



NATSU
Perspective[S]

Cycle 1 | April 2026 | Tokyo

Merit in the Age
of Artificial Intelligence

"Rethinking Authenticity"
Bhavithran Ananthan

"How's the New AI Trend?"
Yi Thung Cheong

"We Are Lying to Ourselves"
Lucas Pinart Benavides

"Sounding Human"
George Zeng

Table of Contents

NATSU Perspective[S]



People Behind This Cycle

03-04 Meet the review panel and editorial team shaping our inaugural cycle

Sounding Human

05-06 The struggle for authenticity in an artificial age
George Zeng

How's the New AI Trend?

07-08 Generative AI is slowly seeping into our lives
Yi Thung Cheong

Rethinking Authenticity

09-10 How AI is changing what authenticity means
Bhavithran Ananthan

We are Lying to Ourselves

11-12 But, should they even be blamed?
Lucas Pinart Benavides

Read More: Honorable Mentions

14-16 Additional essays recognized by the committee

Perspective[S]

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(Cycle 1, April 2026)

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From the Editor

Let's be honest: the idea of merit has probably never been as pure as institutions often pretend or hope it to be. Long before generative AI entered the picture, access to opportunity was already shaped by family background, socioeconomic status, educational privilege, and the invisible advantages some applicants carry into the room.

In that sense, AI did not invent a crisis so much as expose one. It has made an old structural problem harder to ignore. If polished writing can now be generated, refined, and standardized at scale, then institutions can no longer comfortably rely on application essays alone while claiming to evaluate authentic character or potential. The question is no longer just whether AI is fair. It is what merit has meant all along, what it means now, and what admissions systems should do moving forward.

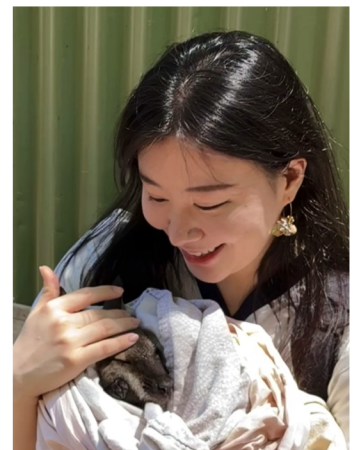
In conversation with John Groschwitz, Associate Director of the Stanford Center for East Asian Studies and a dear mentor to Natsu Project, I was reminded that this is not a distant or abstract concern. It is one that even admissions officers at some of the world's most forward-looking institutions are grappling with. That, in part, inspired this inaugural Perspective[S] prompt.

Rather than pretending to have the solution, I wanted to ask the people most directly affected: the students themselves. They are the ones being asked to compete in an imperfect meritocracy, to present themselves convincingly within systems they did not design, and to make sense of standards that are often arbitrary, unequal, and at times contradictory.

This cycle's prompt invited young students to reflect on the tension between accessibility and authenticity in the age of generative AI. On behalf of the editorial team at NATSU Perspective[S], we hope you enjoy our first issue.

Ria Oyama

Editor-in-Chief



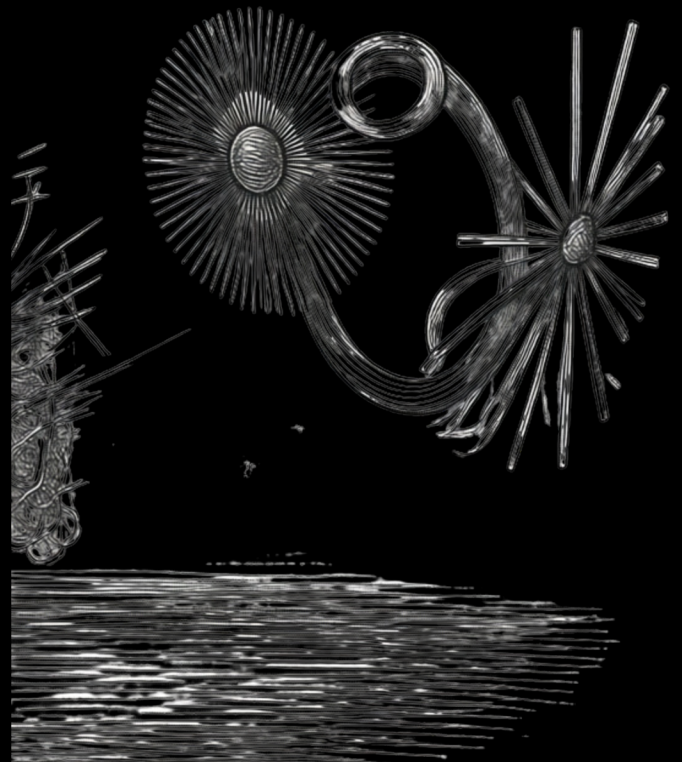
Sounding Human:

The struggle for authenticity in an artificial age

BY GEORGE ZENG

Ontario, Canada

George Zeng is a first-year Medical Sciences student at the University of Western Ontario. He is a student writer fascinated by questions of authorship, authenticity, and AI, and is particularly interested in how institutions can use technology without losing sight of the individual mind behind each application. He plans to pursue a career in medicine following his bachelor's degree.



*Image: Geometric figures made of artificial light in dusk
Source: Original image by Francesco Ungaro from Pexels*

“This essay is, by design, a small act of resistance against the problem it describes.”

An essay about artificial intelligence (AI) is now almost obliged to compete with the very force it critiques. If AI can imitate the cadence of thought, then the task of writing becomes not simply to speak, but to prove that there is someone speaking at all. That is why the question before us is not whether AI can make a job or college application sound better, but whether sounding better is the same as being true.

There is no denying AI's utility. For students who lack access to tutoring, who have been denied rigorous writing instruction, or who must navigate English as an acquired language, it can function as an equalizer, expanding creative possibility rather than constricting it. In that sense, AI can be a corrective instrument: not a substitute for thought, but a scaffold for articulation. Used judiciously, it can help clarify and refine what a student says while preserving what they mean.



Image: A futuristic flower in the mist. Source: Getty Images Signature

Yet clarity is not the same as authorship. An application essay is meant to reveal the architecture of a person's mind, including their judgment, interiority, and moral texture. When AI begins to supply the logic, arrange the evidence, and prefigure the emotional arc, the essay risks becoming a polished simulacrum of selfhood rather than a

genuine expression of it. The danger is not merely deception; it is dilution. It is the quieter erosion of the very singularity these institutions are meant to discern in applicants.

Therefore, the proper place for AI is beside the writer, not in the writer's chair. It may refine syntax, suggest alternatives, and clarify obscurity, but it must not become the source of conviction. To borrow language under the banner of equity without

preserving the substance of identity is to confuse access with authenticity.

If merit is to remain more than a fashionable word, it must still require evidence of a human mind at work. While AI can help a person speak more elegantly, it should never speak for them. Ultimately, the only honest measure of merit is not how convincingly a machine can sound like a person, but how clearly a person is willing to sound like themselves.

“

How's the New AI Trend?

”

In today's world, a common "How's the weather today?" would be replaced with "How's the new AI trend?" The reliance on generative AI is slowly seeping into our lives in all contexts.

I'm an arts and humanities student from Malaysia, where the use of generative AI is relatively new to our society. Constantly analyzing literature, I learned the importance of letting human voices shine through, particularly in the language used to express oneself.

Yet this is precisely what makes generative AI so complicated. While its fundamental purpose is to help humans wield language to articulate ideas, and while those ideas may, to an extent, still belong to us, they are ultimately molded into the same repetitive box of output, wrapped in a nice little bow of "polished flourish."

"... they are ultimately molded into the same repetitive box of output, wrapped in a nice little bow of 'polished flourish.'"

BY YI THUNG CHEONG
PHOTOS COURTESY OF
AUTHOR

Selangor, Malaysia





Image: Yi Thung Cheong starring in a theatre production. Photo courtesy of Yi Thung Cheong

Yi Thung Cheong is a recent A Levels graduate of Methodist College Kuala Lumpur with a strong interest in international relations and global affairs. Having studied law, economics, and English literature, she is interested in the relationship between human behavior, life events, and cultural narratives.

Raised in Malaysia's multicultural society, she speaks English, Malay, and Mandarin, which has shaped her curiosity about diverse communities.

Beyond academics, she is passionate about theatre, dance, and the arts, with experience in performance and creative expression. She hopes to engage in global initiatives in diplomacy while continuing to pursue the performing arts.

Common patterns noticeable include the recurring sentence structure of "It's not x, it's y." and the overuse of em dashes. The latter previously carried greater weight in conveying the human tendency to pause mid-speech to think, but has now become part of AI's generic use of pauses to bring dramatic suspense to even trivial subjects, seemingly to keep readers hooked.

