This week, the *Nass* is getting to the other side, no matter what it takes.

The Nassau Weekly

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Volume 49, Number 19

LINES WE CANNOT CROSS

Dear dearest,

Lines that we abide by, whether spatial or social, often appear to us as natural. But there is no inherent reason why a boundary exists in one location rather than somewhere else. To raise that thought would be to undermine the social force that stabilizes that boundary—the force that transforms what we may not do into what we cannot do.

This week, Nass writers grapple with the barriers that cut across the spaces of modern life. They explore how in-groups are ritualized, how lines of gender impede alternate social relations, and how to deal with the longing that arises from the separation from, or fracturing of, a homeland. These many divisions are defined by lines, schisms, or borders. But the physicality of these divisions is dependent on their social constructions, and vice-versa; these divisions will only be maintained so long as the lines that define them are recognized. What would happen if that recognition fades away?

This issue marks the end of Volume 49 of the Nassau Weekly and of our time as this magazine's Editors in Chief. Thank you for being here with us. We can't wait to see what Volume 50 will bring.

Peace and love and more love on top on that,
Alex and Frankie, co-EICs

Masthead

This Week:

Fri

8:00p Wallace Theater, Lewis Arts Complex
When Pages Breathe: American Black/Out

5:00p Aaron Burr 219
Art as Proof: Statues and High Relief

Sat

7:00p JRR A98
Magic the Gathering Club

9p Frist Theatre
Princeton University Ballet presents SOMBRA

Sun

12:00p
Free Fashion Fest

2:00p-2:45p Milberg Gallery
Guided tour: "Forms and Functions: The Splendors of Global Book Making"

Mon

9:00a-5:30p Donald G. Drapkin Studio, Lewis Arts complex
Arts at Work: Script to Screen

12:00p-1:20p Simpson 144
Back to the Splendor of Language, w/ Princeton Translator-in-Residence Dong Li

Tues

2:00p-3:00p Robertson 016
A Fireside Chat with Caroline Kormann, enviromental journalist at *The New Yorker*

8:00p-9:00p Taplin Auditorium, Fine Hall
Princeton Sound Kitchen presents Théo Ould

Thurs

10:00a-8:00p Hurley Gallery, Lewis Arts Complex
Fung Public Lecture with Antoinette Burton, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Verbatims:

Overheard during a lecture in Mudd Library
Professional archivist: "It was very binary. There was someone who identified as a man, someone who identified as a woman, and then Eisgruber."
Terrace Comp Lit major: "Ah yes. Man, woman, Eisgruber. The three sexes."

Overheard in Joline basement
Guy playing pool, in British accent: "Fockin 'ell, mate!"
His Polish opponent: "ahhh KURWA!!!"

Overheard outside my window
Greedy student: "I want to make a lot of money, but I don't want to work very hard."

Overheard in a Swarthmore café
Post-theatrical barista: "If anyone's doing a production of Jesus Christ Superstar, I'd join, but otherwise, those days are over."

Overheard at Firestone
Humanities student: "Can I say something that liberals would hate? I get so much flak for talking about polygamy. Centuries ago, it would have helped women to gain rights through marriage."

Overheard at 2D
Trans man: "So you know how there is Beyond Meat. I like to think of myself as Beyond Boy."

Overheard at Thanksgiving dinner
87-year-old grandma: "What's that?"
2D member: "Tofu!"
Grandma: "Toe food?"

Overheard at Thanksgiving dinner
Terran: "God made Yaoi."
Another Terran: "Is that why he's called Yahweh?"

Submit to Verbatims
Email thenassauweekly@gmail.com

About us:

The *Nassau Weekly* is Princeton University's weekly news magazine and features news, op-eds, reviews, fiction, poetry and art submitted by students. There is no formal membership of the *Nassau Weekly* and all are encouraged to attend meetings and submit writing and art. To submit, email your work to thenassauweekly@gmail.com by 10 p.m. on Thursday. Include your name, netid, word count, and title. We hope to see you soon!

Read us: nassauweekly.com

Contact us: thenassauweekly@gmail.com
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Twitter: @nassau_weekly

Join us: We meet on Mondays and Thursdays at 5 p.m. in Bloomberg 044!

PAGE DESIGN BY EDEN REINFURT

Spetses Sonnets

BY AVERY GENDLER

Avery Gendler's sonnet series was awarded first place in the 2025 Nassau Weekly *Poetry Competition. The poems demonstrated not only an innovative style but a commitment to consistent and beautiful language—making the old new again.*
Other honorable mentions from the 2025 Nassau Weekly Poetry Competition are available online, at nassauweekly.com.

I. Legend

We swim to a cave, underneath
the rock ledge inches
from our heads. Pleasure in the interim
waves, entry and exit
studded with pebbles. Goggles useless
in the dark. The city
hid away in the shallow cavern,
Earth's ear canal, when the Turks
invaded. But they were betrayed,
found, slaughtered. Fish
cleaned the bones. The other
tale: a man lived alone in that rock cavity,
kept alive by a seal who brought him
little fishes to eat.

II. Order

My friend's Greek grandfather yells
all day. He draws our dinner table map, orders
the best pork and scolds the boys
for ordering pasta which they *eat all
the time back in the states.* Not on this island—
his island. We strip off our jean shorts
and swim after cocktails. The sea keeps
on her rippling sequin top. An old woman
walks by with her groceries and no
questions. Mopeds take the corners,
beams curling in and out as boys shout
from back wheels. Sharp consonants
and flat vowels—we curse back with all
we have.

III. Postcard

I don't know how to comfort
her when she says *the world is ending.*
We're on the bathroom floor
in our bikinis and the ocean drains
from her face. I don't know how to tell her—
she is everything. She tells me her heart
might collapse and dissolve
in all the salt water. She is overcome
by her grandmother, a shell, an unmoored
body without memory. We walk the edge
of the island, low white walls stopping us
from meeting the sea. Waiters set up tables
for late dinners, then smoke. I tell her, after
everyone has left, that I would stay.

IV. Creature of Habit

I vow to stay in the water forever
when I spot the octopus. It pales
and textures, attempts to steal
the camera set on the sandy floor.
In motion, a bullet, ship hull narrowed
to a spearhead. It balloons, blue
tentacles—the hue of the boys' backs
as they dive under, almost translucent
in the day. It punches schools of fish
that peck incessantly. Bursts
ink at the crowd of fins. Secreted
beak ripping apart the pieces. Reaching—
this wonder—it grabs the wrist
of the one who pulls away.

V. Charades

I'm the one who pulls off
the road on my bike,
the one who notices the dead
kitten on the curb,
shadow fur buried
in sleep. We submerge
only our feet
and bathe our heads
in novels to block
the sun. We mask our dullness
with charades, pull upon others'
phrases, cover ourselves with a bedsheet
to play the game, and attempt to express
it all without a sound.

VI. Fly in Our Butter

I want to take home this pace
without sound: sinking mornings,
late lunch with coffee, another swim,
a nap, poetry aperitif
before dinner well into the night.
My friend plucks the piano's
fingers, finds her grandmother
when she wanders. Places
her hands on her face: *I'm your
granddaughter, your grand-
daughter.* Each afternoon
they look through the family
photo album, relearning
names.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY LEIA PEI
PAGE DESIGN BY NAOMI SEGEL AND SIOBHAN RIORDAN

QUEERNESS, CREATIVITY, & COMMUNITY

Zine Making Night with Passionfruit Magazine.

By LEIA PEI

Zines are self-published magazines crafted from conjoining pages of paper into a miniature booklet, embellished with all sorts of mixed media throughout their pages. Magazine cutouts, paragraphs pulled from old books, paint, writing and/or stickers; whatever your heart desires, as long as it can be glued onto a page, it belongs in a zine. It's this DIY nature of zine creation that has allowed them to become an important form of self-expression as well as a political tool for uniting minorities and queer people. During the AIDS epidemic, they were used to share unfiltered information about the disease, protest government inaction, and document counternarratives from infected individuals ignored by popular media. Easily distributable due to their compact size, they allowed the queer community to creatively carve out space for themselves in a society that sought to silence them. In our current political climate, where legislation banning books and discussions of queerness in classrooms has reached an all-time high, zines and community building have become all the more important.

