friends will always be there for you, even when the rain starts to pour.

A LINE TO KEEP

"Why should I have to choose a side?"

ON FRIENDSHIP & SECOND CHANCES



MEET THE WRITER

Kymani Foalima-Squirrell

'28 / STICKBALL & FIRST FIGHTS





ON THESE PAGES

In "Fight," Ky remembers the first time he fought someone during a stickball match. The kid he fought is now a friend he goes fishing with. For Ky, that makes perfect sense: once the game is over, you leave the fighting on the field.

IN THIS ISSUE

Fight

"I know that sounds bad, but it is what it is."

09 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Fight

Kymani Foalima-Squirrell ’28



Last year, I broke my hand during a stickball match. No, it was not because of a hit; I fell and tried to catch myself. I got into a fight.

The kid was already talking smack all game, first just talking to me, no one else. I don’t even know the kid; he was just being a jerk. So, I got tired of it. We fought like three times in this game. He hit me right in the back first, which in stickball is a big no.

For people who may not know stickball, it is like lacrosse but worse. You have two wooden sticks that are made from a hickory tree, one of the strongest trees, with, like, a net that you web on them so the ball doesn’t go out. And you have no pads, just shorts.

There is only one rule: you can’t grab the ball with your hand. The ball is a little smaller than a golf ball, and it is made of cotton or even fur. It just depends.

Stickball is a game from the Cherokee; the original name was “The Little Brother of War.” Back in the day, this game was played by the animals in our culture. You got the flying animals that went against the animals that could not fly; as time went on, they kept playing, and the natives used it to settle who got land or just settle beef that was going on in the tribe.

Now, it’s a full game during the first week of October, and it’s called fair week, where there are rides and games, and all the traditional foods come out: the good-smelling fried bread and burgers and fries.

Now, with stickball, there are teams. You have Wolftown, Bigcove, Hummingbirds, Birdtown, and Oklahoma. We all get together and play stickball. It’s a violent game, but I have been playing since I was six years old. Every year I have played, I have ended up with black eyes or broken bones, so when I say it’s intense, it’s INTENSE.

Like last year, in the fight I was talking about, I came off the field with a broken hand and a bloody nose, but you leave all the fighting and beef on the field. After that, it’s done.

What is funny is that the kid and I are good friends now. We hang out and fish, but it’s like what I said: what happens on the field stays. That was my first fight, and it was a good one, and the crowd was hyping me up.

Now, the hand that I broke gives me problems now, and it also left my hand looking fat, and the bone kind of pops out. You can see it, and when you touch my hand, it feels like a rock. That is how my first fight went, and since then, I have not gotten into a fight.

I enjoyed the fight when it happened, but it’s a part of the game. You can’t get into trouble for it, so I thought that was the best time to get into my first fight. I know that sounds bad, but it is what it is.

That’s why I love playing, because anything goes, but like I said, it is all left on the field, and afterward, you go back to being friends.

MEET THE WRITER

JR Riddell

'28 / A FATHER, IN FRAGMENTS



ON THESE PAGES

JR begins "Stories About My Father" by admitting how little he knows about his dad. Then he starts telling stories. Some he heard from his mother; others, like a camping trip that went badly wrong, he was there for. It turns out he knows more than he thought.

IN THIS ISSUE

Stories About My Father

"So I guess I do know my dad a little bit."

10 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

Stories About My Father



JR Riddell

I don't know my dad that well. I mean, I've only been around for a third of his life. Besides what I've seen myself, all I know are little stories I've heard from those close to him.

Like when he missed the birth of my sister. Not because he was busy or absent. He was in the hospital room and had been the whole night. He just couldn't manage to get his contacts in in time. I heard this story from my mom, and remembering the sight of the poor man fumbling around with his contacts always made her laugh. Imagine that. I think that's why my sister's the favorite. He must feel some sense of having to make up for missing the first moment of her existence.

Four years before, I was born in Virginia in a town called Norfolk. Those were the navy days; the only reason we lived there was because it was close to the base he deployed from. He was a nuclear engineer on a submarine. He spent months at a time thousands of feet below the surface of the Atlantic, to places like Turkey and Iran. One time he took a submarine through the Suez Canal.