Such uniformity becomes especially problematic in college and employment applications, where human personalities must shine through. These applications are the candidates' ticket to spotlight themselves under institutions' scrutiny, where authenticity has to be evident in judging whether they are a fit for the institution's community. Indeed, it can be argued that generative AI increases accessibility for those with lower language proficiency, allowing them to present themselves more effectively. However, when AI assistance begins to replace a candidate's own voice, it risks weakening the very authenticity these applications are meant to reveal.

While technical skills are valued by institutions in candidate applications, above all else, the personalities and characteristics of a person determine how those skills are executed. A major AI service provider used by such institutions in hiring processes is HireVue, which mentions attributes like "cognitive skills" and "emotional intelligence" as traits being measured in candidates. The irony is that such attributes are innately human and difficult to measure or encapsulate in AI's algorithms.

AI usage in the pursuit of polished perfection may create an impeccable image of applicants, but would ultimately result in disappointment if they fail to back it up with reality grounded in personal experience and values. I strongly believe the raw human voice should remain untouched by the consuming influence of generative AI, for the benefit of both institutions and individual applicants.

Rethinking Authenticity

Change is proportional to good and bad outcomes

BY BHAVITHRAN ANANTHAN

Selangor, Malaysia

I don't think generative AI destroys authenticity; it actually pushes schools to find better, more real ways to measure it. Instead of seeing AI as something that ruins applications, we can see it as a positive force for change.

For a long time, college and job applications were never fully "authentic" anyway. Some students had private tutors, editing help, or parents who guided every sentence. Others had to do everything alone. AI just makes this difference more obvious. If everyone now has access to a tool that can improve writing, then schools can no longer rely on polished essays as proof of ability. They have to look deeper.

This is where AI can actually improve authenticity. Schools might start using more in-person writing sessions,

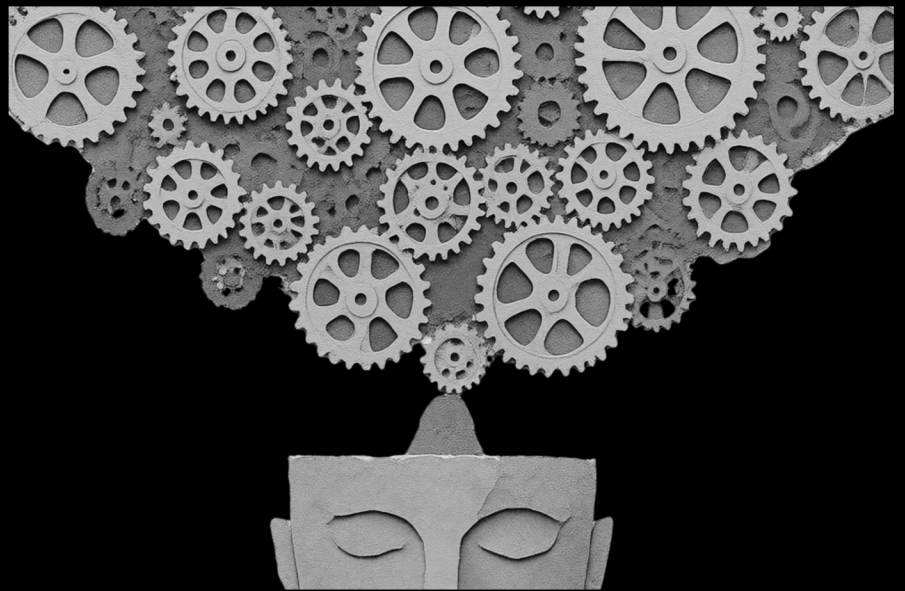


Image: Thinking Machine. Source: Original image by ktsimage from Getty Images

interviews, or timed tasks. These methods show how a person really thinks, not just how well they can edit an essay at home.

A simple example can be seen in the Japanese countryside. Imagine a student from a rural village where life is slower and resources are limited. Maybe they help their family on a small farm, like growing rice or

vegetables. Their English might not be perfect, and they may not have access to expensive tutors. With AI, they can finally express their experiences more clearly in writing. That already makes the system fairer.

