

2024 Elie Wiesel Competition

1st Place Senior Poetry – Linda Belkov Memorial Poetry Award

Eraj Zaidi, 11th Grade

Norfolk Academy, Ari Zito

Running Back to Myself

The ball thudded against my foot as I carried myself forward.

“Run, China!” the soccer shots coach blared at 6-year-old me.

He was intimidating, my head barely

reaching his waist in height.

He had one of those faces that turned beet red when he was irritated.

I had decided he was the scariest person I had met.

I knew my name—

And that he was not calling me by it.

But I decided against correcting him.

On the first day of soccer, he had determined that my name was too unique.

I suppose it was not the uniqueness that merited learning it.

So, of course, as it was the apparent solution—

He was prompted to call me a country.

A country I wasn't from instead.

All the other kids didn't know any better.

They began to do the same thing.

And what blame was theirs?

What difference would it make if I went by a different name?

I was still me—right?

While Kitty Saks diminished her identity to stay alive,

I traded mine to keep everyone less confused.

My parents always said no to argue with elders—

To respect other people's opinions.

So, this must have been what they meant.

So I ran
Towards the ball and away from myself.
Because what was I supposed to do?
The other kids seemed to like “China.”
Just as Kitty Saks was like better under her fake name.
Because it was just easier that way.
People would have liked me, even with my real name,
If I had made an effort—
An effort Kitty Saks wasn’t allowed to make.
An effort to correct.
To be called by what I was given at birth.
And as I slowly lost a large part of who I was,
At least I had my family that knew my name waiting at home.
Something that Kitty Saks didn’t have the benefit of.
And maybe—deep down,
I hated correcting people.
Hated not having a name similar to everyone around me.
Wasn’t it my fault?
My fault for having a name that confused people?

So I ran
Towards the ball and away from myself.
The soccer field was a walking distance away from our house
So my older brother felt great pride that
On that day, his 12th birthday,
Our parents had allowed him to do the grown-up task of picking me up.
As he walked over, exuding confidence and false maturity.
He shouted—
A word I hadn’t heard on that field since I started playing on it.
My parents weren’t nearly as obnoxious as the twelve-year-old boy,

Who had done what he did to make his presence known.

They usually had just stood to the side until I was ready to leave.

But no. my brother yelled.

“ERAJ!”

I stood in shock.

I had the recurring thought that I wasn’t worth being called by my name.

No.

I was too cowardly to be called by it.

I had rejected it for so long.

I should have corrected them on the first day.

I was snatched out of my thoughts when,

Standing confidently with puffed cheeks.

His voice sounded again. Softer this time

“Eraj. Can you please hurry? We have noodles for dinner.”

All of the kids looked around, confused.

And finally, one of the girls, one I had grown relatively close with,

Began to look almost ashamed, and quietly, she said,

“Eraj?” ... “That’s so pretty.”

As I walked home with my brother that day, I smiled until my cheeks hurt.

I silently thanked him—

Because with one word,

He had kicked the ball in the opposite direction

And sent me running back to myself.