



*The* **CORE**

**THE COLLEGE  
MAGAZINE**

Summer 2022 Supplement to  
The University of Chicago Magazine



Image courtesy Kaylie Scorza, Class of 2023

**“Edge of Awareness”**  
by Kaylie Scorza, Class  
of 2023, received an  
honorable mention in the  
University’s inaugural  
“Science as Art” contest.  
Scorza’s image, taken with  
a light microscope at 100x  
magnification, depicts  
crystals made by drying  
liquid growth medium for  
human gut bacteria.

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**Front cover:** From *100 Views of Lake Michigan*, public art project; see story on page 6.  
**Back cover:** UChicago Photographic Archive, apf2-04037, University of Chicago Library

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*From the editor*

## 101 YEARS AGO

In 1921 journalist, author, and Hyde Park resident Ben Hecht began writing the series “One thousand and one afternoons in Chicago” for the *Chicago Daily News*. (See excerpt on back cover.) “Journalism extraordinary,” his editor described it: “journalism that invaded the realm of literature.”

Hecht briefly overlapped with John Gunther, PhB 1922 (see “When the Personal Is Political,” page 18), who began his storied journalism career as a cub reporter at the *News*. In a 1924 photo of Hecht’s farewell party at Schlogl’s bar, Gunther looks away, as if he’s already imagining himself somewhere else. Hecht, based in Berlin, had covered the first World War; Gunther, based in Vienna, would cover the runup to the second.

At the start of the sound era Hecht was lured to Hollywood, where he became a highly paid screenwriter. He wrote numerous Hitchcock films, including *Spellbound* (1945) and *Notorious* (1946). Uncredited, he contributed to Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent* (1940), an adaptation of a memoir by Gunther’s friend and rival Vincent Sheean, EX 1921.

Hecht is often credited with inventing the gangster and screwball comedy genres. But he longed to write great literature and was dismissive of his work for Hollywood. A century of critics and filmgoers would beg to differ.

—Carrie Golus, AB’91, AM’93

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*UChicago creature*

## BLACK-CROWNED NIGHT HERON

*Having worked with the Urban Fishing Program and interned at the Lincoln Park Zoo, **Sativa Volbrecht, AB'20**, has come across her share of urban wildlife. (Read more about Volbrecht on page 8.) Here's why the black-crowned night heron is a favorite. Her comments have been edited and condensed.*

"The black-crowned night heron is endangered in Illinois. There used to be a lot of nesting populations, but then we got rid of all the marshlands, so there were zero in Illinois. Then,

about 10 to 12 years ago, a population from Wisconsin moved to the Lincoln Park Zoo. No one really knows why.

"Around the same time, the zoo, in partnership with the city, was renovating their boardwalk area. It was mostly recreational; they had swan boats and things. They decided to renovate it to be more natural, so they reintroduced native grasses and native species. Their wildlife institute is doing a long-term study to see the effect that change had.

"The herons decided to stick around, their population grew, and they've essentially been there ever since, nesting every spring in and around the zoo.

"It's particularly interesting because before, this species was very

human-shy and didn't like noise. They would essentially avoid cities. Then, for no apparent reason, they decided to nest in the middle of the city. Now you have these chicks growing up in the city, displaying completely different behaviors than the other populations of the species. They're really no longer noise-averse. You'll find them downtown, hanging out near humans, just vibing.

"They're super interesting. They're actually my favorite example of birds being related to dinosaurs, because they look like little dinosaurs."

*If you're not near Lincoln Park Zoo, you might see the herons at other Chicago locations—including Jackson Park Lagoon—where they've been spotted.*

## CLASS DISCUSSIONS

**Alice Breternitz**, Class of 2023, lists her favorites so far.



“You never truly know what is going to happen in a class discussion,” writes **Alice Breternitz**, Class of 2023, in “Why I Love Class Discussions” on the Admissions Office’s *Uncommon Blog*. “The Core means you take so many classes in such a variety of subjects that you can find yourself talking about anything at any moment. Looking back, there are a few class seminars that stand out to me as the most interesting or silliest discussions I had with my peers.”

*This is an edited excerpt. Read Breternitz’s original blog at [mag.uchicago.edu/breternitz](http://mag.uchicago.edu/breternitz).*

### *Deutsch-Amerikanische Themen* (German-American Topics)

**Topic:** Where on campus to put a farm

**Instructor:** **Colin Benert**, associate instructional professor of Germanic studies

“Top contenders included a pasture on top of Regenstein or a cornfield on the Midway. My proposal was a farm on the Main Quad, with pigs, sheep, and cows, that could function as a petting zoo for students. This discussion was held fully in German. We learned a lot of vocabulary during it.”

### *Language and the Human*

**Topic:** Whether the languages you speak influence your thoughts

**Instructor:** **Diane Brentari**, PhD’90, the Mary K. Werkman Professor of Linguistics

“The room was filled with bilingual speakers. Some said poetry sounded better in their native language, but they couldn’t see themselves doing homework or having school discussions in it. Everyone had a different experience with how they saw themselves in relation to their languages. During a different seminar, we discussed naming, and whether the name you give something or someone can have a significant impact on how you think of it. We all shared the history of our first names and last names if we knew it.”

### *Gender and Sexuality in Western Civilizations*

**Topic:** *Dictee* by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha

**Instructor:** **Malynne Sternstein**, AB’87, AM’90, PhD’96, associate professor of Slavic languages and literatures

“*Dictee* opens with an epigraph: ‘May I write words more naked than flesh, stronger than bone, more resilient than sinew, sensitive than nerve—Sappho.’ A classmate casually announced, ‘I think it’s interesting how Cha made up the epigraph and credited it to Sappho.’ My head was spinning. I had seen this quote before, attributed to Sappho, in a billion other places. In my opinion, this is a huge deal. The world needs to know we have all been tricked!”



“Wrong on both counts. I’m a very good painter and not a nice girl!”

—Lee Lozano, AB’51, when told she was a “good painter and a nice girl.”

Read more about Lozano on page 48 of the *University of Chicago Magazine*.

## A MEAL TO REMEMBER

President Hutchins, Milton Friedman, “Elvis,” and more.

In a new Q&A section in the College Review, the Core’s email newsletter, we asked alumni to tell us about memorable meals from their College days. Here are some of the stories we received.



Sculptor Lorado Taft hosts a meal at Midway Studios in 1907.

### Witty

Serving lunch to President [Robert Maynard] Hutchins [1929–51]. Hutchins probably said something witty, of course, but not to his server.

—Stephen Plank, PhB’48

### Irresistible

For two years I lived in Burton-Judson and worked as a “waiter” in the dining hall. The settings were formal; the men were required to wear a coat and tie for dinner. Those were also the days of the legendary campus adventures of Severn Darden [EX’50, comedian and founding member of Second City]. The requirement of a jacket and tie at dinner was irresistible. One evening the dining hall was full and a student arrived wearing nothing but a coat and tie. Subsequently the dress code was amended.

—Herb Caplan, AB’53, JD’57

### Naked

I was there the night in the Burton-Judson dining hall when we put our plot into action to get rid of the “coat and tie at dinner” rule. Several of us, however, wore swim trunks. I never saw anyone actually arrive for dinner naked but for the coat and tie, which was the actual plan. I was sixteen, or barely seventeen, and though there no women in the dorms, there were sometimes female kitchen staff, and the wives and daughters of the housemasters were often present. I was afraid to take the risk. Fortunately our virtual nudity was sufficient and the rule was rescinded.

—Denis Franklin, AB’54

### Friendly

Those of us who lived in Woodward Court were privileged to eat with our

beloved resident masters, Izaak [PhD’55] and Pera Wirszup, and notable scholars every month for the Woodward Court lectures. In the Wirszups’ apartment, sharing wine and cheese with a bunch of students, Milton Friedman [AM’33] turned out to be a very warm and friendly fellow.

—Jeff Rasley, AB’75

### “Elvis”

In the early ’90s, Pierce dining hall hosted a ’50s-themed event for the evening meal, complete with Elvis impersonator. After I was done eating I stood at 55th and Ellis to catch the bus back to Broadview Hall. A Honda Civic pulled up. Elvis was driving. “Hey man, can you tell me how to get to Lake Shore Drive?” I pointed east and gave him the directions. “Thanks, man,” he said, and drove off.

—Kenneth Burns, AB’93, AM’03



**Next question:** Did you have a rat, lizard, tarantula, or other unusual pet while you were in the College? Did you keep a secret pet in your dorm room? Did you befriend a wild creature? Send your animal stories to [collegereview@uchicago.edu](mailto:collegereview@uchicago.edu).

## WHAT'S NEW IN THE COLLEGE

The first Taking the Next Step was held in Ida Noyes Hall in 1998.

### *2022 Quantrell winners*

Five faculty members have been recognized with the Llewellyn John and Harriet Manchester Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, which is based on letters of nomination from students. This year's recipients are **David Kovar**, professor of molecular genetics and cell biology; **Victor Lima**, AM'96, PhD'01, senior instructional professor of economics; **Julie Orlemanski**, associate professor of English; **Johanna Ransmeier**, associate professor of history; and **David Schmitz**, associate professor of physics. Established in 1938, the Quantrell is believed to be the nation's oldest prize for undergraduate teaching.

### *Taking the Next Step moves on*

In 1998 Dean **John W. Boyer**, AM'69, PhD'75, invited alumni back to campus to give career advice to students. Taking the Next Step became an annual event, helping to shape the careers of countless Maroons. (See page 32.)