But if schools only look at that polished essay, they might still miss the real person. So instead, schools could ask the



Image: Bhavithran Ananthan standing in a crowd. Photo courtesy of Bhavithran Ananthan

“For a long time, college and job applications were never fully ‘authentic’ anyway.”

student to write something in person or speak in an interview. When the student talks about waking up early to work in the fields, or helping during harvest season, their authenticity becomes obvious. Their story feels real because it comes directly from them, not just from a refined piece of writing.

At the same time, we should

accept both the benefits and the drawbacks of this change. In-person assessments might be more stressful, and some students express themselves better with time to think and edit. So no system will ever be perfect.

In the end, AI is not the enemy of authenticity. It is a tool that exposes weaknesses in the current system and pushes schools to do better. Instead of trying to protect the old idea of “pure” applications, we should adapt. By combining AI as a support tool with more direct evaluation methods, we can create a system that is both fairer and more genuine.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bhavithran Ananthan is a student with interests in learning, leadership, and social impact. He is particularly interested in cancer research, a field that has shaped his approach to critical thinking, patience, and resilience. Beyond academics, he is actively involved in community and non-profit work, where he has developed a strong appreciation for empathy and teamwork.

A Yayasan Khazanah scholar, he has had the opportunity to engage with a diverse community of peers and broaden his perspective. He is motivated to contribute meaningfully in different environments and to apply his knowledge toward positive societal impact.

We Are Lying to Ourselves

Almería, Spain

BY LUCAS PINART BENAVIDES

“The machine cannot be defended as a means of execution, as the only thing it executes is the individual’s ability to distinguish themselves.”

Em dashes, vivid language, and a quirky style of writing are signs of what’s becoming increasingly obvious: Almost everyone is using AI to write their applications, even for life-changing opportunities.

But should they even be blamed? Increased uncertainty in both job and college applications means individuals feel forced to apply to an ever-growing number of positions, which naturally leaves less time for each application. Reports of companies using AI themselves to screen through CVs and personal statements certainly don’t help, and applicants feel stuck in an arms race where the goal is to trick employers’ LLMs into securing an interview by figuring out which keywords they’re looking for.

It certainly is ironic because these essays are mostly intended to check for fit by letting applicants’ personalities and unique traits shine through in ways that other components of their application



Lucas Pinart Benavides is a motivated final-year high school student based in Almería, Spain. He is particularly interested in economics, mathematics, and technology, and is driven by a strong belief in the relationship between purpose, effort, and results. Beyond academics, he enjoys exploring new hobbies and developing an appreciation for craftsmanship across different fields, with current interests including mechanical keyboards, hardware, and watches.

“It really does feel like both applicants and institutions are shooting themselves in the foot while they pretend nothing is going on.”

can't, yet the widespread use of AI in applications undermines this opportunity. It really does feel like both applicants and institutions are shooting themselves in the foot while they pretend nothing is going on.

More than anything, AI doesn't serve as an equalizer; it is merely a homogenizer. While applications that stand out, whether because of their quality or their lack of it, will still be recognizable from afar, everything in the middle will quickly become noise through which nothing but robotic language comes across. In a sea of sanitized and standardized writing, even a typo or small grammatical mistake could stand out because it shows something simple: you are human, and you care.

If logistics allow it, institutions should prioritize face-to-face interviews to assess candidates' aptitudes. It's an exercise that promotes honesty on both sides by allowing applicants to see past corporate “We regret to inform you...” emails and organizations to speak with a more honest and unfiltered version of the people they are betting on, which was the original goal. This is also more respectful of people's time, as it doesn't require them to put on a façade in hopes of passing filters and also avoids unexpected changes in character between ideal, carefully crafted applications and rocky real-life situations.

Merit is not only what someone has done, but also what it took to get there and how they carry their achievements. The machine cannot be defended as a means of execution, as the only thing it executes is the individual's ability to distinguish themselves.



Image: A robot waiting for an interview.
Source: Original image by Africa images

Opportunities

1.

NATSU Perspective[S] is growing!

Check out our remote positions for student leaders, writers, readers, and designers:

natsuproject.org/recruit



Image: Building site of a house under construction made from white foam concrete blocks. Source: original image by Africa images

2.

The next round of submissions is opening soon. High school, early college, and gap-year students within the ages of 15 to 21 are all encouraged to submit their essays. All cultural backgrounds and geographical locations are welcome.

Cycle 2 Starts on May 1.

natsuproject.org/perspectives

Honorable Mentions

Given the strength of this initial round of submissions, we are pleased to recognize two additional outstanding essays as Honorable Mentions.

