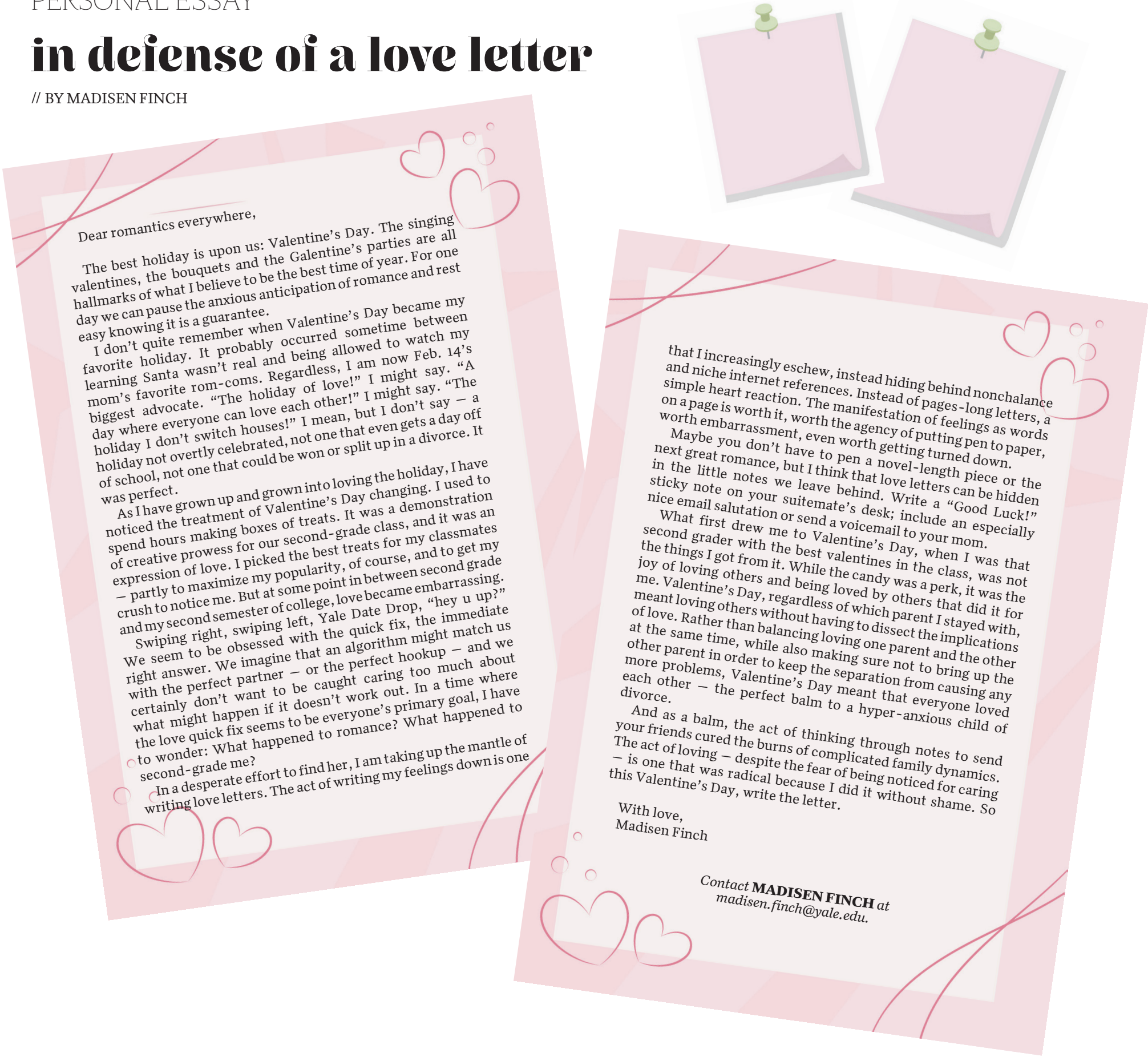


PERSONAL ESSAY

in defense of a love letter

// BY MADISEN FINCH



PERSONAL ESSAY

Love letter to Duck, NC

// BY LILY SCHECKNER

To Duck, North Carolina,		
Love stories rarely last for fifteen years. But against all odds, ours has. Fifteen years of sun-burned shoulders, cricket-filled nights and midday swims spent convincing my sister that mermaids are, in fact, real. Reminders of those fifteen years are written all over my body in freckles and healed-over shin scrapes. Even when walking the snowy streets of New Haven, I can taste salt water on my tongue.	the contrails of planes with banners streaming from their tails. We'd return to our house dehydrated and exhilarated, and my parents would make the meals they always wanted to but never had time to cook at home: creamy corn pasta, shrimp and white beans, tiny olive oil muffins topped with orange zest. At night, we'd watch ghost crabs scurry across the beach, screaming with laughter as we chased after them.	face their date night spot — until we decided to face it together. My mom and I reclaimed that restaurant. We ate steak and talked for hours, watching the sun set over the Currituck Sound. She gave me sips of her wine. I told her about things we hadn't spoken about all year: fears, crushes and inside jokes.
Fifteen years ago, in a Mazda that we no longer own, my family strapped our suitcases to the car roof and drove 300 miles down the East Coast to North Carolina. The first trip we took, the six-hour car ride was unremarkable, but over the years, that drive took on meaning. We decided to stay awake for the milanos and Disney classics, then for the rainbow goldfish and "Hamilton" soundtrack. After the long ride, we passed by the weathered "Welcome to Duck!" sign with its big mallard. We stopped for nachos and virgin daiquiris on the boardwalk, and then we arrived at our house.	Then, after nine years, each one blending into the last, we changed. And so did Duck, North Carolina. One week after our ninth summer — another perfect, sun-kissed trip — my parents separated. It was a shock to nearly everyone. It was a dark year, full of screaming matches and therapy sessions and a pandemic, before we saw Duck again for our tenth trip.	The next year, the new owners of Family Tides took it off the market. We got a new house, on a different street. I stopped taking pictures on the steps and started posing for Instagram stories on the balcony. When my best friend visited, we went on runs around the block and flirted shyly with boys staying across the street. My sister didn't spend all day in the ocean, instead becoming intermittently withdrawn in her noise-cancelling headphones as she entered teenagedom. My mom was happier, mostly. New traditions were forged, and others were forgotten.