Starting in 2022-23, Taking the Next Step will take the form of "bookend events, which will support students at two critical points: fall of first year and spring of fourth year," says **Meredith Daw**, associate vice president of enrollment and student

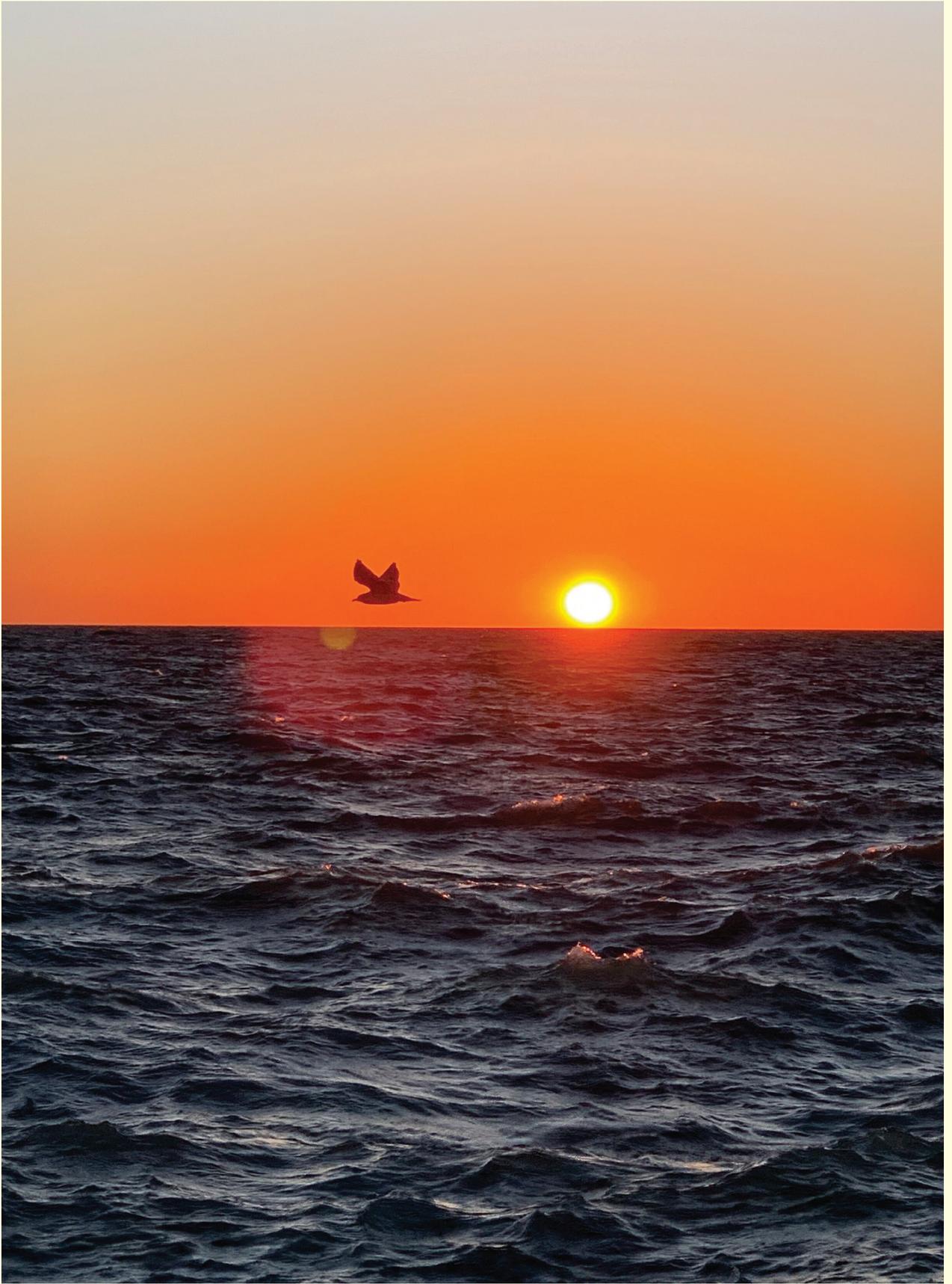
advancement. The first-year event will familiarize students with Career Advancement and teach them how to structure their career exploration and eventual job search. At the fourth-year event, scheduled during Alumni Weekend, alumni will welcome fourth-years into the community and introduce them to the many ways to stay involved after graduation, such as reunion committees, regional alumni clubs, and affinity groups.

### *Optional three-week September term*

This fall an optional intensive September term will be offered for second-, third-, and fourth-years. Students take just one course, allowing them to fulfill major or general education requirements—after their summer employment or internship has concluded, but before Autumn Quarter starts. Course offerings for 2022 include Exoplanets, Writing for TV, Beginning Elementary French III, Computing for the Social Sciences, and more.

### *New majors and minor*

In 2022-23 the College will offer two new majors: human rights and cognitive science. One new minor, democracy studies, has also been added.



## ON THE HORIZON

Last academic year six College students—**Esha Deokar**, '23; **Natalie Jenkins**, '24; **Naomi Koo**, '24; **Kina Takahashi**, '24; **Oscar Taub**, '23; and **Jess Xiong**, '25—cocurated the public art project *100 Views of Lake Michigan*, inspired by Hiroshige's series of woodblock prints, *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*. From a crowd-sourced collection of almost 1,000 photos, the student curators chose 100 images. The one commonality: a horizon line bisecting the image.

The photos were displayed in the Stuart Hall Reading Room, in residence halls, and on

lamppost banners (they started out with 100, says **Laura Steward**, curator of public art, but some were stolen). The photos were also printed on laptop stickers and coffee cups: "a way for students to bring art along with them wherever they go," according to the project's website, [100viewsoflakemichigan.com](http://100viewsoflakemichigan.com).

*100 Views of Lake Michigan* was the first of an annual series of public art projects directed by Steward and artist-designer **Jason Pickleman**. Read more about the yearlong project at [mag.uchicago.edu/100views](http://mag.uchicago.edu/100views).—*Carrie Golus, AB'91, AM'93*





*Education*

## **TEACH A KID TO FISH ...**

*Sativa Volbrecht, AB'20,  
SM'22, wants to get young  
people hooked on a hobby.*

While working as an intern at Lincoln Park Zoo, Sativa Volbrecht rescued a juvenile black-crowned night heron (see page 2) that had fallen out of its nest.

**“One of the things we teach them is, you have to keep your line in the water.”**

**—Sativa Volbrecht, AB’20, SM’22**

**T**ransporting 25 fishing rods and reels—plus bait, tackle, and promotional posters—is cumbersome. For **Sativa Volbrecht**, AB’20, SM’22, who doesn’t have a car and so took everything via CTA, it was a true mark of commitment.

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” she says, “but it did lead to some interesting conversations.” (Sadly, there are no pictures.)

A double major in biology and creative writing, Volbrecht was looking for a conservation-related job for the summer of 2021 when she saw a posting from the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (DNR): its Urban Fishing Program in Chicago needed a clinic instructor. Targeted toward children 16 and under, the program aims to increase interest in fishing and encourage more people to develop it as a lifelong hobby.

Volbrecht was instantly drawn to the idea. Before her family moved to the Chicago suburbs when she was 12, Volbrecht lived in Idaho, “literally in a valley with mountains on all sides.” They went camping every summer, and she’d fished both there and in Chicago.

The communication and education aspect appealed to her writer side. While at UChicago she cultivated an interest in science education through internships at the Lincoln Park Zoo and the Woods Hole Science Aquarium.

Volbrecht says that since scientific terminology can be intimidating, “it’s useful to be able to know how to break it down, particularly when you’re talking to children.”

Volbrecht’s job involved both “dry clinics”—presentations on the ecosystem held at a park, where students might learn to cast a rod but didn’t put a line in the water—and actual fishing clinics. Most of the children were elementary school-aged; only a few had been fishing before.

First, Volbrecht taught her students to bait a hook. “We have little worm strips for them to attach. Some kids don’t want to touch it, but I always try to give the kids the opportunity first.”

Next, they learned to cast the line, and if and when they caught a fish, they learned to hold it and release it—Volbrecht usually helped them take the hook out gently and place the fish back in the water.

She visited parks all over the South and West Sides, taking kids fishing at Jackson Park Lagoon, Sherman Park, Wolf Lake, on the Chicago River at Ping Tom Park, and other spots around the city. They caught bluegill and catfish, both stocked by the DNR. Often the younger children fished more successfully than the older ones.

“One of the things we teach them is, you have to keep your line in the water,” Volbrecht says. “They can’t catch if they’re not in the water.” Younger children “just wandering around” tended to comply, but older ones would get impatient and pull their lines out to see if anything had happened.

She says the biggest catch of the summer was “a pretty large bluegill.” Memories of fish size are notoriously unreliable, bluegills tend to be small—but active—fish, and any fish looks bigger in small hands. Still, Volbrecht confirms it was a fairly big fish. She adds, “They were very excited.”

She incorporated last summer’s experience into her master’s thesis at the Graham School, towards a degree in emergency threat response management for environmental security, and is working for the Urban Fishing Program again this summer. Ultimately Volbrecht hopes to work on environmental policy issues in the public sector. And while she misses the mountains, she hopes to stay in Chicago; strolls through the Burnham Wildlife Corridor tide her over between trips back West.—*Jeanie Chung*

## AMONG FRIENDS

*In her debut novel, Tomi Obaro, AB'12, writes the story of a 30-year friendship.*

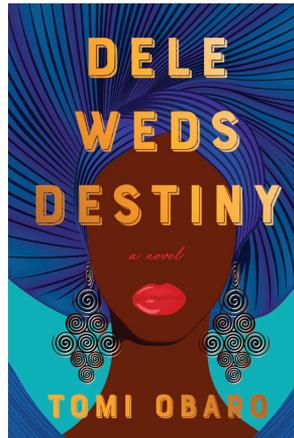
**Tomi Obaro**, AB'12, is not a middle-aged woman. But in her debut novel, *Dele Weds Destiny* (Knopf, 2022), Obaro writes about middle age poignantly and convincingly, as if it were familiar territory.

Funmi, for example, had always been beautiful. “She still felt in her spirit that she was no more than thirty,” Obaro writes, “but her body was beginning to betray her.” Thinning hair, thickening waist, back fat. She is newly self-conscious around her old friend Enitan, who has not aged in the same way: “a stark contrast from when they were teenagers and Funmi had mainly felt persistent pity.”

The novel, which inspired an auction among 13 interested publishers, centers on Funmi, Enitan, and Zainab, three friends who met at college in Nigeria. They are reunited after 30 years for Funmi’s daughter’s wedding in Lagos. The inspiration for the novel came from observing her mother’s close relationships with her best friends from college, Obaro says: “They all ended up in radically different places, but have been able to maintain deep, meaningful friendships.”

There are younger characters in the novel too—Enitan’s half-American daughter Remi as well as Funmi’s daughter Destiny—but Obaro does not let us into their heads very much. As a writer, she says, it was exciting, and a little frightening, to imagine herself her mother’s age, to “grab for myself that authority.” In Yoruba, Obaro notes, there are no gendered pronouns—no he or she. But there are sharp differentiations around age and seniority.

Obaro writes just as confidently about Nigeria, although this is somewhat



unfamiliar territory as well. Born to Nigerian parents, she has never lived there; they visited often when she was a child growing up in the Gambia. (The family also spent time in Surrey, England, and in Ohio.) Obaro researched the political unrest in Nigeria in the 1980s—the period when the three friends met—and occasionally asked her parents veiled questions: “It’s only now they’re like, ‘Oh, that’s why you were asking.’”

At UChicago, Obaro majored in international studies, with no specific career plan. She wrote for the *Chicago Maroon* and the *South Side Weekly*, took a few classes in creative nonfiction writing, and after graduation interned at the *Washington Post*. She is a senior editor at *BuzzFeed News*, where the writers she has worked with include cultural critic **Lauren Michele Jackson**, PhD'19.