1. When the Reins Slip

UY. (TOKYO, JAPAN)



Image: Jockey woman rides her horse in the equestrian center.
Source: carlo prearo from carloprearaphotos

UY. is a second-year high school student at Hiroo Gakuen with a strong interest in politics, law, and related issues. They enjoy both reading and writing, and spend much of their free time doing both. They came across this prompt while scrolling on Instagram, and it helped pull them out of a writer's block. They especially enjoy discussing and debating topics like this with friends and family, and are glad to have the opportunity to share their views with a wider audience.

2. The Automation of Human Expression

GAURAV MALL TARLOK (ATHENS, GREECE)



Image: Industrial glass bottle production line.
Source: Keegan Checks from Pexels

Gaurav Mall Tarlok is a 20-year-old second-year Biomedical Engineering student at the University of West Attica (UNIWA). His studies focus on the mechanics of the human body, artificial body parts, and the treatment of disease through nanorobotics. Alongside science, he has a strong interest in writing, which has become both his favorite form of expression and a valuable tool for self-exploration. He hopes this piece marks the beginning of a side hobby of publishing a few essays each year.

When the Reins Slip

Tokyo, Japan

BY UY.

Coming into contact with new technology is unavoidable, and it is crucial we learn to adapt. Yet, we mustn't forget: technology has always been a tool that enhances and nurtures abilities. When humans forget this, technology no longer serves its true purpose. The same principle applies to AI.

When one writes, it is to get *their* point across. Neutral opinions are still opinions, and struggling to find one conclusion shows layers. If AI is used to create ideas because one thinks that their opinions are invalid, or because they fear they lack sufficient knowledge, the purpose of writing is undermined. The goal of applications is to see if individuals are truly compatible with the institutions, not to find an all-rounded, flawless individual. If one pretends to be someone they are not, that could be harmful for both parties in the long run.

Furthermore, the usage of AI does not even out the playing field for applicants. AI is tailored to the individual, so if one knows how to use AI effectively, they are likely to get higher quality results than someone who doesn't. This mechanism is similar to learning without AI. If you know the right teachers or the right formulas, you are more likely to do better. Although the base level may increase, there will still be discrepancies.

Currently, 86% of students use generative AI in academics; 54% use AI at least once a week (Kelly). The vast majority use it for its intended purpose— to strengthen ideas. However, others misuse the technology. A question that arises here: How did AI become widespread so quickly within students?

Ever since the industrial revolution, efficiency has been a priority of many, and this value has only been pushed further since we entered the age of overconsumption. Moreover, as Byung-Chul Han has said, society has become an "achievement society". Having fancy titles and a 4.0 GPA is valued over taking time to learn for the sake of it. Students are pressured by such trends and unrealistic standards, contributing to overreliance on AI.

Our world is built on curiosity and it will continue to develop as long as the emotion is embraced. When AI holds the reins for our thoughts and desires, we lose all integrity. AI is a tool for us to use, but if we stop thinking for ourselves, AI will have nothing to enhance.

Han, Byung-Chul. *The Burnout Society*. Stanford University Press, 2020.

Harris, Alyza. "22 Million Student Essays Show Signs of AI Generation, and Professors Aren't Helping Curb the Trend." *Minding The Campus*, 8 Apr. 2025. mindingthecampus.org/2025/04/08/22-million-student-essays-show-signs-of-ai-generation-and-professors-arent-helping-curb-the-trend/.

Kelly, Rhea. "Survey: 86% of Students Already Use AI in Their Studies." *Campus Technology*, 28 Aug. 2024. [campustechnology.com/articles/2024/08/28/survey-86-of-students-already-use-ai-in-their-studies.aspx#:~:text=Survey%2086%25%20of%20Students%20Already,Their%20Studies%20%2D%20%20Campus%20Technology](https://campustechnology.com/articles/2024/08/28/survey-86-of-students-already-use-ai-in-their-studies.aspx#:~:text=Survey%2086%25%20of%20Students%20Already,Their%20Studies%20%2D%20%20Campus%20Technology.).