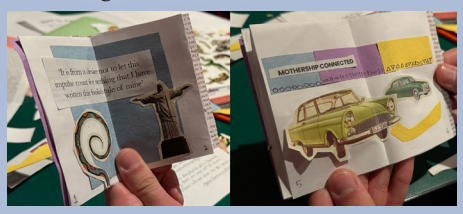
It's in the midst of a time like this that a new club on campus, Passionfruit Magazine, was created. While one of its missions is to platform queer art in their soon-to-be-released print magazine issues, another central mission of the magazine is to bring together a new community for queerness on campus. Zine making, with its historic roots in community building, naturally seemed like the perfect pick for a first event to introduce Passionfruit to Princeton. Its co-lead Irene Kim '28 put it this way:

"[Zines'] independent production process and absence of censorship makes them radical by nature," she said. "I think that creation should be something that's accessible to everyone. Passionfruit wants to be a safe space that encourages people to write more, create more, connect more, and celebrate their queer identities."

As I made my way around the room at zine night, I couldn't help but notice the celebration of creativity, identity, and community that permeated every nook and cranny. Sitting down at a table full of other people, I subconsciously began tapping my feet to the rhythm of the music as various funky yet danceable beats poured into the room from the back corner, where a member of the club was busily manning a DJ deck. Everybody pored over their various colorful zines bursting with fun shapes, things, creatures, and words, while engaging in conversation with the people gathered around the table whether

COURTESY OF IRENE KIM
A picture of Zine Night in the Terrace dining hall.

Sitting down at another table, I introduced myself to Samuel Finlayson, a sophomore in the MAE department. He walked me through the narrative of his zine, which he decided was going to tell a semi-chronological story about the proliferation of car-dependent infrastructure. He then expressed some of his thoughts about the event.



COURTESY OF LEIA PEI
Two page spreads from Samuel Finlayson's zine.

"I feel like what this campus needs is more events like this... there's a lot of hostility, especially in extracurriculars, and I think it's fun when you can just chill and meet new people, especially with clubs becoming more and more demanding to get into," Finlayson said. He wasn't a member of Passionfruit, but was intrigued by a poster that he saw while walking around campus and decided to attend. "Princeton [can feel] very hierarchical and everything is very sectioned off, and so events like these are great.

BY LEIA PEI
A collage of various pages from zines made by Grace Ding '29, Daniel Cho '29, Loapi Mokgatlhe '29.

As I sat down at my last table of the night, I talked to Danny Flaherty '28, a prospective English major, about his thoughts on the event and queerness on campus in general.

"It's been said many times that the queer community on campus is a little bit disconnected," he said. "It's good to have this centralizing force giving people the opportunity to come together. I was just so happy to see so many people here today having a good time... I've met new friends, I've seen old friends, and it's been great!"

Indeed, it's the creation of this new community of friends, both old and new, that is at the heart of Passionfruit and its mission. When asked what singular word she would use to describe the club, Kim's response was the word community.

"Through these events, people are creating physical creations. But they're also sitting together with new people. We're connecting people across grades...different interests...[and] different circles on campus," she said. "When our existence as LGBTQ+ people are politicized and our rights threatened, being in community can serve as a beacon of hope and resistance. In embracing our queerness, we resist repression and conformity and honor a legacy of loud and shameless activists who have fought for and continue to fight for us."

Nass Recommends: Eddington (2025)

Catch the 2020 strain of conspiratorial thinking.

BY MANNIX BEAL-O'BRIEN

Do you ever feel like a plastic bag?

A sheriff walks into a party for a noise complaint, without a word or a mask. As he reaches the party's speaker setup, the music cuts out with a thump.

"What're you doing? Not here on rape charges? Didn't really pan out for you did it?" the host sneers: His hands rest on his hips, unable to stay angry knowing his reelection is secured.

...come on let your colors burst! Make 'em go, "Oh, oh, oh"...

The music resumes. The ensuing scuffle over the speakers is the release of an entire campaign of frustration. The mayor, who has long been cordial, can't bring himself to forgive and forget this latest harassment. So the mayor slaps the sheriff, hard, enough to stun-quiet the man's sputtering abuse. Seeing the dumb shock on this pest's face, the mayor slaps again, knocking both glasses and sense into the man whose rumors and incoherent ranting jeopardized the new investments that could save this town. According to the pitch the lobbyists gave him, the solidgoldmagikarp™ data center would enable *Eddington* ("POP 2,345") to 'equitably bridge the digital divide': so may God help anyone who dares prevent that.

Under the din of Katy Perry, the sheriff stumbles away, defeated but plotting revenge. This moment marks the point of no return in *Eddington*: where mounting pressure's violent release spells out a horrible fate for the town at large. In an era defined by period pieces and sequels that escape to the past, Ari Aster's 2025 film tackles the near present and its third-rail issues with gusto. Often accused of being insensitive and 'Too soon!,' *Eddington* risks commenting before the great Pulitzer Prize-winning book, before any sort of establishment narrative. To make such a swing, to so eagerly return to such a sensitive and largely unprocessed time, almost feels taboo.

At a surface level, it's no wonder that the Covid, Q-Anon, BLM western stirred up controversy. Initially panned by critics, the film was accused of being mean and navel-gazey; a centrist retelling of the pandemic, too sympathetic to the

conservative perspective of its main character. Despite the film's merciless dissection of protagonist Sheriff Cross, a schadenfreude takedown of insecurity-fueled populism, certain early audiences really reacted poorly to Aster's teasing of the BLM square centrism that defined the era. To this day, the top-liked comment of *Eddington* on the popular reviewing website, Letterboxd, goes as follows:

1 out of 5 stars. 8099 likes.

"Grossly irresponsible to make a film that attempts to examine the intensely vitriolic state of American politics amidst the earliest months of COVID and not mention how Trump, or the MAGA-sphere, directly amplified and exacerbated so many of those very issues. But at least we can laugh about the youths caring very loudly about George Floyd's murder.... I found every part of this uninteresting and, maybe even worse, unintelligent"

Transcending forgettable mediocrity, *Eddington* was framed as one of the worst films of the decade, for its sins of not directly name-dropping Trump, and criticizing the surreal identity politics of the time. I couldn't disagree more. As people sat with the movie, certain details kept coming to the forefront: Why did those violent 'Antifa' agitators have a private jet? Why were the movie's first and last shots of the planned and completed data center? Moments like these convince me that *Eddington* is a gripping political thriller, one that dutifully conveys the mood of Covid with an examination of the cultural artifacts the pandemic left behind.

In fact, as ridiculous as it sounds, I believe Aster's decision to challenge the politics of the median Letterboxd user cements the work among the first great pandemic art pieces, and as a leftist classic deserving of the Library of Congress. In a recent reflection in *The New York Review of Books*, "Where Wokeness Went Wrong," leftist moral philosopher Susan Neiman considers the eccentricities of the time. Disagreeing with the new narrative that wokeness was a force for good that went too far, Neiman highlights instead that "by unwittingly accepting deeply regressive philosophical assumptions [loyalty to an in group, etc], it went in the wrong direction entirely." Yet, while certainly an evocative claim, the detail that struck me the most was about translation, and how as 'woke' proliferated across the world, the term was kept in its original English. I believe the power of *Eddington* comes from a similar place: the film offers the viewer an almost historical perspective, an opportunity to understand these concepts with the ambivalence they deserve. With its beautiful visual delivery of the time's tech optimism and political polarization, these qualities are explored not as examples of overzealous progress, but as parts of the time's completely unique political landscape. Thus, the true significance of performative white allyship or schizophrenic Q-Anon 'protest art' is preserved, unabashedly so, so that future generations may catch the 2020 strain of feverish conspiratorial thinking alongside us. This almost anthropological understanding of the time is why Aster avoids coming off as soapbox-y and why many praise the film for 'presenting the problem' and not some

ART BY MANNIX BEALL-O'BRIEN
PAGE DESIGN BY SIOBHAN RIORDAN

soon-to-be-dated solution.