Obaro began writing *Dele Weds Destiny* in the summer of 2019, after her twin sister, **Dami Obaro**, AB'12, moved out of their shared New York apartment, leaving behind her desk. “There’s



**“She still felt in her spirit that she was no more than thirty, but her body was beginning to betray her.”**

**—Tomi Obaro, AB’12,  
*Dele Weds Destiny***

Debut author Tomi Obaro, AB’12, is a senior editor at *BuzzFeed News*.

something about actually having a desk,” Obaro says. “It just made it easier.”

Tomi Obaro wrote movingly about the push-pull of twinship in the essay “To Love Your Sister Is to Grieve Your Twin,” which was included in the *Atlantic’s* 2017 list of exceptional works of journalism. “Growing apart, or becoming sisters and not twins, was mostly horrifying,” Obaro wrote, “but sometimes it’s a relief.” Dami, who majored in political science, is now assistant attorney general for the state of New York.

Dami was Tomi’s first reader, but didn’t help shape *Dele Weds Destiny*—other than confirming it was worth reading. “We’re very honest with each other,” Tomi says. She shelved her first attempt at a novel—keeping only the title, *Dele*

*Weds Destiny*—after Dami’s less-than-enthusiastic response.

When the pandemic hit, Tomi Obaro—like many young New Yorkers—moved back in with her parents. There was nothing to do in suburban Omaha, Nebraska, other than eat all the Nigerian foods she had been craving and write. Soon the manuscript was finished.

Now back in New York, Obaro has a new project underway; too new to talk about. Once again it’s hard to carve out time for writing, although the fact that her job is in editing, not writing, is helpful, she says: “If I were doing any kind of writing every day for work, it would make writing novels much harder.”

—Carrie Golus, AB’91, AM’93

## BALLPARK FIGURE

*In his spare time, applied math major Wilson Cunningham, Class of 2025, trains for the Cubs.*

Last July **Wilson Cunningham**, Class of 2025, got a life-changing call from the Chicago Cubs.

It was the final day of the 2021 Major League Baseball draft. Cunningham, in Hyde Park on a campus tour with his parents, was finding it difficult to focus.

Finally, his phone buzzed. The Cubs had selected Cunningham—a 6'8" left-handed pitcher—in the final round. Typically, playing professional baseball would make it impossible to pursue a college education full-time. But an unusual contract arrangement allows Cunningham to train and play with the Cubs while studying at UChicago.

Growing up in Orange County, California, Cunningham devoted years to the sport, from T-ball to middle school travel ball. By high school, he was burned out, in part due to overuse injuries. So he quit.

As a freshman and sophomore, Cunningham played golf and ran track—hoping to have fun and decide if he needed a break from baseball, or from sports in general. He spent more time on his other interests, including piano and math.

But he missed baseball. Cunningham earned a spot on his high school team as a junior in spring 2020. As a left-hander with a fastball close to 90 miles an hour, he quickly drew interest from college baseball programs. (Left-handed pitchers are sought after, as their pitches often befuddle right- and left-handed hitters alike.) Until June 2021, he had planned to play for the Maroons.

Then he received a phone call from a California-based Cubs scout. The scout advised him to enter his name in the draft and proposed the unique arrangement allowing Cunningham to attend college.

Standard minor league baseball contracts include a continuing education provision, but only after playing for a certain number of years. The Cubs offered to enact that provision for Cunningham at the start of his contract, allowing him to enroll in the College with his tuition partially covered by the team. (This arrangement voids his eligibility to play at the collegiate level).

At first, Cunningham assumed the Cubs would check up on him in a few years. “But when they told us about the plan that they had in mind—which is the best of both worlds—it was just crazy,” he says.

The proposal was not a promise, however. During drafts, teams can change plans. There was always the possibility that another team would swoop in. Finally, picking at No. 604 out of 612 in the 20th and final round, the Cubs called Cunningham.

Cunningham's first year at UChicago was a whirlwind. An applied mathematics major with a specialization in economics, he spent 20 hours a week doing baseball training on his own. A typical weekday consisted of a morning workout at Henry Crown Field House, classes in the afternoon, and an intense throwing session after class.

During throwing sessions, he starts with a dynamic warm-up, then does





Wilson Cunningham, Class of 2025, during a solo training session.

strength training with resistance bands and weighted balls. From there, he follows the Cubs training staff's personalized throwing instructions, sticking to a plan he calls "quantitative and regimented."

Training alone has been challenging, especially during the winter, Cunningham says. And unlike other pro players, he's faced the pressures of physics and calculus classes. "Obviously, it's been difficult," he says, "but that's what I knew going into this."

During the summer, Cunningham plays for the Arizona Complex League Cubs,

going up against professional hitters. "There's something about being on the field with a team that's essential to being the best pitcher you can be," he says.

After graduation, Cunningham hopes to take his baseball career as far as he can. Longer term, he's considering a career in finance or academia.

For now, with three years at UChicago ahead, he remains focused on college life. "I'll be walking down the hallways and hear two friends having a discussion about Aristotle," he says. "It's been a cool and interesting experience."—*Andy Brown*



Barbie Army members outside their reunion show in June 2022. From left, Lyn Pusztai; Alaina Lemon, AM'88, PhD'96; Tina Matlock; Liz Tate; Ellen Philips; Mary Dean, AB'87; Jean Lyons Lotus, AB'88; and Tanya Mushinsky, AB'90.

## Music

# GETTING THE ARMY BACK TOGETHER

*Barbie Army, which broke up in 1991, releases a retrospective album.*

You—an alum of a certain vintage—saw the flyers stapled to billboards in Hutch Court, in front of Cobb, along 57th Street, mixed in with stickers blaring *U.S. out of El Salvador* and *Impeach Bonzo*. They advertised concerts at the Blue Gargoyle or Delta Upsilon. The band names became familiar even if you

never caught a show. Fang Beach. The Farmers. The Blue Notes. The Rhythm Method.

There was also Barbie Army, founded by **Mary Dean**, AB'87, and **Jean Lyons Lotus**, AB'88. After playing music together in high school in Fort Collins, Colorado, they both entered the College in 1982. "It was literally the only place I applied," says Dean. "Then Jean finds out ... and it turns out her dad [Daniel Lyons, AM'62, PhD'67] went there."

Lyons Lotus and Dean fell right into Hyde Park's music scene, playing in a short-lived cover band called the Sugar Pops and in other configurations and hanging out with the musicians who came through for the Folk Festival each February. Dean was also known to burst into song

on the quads. Years later, during an alumni book club meeting, someone asked her if she had once jumped up on a table during Homecoming to belt out "Gloria." ("The Patti Smith version," Lyons Lotus specifies for her friend, confirming the legend.)

Barbie Army formed in 1986 when Lyons Lotus returned to the College after two years away, part of which she spent in London. She'd noticed a skinhead group there called the Barmy Army and thought, "Wouldn't it be funny if there's this all-girl band called the Barbie Army?" After recruiting a bassist and a drummer, guitarist/singers Lyons Lotus and Dean were soon entertaining Hyde Parkers with a mix of punk aggression and (sometimes) sweet vocals described as



Clockwise from top: Starbuck Avon, Tina Matlock, Jean Lyons Lotus, and Mary Dean in 1986; a flyer for a show at Club Dreamerz; Matlock (on borrowed Farmers drum kit), Lyons Lotus, and Dean play an outdoor gig.

“Tammy Wynette fronting for the Runaways.”

Like several other Hyde Park bands, the Barbies played around the city, at the Metro, Batteries Not Included, Exit, and the Avalon, the last especially easy to get to for UChicago students since it was steps from the Belmont “L” stop. They even played a show in Beloit, Wisconsin, at a frat house, where Lyons Lotus wondered why the lights would go off whenever she sang. Later she learned her microphone hadn’t been grounded, “so it was me, like, blacking out” whenever she leaned into the mic.

By the late ’80s, Lyons Lotus says, the band was playing a “ton of gigs.” But since they were “mostly paid in alcohol,” Dean adds, she soon realized, “I

can’t live this lifestyle.” So Dean followed her politics to Guatemala and El Salvador, to support people resisting the repressive governments in those countries. She continued her involvement after returning to the States, helping refugees from Central America and hosting movement organizers. Lyons Lotus soldiered on through lineup changes (including stints by **Tanya Mushinsky**, AB’90, and **Alaina Lemon**, AM’88, PhD’96) that could put Spinal Tap to shame, but she herself called it a day in 1991.

In the three decades since, both have raised families, Lyons Lotus as a journalist in Oak Park, Dean in Boston working in computers and construction. But in the last few years, both have migrated back to Fort Collins—“I lured her

here,” says Dean—where they have started playing together again at gatherings of family and friends. At the same time, old Barbie Army songs, once available only on DIY cassettes, started popping up on YouTube, courtesy of an anonymous punk archivist. These caught the ear of folks at Berlin-based No Plan records, which recently released *Barbies Don’t Bleed: Retrospective 1986–1990*.

To celebrate their 12” vinyl debut, on May 20—the Friday of Alumni Weekend—Lyons Lotus and Dean returned to the stage with several other Barbies at old haunt Phyllis’s Musical Inn. “The show was great,” says Lyons Lotus, who was excited to once again see “lots of U of C people” make the trek north “to party with us.”—Sean Carr, AB’90

## ANOTHER MAN'S TREASURE

*John Snyder, AB'56, gives new life to the lost and discarded.*

**“Like magic, pieces always seemed to come together whether repairing or making something from scratch.”**

**—John Snyder, AB'56**

In 1943, when **John Snyder**, AB'56, was eight years old, his father bought a 1,000-acre farm outside Walhalla, South Carolina, in the elbow crook between the Carolinas and Georgia. Behind the main house was an outbuilding where his father kept tools; he called it “the warehouse.” Its walls were lined with open bins that gradually filled with cast-off bits—washers, rope, wire, rusty hinges—found in the woods or on the side of the road.

“I would watch Daddy, a broken part in one hand, pillaging through the bins until he finally plucked out an object that recommended itself,” writes Snyder in an essay about his young life published on his website. “Like magic, pieces always seemed to come together whether repairing or making something from scratch.” His father was a finder and a fixer; John, a maker in the making.

He recalls from the warehouse a wooden frame from a McClellan saddle, standard issue for United States cavalry, that was used in the American Civil War. It had no leather, but his father

had received a goatskin in exchange for a bale of hay. Snyder identifies the resulting goat-upholstered saddle as the spark for his own bin-keeping and collecting of materials from salvage yards, sidewalks, and railbeds. You never know what might be discovered, he says, or how it might be useful.