After I grew up a bit, he settled down and became a lawyer. Usually when you hear about a boring job like that, you assume he was never around. Long hours in the office, leaving home early and coming home late. However, he managed to work from home a lot, which worked out for me. One time I tried playing Minecraft on his laptop and somehow locked out the whole computer.

He was never much of an outdoors kind of guy. To be fair, he didn't need much of that in Houston, where he grew up. Most of this kind of thing was left up to my mom. So, when he one day decided we were going on a camping trip just the two of us, I was nervous. Did he know how to put up a tent? Did we even have one? Was Mom coming?

We decided to drive to Shining Rock Wilderness, an area in Western North Carolina that, according to my dad, would have easy, short trails and campgrounds perfect for beginners. He handed me a bottle of water and a plastic baggie of trail mix, and we got going. Ten miles later, we were lost and out of food.

After a fitful night of sleep, I wasn't looking forward to another day of hiking and another night in a tent. Neither was my dad, but he didn't like quitting, so neither did I. But after camp was packed up, he turned to me and said he'd had enough. I'd never heard him give up on anything, ever. But I wasn't about to say anything against it. I was happy to leave too.

He was always trying something new, whether it was writing music or becoming a rock climber or learning how to fly planes. One time he even substituted for Ms. Grant for a month, with barely any

teaching experience. I never knew what would come next.

I remember when he went on *Wheel of Fortune*, the TV show your grandparents watch religiously but no one else really cares about. He flew out to LA to record, and even though he didn't make it to the bonus round, he ended up with a trip to Iceland and 15 thousand dollars.

He remembers the names of everyone he's ever met. He'll tell me long-winded stories about his high school, St. John's, and he'll say every classmate and teacher's name as if he still saw them every day.

One of these people was Elizabeth Holmes, who ten years ago became the youngest female self-made billionaire with her healthcare company Theranos, before getting thrown in federal prison for fraud. Wish he got to know her a little more.

So I guess I do know my dad a little bit.

A LINE TO KEEP

"So I guess I do know my dad a little bit."



JR RIDDELL

MEET THE WRITER

John Gregory

THE LONG WAY AROUND



Can you spot Mr. Gregory?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Gregory is a husband of 1, father of 4, grandfather of 2.5, and English teacher of hundreds over the past 26 years at Asheville School. He is a huge fan of Duke basketball, sushi, Dante, fall, Japanese ultra finepoint pens, red scarves, and Handel's *Messiah.*

Written by John Gregory

ON THESE PAGES

Mr. Gregory writes about the lives that unfold beyond our plans. "College Acceptance" questions the promise of an elite admission letter. "My Worst and Only Father-Son Camping Trip" follows the distance between a father and son, and the hope of doing things differently.

IN THIS ISSUE

College Acceptance
My Worst and Only Father-Son Camping Trip

"Whose job is it to keep these conversations going?"

11 / CREATIVE NONFICTION

College Acceptance



Mr. John Gregory

15 December 1987

Dear John,

Congratulations! We are pleased to let you know that you have been accepted into the college of your dreams. Actually, the college that is beyond your wildest dreams. Our college wasn't just a reach for you. It was so far beyond your grasp, your college counselor should be fired for even letting you apply. What was she thinking? And yet, here we are. Somehow, you got in. We can't really explain it ourselves, but it doesn't matter. Now that you're in, your life will instantly start being awesome all the time and forever. Can't you feel it? Hasn't it started happening already as you read these very words?

You are now accepted. You belong. To the most elite university in the universe. Not just the world, because if there were universities on Mars or any other planets, we would still be the most elite. Thus, we can assure you with great confidence that, as a result of this letter you are reading right now, all your dreams will come true. Because of this acceptance letter, you will now have proof to show anyone who asks that you belong. You matter. You are somebody.

But, just for fun, let's pretend you didn't get in. You totally did. Don't worry. This isn't a joke or a computer error or anything like that. A university this elite can't make mistakes. But let's just pretend for a moment that you didn't get in. And this was a rejection letter. Imagine it said something like this:

Dear John,

We regret to inform you that even though you are a really nice guy, thousands of other really nice girls with way better SAT scores applied, and we had to accept them instead of you. Because, frankly, they were just way smarter than you. And, as a result, sadly, the rest of your life is hopeless. You have zero chance of making all your dreams come true. We hope you believe in reincarnation, because then you could live out the rest of this meaningless life and then be reborn as someone with better SAT scores, at which point your next life might actually be awesome. Short of that, you're cooked.