We called it our house because we stayed there for two weeks every summer, and that was the closest we could get to owning a vacation home. It was named Seaduction, one of the hundreds of beach-based puns that were attached via colorful signage to the places for rent. We always giggled at it. We loved the way it seemed to laugh at its own sentimentality, at its commercialism.	My mom's car was too small to take our boxes of belongings. Instead, we rented a U-haul that clanged behind us for six hours. It was still a quieter ride than usual. Sufjan Stevens and Mazzy Star played in my earbuds as I stared out the window, occasionally grabbing handfuls from a bag of slightly stale pretzels. When we got to the winding suburban roads of Duck, they felt less magical. We pointed out fascist bumper stickers and confederate flags, flipping them off as we drove by. As we pulled up to our house, we saw it was different too. The sign that had said Seaduction for nearly a decade was gone. Instead, it read Family Tides. No, I'm not joking.	Now that I'm in college, we've planned to reduce our time in Duck, North Carolina from two weeks to one. But I want Duck — or rather, me — to know that this is not a goodbye letter. Duck is a love of my life. When our family devolved and evolved, Duck, like the tide, was steadfast, constant. I grew up with Duck. I walked Duck's streets in every stage of my life, in shoes that grew ten sizes. When I was naive, when I was heartbroken, when I was exhilarated, that small town in North Carolina was there. I've seen myself and my family in Duck's waves, and though our reflection has changed, one thing never will: Those waves will come in again, and go out again, whenever we choose to return.
My sister and I grew up on the steps of Seaduction. In colorful tankinis and too-big baseball caps, we'd reluctantly pose for pictures year after year. I'd usually stand above my sister, my hand on her shoulder as we'd squint into the sun. When our mom would finish taking our picture, we'd run the short block down to the beach. We'd spend entire days in the ocean, especially my sister, who we'd affectionately call "water baby." My mom and I would turn red while my dad and sister would tan. Laying on our towels, we'd trace	Everything seemed heavier as we lugged our supplies to the beach each morning. My sister and I pretended not to see my mom stare, with glossy eyes, out over the ocean. Family Tides was haunting us with more than just its name. When we were younger in Duck, my parents had a date night restaurant they'd go to on the boardwalk. They would leave me and my sister at Seaduction with a family friend while they had "high end seafood and southern fare." After the divorce, my mom couldn't	Love, Lily
Contact LILY SCHECKNER at lily.scheckner@yale.edu .		