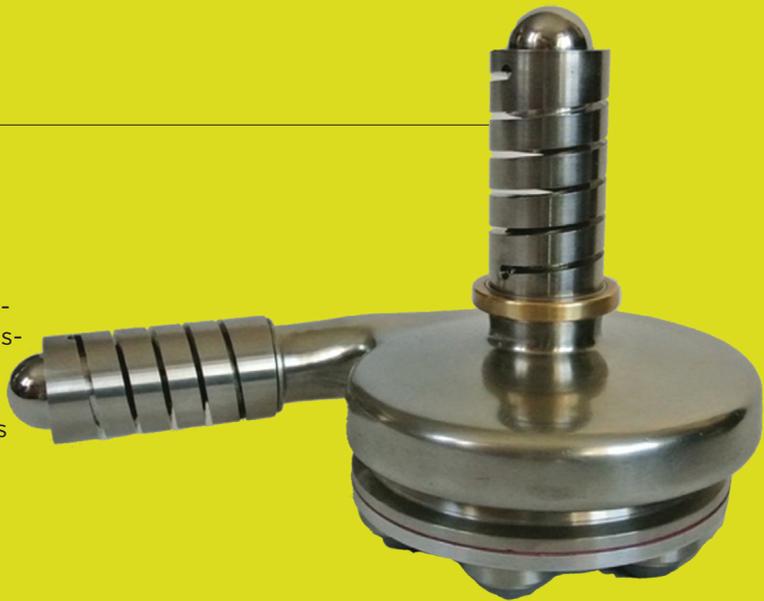
Taking after his father—a farmer, builder, inventor, painter, and poet—Snyder has had a miscellaneous collection of careers. After graduating from UChicago, he served in the navy (he trained as a pilot, but budget cuts prevented him from earning his wings); bought glass and china for Bloomingdale's; and conducted research and development for a carpet manufacturer, acquiring several patents—a testament to his ability to fabricate solutions to technical problems. In 2001 he retired as an executive director after two decades at Morgan Stanley. He's also written off-Broadway plays in addition to his memoir, *Hill of Beans: Coming of Age in the Last Days of the Old South* (Smith/Kerr, 2011).

**Centrifuge with Twin Spiral Accelerators, 2013**

Stainless steel, bronze, aluminum, rubber

W 9" x L 15" x H 10"

Snyder found what he thought was a stainless-steel centrifuge and fitted it with stainless-steel accelerators (spiral-shaped pieces), capped with a stainless-steel ball stamped with the camera company name Leica. He doesn't know their original purpose, but he has a bucketful. "Because I have so many," he says, "they probably didn't have a good use for them. They ended up in the paws of people like me."



**Firehose Nozzle Lamp, 2002**

Bronze, aluminum, stainless steel

H 27" x W 14" x diameter of base 9"

This functional lamp was built around a bronze firehose nozzle discovered at Vulcan Scrap Metal Co. The base is made from an industrial liquid stirrer, and the shade is a stainless steel funnel with a ribbed aluminum skirt, both perforated for cooling.

**Asteroid Station, 2016**

Aluminum, glass, polyurethane, stainless steel, bronze

H 9" x 10" diameter

Snyder envisions this piece as a survey station deposited on an asteroid. Its landing might have been cushioned by the three rollerblade wheels. Its core contains a brass mounted prism from a World War II tank gunsight. The apparatus is mounted on circular aluminum disks, pocked by imagined collisions with high velocity—possibly interstellar—particles.





***Tape Dispenser, 2014***

Aluminum, stainless steel, brass, polymer

H 8 1/2" x W 9" x D 6"

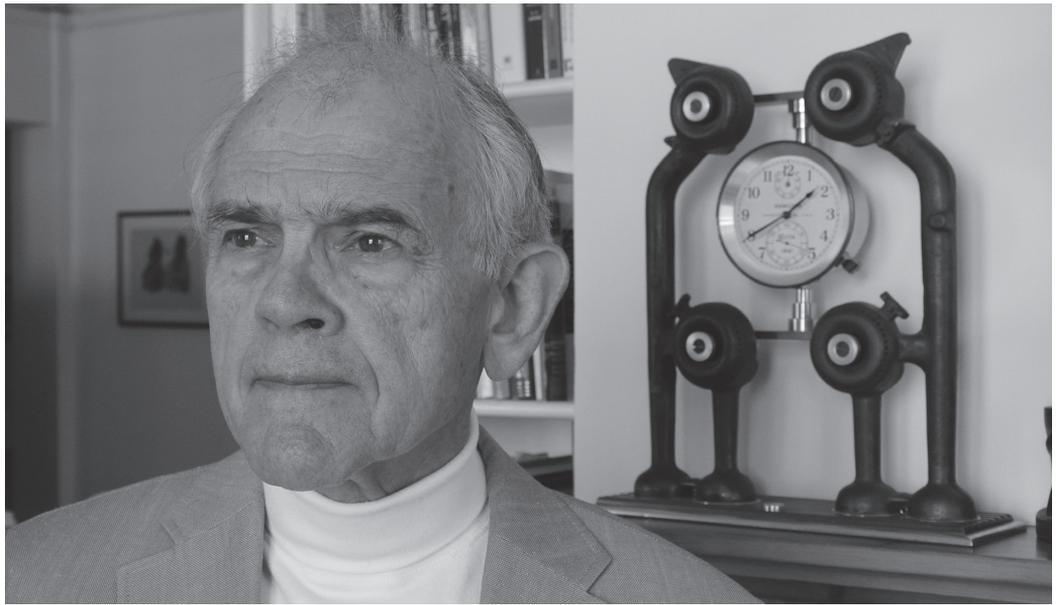
Snyder and his wife, Virginia Lawrence, use copious amounts of tape, and his collection contains several functional dispensers. ("I make a lot of tape dispensers because I like to make things that work.") Virginia custom ordered a heavy dispenser for her preferred two-inch rolls. The resulting sculpture weighs nearly seven pounds.

***Fire Hydrant Towel Dispenser, 2006***

Aluminum, brass, bronze, cast-iron base from NYC fire hydrant

H 16 1/2" x 7" base and 4 1/2" top diameter  
Virginia commissioned a paper towel dispenser heavy enough to stay put. A cast-iron NYC fire hydrant cover that she "found" on the street provides stability. A spring-loaded bronze gear presses down to anchor the roll before tearing off a sheet. The little bronze ball is swivel-mounted on the base so that it falls by gravity into the paper towel roll and keeps it snug as the diameter of the roll decreases.





**“Eventually I  
bought the bomb  
from them, too.”**

**—John Snyder,  
AB’56**

All the while, Snyder was building and sculpting with his found fodder, melding utility with art. As materials recommended themselves to his father, they reveal themselves to him. For a recent exhibit, titled *Bins of Miscellany* in honor of his father’s Walhalla warehouse and his own collections, he writes that his work is inspired by the “remarkable beauty of mechanical things often shrouded from view in the interior of machinery, instruments, and appliances of everyday life.” His materials are found in “places where spent things are discarded.”

Yet not all of the raw materials Snyder uses are common detritus. You don’t often stumble upon centrifuge parts (*Centrifuge with Twin Spiral Accelerators*, 2013) or a prism from a World War II tank gunsight (*Asteroid Station*, 2016) while strolling down a dirt path. He sources components from a friend who

owns a professional kitchen outfitter, for instance, or purveyors of military surplus, or Snyder’s version of paradise: a place called Vulcan Scrap Metal Co. in Stamford, Connecticut.

Vulcan sells metal of every shape you can imagine, he says. He found the whole nozzle for *Firehose Nozzle Lamp*, 2002, in the bronze section. These pieces have no meaning to Vulcan’s vendors, says Snyder; they sell by the pound. But he sees beauty in the scrap, and future purpose. To enter, “you went under a World War II bomb, a practice bomb, they had hung over the gate that said, ‘Have a blast at Vulcan,’” he recalls. “Eventually I bought the bomb from them, too.”

Snyder continues to create art in his New York and North Carolina homes, with lathes and milling machines, and the windowsills, floors, and closets filled with his trove, destined for reinvention.

—Maureen Searcy



**J**ill Mateo, associate professor in comparative human development, knows what the students in her Darwinian Health course are thinking.

She knows because she assigns reaction papers, due before class. She walks in understanding what the students think of the day's readings ("You guys hated it," she says of one 1993 article. "Really interesting.") and what they're confused about: "A couple of you pondered the evolution of sex. You still have questions? Why do we have male and female?"

It's a gray, overcast day late in Winter Quarter. Twelve masked students sit around a long table in Rosenwald Hall, with four more in desks at the edges; Mateo stands at a lectern in the front. Today's topic is sex and reproduction.

According to the syllabus, Darwinian Health takes "an evolutionary, rather than clinical, approach" to health and disease. So far the course has covered pregnancy sickness, senescence, allergies, cancer, and more. Mateo, who holds appointments in the Committee on Evolutionary Biology and the Institute for Mind and Biology, earned a doctorate in biopsychology; most of her research focuses on Belding's ground squirrels.

When no one offers much of an answer to the male-female question, Mateo explains. "The default state is asexual, and the default sex is female," she says. Asexual reproduction has its advantages: "You don't have to divide your gametes, you're just reproducing clones. But what if the environment changes?" That's when sexual reproduction—or "mixing up gametes," as Mateo describes it—might help your

species survive. Maybe at least one of the offspring will be suited to the changed environment.

"We don't have the Wayback Machine to see how we ended up with sperm and eggs," Mateo continues. But at some point in evolutionary history, something in the environment of evolutionary adaptedness (during class, this is just referred to as "the EEA") resulted in anisogamy, meaning unequal gamete size. "This unequal investment in gametes sets the stage, in the world of sexual selection, for a lot of sex differences," Mateo says. Males, who invest very little in their gametes, tend to invest less in their offspring, while it's the opposite for females, she says. Females are also much choosier about partners.

Mateo brings up a slide with the headline, "So, do humans fit predictions of mate choice?" above two black-and-white photographs: on the left, some 19th-century guy in a dapper three-piece suit; on the right, Marilyn Monroe. "Anybody know who this is?" she asks, then clarifies, "The male." The class laughs. Everyone recognizes Marilyn Monroe.



"John D. Rockefeller," she says, "the richest man in the world. He founded Standard Oil and the University of Chicago. Rockefeller Chapel?" Sounds of "ohhh" and more laughter.

**John D. Rockefeller in 1895 (left); Marilyn Monroe in 1955.**

Since Rockefeller had so many “resources” (in the parlance of evolutionary biology) “he would be expected to be desired,” Mateo says. Meanwhile Marilyn Monroe “shows signs of fertility: glossy hair, taut skin. Those are signs that men might find attractive.”

Mateo flips to a slide about reproductive potential for men and women. “What do you think the record is for the most offspring that a woman bore?” Students call out answers ranging from the high teens to the low twenties.