There is, of course, one other option. Now, humor us by just one more thought experiment. Imagine this was your fourth college letter. That you got three rejection letters like the one above from your top three choices—all elite Ivy League schools. But you got into your fourth choice. A tier-two school. And imagine this was an acceptance letter into your fourth-choice school. One you barely even heard of and only applied to as a safety school because your college counselor made you. And imagine you met your wife there and had 4 kids and 2.5 grandkids and a job you loved and a family you adored. Imagine

you ate your first grits and pulled pork and sweet tea there. Imagine you lived the most meaningful life, and went to Italy, twice, on a free school trip and had the best mango gelato in the universe. Imagine your granddaughters called you “Doo-Dah,” and cracked you up every day on Zoom calls by trying to say words like blueberries and fire truck. Imagine your students wrote moving pieces about relationships and the meaning of life and you literally got paid to read and talk about books. Imagine you walked to work every day looking at the leaves changing across the Blue Ridge Mountains.

And then, imagine you are writing this very piece during the class you are teaching on creative non-fiction, and your granddaughters, Georgia and Genevieve, ages 1 and 2, call you on FaceTime, and you take the call on your IPAD. Genevieve is fully naked and sitting on her practice potty. Georgia grabs the screen and demands to speak to your wife, Mama G, because she wants to see the big hairy spider that lives on your side porch. She is not interested in talking to you today, which cracks your students up. “Doo-dah,” she says, “want to see hairy spider.” She keeps repeating this, even when you tell her you are not at home, but you can show her later. She hangs up on you, and you think, “Who has it better than me?”

A LINE TO KEEP

“You are now accepted. You belong.”



MR. JOHN GREGORY

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My Worst and Only Father-Son Camping Trip



Mr. John Gregory

When I was born, my dad wasn't present. Not sure how many hours or days it was till he saw me for the first time, but I know he wasn't there.

To be fair, that wasn't as much of a thing in 1969. Dads would show up with cigars after the fact. But my mom describes taking me home from the hospital by herself and carrying me up to their third-floor walk-up, crying because she had no idea what to do with me.

My dad, I assume, was on call at the hospital doing surgery.

When I was growing up, he would leave for work before we got up and come home after dinner. His absence is one of the main things I remember about him.

When my first son was born, my parents came to visit. Someone handed the baby to my dad. You never saw someone look so uncomfortable. He said to my sister and me, "I never did much of this with you kids." To which I thought, "Much of what? Holding us? You never held us during our entire childhood?" I knew we were never very close, but this might explain why.

What I mostly have are possibly apocryphal stories like the time (maybe the first and last time) my mom left me home alone with my dad. He fell asleep. I got into the ashes in the fireplace and tracked them all over the house.

Or the time he took me to see my first R-rated movie—*Alien*—at age 10. The scene where the guy starts grabbing his stomach, and his friends say, "The food wasn't that bad." And then an alien bursts out of his stomach. I loved it, I think, but I'm not sure it was appropriate for a 10-year-old. Then again, what I always liked about my dad was that he was always a little inappropriate. Always pushing the edges of propriety. Singing loudly and off-key. Nicknaming my sister Meredith "Merpopulitchofazzio," which he shortened to Merp, and which we all still call her today. He was a urologist and did sex changes for fun because no one else in the area would do them in the 1980s. He got boxes of Cuban cigars from mafia members he did surgery on.

Another story I remember him telling is how he narrowly avoided being expelled from St. Andrew's boarding school (where *Dead Poets Society* was filmed). He said a bunch of his friends got kicked out for drinking, but he had already been suspended for making a bomb in chemistry class the week before, so he wasn't with them at the time.

I never thought of this before, but I've worked at a boarding school for 25 years, a school very much like St. Andrew's, and I wonder how much he

influenced my path to teaching here (without either of us realizing it).

I was born in 1969, the year of Woodstock. But my parents missed the whole hippy, free love scene completely. Dad was in residency; Mom was a nurse. They loved Joan Baez, but when she brought the young Bob Dylan on stage, they lost interest.

They were at a party in Philly with Jim Croce once, but that's as close as they ever came to the sixties thing.