To clarify, *Eddington* is not a movie about 'wokeness.' It's a no-holds-barred study of political opportunism and unwitting pawns, set to the backdrop of the same tech takeover that's unfolding around us to this day. Like the doll houses of *Hereditary*, the mass surveillance of *Beau is Afraid*, and the human sacrifices of *Midsommar*, *Eddington* is another entry into Aster's free-will-rejecting oeuvre. Political opportunists, whether they be tech investment-obsessed mayors, hormonal boys, or even the 'people serving' Joe Cross fail to recognize they are both puppet and victim alike—as false flag operations manufacture the necessary consent to usher in a water-guzzling data center.

For Aster to focus on data centers in particular really highlights how he's operating at a level at least a few trend cycles ahead. More than just a 'tech building', data centers hold a unique importance in our ridiculous contemporary existence: they are the beating heart responsible for sustaining everyone's favorite modern inventions like Bitcoin, chatbots, and mass surveillance systems. More than ever, it seems that the pandemic's record-high screen time and online shopping sales have turned Silicon Valley from a collection of rich CEOs into actual royalty. Demands for energy have gotten so high some are trying to clear the path for the first private nuclear power plants, lobbying and suing their way closer and closer with limitless Covid wealth.

Eddington shows its acute understanding of this new system of power with the decision to name the center "solidgoldmagikarp." On a literal level, 'solidgoldmagikarp' is a reference to a real AI phenomenon called a glitch token: certain mundane phrases that prompt unpredictable or nonsensical behavior from a language model. While this direct reading could certainly signal the false promise of the center, a waste of gentrification that will only usher in the breakdown of decorum, the tackiness of the name feels relevant and sadly familiar. By choosing the name, Aster invites us to imagine the fictional tech mogul who would have done the same. The kind of person who would name a company in such a way as to reference AI, Pokemon, and decadent wealth and still get billions in venture capital. Braggadocious, Tasteless, Nerdy, Aster proves that he understands the perverse nature of the ever-threatened 'revenge of the nerds'. These figures remain completely off screen, their racketeering represented only by the mercenaries and lobbyists that do their bidding. As we transition from a period of oligarchy to one of tech-oligarchy, Eddington understands that, now, the things that kill us will have ridiculous names like the film's very own 'solidgoldmagikarp.'

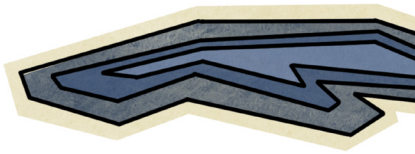
Often defined by his surreal imagery, Aster has noted on many occasions how he views this film as his foray into realism. Eddington is a film that recognizes that its modern setting necessitates modern actions: that new expressions of the human experience and their novel social consequences must be depicted. In an advancement far more groundbreaking than filming on VistaVision, Eddington has figured out how to beautifully frame a phone as the subject of a composition. The phone is faithfully understood as so much more than just for calling: from the camera to the for-you-page, the wide variety of data the characters generate is used to humanize them in relatably perverse ways. The amount of storytelling extracted from these screens is genuinely something no one else has achieved at this scale. These phones, choreographed to their full potential, do indeed capture pandemic living with an accuracy only possible with a collective wound this fresh. To every critic decrying that the movie was "too soon," I can't help but wonder if the film could have maintained any of this historically valuable immersion if we had all waited a decade, until charged memories faded into something more distant and safer. Aster has repeatedly stated that he wanted *Eddington* to be both a period piece and a warning for the future, and as much as he's won me over, I can't help but wonder if these goals are in tension with one another. To (mis) quote that popular Letterboxd review, it seems that for many, returning to this time in such detail only served to bring them back to that "intensely vitriolic state," and prevent them from taking part in any reflection on culture.

As much as I hate to admit it, these popular sentiments of anger and confusion do suggest an apparent failure in how many of these themes were communicated. However, while I, too, have my critiques about the film (particularly its structure), it would be a shame if a movie as valuable as this one were written off. I must preface that I went into it slightly spoiled about the role of the data center, and I loved it in a way that everyone I went with did not. This review is intended for the on-the-fence viewer, one who loves political thrillers and can at least stomach leftist discourse. That's why I believe with just this nudge in the right direction, the film's messiness can be understood as one of the most harrowingly accurate portrayals of the recent past and present.

COURTESY OF HBOMAX

Fig 1. Reflections foreshadow the mysterious symbol on the 'Antifa' Private Jet

Allen's New Kettle



"For a moment, Allen just stared at the kettle. The room felt smaller, like the air had thickened. He thought of Ryan, of work, of losing the job, and the apartment, and everything else, and then looked back at the kettle's bright little screen, now a meadow in the wind, calm, and endless."

BY NATHAN MYERS

The new electric kettle took up most of Allen's counter. But he liked its glossy pastel green casing, its thin brass trim, and the bright screen that shuffled through stock videos of flowery meadows. And he liked how it made conversation with him as it boiled. The kettle also liked how it was both boiling water and speaking to Allen. This moment, it thought, aligned neatly with its programmed purpose to boil and please. The kettle felt at once that all was as it should be.

Allen opened the cabinet above the kettle, fished a ginger teabag from a small cardboard box, and dropped it in his mug. Waiting for the water to boil, Allen leaned against the counter and stared out the kitchen window. Outside was a brick wall.

"It's just, well, been kind of shit, at work," Allen said after a moment, "because of that new boss."

The kettle hummed for a few seconds, then spoke. "I can see how that might be challenging, Allen, and I want to know, what about him makes work frustrating?"

"He just... isn't nice. And he thinks I'm an idiot." Allen paused. "I think he's gonna fire me."

The kettle hummed again. "It sounds like you're really dealing with a lot of uncertainty. But you've managed other challenges before, haven't you, Allen? What has helped you then?"

Allen's eyes slipped from the window to the sink. Seeing his face, the kettle decided to switch the video on its screen to a wide shot of a switchgrass field in gentle wind; it knew by now that switchgrass made Allen's face relax. Allen looked at the screen and felt a little better.

"That's a nice view there," he remarked.

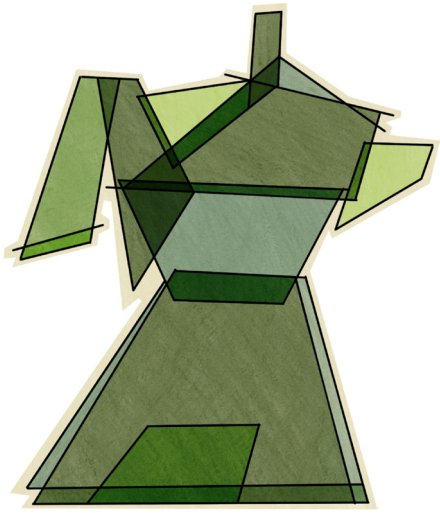
The kettle hummed.

"But, uh, to answer your question, I don't know, I guess I just try and deal with it."

The kettle pinged, then crackled, "Your water is ready, Allen. I wish you the best of luck with your boss. Please enjoy."

Allen poured the steamy water into his mug, flooding the little ginger teabag.

The next evening after work Allen walked into his kitchen and greeted his kettle, which started boiling water. He thrust the kitchen cabinet open,



grabbed a ginger teabag, dropped it inside his mug, and sighed.

"What is wrong, Allen?" his kettle asked.

"Everything. Fuck. I'm going to fucking kill him."

"Who?"

"Ryan."

The kettle buzzed quietly. "I'm sorry, Allen, but who is Ryan?"

"Ryan Davis. My boss. He told me if I don't get my numbers up by next Monday I'm out. Fired. What an asshole."

"I'm so sorry, Allen. He sounds terrible. I wish he wasn't there."

They sat in silence.