Mateo reveals the number—69—to a lot of surprised noises. “I honestly feel bad for whoever that woman was,” one student murmurs. (The first wife of 18th-century Russian peasant Feodor Vassilyev, whose name has been lost to history.)

“She had lots of twins and triplets,” Mateo says, explaining the seemingly impossible math. “But most of them survived.”



And for men? Now the students’ guesses are much higher. The actual total: 888, the children of 18th-century Moroccan ruler Moulay Ismail Ibn Sharif.

Those two hold the records for lifetime reproductive success. A “more realistic” limit for lifetime reproduction for a human female—since most women do not have multiple sets of twins or triplets—is 12 to 20 children. How about for a human male?

“It could be, like, infinite,” one student offers. Another student agrees. Mateo reveals the answer on the slide: “???”

“Across all species, is polyandry [when females have more than one male partner] less common than polygyny?” a student wants to know.

“That’s a great question,” says Mateo. “Polyandry is fairly rare. We see it in some bird species, very few mammals, some insects, but it is rare.” In such polyandrous situations—among pipefish, for example—males are the choosy ones.

According to evolutionary theory, there’s always a logical explanation for choosing a mate based on what might—among humans—be considered shallow reasons. Male pipefish prefer long females to short females: “Female length is an indicator of her quality and the number of eggs she might be carrying,” Mateo explains. Male pipefish also prefer female pipefish with a large skinfold, “which again might signal something about her genetic quality.”

After the slide presentation, Mateo leads a discussion on each of the day’s three readings in turn. The first, an article titled “Pathogen Prevalence and Human Mate Preferences,” found that in areas of the world where certain diseases are more common, physical attractiveness is more important in mate choice than in other parts of the world. (Put simply, physical attractiveness serves as a proxy for health.) A second paper, “Chemical Signals and Parasite-Mediated Sexual Selection,” shows that female mice, who are attracted to male mice’s urine scent marks, prefer healthy mice to those infected with a parasite.

In a discussion about the risks and costs of reproduction, a student asks: Are conditions ever so harsh that sperm production stops entirely?

“That’s a really good question that I don’t think anyone has posed before,” Mateo says thoughtfully. “I suspect if males are in really poor condition, at some point testosterone production is going to decrease,” which eventually could inhibit sperm production.

**Moulay Ismail  
Ibn Sharif (left)  
reputedly fathered  
888 children.**

# “The later a woman had her first pregnancy or childbirth, the longer she lived. And I was like, that’s a take.”

—A student in Darwinian Health

“Google says after 16 days of starvation,” another student volunteers. (Clicking through to the source reveals a 1969 paper by two professors in Clemson University’s poultry science department. Seemingly this research has not been widely done on other species.)

With 12 minutes left, Mateo turns to the final reading, “Human Longevity at the Cost of Reproductive Success.” The authors looked at centuries of birth and death records for British aristocratic families, some dating back to 740 CE.

“Why do you think they chose to limit their study to British aristocracy?” Mateo asks.

“They’re reasonably homogeneous,” a student points out.

“Right. It’s a really good sample. The data are rich,” Mateo says, adding, “Pun not intended.”

The paper draws a correlation between a woman’s age when her first child was born and her age of death. The paper fits with “disposable soma theory,” Mateo explains: “You can invest in your body, or you can invest in reproduction. Investment in total is limited.”

“The later a woman had her first pregnancy or childbirth, the longer she lived,” as one student put it. “And I was like, that’s a take.” Once again, the class is laughing.

**“WELCOME TO BIOS 24217, The Conquest of Pain!”** reads the first sentence of Keith Ruskin’s syllabus. Ruskin, professor of anesthesia and critical care, has published research on

such topics as the safe use of automated medical technology, personal protective equipment and human performance, and supplemental oxygen for rescuers doing chest compression (it may increase the amount of time rescuers can sustain their efforts).

Among the notable characteristics of the popular biology/neuroscience course: the long list of guest lecturers, the chance to shadow Ruskin during actual surgeries, and his extreme enthusiasm.

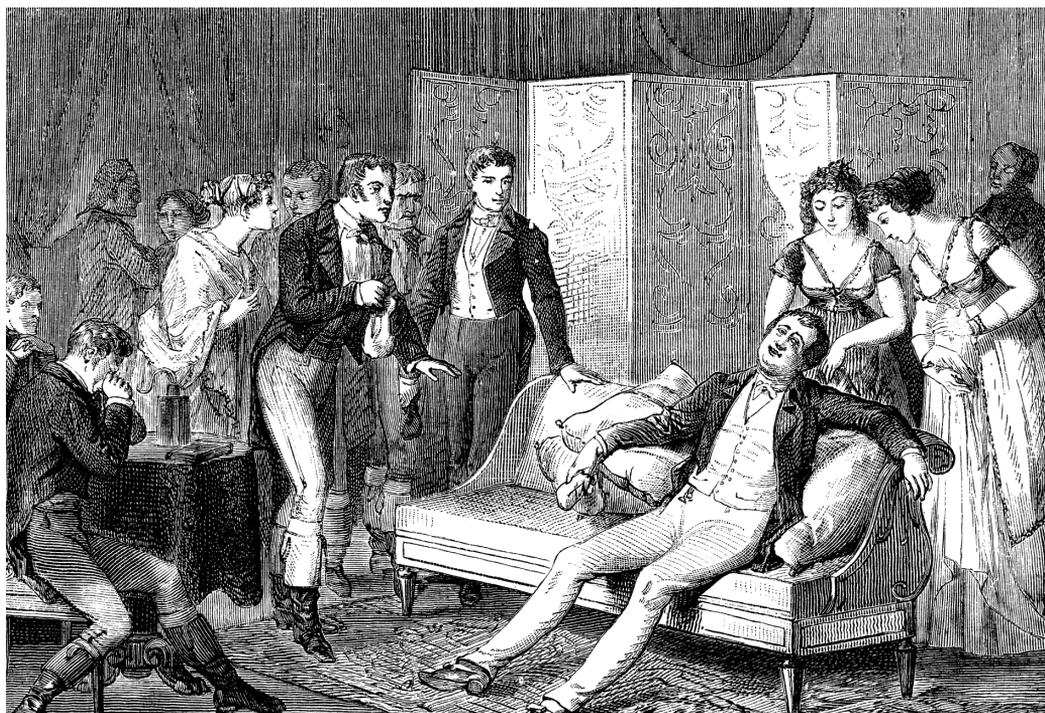
As today’s guest lecturer, Ming Xu, sets up at the front of O-413, the anesthesia conference room, a student tells the class about her shadowing experience. She observed two cases. In one procedure, a patient had a mass removed from his knee. Watching the man suddenly regain consciousness afterward “was really cool,” she said. “It was just like that.”

A more complicated procedure, for a patient with a tumor in his neck, went on much longer, so she didn’t observe it all. The surgery, “a very big neck dissection and reconstruction,” as Ruskin describes it, began at 8:00 a.m. and wrapped up around 1:30 a.m.

“Does the surgeon rotate out?” another student wants to know.

In this case, Ruskin explains, a few teams were required: ENT (ear, nose, and throat) surgeons as well as plastic surgeons. “They will take periodic rest breaks and bathroom breaks,” he says. Sometimes there are quiet moments when those who aren’t directly involved can step away.

At other times, “it’s all-hands-on-deck,” Ruskin says. For most of the



An illustration of chemist Humphrey Davy's early experimentation with nitrous oxide, commonly known as laughing gas, in 1799.

students in the class, he says, "I've been able to leave the room with you and show you around. But a couple of you had experiences where it was like, 'I'm really sorry. I can't leave here right now. You're just going to have to watch me deal with this problem.'"

Another student asks about the type of anesthesia used for lengthy procedures. Is it safe for a patient to be under for so long?

"How many more weeks do you have for the answer?" Ruskin quips. The quick version is yes and no. "After an 18- or 20-hour procedure, it might not be safe to allow the patient to wake up right after," due to fluid shifts, swelling, or other factors, he says. "Usually you let them stay asleep overnight." Some drugs tend to accumulate in the body over time, but in the case of a long procedure, that can be an advantage: it helps keep the patient asleep until morning.

So far this quarter, the course has featured 10 guest speakers, lecturing on subjects such as chronic pain and spinal, regional, and general anesthetics. "Do Children Feel Pain?" was the title of one

lecture. "A Psychologist Looks at Pain" was another.

Ruskin introduces Xu, a professor of anesthesia and critical care, whose topic is drug addiction, as well as a novel treatment he helped develop that "I am confident will revolutionize" how addiction is treated, Ruskin says.

Wearing a gray V-neck sweater, beige pants, and comfortable shoes, Xu is soft-spoken with a calm demeanor. "There is a huge unmet need for proper treatment," he says. "It's one of the most active areas in biomedical research." Pain relievers—as anyone who follows the news knows—are a common source of drug misuse. "And I'll have plenty of slides to show that," he adds, somewhat ominously.

First, Xu defines the different risks of drug *use* (which is occasional and recreational, with the primary concern being acute overdose), drug *misuse* (more frequent; characterized by a negative effect on the user's life), and drug *addiction*. Addiction "is not just a bad habit or lack of willpower," he says. It's a chronic brain disease, characterized by compulsive drug

seeking and taking—and it’s very difficult to extinguish.

Xu’s slides, with yellow and white text against a peaceful blue background, belie their dismaying content. He walks the class through the most commonly abused categories of drugs. Opiates and opioids (opiates are derived from the opium poppy, while opioids are synthetic). Alcohol. Nicotine. Psychomotor stimulants (cocaine, amphetamine, methamphetamine). Cannabinoids. And, finally, club drugs (LSD, MDMA, GHB).

Some of these drugs, Xu notes, have medical and other uses. Amphetamine is used by fighter pilots, for example, to increase focus and energy.

“There are two drugs that are used in the military as ‘go’ pills,” Ruskin interjects: amphetamine and, increasingly, modafinil. (Ruskin, a fellow of both the Aerospace Medical Association and the Royal Aeronautical Society, is an expert on aerospace medicine.)

Each squadron of pilots has a flight surgeon who issues pills “to take under extenuating circumstances only,” he explains. But first, pilots are required to take them while on the ground to judge the effects, because the drugs can cause aggression. “The last thing you want is an aggressive, emotional fighter pilot.”

Back to Xu, who adds two more categories of drugs to the frequently abused list—prescription medications and anabolic steroids—before warning, “The next five slides have really discouraging data.” Opiates and opioids (the terms are often used interchangeably) account for 70 percent of global drug addiction, he says. But alcohol, smoking, and psychostimulants are also serious problems. Xu takes a dim view of marijuana use despite its changing legal status: “It’s particularly bad for infants, children, and teenagers, because the brain is still developing.”