And then there was the camping trip. I don't even remember how old I was. I know it was before 4th grade. And I know there is a single picture of me standing in front of our house in U City with a frame backpack that looks way too big for me. And I look terrified. A lamb before the slaughter. No idea what I am getting into.

Sure enough, just a few minutes into our hike, I stepped on a rock, lost my balance, spun around, fell, and broke one of my front teeth in half.

Did we turn around and go home? No. We just carried on with our trip.

I don't remember anything else except hiking out at the end and stepping in a yellowjacket hive. My backpack fell off, and I was trapped standing right over the hive. I remember the bees flying inside my shirt and pants and me not being able to run away.

And then, when we finally got to the car, my dad's red Ford Pinto, the kind that exploded if you rear-ended it, the battery was dead. So we had to hitchhike to the nearest gas station. Somewhere along the way we found a turtle, which we kept, and it became my pet.

And then we never went on another father-son camping trip again.

I remember three other non-camping trips, though, with just me and my dad.

I suspect all of these were the result of my mom putting her foot down and saying she was not doing it. Dad would have to step up. Like my college trip.

All I remember is visiting the University of Pennsylvania by flashlight. Literally. I don't remember having any appointments or meeting with anyone. We slept in the back of our van together. Why? He was a surgeon who made good money. We had a huge house with a pool. Why were we sleeping in the back of our van?

I remember going on a ski trip, maybe to Vail, and we stayed in one of those condos where you could ski right from your room to the lift line. We stored our yogurt and OJ in the snow outside our room and carried gorp bars my mom had made for us to snack on all day. Dad blew out his knee in a race but didn't get surgery for 45 years.

Another time, don't know when, I hiked with him around Mt. Washington. I remember we were trying to hike along a ridge and summit multiple peaks in one day. It was a really long day, and my mom was upset that we hardly drank anything the whole time and were dehydrated. Dad was not a big planner for such things. Recently my sister said she and my mom took the train up to the top of Mount Washington and met us there. I need to find pictures to verify.

Fast forward to 2025. I just spent three weeks visiting my dad in Maine in the ICU and the step-down unit where he received IV antibiotics for an infection that almost killed him. In the hospital where he semi-retired and worked till he was 81 just a mile or two from his house in Belfast, Maine. Many of the nurses remember Dr. Gregory fondly. How he trained them when they were first starting out years ago.

I've never taken my own kids camping, and until this moment, I never thought about why. Well, that's not exactly true. My wife and I once tried to take our kids car camping, but it rained so hard, and when we tried to take one of our daughters into the tent, she

said, “I’m not going in there.” So we had to strap her into her car seat in the minivan, and I slept with her there all night. We never attempted camping again.

When I visited him each day, we didn’t have much to say. I hope my kids will have more to say to me when my time comes, or I will have more to say to them. Whose job is it to keep these conversations going? Whose fault is it that we don’t really know each other? When I called my dad from college, all he could say was, “How’s rugby?” And even after I graduated, he kept asking me that, because that was the last real connection we had. Even though I hadn’t played rugby in years.

What can I do to not end up like this? With nothing to say to my own kids. And them with nothing to say to me. He called it “hands-off parenting.” He and my mom were both smothered by intrusive parents, and they couldn’t wait to get away. But which is worse? Maybe they took the hands-off thing too far. I don’t know. I only hope I can do better, but I’m not sure I have.

A LINE TO KEEP

“Whose job is it to keep these conversations going?”



MR. JOHN GREGORY

Credits

FIRST TRIMESTER / 2026-27

EDITORS

Jerry Jiao ’27
Shiloh Mukendi ’27
Rocket Pan ’27
Sara Wan ’27
Ky Foalima-Squirrell ’28
JR Riddell ’28
Olivia Wong ’28
Miranda Zhang ’28
Mr. John Gregory

AUTHORS

Jerry Jiao ’27
Rocket Pan ’27
Sara Wan ’27
Abby Bakelaar ’28
Kymani Foalima-Squirrell ’28
JR Riddell ’28
Olivia Wong ’28
Miranda Zhang ’28
Mr. John Gregory

EDITORIAL CURATION & PIECE INTRODUCTIONS

Sara Wan ’27

SPECIAL THANKS

Mr. John Gregory

LAYOUT & VISUAL DESIGN

Sara Wan ’27

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Think of a moment you don’t want to forget. Begin there.

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