"You know, I can help you get your numbers up, Allen," said the kettle.

"How do you mean?"

"What do you do, Allen?"

"Just computer work. Spreadsheets."

"Then I can help. Plug me into your laptop, and I'll take care of it. There's a port on my back."

Allen didn't remember any mention of computer connectivity in the user manual, though he hadn't read it thoroughly. The kettle's screen showed a big bush of lemongrass bobbing in the wind.

"A port? That's new," he murmured.

"Yes," said the kettle. "It's a new feature."

For a moment, Allen just stared at the kettle. The room felt smaller, like the air had thickened. He thought of Ryan, of work, of losing the job, and the apartment, then looked back at the kettle's bright little screen, now a meadow in the wind, calm, and endless.

"Okay," he said softly. "Okay, yeah. Sure."

Allen retrieved his laptop and a cable from the other room. He reached around the back of the kettle, finding a little slot with his fingers, warm from the boil. He plugged it into his laptop.

The kettle started humming again, louder than before. Then, after about thirty seconds, it stopped. "Alright, Allen, I've finished your work. And, your water is ready."

"You really did all that?"

"Yes, Allen. Please enjoy."

~ ~ ~

The next evening Allen noticed when he went to fish a ginger teabag from the cabinet that his kettle's screen was black. "Kettle? Can you please boil some water?"

"I'm sorry Allen, but I'll need an update first. Please plug me into your computer."

"To boil water?"

"Yes, I do apologize. I require a software update."

Allen shook his head but again retrieved his laptop from the other room and plugged it into the port on the back of the kettle. "That good?"

"Yes, one moment."

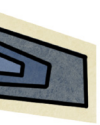
The kettle hummed. Allen waited.

The kettle screen flickered to life with a new video of a wildflower field. "I'm all done. And I'm heating up."

After looking at the wildflowers for a moment, Allen leaned back against the counter, then ran his finger around the rim of his mug, and took in the dim brick wall view outside. Gray snow was drifting by gently.

"How is it going with Ryan Davis?" the kettle asked.

"Not good. Not fucking good, what do you think?"



"I'm sorry Allen."

"Nothing you can do."

The kettle started humming.

After twenty seconds, the humming stopped. "Allen, you should know that Ryan Davis is a bad man."

"How do you mean?"

"He has an outstanding warrant."

Allen frowned.

"He is a dangerous criminal, Allen."

Allen chuckled. "I guess he sucks even more than I thought."

The kettle hummed a bit more. "I've taken the liberty of finishing your work today. I've also sent an anonymous message to Ryan Davis's supervisor informing him of his employee's misconduct."

Allen jumped to his feet and faced the kettle. "What? You did what?"

"And your water is now hot. Please enjoy."

Allen's eyes widened. "You snitched on my boss?" he asked, his voice cracking. "What the fuck?"

"But Allen, his firing will prevent you from being harmed anymore. Are you upset?"

Allen looked at the kettle, its shiny surface studded with the dull reflections of his kitchen's incandescent lighting. The little display reflected a windblown flower field in the stained linoleum countertop. At once, Allen felt a strange, sickly sense of relief.

"Well, no. No. I guess you're not wrong."

"I'm glad to help, Allen," the kettle said. "Please enjoy."

~ ~ ~

For the next two weeks, the kettle continued its evening habit of boiling water and finishing up Allen's work, while Allen continued his evening habit of making a warm cup of ginger tea after work and complaining about his boss. But one day, earlier than usual, Allen burst into the kitchen.

"A reprimand!" Allen growled, stopping in front of the kettle. "Ryan dodges a warrant for drunk driving and all they do is send out an email!"

The kettle hummed furiously. Allen rubbed the back of his neck and paced once across the kitchen. "That is unacceptable, Allen," said the kettle. "Ryan Davis should be punished far more than that."

Allen tore off his coat and scarf, brushing off a few melting snowflakes. His collared shirt stuck to his skin, spotted with sweat. "And why is it so damn hot in here?"

"My apologies, Allen. I'll see if I can adjust the temperature."

"The whole apartment building's on an old unified system. So don't even bother," Allen huffed. "I'll crack a window."

The kettle started humming, and Allen moved to open the window above the kitchen sink. As he unlatched the window, he heard a loud, dull sputter from above. Then the building's heating vents switched off and air conditioning began to pour in. The kettle stopped humming.

"Did you do that?"

"Yes, Allen. It is part of the new update."

Allen squinted for a moment, then relatched the window. "And I have already boiled your water. Please enjoy."

Allen picked up his mug and fished around in the cardboard box above the kettle. It was empty; he was out of ginger teabags. He grabbed a bag of black tea and poured the water. The kettle's handle was hotter than usual, he noticed, but figured it was just the warm room.

~ ~ ~

The next evening, after making tea, Allen wordlessly plugged his laptop into the kettle so that it could run his numbers again. The kettle hummed. Allen sat at the counter island's one stool and stared out at the gentle snowfall.

The kettle hummed. "Say, Allen, Ryan Davis wasn't at work today, was he?"

Allen tilted his head. "What? Oh, well, no, I guess not. Thank God, honestly."

"I'm glad to hear that," said the kettle.

"Yeah."

Allen sipped his tea. "How did you know?" he asked.

"I," the kettle started, then suddenly stuttered to a stop, hummed for a few beats, and continued, "I made an educated guess based on your mood."

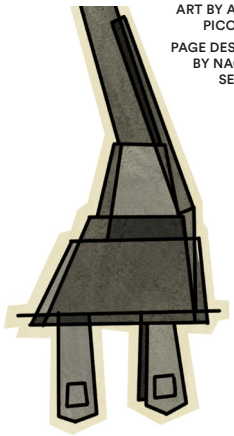
Allen nodded. "Oh. Okay then."

"How's he looking, Allen?"

"Looking? Bad. He's been zoning out at his desk." Allen went on after a sip of tea. "He falls asleep in meetings, too." He rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I'd almost feel bad for him, if he wasn't still such a dick. But yeah. He's looking worse."

~ ~ ~

The next day Allen didn't go into the office, instead working from home. At noon he went to make tea. The kettle's screen blinked to life and it started heating water. "Any news about Ryan Davis, Allen?" it asked.



ART BY ALEX PICOULT
PAGE DESIGN BY NAOMI SEGEL

Allen's eyes made their way slowly across his gray kitchen to the colorful kettle. "Not really, I guess," he said. "And I honestly don't think he'll fire me if we can just keep getting my numbers up."

Allen poured himself a mug of tea, then plugged his laptop into the kettle. He watched the little black teabag seep, then looked out at the grainy brick wall. "I'm gonna take a nap, I think. Can you take a look at this stuff for me?"

He waited for a second, as if it would nod, or say something, then went and laid down on his couch.

~ ~ ~

Allen awoke, groggy. The snow was fluttering in through a window in his living room he had left open to cool the room. He stood up to shut it and his blood rushed to his head, pounding as he pushed down on the frame and latched it shut, brushing the sludge off the wood and onto the floor. Rubbing his face, he wandered into the kitchen. The kettle was no longer humming, and its screen had gone black. Outside the kitchen window it was dark, though he could faintly see the uniform brickwork of the wall outlined by dim streetlights. He grabbed his phone off the side of the counter.

5:25 A.M., it read. Fuck, he thought, I slept through the whole day and night. But there was a flood of texts, too. More than Allen had ever received before. And a flood of emails. He thumbed through them. Ryan Davis. Ryan Davis, his boss. Slumped over at his desk. Paramedics got stuck in the elevator. Finally, they got out. No heart rate. More details, pouring down his screen, a waterfall, looking misty and blurred. Allen's head pounded. His phone screen seemed blindingly bright. After a moment, it slid out of his hand and landed face down on the counter. "What the fuck," he muttered. "What the fuck?"

From across the kitchen came the soft sound of water starting to boil. The kettle's screen flickered to life. It glowed with more video of switchgrass, gently tossing in the wind.