Different classes of drugs target different brain receptors, Xu continues, and many are related to elevated dopamine release. In animal models, for example, cocaine is more addictive than natural rewards, such as food or sex. “Cocaine wins all the time,” he says.

A student has a question: Could these drugs be used to treat diseases with low levels of dopamine, such as Parkinson’s?

“Your thought is right,” Xu says. But attempts to control dopamine—which could also alleviate schizophrenia, characterized by excess dopamine—have not been successful. “There’s a lot of research, but no optimum outcome.”

Having described the scope of the problem, Xu introduces his own research: “I’m kind of proud of this,” he says, “because it addresses a huge unmet need.”

His experimental treatment, as bizarre as it might seem, is to remove a piece of skin, culture the cells, edit the genome slightly, and graft the skin back onto the donor (mice, in this case). The genetically modified skin cells release a molecule that regulates dopamine, dulling alcohol cravings. Another type of modified cells can make an enzyme that breaks down cocaine. Why skin? For two practical reasons: it’s easy to access, and skin cells can withstand a long culture time in the lab.

Xu’s research is so new that his start-up, AddGraft Therapeutics, had launched just two months before his Conquest of Pain lecture. Soon afterward the story hit the mainstream media, with articles in the *Chicago Tribune* and the *New York Post*.

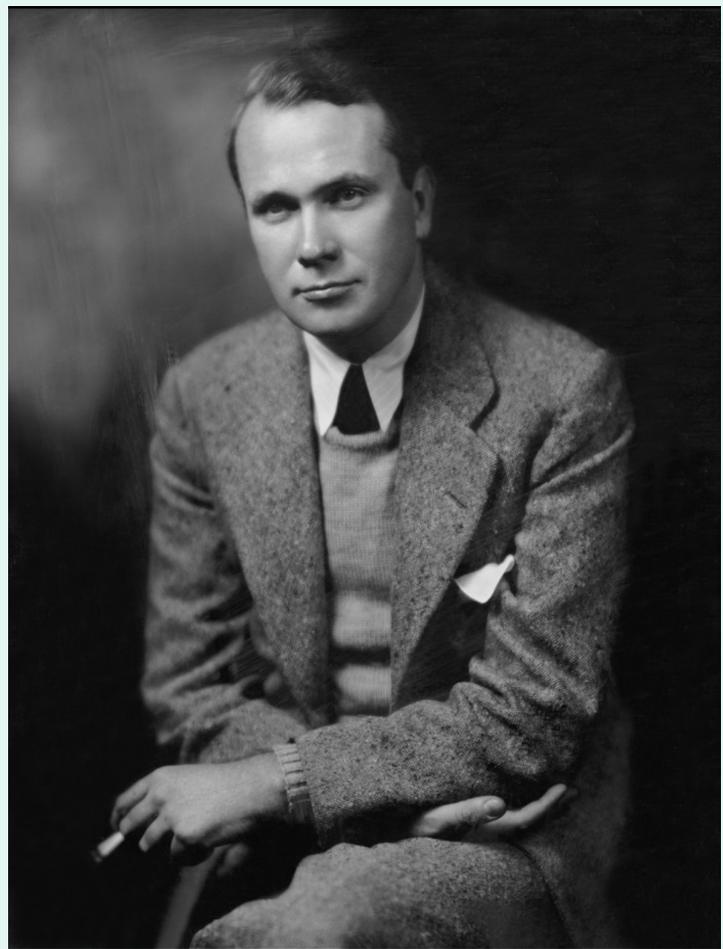
The treatment is effective for cocaine addiction, alcohol addiction, and both together—but not for methamphetamine. “It works really nicely,” Xu says. “We’re looking forward to translating it to human testing.”

Presentation over, Xu asks if students have any questions. There are hands up all over the room. ❀

# WHEN THE PERSONAL IS POLITICAL

Reporters John Gunther, PhB 1922, and Vincent Sheean, EX 1921, sounded an early warning about the rise of European dictators.

By Carrie Golus, AB'91, AM'93





**John Gunther (left) in 1926; Vincent Sheean in 1934.**

One day, Hitler vowed, he would return to the Hotel Imperial. As a young man, he had shoveled snow in front of the grand Vienna hotel, doffing his cap respectfully at the Habsburgs, who ignored him. Underneath his obeisance was rage.

In the spring of 1938, after the German army marched into Austria, that day finally came. Hitler set up his headquarters in a first-floor suite—one floor up from the café that had been a favorite hangout of the era’s foreign correspondents.

That sharp shift of events inspired the title of *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial: The Reporters Who Took On a World at War* (Random House, 2022), a new book by historian Deborah Cohen. *Last Call* is a group biography of a circle of foreign correspondents: Dorothy Thompson, H. R. Knickerbocker, Vincent Sheean, John Gunther, and Frances Fineman Gunther. Two members of this small circle—Sheean, EX 1921, and John Gunther, PhB 1922—began their illustrious careers at the *Daily Maroon*.

All household names in their day, this group of urbane foreign correspondents were friends and rivals. They drank heavily, threw raucous parties, had tumultuous marriages and affairs, and wrote brutally frank letters and diaries.

Middle-class Americans from provincial backgrounds, they

understood what ordinary Americans wanted to know about the world, says Cohen. They also understood—and tried to convey to their readers—what the rise of dictators across Europe meant. War was inevitable, they all agreed; it was only a question of when.

Sheean, Gunther, and the others, with their portable typewriters and their unvarnished ambition, helped define the profession of foreign correspondent in the period between the two world wars. And they are almost entirely forgotten today.

**IN 2015** Cohen, a Northwestern professor who contributes to the *Atlantic* and other popular publications, drove down to Hyde Park to look at John Gunther’s files in Special Collections. Thinking she might write about Gunther’s taboo-breaking 1949 memoir *Death Be Not Proud* (Harper and Brothers), she wanted to read some of the thousands of letters he had received after its publication.

Gunther’s files in Special Collections fill up 122 boxes—that’s 61 linear feet. He wrote 25 nonfiction books, seven novels, countless articles, drafts of novels and short stories that never made it into print, and reams of letters. On a whim, Cohen glanced through a 1937 folder marked “miscellaneous correspondence” and came across “incredible riches,” she

says. There was a letter from Indian nationalist leader Jawaharlal Nehru describing his love for his late wife. A note from Czech foreign minister Jan Masaryk gossiping about the abdication crisis in Britain, calling it a “typically kinky British affair.”

The more she read, the more her scope broadened beyond Gunther. She realized he was part of a group of correspondents who shared a similar sensibility and career trajectory, and who had documented everything. “I’ve been a historian for 30 years and I’ve worked in some amazing archives,” Cohen said in an interview with the *History Author Show*, “but *nothing* like this.” The documents she unboxed revealed individual lives as well as a fateful stretch of world history.

**BY 1929** James Vincent Sheean, who used “Vincent Sheean” as his byline but went by “Jimmy,” had insinuated himself into a circle of writers and artists now known as the Bloomsbury Group. It was a remarkable achievement, given their reputation as “notoriously clubby and self-sustaining,” Cohen writes. Music critic Edward Sackville-West was one of Sheean’s lovers. (Eddy’s sister, Vita Sackville-West, was one of Virginia Woolf’s.)

This glamorous, bohemian existence was a world apart from Sheean’s hometown of Pana, Illinois, population 7,500. Sheean had plotted his escape for years. By high school he had read all of Shakespeare and learned French, Italian, and a bit of German; in his senior year, he wrote an essay on literature that won him a scholarship to UChicago.

At first Sheean struggled to fit into the byzantine social structure of the early University, which he pilloried in his 1935 memoir, *Personal History*. In a cringe-inducing anecdote, Sheean accepts a bid from a fraternity led by a *Maroon* editor he much admires. A woman student takes him aside to explain that pledging such a low-status fraternity would mean social death. Sheean, who has already

moved into the fraternity house, climbs out the window in the middle of the night and flees.

John Gunther, a year behind Sheean, came from similarly humble beginnings on Chicago’s North Side. Formerly the Guenthers, the family changed their surname during the First World War. An ambitious autodidact like Sheean, Gunther kept a notebook of obscure vocabulary words and jotted down ideas, observations, and quotations on index cards. “Growing realization that I was meant for something big,” he noted on one of the cards.

Gunther enrolled in the College at age 17, living at home to save money. When he received bids from two fraternities, both considered “bad,” he turned them down, remaining a “barbarian,” as nonaffiliated men were called. Sheean and Gunther knew each other distantly, but Sheean—who later pledged a fraternity higher up the pecking order—considered Gunther “a real barb in those days.”

**SHEEAN LEFT UCHICAGO** without finishing his degree and moved to New York, where he was hired at the New York *Daily News*, the country’s first tabloid. In contrast, Gunther graduated in 1922 and began his journalism career as a cub reporter at the *Chicago Daily News*, considered the most literary of Chicago’s newspapers.

By the mid-1920s both had landed in Europe—Sheean went first to Paris, Gunther to London—and were busily reinventing themselves as foreign correspondents. Scoops, they learned, were to be sent by cable. Less urgent stories, called “mailers,” were longer, more colorful articles sent by post, which was cheaper.

Gunther had managed to get his first scoop on the journey to England: Edward, the Prince of Wales, was traveling on the same ship from New York to Southampton. Gunther got a \$100 advance from the United Press to move to first class, the better to stalk his prey.

While much of the correspondents’ reporting centered on Europe, they occasionally traveled farther afield. In 1925 Sheean went to Morocco

Vienna's Hotel Imperial was originally built as a palace.



to cover the Rif War, a rebellion against the Spanish. He was determined to interview the leader of the Rifi, Mohammed ben Abd el-Krim, who had established an Islamic republic in hopes of uniting Muslims against European imperialism. To get past the Spanish blockade, Sheean wore traditional North African clothing and rode a mule across rugged terrain. He got his interview—and a reputation for going to extreme lengths to nab a story.

In 1929 Sheean and Gunther were both reporting from Palestine, a former Ottoman territory that the League of Nations had given to the British to administer after World War I. Sheean filed some of the earliest reports of the outbreak of violence between Arabs and Jews, which began at the Western (or Wailing) Wall and left hundreds dead. Hard-bitten Sheean was so shaken by what he saw that he had a nervous breakdown.

Gunther, arriving later, wrote a series of mailers attempting to explain the complexity of the conflict, which had inflamed international opinion: “a question with no solution,” he wrote. During these dark times in Jerusalem, Sheean and Gunther finally became friends.

**BACK IN EUROPE**, the political situation showed similar signs of instability and impending violence. “Armed with a peculiarly American obsession with personalities,” Cohen writes, this group of correspondents “sounded an early warning about the rise of the dictators.” As early as 1926, Gunther had the idea for a series of articles about countries that had become dictatorships: Poland, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece, and on and on.

