PERSONAL ESSAY

The end of the beginning: April's blooms and graduation

// BY ALEXANDRA HELFGOTT



ILLUSTRATION BY VIRGINIA PENG

I have a theory that the vibrancy of a spring is proportional to the severity of the preceding winter.

This winter was an interminable test of patience and endurance, an effort in resilience and commitment to follow through. Though the days were short, cold and bleak, winter felt like a slog. It rendered one week identical to the next, even as the drumbeat of homework and assignments continued and quickened, pushing us toward the promised spring. For me, this promised spring doubled as a finish line: graduation.

Winter endured well into March, with snowflakes and icy rain taunting us just before spring break and snow piles stubbornly persisting on the streets.

We returned from break to find the snow melted, giving way to sparse but vibrant patches of green grass and mounds of leaves — remnants of last year's fall and promises of the coming summer that had been buried under this year's record snowfall. The chirping of birds resumed, a welcome soundtrack after months of quiet skies. If winter was a blur of days and weeks, spring is the opposite. Each day is evidence of the passage of time, marked by blooms that weren't there the night before.

For all the progress made, however, the tree branches remained bare, the wind sharp and biting. It was early April, yet spring felt distant.

And then, things — as they are prone to do — changed. Shoots of green emerged from the soil, buds populated the otherwise bare tree branches and the longer days promised that spring was indeed on the way. The shoots grew taller and taller. Eventually, bursting daffodil, tulip and crocus blooms — vibrant yellow, burnt orange and deep purple — came up across yards.

In August, the trees that had offered us relief and shade during the hottest days seemed identical. In the spring, they reveal their uniqueness, with different flowers adorning their branches. The Bradford pear trees, with their pungently scented flowers, frame the streets of East Rock like bangs. The cherry blossoms offer delicate white, sometimes pink, flowers, while the weeping cherry trees are somehow even more majestic, bending to let their blossoms billow in the spring breeze. The flowers on the tulip magnolias look like magenta and cream-colored teacups poised on the branches of a tree.

Walking from the Humanities Quadrangle toward Beinecke Plaza, with Harkness Tower and Cross Campus to my right and the Yale Law School to my left, I hear seagulls squawking — a reminder that we're mere miles from the beach. Beinecke is filled with undergrads soaking up the sun in their best spring outfits, laughter and chatter echoing across the marble promenade that just weeks ago was vacant.

And then, just as flowers arrived overnight, so they depart. Spring showers knock the delicate petals from the branches. They swirl in the air before landing on the streets and sidewalks, as they do in the wake of a flower girl during a bridal procession.

Spring blooms are nature's hourglass, reminding us with each passing day that we're one day closer to the end, one day closer to the finish line. A near-constant thumping and pulsing in my brain keeps time: This ends, this ends, you are one day closer to the end. It's difficult to be fully present in this transitory phase, when the administrative burdens and logistical requirements of the future beckon. Despite our best efforts to stay grounded in the present, we must somehow finish the tasks that loom, tasks that in three weeks won't even be a blip on the radar. Ignoring them feels irresponsible, but it's the only way I can calm myself down about the imminence of the end. These projects, exams and essays have become all-consuming. In a matter of weeks, their deadlines will have passed, and in their place will be distant memories and the hint of the question: Was it really that difficult? Was winter actually that cold?

I eagerly awaited longer and warmer days, and I happily watched the flowers bloom. And yet the falling petals that make way for green leaves are a reminder that time is indeed marching forward. This chapter of life, like the blooming of the cherry blossoms, was always ephemeral. It can't be stretched beyond the time confines of my program of study, no matter how often I think I'd enjoy another six months or list all I'd be willing to give to pause time.

I'm on a never-ending merry-go-round, cycling between profound nostalgia for a moment I'm still living in, daydreaming about the future and fixating on whatever is due tomorrow. The present keeps falling off the trees around me, a confetti of petals at my feet.

The spring blooms reward us for surviving a long and hard winter. They fall to remind us that time is passing, that the things we most love about the present must give way to a new future. The full, verdant, vibrant trees of the summer can't exist without the falling of the petals in the spring. I can't stop the petals from falling. But I can appreciate the flowers while they're still on the branches. In the rush to class, I can stop, slow down, see the flowers. I can smell them. I can take a picture. I can remind myself of the magic and beauty of spring. But I can't stop the flowers from falling.