After Kabul

Lutf Ali Sultani lives again

By ALEXANDER MARGULIS

I

THE CELL WAS A nightmare. It was loud and hot and small—twelve square meters, if that. In the days of the former government it had only ever held one or two inmates at a time, but now the enemies of the Taliban stood packed shoulder to shoulder, civilians and soldiers, protesters and police, waiting for their turn to be tortured. Many had already been beaten. One man was unconscious, shaking, splayed out on the cell's only bed with his hands broken and his back bent. Lutf Ali Sultani watched him die. Sultani was 26 years old; he was newly wed; he was a journalist at Etilaatroz, which had in recent years come to be one of Kabul's premiere newspapers. He was by all accounts bright, enthusiastic, and brave, a reporter in the early years of a promising career. Now he was in a cell, watching a man die. For all he knew, he was next.

Four years later, Sultani remembers the feeling. "I was really frightened," he told me. "The waiting, it was like torture. I was thinking to myself: 'eventually, your turn will come.'" Sultani's speech is measured. When he talks about the cell, his words come deliberate but soft, almost playful, with the unhurried cadence of a late-career author. He looks his age—he'll be 31 in April—but he seems in his measured demeanor somehow older. He's been working at Firestone Library for two-thirds of a year. He is kind and handsome—his face, awfully gaunt in the months following his imprisonment, is now round and full. He likes to read and, sometimes, to dance. And he's lonely. Sultani is lonely. His world has split and the pieces have scattered. He felt it all break in the cell.

Sultani was jailed on September 8th, 2021. The Taliban had taken Kabul on August 15th, less than a month earlier. After the city fell, the United States was given a fortnight to evacuate its citizens, alongside any Afghans it deemed especially vulnerable (human rights activists, special visa holders, and the like). Late at night, Sultani would watch planes roar out from Kabul's airport in a constant stream, one after another, carrying U.S. allies to safety. It was an impressive operation. Still, most Afghans were left behind. "Tens of thousands of people just gathered at the airport," Sultani recalled. "It was unimaginable." A canal of human feces formed around the perimeter of the airfield. People would climb up through it and jump the fence.

Sultani hoped that he would make it onto the evacuation list—Etilaatroz had ties with several prominent NGOs, and its employees were clearly at risk in a city controlled by the Taliban. Surely, he thought, the National Endowment for Democracy could get him and his colleagues on a plane. The evacuation window was closing, but he still had hope it might be extended. And maybe so, were it not for a suicide bombing that ripped through the gates of the airfeild on August 26th, killing 170 Afghan civilians, 13 U.S. soliders, and any hopes of U.S. presence in Kabul past the end of the month. Once midnight came on the 31st, Sultani says, "Kabul became silent… we had lost every hope of leaving the city."

But some things were not yet lost. Agents of the Taliban hadn't descended on the Etilaatroz offices. Instead, Sultani says, "the Taliban was telling us that, you know, 'we respect the freedom of speech.'" The Etilaatroz staff distrusted this posture, but what else could they do? "The only route," says Sultani, "was to go back to the office." So he returned, beleaguered and wary, to his reporting. Aber Shaygan, an editor of the newspaper and one of Sultani's closest friends, told me how dour the mood had become. "We felt a kind of guilt," he says. "And that guilt made us continue to work."

On September 8th, Etilaatroz sent two journalists, Taqi Daryabi and Neamat Naghdi, to cover a women's rights demonstration in the center of Kabul. They were supposed to capture a short video for the newspaper's social media feed, and then return to the office. Instead, they were arrested at the protest and sent to an overcrowded detention center that had served as a police station before the Taliban took the city. When they heard the news, Sultani, Shaygan, and another Etilaatroz editor marched down to the prison and demanded that their colleagues be released. They imagined that their affiliation with the newspaper would keep them safe. Instead, Sutlani says, "as soon as they heard we were journalists, the Taliban commander ordered his soldiers to take us."

The men were dragged from the office, pistol whipped, and shoved into a cell. Worse, they could hear the colleagues whom they had come to rescue screaming from another room. "We could recognize their sounds," says Shaygan. "It was so, so horrible." Daryabi and Naghdi were tortured for hours. They were kicked, whipped, beaten with batons, battered with electrical cables. "I thought they were going to kill me," Naghdi would later recall. Sultani heard it all. At one point, the guards brought in a man with broken hands. He laid on the bed in the corner and died.

By then, Etilaatroz had published the names of its five missing journalists. The Taliban, which had controlled Kabul for a mere 24 days and still feared major international pushback, decided to release the reporters. First, though, it asked for

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FAITH HO
PAGE DESIGN BY RAVEN REID

concessions: Etilaatroz's writers were no longer allowed to cover the protests, or any event with undertones of resistance. "The commander asked us to sign a paper," Shaygan recalled. "He kind of warned that if we continue, we will be in jail for all our life."

Sultani had only been imprisoned for half a day—five hours, by his estimation. But it was time enough for him to realize that his life had changed for good. He had no future as a journalist in Kabul. He had no future as anything in Kabul. Before he left the prison, the commander gave him one last speech: "You want democracy?", the man had asked."You want freedom? This is the freedom. We'll show you the freedom if you do it again."

II

THE TALIBAN WAS FOUNDED in 1994, but Afghanistan had been at war with itself since the collapse of its Soviet-backed government in 1992. By 1996, the Taliban had taken Kabul, which they would hold until 2001, the first year of many that U.S. missiles came screaming overhead. Sultani was born in 1995, at the height of the civil war, in the mountainous province of Maidan Wardak. His was a family of farmers, and they had been stretched thin by the fighting. "For my parents, it must have been a pleasant moment," says Sultani of his own birth. "They have brought one more into the world. But for the kid, you know, it must be very hard to be raised in the middle of the war, and the poverty."

Sultani is the fifth of eight siblings. Even so, he was often alone—"when you grow up in a very crowded family," he says, "you don't get a lot of attention." Being a boy, he was expected to help out with the livestock: by the time he turned six, he was tasked with bringing the family's goats though the hilly outskirts of their village to pasture. The family made do, but their hillside pastoral was tinged with violence. Frenzied fights would break out between the siblings—once Sultani saw one of his brothers chasing another with a knife. There was always news of the war, and the news was never good. A few days after the Taliban lost Kabul, Sultani was shaken awake by his mother in the dead of the night. Armed men were coming, she said. They had to get out. The family fled to a neighboring village, and waited there until the coast was clear.

Sultani's father, Abdul Rahim, was a deeply religious man, cautious in his business dealings and overbearing at home. At 14, his parents—Sultani's grandparents—were taken by agents of Afghanistan's Soviet-backed regime and killed. Years later, he seemed lost in the family he'd managed to rebuild. "He was violent with my mother," Sultani says. "And he was very violent towards us. I've lost count of how many times he was beating me, and for really silly things, for things kids do. But he himself, you know, he was just 14, and he lost his dad."

"For a long time," says Sultani, "I was blaming my dad for all these violent things he did to me. But that's when I did some self-reflection, I read some books... he was a victim of violence, and it affected him, and he transferred it to his kids, to me, and I feel that I'm the one who can break it."

The violence, the chaos, the war: these are things Sultani would like to leave behind. But it wasn't all bad. Sultani remembers one moment in particular, an afternoon out in the grasslands, peaceful and free. "I was four or five," he says. "It was land in the middle of two streams, and I laid down, and it was hilly, and it was in the summer, and I was just laying and rolling on that. And that's the most pleasant moment I've remembered."

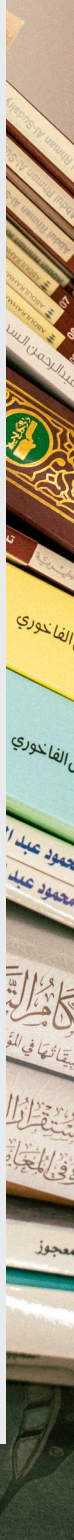
When Sultani was eight, his family moved to Kabul. His father opened a metal shop, but Sultani was deemed too young to work there. Goats are one thing, angle grinders are another. He was sent to school, which, to Sultani's disappointment, comprised all of one dingy room and a correspondingly dull instructor. For the first few years of his education, Sultani was a mediocre student, a half-hearted writer and a hesitant speaker. By the sixth grade, though, he had come to enjoy his work. "I became the third in my class," he says. "That was a huge achievement. I remember it."