Objectivity had become a journalistic ideal in the 1920s, just as Gunther and the others were beginning their careers abroad. But as the situation in Europe deteriorated, they began to question this approach.

By the early 1930s, Gunther had settled in Vienna with his wife, Frances—then a correspondent for the *London News Chronicle*—and their son, Johnny. When the Nazis came to power in Germany, Gunther tried to write about their terror campaign against the Jews. Gunther’s Chicago editor, firmly believing there must be two sides to any dispute, requested “more diversified” articles, since the purpose of a newspaper “is to publish a well-rounded account of events.”

The 1940 Hitchcock film *Foreign Correspondent* was loosely based on Vincent Sheehan's 1935 memoir, *Personal History*.



Sheehan filed similar dispatches about the persecution of Jews in Austria after its annexation—worse than in Germany, he reported. He even predicted the Nazis would try to murder all of Europe’s Jews, “and the rest of the population—terrified, half believing, uncertain—will be glad to forget it in a week or so and say it was ‘all greatly exaggerated by the foreign press,’” he complained bitterly.

In 1936 Gunther finally had the chance to make his case about the rise of dictatorships—all 500-plus pages of it. His book *Inside Europe* (Harper and Brothers) focused primarily on the new crop of dictators—Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin—and the diplomats who seemed powerless to keep them in check. “Unresolved personal conflicts in the lives of various European politicians may contribute to the collapse of our civilization,” Gunther asserted, echoing the Freudian thinking that was fashionable at the time. (John and Frances Gunther had both undergone psychoanalysis in Vienna with an acolyte of Freud.)

Sheehan agreed with Gunther’s focus on the rise of individual personalities but rejected his Freudian analysis. He struggled to provide a blurb for his friend’s book. “You may not agree with Gunther’s central thesis on the historic role of the accidents of personality (I don’t, for instance),” he wrote in an early draft.

Immediately banned in Germany (a fact the publisher played up), *Inside Europe* sold a million copies worldwide. Anthony Eden, British foreign secretary and future prime minister, was observed reading it; young John F. Kennedy took a copy with him when he traveled to Europe. The book became the first installment of a series of best-selling books for Gunther: *Inside Asia* (1939), *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), *Inside Africa* (1955), *Inside South America* (1967), and more.

**LIKE GUNTHER**, in *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial* Cohen juxtaposes the personal with the political (to the point of distraction, some

reviewers have suggested). Sheean, Gunther, and the others—as revealed by their letters and diaries—come across as deeply flawed characters, lurching from one personal disaster to the next.

Sheean and Gunther revealed a little of their private lives themselves, in memoirs that were, at the time, considered *outré*. Published in 1935, Sheean's *Personal History* was a literary sensation: “the coming-of-age memoir of the 1930s,” in Cohen’s description. Not quite an autobiography, it was the story of a young man trying to find his place in a new and confusing world. The success of the book—in which names were left unchanged—made him feel “like a dog that’s made a mess in the middle of the drawing room,” Sheean wrote to Eddy Sackville-West. “I couldn’t help making the mess, but now I feel very guilty and very conspicuous.” The book was the inspiration for the 1940 Alfred Hitchcock film *Foreign Correspondent*.

Gunther’s memoir came later, in 1949, after his son Johnny died of brain cancer at age 17. *Death Be Not Proud*—the title taken from a sonnet by John Donne—was a slim volume in three parts: Gunther’s narrative of his son’s illness, excerpts from Johnny’s writings, and an afterword by Frances Gunther, by then his ex-wife.

“To air publicly such an intimate story of sickness and suffering was unheard of,” Cohen writes. Some reviewers were shocked, but letters from bereaved parents poured in: Gunther had finally spoken the grief in their hearts. It was this collection of letters, now in Special Collections, that Cohen had first wanted to peek at.

In their later careers, Gunther and the others wrote numerous best sellers and Book-of-the-Month Club selections. Sheean wrote a tell-all book about a marriage that wasn’t his—*Dorothy and Red* (Houghton Mifflin, 1963), on fellow foreign correspondent Dorothy Thompson and her second husband, author Sinclair “Red” Lewis. “Vincent Sheean uses all his fine skill as a war correspondent to dramatize the embattled marriage,” read one review.

But of all these widely read, commercially successful books, *Death Be Not Proud* is the only one still in print.

**ACCORDING TO** the “great man” theory of history, Hitler himself, through the force of his charismatic, sociopathic personality, brought about Naziism. No Hitler: no Nazis, no Holocaust.

In the 1930s, when Gunther, Sheean, and the others pointed to dictators who were driving the world to war, says Cohen, “they’re resuscitating a 19th-century idea,” developed around the time of Napoleon, “that history depends on great men.” This group of foreign correspondents “became very focused on these personalities. And that causes a big rush to try to land interviews with them.”

Hitler, by all accounts, was a terrible interview; rather than answering questions, he delivered his usual speeches to an audience of one. Gunther, in an attempt to comprehend him through his upbringing (Freud again), traveled to rural Austria and interviewed his peasant relatives.

After World War II, “historians turned away from these ideas,” says Cohen, and “disdained the great man theory.” The postwar approach, focusing on larger swaths of society, was possible partly because more facts became available, she says. The Nazis, for example, closely monitored public opinion. These archives were accessible for study after the war—a luxury not available to reporters of the time, when freedom of the press was curtailed. (Desperate to learn the views of ordinary Germans, Gunther resorted to going to the movies; when Hitler came onscreen, he noted how many people applauded and how enthusiastically. It wasn’t much to go on.)

But in the last decade, with the rise of “new model authoritarianism” around the world, some scholars are reexamining their assumptions, Cohen says. She noticed the shift even as she worked on *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial*. She began her research in 2015; Donald Trump was elected in 2016.

In 2017 Princeton historian David Bell published the essay “Donald Trump Is Making the Great Man Theory of History Great Again” in *Foreign Policy*. He argued that Trump—whether you supported him or not—is exceptional in American history. To understand his presidency, historians need different tools. “We’re in a phase,” says Cohen, “when the great man reporting these correspondents did in the 1930s seems exigent.” ❀

# YOUR STARTUP WILL PROBABLY FAIL

And other lessons learned the hard way, according to three young entrepreneurs.



By Carrie Golus, AB'91, AM'93

In 1998 Dean **John W. Boyer**, AM'69, PhD'75, had an idea. Why not invite alumni back to campus to give career advice to students?

The event, called Taking the Next Step, “began in a modest way, with a few hundred kids in Ida Noyes. We weren’t certain that anyone would show up,” Boyer told the students who had gathered virtually for the 2022 version. “But they did show up.”

Taking the Next Step was the beginning of serious attention to career advisement, leading to the Jeff Metcalf Internship Program,

weeklong career treks, the “Careers in ...” preprofessional programs, and more. Previously, Boyer quipped, the attitude was closer to “you take your courses, you get your diploma, good luck.”

This year’s Taking the Next Step offered panels in 16 broad career areas, including academia, consulting, law, medicine, and policy and government. The *Core* eavesdropped on the entrepreneurship panel, which featured three alumni aged 30 or younger. Their remarks have been edited and condensed.

**Scott Metcalf**  
**What was your college experience like?**

**Richard Wu**

I got as involved with Polsky [Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation] as possible. In my second year, I became a cofounder of a Social New Venture Challenge concept called KitcheNet. That company was my life for the next two years. I'm not necessarily the best role model. I'd send emails through Mailchimp during lectures.

**Nick Chua**

Beyond the academics themselves, the majority of my time was spent on the tennis team. Unlike Richard, I got into entrepreneurship kind of late. As many economics students could tell you, finance seemed like the only path forward.

But I unknowingly took some classes that were really helpful, like Entrepreneurial Selling, which I took at Booth through the Trott Business Program. One of the assignments was to cold-call 50 people. You had to record it and present to the class. I hated that assignment. But I realize now that is a core part of the job.

**Vicente Fernandez**

Aside from playing football, I cofounded the UChicago Sports Business Team. We brought in speakers such as the president of the Chicago Bulls, the owner of the Chicago White Sox, the agency that reps Nike, speakers from ESPN. I also cofounded Maroon TV to broadcast UChicago football games and other cool

happenings on campus. That was like running a startup.

I had an incredible professor in cinema and media studies, **Judy Hoffman**. If you've seen *Divergent*, they use UChicago as one of the locations for the Erudite faction. The location scout connected with Judy, and she arranged for me to shadow the producer. I had an incredible experience with Lionsgate, the production company. Lionsgate is now one of our partners at SportsManias.

**Scott Metcalf**  
**What do you wish you had known as an undergrad?**

**Vicente Fernandez**

First, funding is incredibly important, but sometimes you can get lost in the funding chase. There's a balance between building a solid business and fundraising. Building a business is more important in the long run.

Second, you want to be the most knowledgeable person in the room about your specific area, whatever that is.

**Nick Chua**

To be an entrepreneur, you just start. You don't need permission. No one is going to tell you that you are ready to start a company. All you need to do is be really interested in a space, start, and then just keep iterating. It's okay if your MVP [minimum viable product] sucks, as long as you keep making improvements.

A common misconception is that successful entrepreneurs had everything figured out from the start. You hear legendary stories of people



**Nicolas "Nick" Chua, AB'18**  
**Cofounder and CEO, Edith Labs**

Edith Labs matches college students with mentors in careers such as technology, finance, and consulting. After graduating and finding a job, mentees pay their mentors one percent of their salary for a year.