The Automation of Human Expression

Athens, Greece

BY GAURAV MALL TARLOK

Let's face it: writing a document that will determine your academic or employment future is stressful, no doubt. Educational and corporate applications are part of a highly competitive system where success hinges on a résumé's font. And all that for a job at your local Starbucks. Therefore, enlisting the help of a trained professional is no crime. Application writers did exist some years ago; it's just that they've been replaced by generative AI agents now. Picking out the layout to present the information, fixing grammar mistakes, and enhancing your lexicon are things generative AI can and should do. Such a process doesn't remove the human element from the essay; it enhances it.

The problem, however, presents itself when AI completely replaces human expression. There, it stops being an individual creation and transforms into a cheap, mass-produced piece of text. Recruitment is turned into an elegant Orwellian production process where eligible applicants are put on a conveyor belt and thrown away based on how "standardized" they are. And this is not just a matter of "it won't be fun reading applications anymore." It's a matter of who is behind the text: a person with a life story or an AI agent optimized for a high application turnout percentage?

A piece of text that intends to describe someone only has meaning if it is presented through the prism of human experience. "I am happy" or "I suffer" have meaning if a person tells us so. Opinions and beliefs are valued constructs that result from years of honing one's critical thinking and represent the inner workings of a person. This discussion can be summarized excellently as follows: if you wish to learn who one is, do you watch the soul that guides them or the shadow that mimics them? An AI piecing together bits of text from its training data is not an expression of anything, just a close enough mimicry to fool someone into believing in its originality.

Generative AI usage as a means of expression is impertinent to humanity. If you're unsure of your grammar or syntax knowledge, AI is a wonderful tool to use, a proofreader of sorts. But seeing as essays and applications are as much of an art as Picasso's paintings, expression of the human spirit should remain in the hands of humans, with slight help.

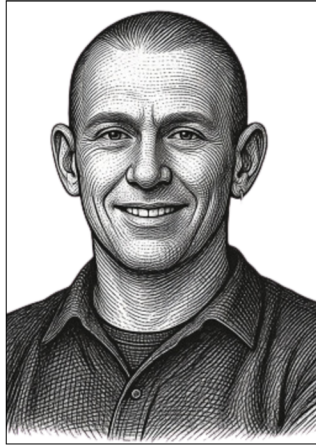
Merit in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

NATSU Perspective[S] | April 2026 Newsletter | Call for Submissions

The Question:

As generative AI transforms the drafting of college and employment applications, we face a fundamental tension between accessibility and authenticity. Does AI serve as a vital "equalizer" that levels the playing field for all applicants, or does its use inherently undermine the human integrity these institutions seek to measure? In the pursuit of merit, should we embrace the machine as a tool for execution, or must we protect the sanctity of the unassisted human voice?

Selection Committee



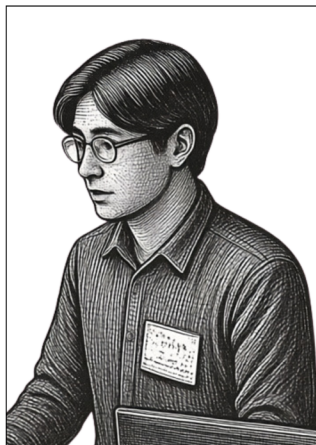
Since 2008, John has served as Associate Director of the Center for East Asian Studies at Stanford University.

John Groschwitz



Caroline is a former data scientist at Johns Hopkins Hospital. Based in the United States, she is now building her own project combining technology and self-care.

Caroline Cheng



Yifan received his bachelor's degree from Ritsumeikan University and his master's degree from Stanford University, specializing in international relations.

Yifan Xu



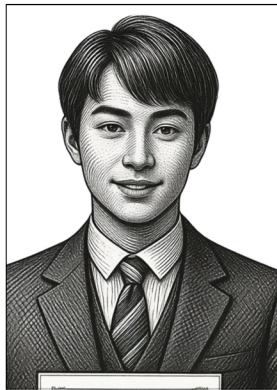
Lauren graduated from Stanford with a master's degree, specializing in literature. She spent two years in East Asia under a Fulbright grant.

Lauren Barnes



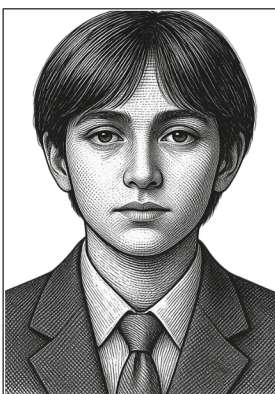
After earning his bachelor's and master's degrees in mechanical engineering from Keio University, Hitoshi started his career at P&G. He now serves as Sales Manager at a Tokyo startup.