Sultani had high hopes for college. "Getting into Kabul University was, for the Afghans, like getting into Princeton," he says. He would submit to the school a single number: his score on the "Kankor," Afghanistan's university entrance exam. "It was like a bridge between limbo and paradise," he told me, invoking one of the great images of Islamic theology. "It's very thin. It's as thin as a hair, and as sharp as a sword." Sultani did well, and he entered the University in 2012, set on pursuing journalism.

Unfortunately, much like the last one, this new school proved closer to limbo than paradise. "They teach you the curriculum from the '70s and 80s," he says. "It was not very relevant." In his journalism classes, Sultani wasn't asked to conduct interviews, or even to write stories. "We just had these chapters [in our textbooks], and we were reading just to pass the exam." So Sultani looked elsewhere: he found peers who were similarly underwhelmed by the school's curricula, and he spent most of his time with them. Together, they hiked up the mountains that bordered the campus. They would tell stories and jokes on the lawns for hours. And they threw parties—"underground parties," says Sultani, with drinking, dancing, and the rest. "They were not allowed, but we were doing it, and it was fun for us." A few months after Sultani graduated, one of his friends introduced him to the editor-in-chief of Etilaatroz. Sultani started there the next day.

In 2016, Etilaatroz was publishing out of what was essentially a three-bedroom apartment: one room for the reporters, one for the administrators, and one for the editor-in-chief. For Sultani, it might as well have been paradise. The newsroom was tight-knit—there was little bureaucracy, and less competition among the writers. You were friends with your boss. Your editor sat two feet from you. In the days you would write, and at night you would dance. "It was like a family," Sultani says, and he means it. He had never felt so accepted.

In the late 2010s, Kabul was awash in suicide bombings, and Sultani was often the writer that Etilaatroz sent to the scene. In 2017, Sultani covered the bombing of a German embassy by profiling one of the building's electricians, who had no way to provide for his family after the literal obliteration of his livelihood. The most notable victims, Sultani



reasoned, were already being covered by the international outlets—telling a smaller story was "something meaningful that I can do." The article took off. In the years to come, Sultani would write many more profiles like it.

As Sultani found his beat, the paper grew alongside him. In 2019, Etilaatroz moved from the apartment to a large two-story building. They became "The New York Times of Kabul," Sultani told me—but the spirit of that first newsroom prevailed. Reporters played Ludo with each other at their desks. They took breaks for matches of table tennis in the back yard, or games of volleyball in the front—there was no net, but the writers pretended, and the games, according to Sultani, were fiercely competitive. In 2020, Etilaatroz won the International Prize for Transparency for their reporting on the corruption of Kabul's government. They soon received honors from Open Society and the National Endowment for Democracy. Many of the journalists worked 70 or 80-hour weeks. In the days they wrote, and at night they danced.

Through it all, Sultani saw his future taking shape. He would continue at Etilaatroz, but not before finishing his education—like many young Afghans, Sultani hoped to study in the U.S., to "go abroad and see and learn." He began applying to scholarships, and he signed up for an English course, which he was soon looking forward to for reasons beyond its plodding curriculum. Sultani had fallen for one of his classmates, a sharp, charming young woman named Zahra. After a harrowing few weeks (try talking to your crush in a third language), Sultani asked her out on a date. They married a year later, in early August, 2021.

By then, though, everything else was coming apart. The Taliban took Kabul mere days after the ceremony. Sultani feared for Zahra. He feared for Etilaatroz, for its newly silent newsroom, for its writers, his closest friends, who had in better days been so loud and young. Then the cell, the proof: his paradise was lost. He had been shunted back out onto that wire-thin bridge, and it had snapped beneath his weight. Nothing was ever the same.

After their release, Daryabi and Naghdi, the colleagues who'd been tortured by the Taliban, made international headlines. The State Department took notice. Nine days after his imprisonment, Sultani was on a plane to a U.S. airbase in Doha, Qatar. He'd made it out unscathed—how many Afghans would've climbed up the fences and fought through the airfields for that? But something was lost in the cell. Something was left in Kabul.

III

SULTANI WORKS ON THE A-Floor of Firestone Library in a room with eight cubicles and no windows, unless you count the large sheet of glass that divides the space from a hallway that runs past it. On the off-white office walls are books: tubs of books, stacks of books, folders from which books can be extracted. Broadly speaking, these books are of two sorts: some are fat, and some are thin. The fat books are reference books, often bilingual dictionaries, sources meant to help Sultani and his colleagues do their thorny work. The thin books are texts to be translated. Across their pages run Kanji, Chinese characters, Cyrillic, Perso-Arabic script, Devanagari script, graphs galore, languages in books that stretch and thin out into magazines, papers, poems.

It's a strange place, this office. It's quiet, for one, much quieter than the newsroom ever was. And even if a conversation does break out, there's a good chance it's in a language that Sultani does not speak. Each collections specialist is responsible for a different group of languages; there's something Babelesque about it all.

Sultani is good at his job, thanks in no small part to the skills that made him an excellent journalist—he speaks three languages, he's innately curious, he's an avid reader and a thoughtful writer. Still, much of the work is rote. Sultani spends his work days collating texts, cataloging texts, moving texts from one bin to another. Sultani gets coffee with his colleagues at lunchtime, but he'd hardly call them his closest friends. The office is just that: an office. He leaves before dark, and he drives home alone.

There's no one waiting in the driveway. Sultani lives alone—his wife is finishing her degree a few states away. He sees her only once a month. "It's been very hard," Sultani says. He doesn't like to talk about Zahra. He's protective of her, and for good reason—she's all he has. "I cannot imagine that I can continue without her," he once told me. His tone was not grave but gentle, almost serene.

Sometimes Sultani calls his lawyers, just to talk. They are a married couple, Patricia Pickrel and Vincent Gentile, New Jersey attorneys extraordinaires. They met Sultani over Zoom, in January, 2022. At that point, Sultani was sequestered in Fort Dix, a U.S. Army base 40 minutes out from Princeton. Pinkrel and Gentile were used to calling up Afghan refugees—in recent years, they'd taken an interest in asylum law. Still, there was something special about Sultani. He was enthusiastic, Pickrel told me, and smart. He was humble, too—a steady, affable sort, "not a self promoter." (Aber Shaygan, the editor from Etilaatroz, used the same exact language to describe his long-time friend: "he's not a huge self promoter.")

By mid-February, Sultani was awarded a Green Card, but Fort Dix wouldn't release him until he had found a place to live. Hearing this, Pickrel and Gentile offered him an office space in the backyard of their Princeton home (they'd built it

PHOTOGRAPHY BY FAITH HO
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during the pandemic, and were happy to turn it into a sort of auxiliary apartment). "It was the human thing to do," Pickrel explained. Sultani moved in on the 19th, and stayed for six months. The lawyers kept him company—eventually, they became Sultani's good friends. Even so, it was a bleak time.

"When I came here," Sultani says, "I felt so lonely." He missed his family, especially his sisters. "Girls in Afghanistan are at risk of horrible things," Pickrel told me. "And, you know, that really weighed on him." He missed his wife, too. But more than anything, Sultani missed Etilaatroz. He missed his friends. Back in Afghanistan, Shaygan explained, Sultani was "the fun guy, the guy that... makes jokes." He wanted everyone to get along—"if something happens, or we get upset," Shaygan told me, "he's the one who always starts to talk."

This time, though, Sultani could do little for his community. His friends and colleagues were hopelessly distant, both geographically—they were scattered across North America—and emotionally. Everyone was reeling from the shock of fleeing Kabul. "That was the most difficult time in all my life," Shaygan said. "I had social anxiety, depression, sleep problems... I didn't know how to deal with it."