**Vicente Fernandez, AB'14**  
**Cofounder and CEO, SportsManias**

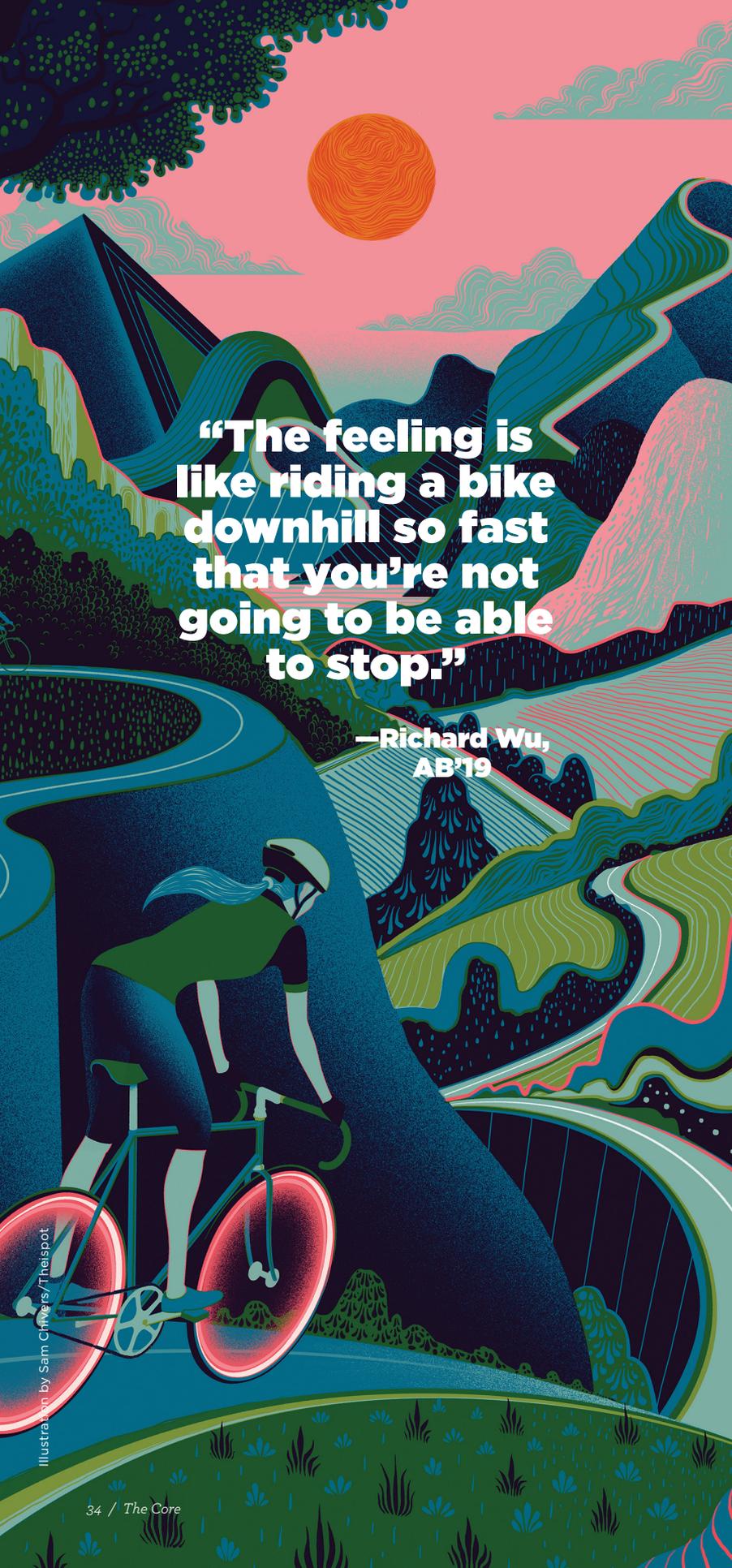
Originally billed as a curator of sports news, SportsManias now creates sports emojis and augmented reality (AR) effects.



**Richard Wu, AB'19**  
**Product manager, Woflow**

Woflow automates merchant data onboarding—for example, the digitization of restaurant menus (previously a time-consuming manual process) for food delivery apps.

**Moderated by Scott Metcalf**  
**(no relation to Jeff Metcalf),**  
**MBA'94, program director,**  
**Careers in Entrepreneurship**  
**and Healthcare**



**“The feeling is like riding a bike downhill so fast that you’re not going to be able to stop.”**

**—Richard Wu, AB’19**

like Jeff Bezos leaving his job at a hedge fund. But there’s a lot of survivorship bias. Even talking about my own story, success makes so much sense when you hear about it afterwards. In the moment, there are a lot of times things will seem questionable.

### *Richard Wu*

When you’re starting a business, the only things that matter are talking to users and building the product. Then you get feedback and build a better product. You don’t want to focus on the wrong things, like vanity metrics. If you get press, even something like *Forbes* 30 under 30, it not only doesn’t matter but also can push you in the wrong direction.

Most likely your college startup will fail. Statistically, it’ll probably fail. Not that you shouldn’t try, because maybe yours is Facebook.

But what I mean is, as college students, we haven’t really failed yet. And when your startup fails, it’s going to suck, but the next thing is always better.

### *Student question:*

**How do you know when you’ve achieved a good product-market fit (PMF)?**

### *Nick Chua*

We knew we were onto something when we kept getting emails. Even complaint emails, like, “Hey, this sucks, I want this to change,” or “Why can’t I sign up now?”—you’ve got to recognize that’s actually valuable input. People’s time is valuable. If you

don't like something, you're just going to stop using it.

You can really feel the difference in momentum. It's not like when you feel sad every day, because you're cold reaching out to people.

### **Vicente Fernandez**

It's difficult to tell early on. We had this idea that SportsManias was going to grow by curating content from local newspaper beat writers. It was really challenging to partner with these publications, in a way we didn't expect.

We had to come up with a different approach, which was the emojis. And there we saw immediate results—people reaching out. Instead of having to get new business or new customers, we're seeing hundreds of millions of views organically and we have some big partners coming our way.

### **Richard Wu**

When you've found PMF, the feeling is like riding a bike downhill so fast that you're not going to be able to stop.

A recent example at my current company: We had three very big customers sign up at the same time. We had a team of 15, and we couldn't deploy capital fast enough to hire enough people. We were going to fail and lose these customers with huge contracts.

The only real way to find PMF is to launch early, talk to users, and build product. Then all of a sudden, one day, you'll be like, Wow, I'm going to fail because I'm winning so much.

**Student question:**  
**I've heard that for entrepreneurs, grades don't matter. True?**

### **Richard Wu**

I don't know if I'm allowed to say this, but I've never had someone ask for my GPA. An A minus, or an A, never really made a difference in my life.

I would say, if you can't get good grades, the reason should be because you have an opportunity cost—you're busy doing other really cool things and you're optimizing for the B. Not because you're not studying hard enough.

### **Nick Chua**

In terms of the startup world, right, your grades don't matter.

If you apply to an MBA program or another master's program, they do check your GPA. Some will even ask for your SAT score. And lots of investment banks have a GPA cutoff.

Many companies fail, and the outcome of a failed company is zero financially. You're going to have to find a job or start another company. So having a good GPA gives you some optionality.

### **Vicente Fernandez**

The main thing that comes to mind is a quote from a football coach: "How you do anything is how you do everything."

In a lot of these classes—especially HUM and SOSC—you're tasked with putting together an original thought about something a lot of people have thought about, and supporting that thought and

defending it. That's very much what entrepreneurship is like.

**Student question:**  
**How do you know if you have the right team?**

### **Vicente Fernandez**

Building the right team is really hard and very important. Having the right people around you is critical to your success.

I was a cinema and media studies, creative writing, Latin American studies guy. I didn't have the skills to build products. People ask me all the time, "Are you the person who makes the emojis?" I'm like, There's way more talented people than me to make the emojis and make our AR effects. I'm the person who's out there pitching and driving forward the partnerships.

### **Richard Wu**

I would reframe the question a little bit. It's not how do you find your team, but how do you find a cofounder.

You shouldn't start building out a huge team while you're an undergrad. It's a big mistake to do what I did, which is hire an army of interns. You're delegating what you are most passionate about to people who are less passionate, and you're essentially making them find PMF for you.

Find the right cofounders, then raise a bunch of money, and you'll find a team by hiring them. The more you've really validated your product, then you'll know exactly what you should be looking for. 🌸

## BLOSSOMS SNAP FROM PAINTED VASES

*Reema Saleh, AB'21*

a vase is beautiful, painted,  
bursting with life and the stems shoved down its throat,  
and holds & holds & holds,  
lose its leafing,  
turn around to hide  
the glue piecing large bits together,  
a half-shattered vase can hold again.

the handful of chores brimming from her arms,  
dropping, spilling, trailing around,  
forgotten slivers of laundry on its way,  
absent from the record, willfully neglected,  
invisible labor for those who choose,  
to blink when it happens.  
what incredible things happen, on burning  
a quarter tank of gas, pooling to chase a pill,  
mama's knee creaks up the stairs,  
the porcelain pieces shift in the glue.

i am asked a question and  
[interrupted]  
yet again  
[interrupted]  
no space to answer  
*which does he want*, I wonder,  
*to hear, to talk, to hear what he hears*  
*and only*  
the echo sounds down the earthenware stem,  
blossoms spurt down, waiting to snap.

what grows outside & makes us more than we can bear  
loud, clustered chokes ripping through the air  
keeps men complaining through the night  
the warm spot my sister leaves on my spotted twin bed  
the crook my head outgrew between my mother's waist &  
hip  
bathroom stalls become prayer circles for familiar  
strangers  
the force my grandmother cradles my face and kisses my  
cheek  
could leave bruises in the dust collecting on pottery skin

the greatest fear  
outside buzzing, caring, laughing, mourning, and all the  
rest  
the work is not seen  
or  
the work is only seen  
the vase lives on,  
with ready to wilt flowers or without

**Reema Saleh, AB'21,**  
is a graduate student  
in the Harris School  
of Public Policy.

**"Blossoms Snap from  
Painted Vases" first  
ran in the November  
2021 issue of the  
student literary  
publication *Sliced  
Bread Magazine*.**

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*Strange Planet*

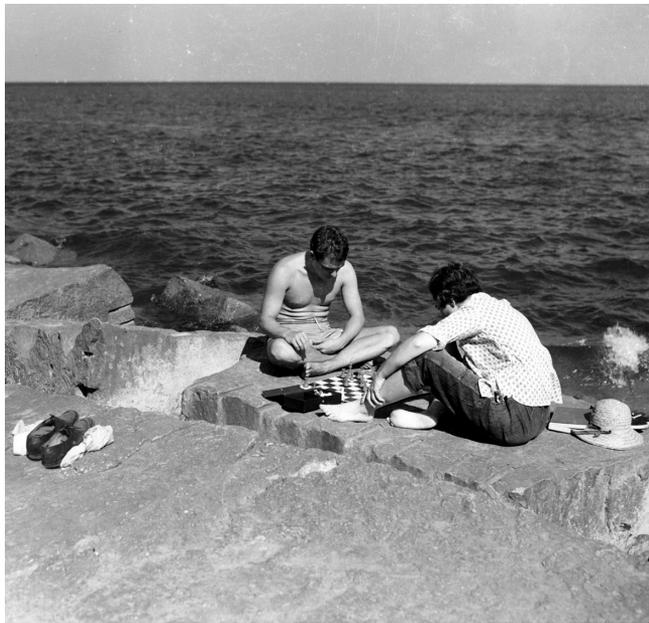
By Nathan W. Pyle



*Ibidem*

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## **LAKE MICHIGAN**



*... the inanimate sweep of the water, its hugeness and silence, make one forget the petty things and the greedy trifles which form the routine of one's day.*

**—Ben Hecht, “The Lake,” *A Thousand and One Afternoons in Chicago* (1922)**