PERSONAL ESSAY

Light and truth

// BY MADISON BUTCHKO

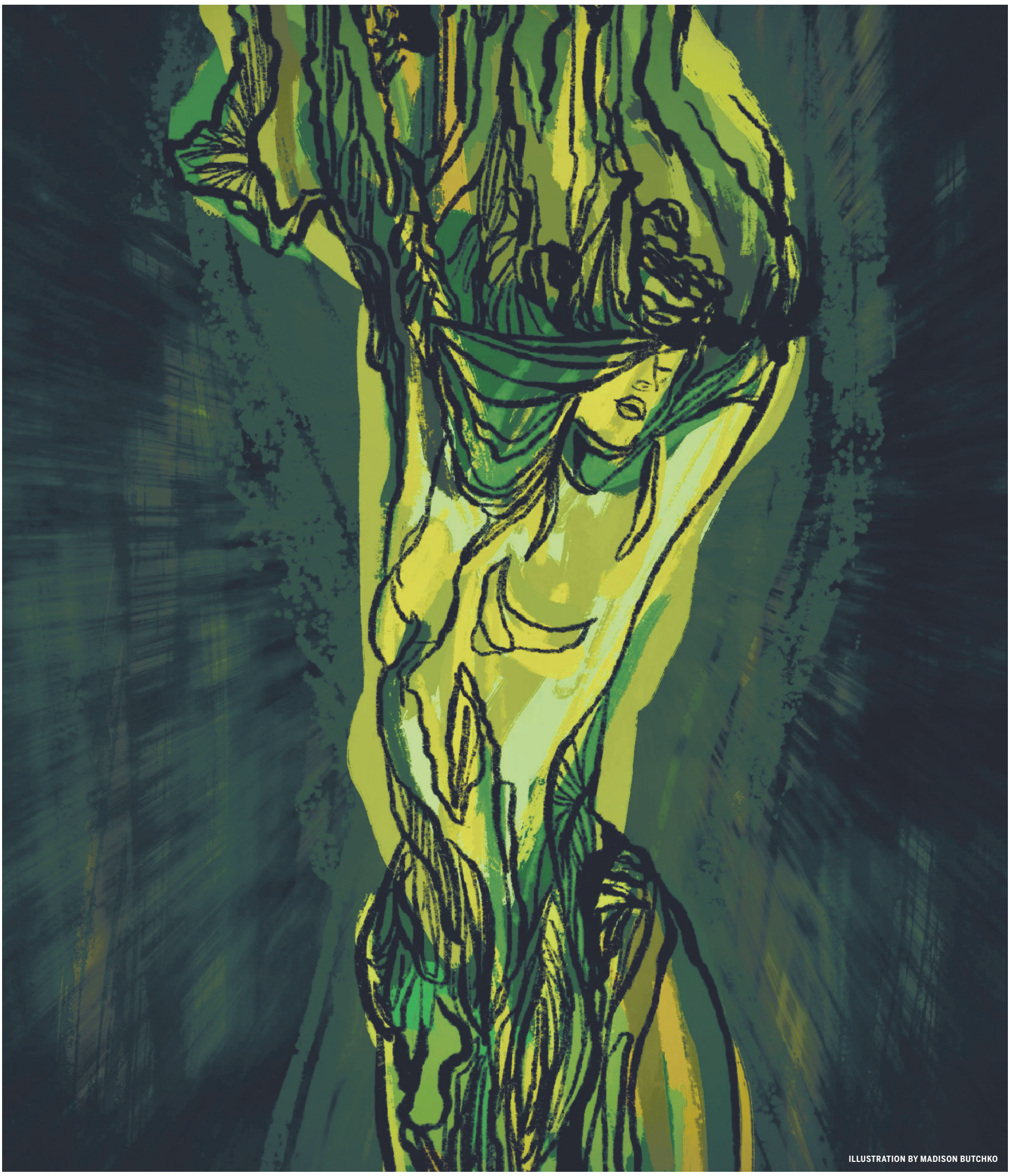

ILLUSTRATION BY MADISON BUTCHKO

On Ivy Day, I put on my lucky purple jacket, a soft lilac almost identical to my bedroom walls, which I had stared at for the 17 years of my life in Michigan. All day, I reassured myself that whatever verdict graced my laptop, I would be okay — though my body knew I was lying. Sitting at my desk, I knotted my fingers together. Before opening my Yale decision, I whispered a series of small prayers.

I clicked, and the screen went black briefly before the bulldog appeared, singing, "Bow wow wow." Tears streamed down my cheeks before I could process a single thought. My hand covered my mouth, muffling a series of "Oh my God, oh my God," as I sobbed at my desk before running to tell my parents.