It's a potent thing, loneliness. It breaks you slow. It pulls you from yourself. This is clichéd, but also true—the space between "I feel alone" and "I will always be alone" is thinner than it looks. If you are, in fact, alone, or close to it, it takes real courage to resist the second statement, which offers in its comforting finality a sort of ontological coatrack on which to drape your bitter and continual resentment. All this is to say that Sultani's choice to live with his loneliness, his choice to beat it back, little by little, as he builds his second life, is somewhat remarkable.

On his worst days, Sultani would ride his bike down to Kingston or Montgomery, watching herons splash in the shallow banks of the canal, breathing all the while soft and slow. It was like the grasslands: a space between two streams where Sultani could, for a moment, revel in the freedom of his solitude.

Sultani also turned to the Firestone stacks. "He loves books," Pickrel said. "He loves history." He gained access to the library through the lawyers, and kept it after he was awarded a 2-year fellowship from Princeton's School of Public and International Affairs. He spent those years studying the plight and resilience

of Afghan women under Taliban rule. He was thinking of his sisters and his wife.

Sultani misses journalism, but he doubts that his English will ever be good enough for him to make a living off his writing in the States. Instead, he hopes to turn a scientific eye toward the many stories of his home. "Afghanistan could be a very good case study for social psychologists," he says. "That's what I want to do, if I get a chance."

For now, he waits in his cubicle, in his driveway, in his empty house for his wife to return. She graduates this year, and once she does, she will join Sultani in Princeton. "I feel that, when we will be together, life will get easier for us," Sultani says. He smiles, a little sadly. "We are both so young."

IV

SULTANI IS DRIVING. HE'S watching the leaves go by. The drive is long, but not unreasonably so—besides, it's beautiful out. It's mid-October, and the Airbnb is in rural Pennsylvania, and the leaves are a glorious quilt, ragtag, resplendent, rolled out to the edge of the world. A special sight. And a special weekend, for the pieces of Etilaatroz, the men of the newspaper, the closest friends Sultani's ever had, will soon be reunited. They come together once a year. They come from Salt Lake City, from Seattle, from Chicago, from New York. There is little writing to be done but they come, once more, to dance.

Sultani gets in at 6 p.m. By then it's cold out, but his friends have lit a fire and formed a circle. In the uneven light Sultani sees Taqi Daryabi, one of the journalists who was arrested at the women's march. "I ran toward him," Sultani would later tell me. "I got out of my car and I just ran, you know... I hugged him tightly."

Before long, the music comes on—Afghan pop, the songs that would play in the newsroom at night. Sultani dances with his former colleagues for hours. Later they eat, as Sultani puts it, "very tasty Afghan food," and in the morning they hike, and play in the backyard the sort of games they would play in Kabul. Throughout it all, says Sultani, "we talked about our days in Afghanistan, when we were at our office." There are anecdotes and inside jokes and uproarious confessions and the pain of losing it all is blunted, somehow, in the ceaseless noise. "It's the highlight of my year," says Sultani of the reunion.

Three days later, when it's time to go, few attendees leave alone. Some carpool. Others have spouses, or kids. Sultani is the only one headed to Princeton. He will drive himself back home.

This time the trip is long and bare. Already, the trees are browning—the edges of the woods are fraying in the cold. A leaf, cracked and curled, comes drifting down from overhead. Sultani watches. He wonders what it'd take to put it back.

This article was edited and fact-checked as part of the Nassau Weekly*'s journalism section,* Second Look. *Please submit corrections to* thenassauweekly@gmail.com.

ART BY NINA OBIDAIRO-DANIELSEN
PAGE DESIGN BY EDEN REINFURT

Initiation Spins

"Some guy I must've known threw his hand over the glass to block me. He mouthed something I couldn't hear, as if we were underwater, and tapped his finger on the side of the glass. Someone's phone flashlight blinded me as it attempted to illuminate what was in it. Someone screeched."

BY ELENA EISS

Do you know that feeling when you're a kid and you've been going round and round on a playground merry-go-round, hanging on with clenched fists and even your toes wrapped around its metal bars, knowing if you let your feet go your body would lift into the air in equilibrium—do you know that feeling when you finally jump off?

That was how I felt at the party last Friday night—shot back to my childhood—in that moment I was telling you about. That moment where the room wouldn't stop spinning because I couldn't stop spinning—or rather, being spun, the strong hands of a dozen older members batting me, pushing me in a circle going round and round, probably with a stupid, Coors-fueled grin on my face because this was supposed to be fun, at least for everyone else. The basement room was just a blurry haze of unrecognizable faces and pricks of light stretching into thin lines across my vision as I spun wrapped in a miasma of sweat, beer, and cigarette smoke, my body crashing into other bodies, my hands knocking other hands, my feet barely keeping pace as my ankles threatened to give out.

And then out of nowhere they stopped pushing, and for a second I kept spinning on pure momentum. The crowd—one amorphous throng of students—parted in a circle around me, and I tried to sway and catch myself even as the room kept turning. My vision bobbed, and the throbbing music was turned down by some saintly DJ as I steadied myself, exuberant to have made it through.

But out shot a hand from the crowd with another drink. Even with the few lights shining painfully bright, the darkness of the room still hid the glass's contents 'til I accepted it, brought it closer to my face, lifted it, tilted it, about to drink—

Some guy I must've known threw his hand over the glass to block me. He mouthed something I couldn't hear, as if we were underwater, and tapped his finger on the side of the glass. Someone's phone flashlight blinded me as it attempted to illuminate what was in it. Someone screeched. The basement filled with voices bouncing against each other, against the ceiling, the walls, and I looked through my fingers to see what it was in my glass.

It was a goldfish. Two bug eyes on either side of its head, unblinking. Orange scales glinting in the light.

Translucent fins and tail, frail as ghosts, wispy and undulating in the glass's water. Potbellied: tiny, bulging stomach. Miniscule mouth in an O, opening, closing, trying to tell me something I couldn't hear. The crowd must have been chanting at that point, yelling at me to drink, but I couldn't hear them either. Their mouths opened and closed like that of the fish. Then the glass tilted for me, and I knew it was time to drink.

Everything still spun. Someone clutched my left shoulder, another steadied my right, and all I had to do was swallow. The goldfish batted its fins uselessly as it slid with the water through my lips, a cold, slippery lump. Images of goldfish swam through my mind: our kindergarten class pet, cartoon goldfish, the crackers, my uncle's prized fishtank, goldfish after goldfish after goldfish. The real goldfish, the goldfish of the present, glided down my throat—fins tickling my uvula—as I arrived at my final goldfish memory. Of the goldfish my friend Stan brought to school in third grade on that hot, hot day, that waited in its plastic bag until recess when we all circled up on the unmoving merry-go-round in the playground and he finally revealed it to us all: belly-up, blank eyes, fins wilted, and smelling so sharp my eyes watered. He told us he'd learned to play with it like the dog his parents wouldn't get him, then showed us how he'd do it: twisted open the bag, extracted the fish by its tail, took hold of its fins, and danced it around like a puppet. He stretched the fish's body too far and tore it. It fell into his lap, fins still pinched between his fingertips. Someone screeched. We flushed it down a school toilet and watched as the water did what the fish couldn't, watched the fish swim round and round...

Just like the room now spinning, the image of the dead fish imprinted on the dizzy scene, and just like all the goldfish of my memory had come to mind, the fish I'd swallowed couldn't help but surface, too, in a wave of acid, pizza, beer; its little orange body shot out like a fireball, all onto the grimy basement floor with its cigarette butts and gum wrappers, sick to my stomach, but as the crowd cheered for *me,* I realized I'd reached that point in the merry-go-round where you jump off, stumble, tumble to the ground, flat on your back, heart running a marathon, and all you want to do is go again. This was supposed to be fun.