Hitoshi Kiyokawa



Kohei is CEO of a Tokyo-based startup. He holds engineering degrees from Keio University and Penn State, and previously worked at Bosch Japan and NTT Data Group.

Kohei Oyama



Manami is a Natsu Camp 2025 alumna and social impact youth leader. She won the Japan Soken Prize at Technovation Girls Japan and founded One Flower One Ring.

Manami Rawaha

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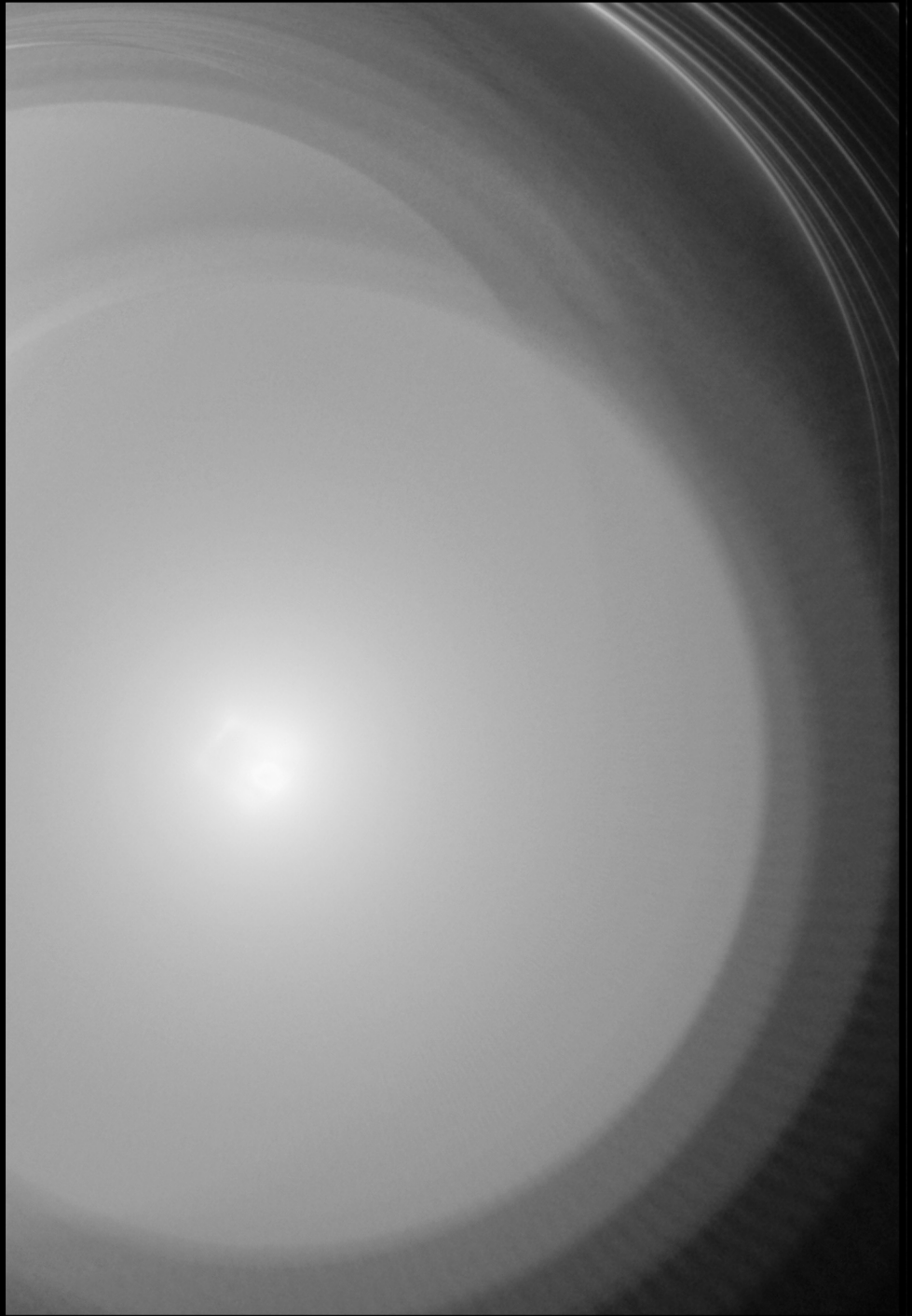
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