For a long time, Yale existed in my mind as a lighthouse: distant, bright and almost impossible to reach. I believed education could move me toward a larger life, so I pushed harder into the current — I woke up early, stayed late, studied, worked jobs, joined clubs and sports and kept going, even when no direct sign of progress encouraged me. Somewhere ahead was a fixed point of light. I didn't know if I would reach it, but it gave me direction when the water was dark and I could not feel the bottom.

The following August, the light became a destination. Arriving at the entrance of Jonathan Edwards College with my parents and walking through the doors of Sterling Memorial Library for the first time, I thought I had reached my dream. The cathedral of books enchanted me: the vaulted ceilings, the stone archways, the light falling through tall windows in pale columns. I took photographs of the carved faces in the walls, the floral designs, the small details I wanted to savor in memory.

For a long time, I wanted Yale to remain that place in my mind, that place I had dreamed for: all the libraries and courtyards, late nights in the buttery and bright laboratory windows, the stone-bound beauty. I wish I could write about those things as if they belonged to one life — without accepting any connection to his abuse, the court cases, my years of silence and suffering and the irreparable damage I will never have enough words to encapsulate. I still do not know how to separate my experience of Yale from the insurmountable pain I endured here. Lives do not divide themselves that neatly. When I think about graduation, I think about the people around me crying because they will miss this place. I am crying for what I missed — for the version of college I imagined before I knew how much these years would hold. There is no ceremony for that kind of shattering loss.

At Yale, achievement is easily recognizable. It has titles, fellowships, publications, neat lines on a resume. Emotional growth doesn't lend itself to such memorabilia. In high school, my "best" looked obvious: discipline, early mornings, good grades, awards, medals, things other people could see and measure. In college, my "best" became harder to specify. Sometimes, it looked like simply getting out of bed. Sometimes, it looked like answering one email, eating something without feeling sick immediately after, doing far less than the old version of me would have done and trying not to berate myself for it.

I don't want to call what I have been through strengthening. I never wanted to be stronger in this way. Surviving does not mean you are grateful for its so-called lessons, and endurance is not the same as growth. Healing has not felt like rising from the ashes, not like a fire catching again — dramatic and bright. Most of the time, I've felt like the embers after a fire: small, hot, exhausted, glowing in places but no longer able to burn the way they once did, with my soul broken into pieces too small to gather once more. I did not choose to keep fighting. I felt caught between my will and my body, between the part of me that wanted to stop and the body that kept moving anyway. Because bodies do that. They fall asleep. They wake again. The sun sets. The sun rises. Seconds pass into minutes, hours, and days, and somehow I remained imprisoned inside time, even when I felt left behind by it. Life moves forward with both cruelty and mercy. The cruelty is that everything continues while you are the one who carries the damage, even though you were not the one who caused it. The mercy is that time carries you too, even when you cannot carry yourself, moving you into another morning, another chance to keep living before you feel ready.

Even the small things bring comfort — waking up a little earlier, sleeping without nightmares, meeting friends again after months of absence, walking across campus despite feeling unsafe, writing my truth despite the fear. Healing does not bring peace unilaterally. My friendships, my writing and the small ordinary things that accumulate into a life do not erase the years I've lost. They remind me that the harm I suffered can belong to my life without becoming the entirety of it.

Healing has become the slow growth of life around the wound. A tree does not heal its wounds. Its trunk thickens around them, laying down new rings over what cannot be undone, with the wound preserved at the center of everything that follows. What happened to me is fixed at the center of these years in the same way: unchangeable, present in everything I have become — the core around which the rest of my life has had to grow.

People carry far more than they show. We move beside people whose lives we may never fully understand. Pain has blanketed the world with loneliness, but it has also made me more tender toward the hidden lives of others. If there is anything I will carry beyond Yale, it is that tenderness: a deeper kindness, a greater compassion, a soft heart that reaches toward anyone who has been hurting.

I mourn the girl who was seventeen, sitting at a desk in Michigan in a lilac bedroom, crying from pure joy because she was about to attend Yale. She believed the world was beautiful, that all people were good, that her dreams were infinite. I wish I could hold her tightly. I wish I could have protected her. She will go through things she cannot yet imagine, not cleanly, not without cost, but through.

I think of "Lux et Veritas" and understand it differently. I came to Yale believing light was a destination, a reward for all that swimming toward the lighthouse. But light is what you learn to see after your eyes have adjusted to the dark. Truth is not a given, either. I used to think truth would be recognized simply because it was real — because it is what happened. I learned that truth can be denied, buried, silenced and made costly to speak. For the past four years, I prayed so desperately to return to my 17-year-old self, to the innocence and possibility she carried in her heart. I cannot. Instead, I protect what remains of her in me: a hope that has changed shape, the way light does, bending around whatever stands in its way and continuing on.

Contact **MADISON BUTCHKO** *at maddie.butchko@yale.edu.*