In just a few weeks, the trees will be in their full glory, loaded with green leaves that, long after we're gone, will turn to the beautiful red and orange of New England fall. We might not be here to see them this year, but how lucky we were to have seen them at all.

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PERSONAL ESSAY

Looking Up and Slowing Down

// BY MICHAEL WILLEN

Looking up

I have a knack for noticing shoes. They hold space in my mind as a representation and understanding of my friends. I see how they compliment or clash with their personalities and how their choices change with the seasons. I notice when they switch it up, and I know instinctively when they're debuting a new pair.

A scarily good memory is partly to blame. But, in full, it's a defense mechanism. Instead of focusing on a face, I would find some background fixation: like a baby's game of peek-a-boo, looking down meant that no one could study me too closely or perceive too much.

I spent a lot of my time at Yale afraid of that perception. The school can feel nauseatingly small sometimes: No one is more than one degree of connection away, and if you haven't met someone, you've heard of them. We talk and compare so incessantly. Opinions spread like wildfire, which doesn't inspire confidence for a people pleaser.

In dining halls, I'd stress when conversations got too loud or clam up when neighboring groups got too quiet. Walking through crowded spaces had me on high alert. Overthinking my own racial identity often kept me away from events at the Afro-American Cultural Center. In general, I tried to let any moment of possible judgment pass as quickly as possible.

We're our own harshest critics, in this way. We notice every quirk in a photo and contemplate our actions until every facet has been scrutinized and regretted. Beyond that selfish veil, everyone is living far too much of their own lives to spend more than the briefest moments on you. Across my four bright college years, I've come to realize that more and more.

And looking back, the moments I've enjoyed the most are the moments when I stopped caring.

So own the space you take up and stay confident in your ability to make mistakes. Spill your chai latte everywhere in the Elm? Clean it up with a laugh and a smile. Be ready to fall on your ice skates and don't care who might see — it'll make you a better skater. Mess up a dance move on stage, or many — shoutout to Danceworks — and no one will notice. Accept that an interview or a date might go badly — the bad ones are the only way you'll get practice for the good ones. Don't look back in regret because you've let your fear of failure or embarrassment keep you from living Yale to the fullest.

If things go wrong? Bounce back. Care about what people think to the extent that it helps you be a better person, but not so much that you live solely for that perception.

I still notice shoes. But now I notice faces, too — the eyes, smiles and everything behind them. I let people truly see me, and in doing so I start to truly see them.

Slowing down

I'm a fast walker. Across two New York summers, I perfected the New Yorker stride that would get me from point A to point B as efficiently as possible without ever showing effort. It's great when I'm making the crosstown trek from Grand Central Terminal to Penn Station on my way home to Philly or when I'm running embarrassingly late to a class.

At Yale, our brains seem trained to work like that, too. We're a school full of overachievers, overcommitters and overextenders. It's what got us here in the first place, and here, it only gets worse: Seemingly infinite clubs, classes and events provide never-ending options to fill space in our lives — worsened by an embedded peer pressure to do so. So fill space I did. Each semester, I'd populate my life with every sign-up and every yes.

But we have limits. Every new activity removed hours of sleep and added late nights spent in the library. Every new commitment meant less and less blank space in my Google Calendar.

I took too long to realize the importance of that blank space. In finding more time for scheduled things, I found less time for myself. I rue the times I said no to friends' side quests and the times I missed nights of hourslong chatter in our suite's common room. I spent too many moments with some part of my attention stuck on the next task or deadline instead of what was happening directly in front of my eyes. Always on the lookout for the next thing that needed to be done, I never gave my brain the benefit of a pause.

Sometimes, the velocity of keeping up caused me to speed past people. If some adjacent worry took over, I'd accidentally walk faster and leave a friend behind, or I'd space out on important parts of a deep conversation over dinner. I'd forget names or miss important moments.

With graduation approaching, I look forward to finally getting a bit of that pause. But taking on so much isn't in Yale's graduation requirements. I wish I'd reflected sooner on the intentionality of my commitments, and I wish I'd given myself the grace to question what's worth it and to drop what wasn't.

Don't forget the value of slowing down. Have blank space in your schedule — it's more important than whatever might take its place. It's okay to say no when you know something is too much, and it's okay to do less than what it seems like everyone else is doing.

It's okay to take a little bit longer to get from point A to point B. And don't leave your friends or yourself behind on the way there.



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