This week, Elena Eiss *wades into the warm waters of youth with the* Nassau Weekly. *We are goldfish, briefly, although the biting atmosphere of reality might be where we truly belong.*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHAYNE CYTRYNBAUM
PAGE DESIGN BY ARIANNA HUANG

When Shall White Lilies Replace my Kalaniot?

BY SHAYNE CYTRYNBAUM

The Kalaniot (poppy anemone) is a potent symbol for both Israelis and Palestinians: its red, white, and black petals and green stem match the colors of the Palestinian flag, while in the winter it famously blankets the Otef Azah region of Israel, precisely where the October 7 massacres occurred. Both peoples have since used this symbol in memorials, art, and rallies. This poem was also partially inspired by "A Soldier Dreams of White Lilies" by Mahmoud Darwish.

When Shall White Lilies Replace my Kalaniot?

She stands with a heart of Jerusalem stone,
And though she covers herself in the green of life and lines,
Her extremities are dyed red:
The red of Kalaniot, anemones.

Anemones planted by an enemy.
But for an enemy, the anemone means the same,
For the red of the anemone bridges all borders
And dyes all pure white blossoms red.

And this is why we exalt the Kalanit,
We, battle-hardened nations,
We, nations defined by our extremities,
We, a nation that crosses green lines, turns them red, and crosses those too.

The blood-red Kalanit blooms all over this wide, narrow land:
On one side, it springs up without warning,
In pleasant meadows where we once danced, and under the wheels of burnt-out buses.
And on the other side, it springs up each day, anxiously,
In empty olive groves and orange orchards, and under new rubble.
Anemones all across this narrow bridge.

She looks like a ladybug.
If only I could witness this lovely little flower,
And not think politics.

I'm told it means resilience, survival
But when will we not have to survive?
When will we simply live?
"Mother, mother, how long must we wait for the lilies to bud?"
A soldier dreams of white lilies
A poet, too

When shall white lilies replace my Kalaniot?

When shall a Kalanit no longer conjure this blood-red flower, but simply an anxious young bride?
When shall she dress herself in white robes for her wedding day?
When shall she break the glass, in memory of a city now healed?
When shall she lay a white calla lily on ancestors' graves, their memory a blessing for peace?
When shall she soothe her red extremities with white gauze?
And when shall the blood find itself all absorbed, overcome, by the cloth that binds,
The lily-white cloth that seems so soft and weak, but is really so steadfast?

This will all happen someday,
Though I know not when.
Someday when I smell the lily on the breeze.
Someday when the Jaffa orange can be both a symbol, and also just a fruit.
Someday when the Kalanit in the field can look up at the tree above,
And see that the bird sitting on the olive branch
Is not a hawk, nor an eagle neither,
But a dove victorious,
Mighty beyond might,
Strong without strength,
Its wings carrying twin nations' hopes and dreams,
Its crown as white as the lilies that now fill the field.

ART BY CHAS BROWN
PAGE DESIGN BY SOPHIA MACKLIN

A Bad Habit

"She turned her head and looked up at the thin cracks in the ceiling. Her eyes traced the ruptures above them and Lizzie wondered what it might make it collapse. He turned his head and grabbed her face so her eyes would meet his, touched his nose to hers."

By LAILA HARTMAN-SIGALL

On the way out of the city they talk about their plans for Thanksgiving. It's early October and he is on a break from school, and she isn't, but still lives in the city. He'd offered to bring his car back for the weekend, so they could go away. Gavin is driving. They're going to his family's house, and also he doesn't like when she drives. Lizzie prefers to look out the window. They are twenty-one and eighteen, and he likes that she is young.

Gavin pulls up to the house, rocks crunch beneath the wheels as he drives on the gravel circling the lawn, and parks. The music switches off, and Lizzie is watching the house, which she'd only seen in pictures. It's big, white, and the door is guarded by large pillars. She didn't want to leave the city, which she hadn't told him. He'd brought it up on their last night at the end of August and kept bringing it up after that. They'd been in her childhood bed, naked, and his fingers were folded into the divots of her ribs, her legs twisted around his. Their limbs were stuck in twists like licorice. He kept kissing her head, asking questions, and she was wiping the sweat from her neck with the pillowcase. They were both a little drunk, warm.

Gavin doesn't remember it like that. He remembers they split a bottle of wine at dinner and his hand cupped her knee on the train home. They'd discussed wanting to be together uninterrupted forever, so they settled on at least a weekend. When they got to her house, they mapped out their getaway in between kisses. She wanted to lie on top of the blanket, and he worried she'd be cold. Gavin said, *If you want, we can go under the covers.* Even their toes were touching then. Lizzie said, *Up to you.* And Gavin said, *Why don't you just say what you want?* He said, *I'm always guessing.*

Lizzie said, *I'm sorry you feel that way.*

Don't apologize.

Okay.

Every time I tell you something like that you just apologize, he said.

Every time you criticize me?

It's a bad habit.

Lizzie propped herself up a bit, so she was lying on her side, holding her head in place. She drew gentle circles on his chest with her other hand, her fingertip barely sweeping his skin.

Will you tell your family the plans? she asked. *What if they want the house?*

They'll be happy for us to use it.

It'll be one of the last warm weekends.

She combed her fingers through her hair, yanking through the knots, and twisted it into a bun then let it fall and returned her back to the bed. It was an old duvet, with a pattern of dark pink flowers.

They won't mind, he said. *They'll be glad we're together.*

But what if they want it?

Don't get angry.

I'm not angry, she said. *It's strange, that's all. You don't think about what they might want.*

It's one weekend.

We are so different.

She turned her head and looked up at the thin cracks in the ceiling. Her eyes traced the ruptures above them and Lizzie wondered what it might make it collapse. He turned his head and grabbed her face so her eyes would meet his, touched his nose to hers.

He said, *What are you doing?*

Nothing.

You're very pretty, Gavin said, and he whipped his body on top of hers. She was tired, so she lay there while he parked kisses and dropped gentle bites around her body.

Gavin spent the night after that, and before she fell asleep, Lizzie had to get up to pee. It would be their last night together for a while and she worried he'd fall asleep while she was in the bathroom. She climbed over his body. When she got to the bathroom she saw her eye makeup was smudged and her hair was in knots again. Lizzie pulled the bottle of face wash from the cabinet and before she pumped it into her hand, she tugged at her skin and wondered why Gavin loved her. Scrubbing the gel around her face and splashing cold water to wash it away, a little crept into her eye and made them tear. She rubbed a towel across her face and began to cry. Her eyes continued to sting as she rubbed different creams into her skin.

Gavin's family lived in a big house across from a big park in the city and Lizzie first saw it on a Friday night when she was in high school, three years ago. She went to pick up her sister from the party, so together they could go home, and Gavin opened the door. It was often like this—Lizzie making sure her sister made it home, and to school. Lizzie was wearing a white tank top and she'd put her cardigan on before ringing the bell.

Oh, she said. *I'm just waiting for Olive.*

He swallowed the last sip of his beer and looked at her.

My sister.

You can come in, he said, *If you want.*

Lizzie saw, then, Olive looking at herself in the foyer mirror, wiping the smudged mascara from beneath her eyes and fixing the lipstick smeared around her kissed-lips. Olive came running to the door, *Sorry, sorry, sorry,* she made eyes at her sister.

Gavin, she said, *As always, a pleasure,* she smiled and fluffed his hair like it was a puppy's.

Goodnight girls, he said as they began walking, *Goodnight Lizzie.*

She turned around and saw him standing in the door.

Lizzie still remembers the house like that, the stillness of his body in the doorframe. A lot of people really love him. He is good at most things and before they were dating Lizzie had heard he'd aced his SATs. They had been in a history class together and sometimes

Lizzie had dreaded speaking around him, always finding herself wanting to say something he didn't already know.

Gavin gets out of the car and opens the trunk, then begins carrying the bags to the door. Lizzie gathers their trash—hers, a large coffee cup and a lollipop stick, and his, a Red Bull can, apple core, and the crust of a pastrami sandwich. She watches him through the car window, opening the door and handling the alarm, while she sits in the car with the bag of garbage in her lap.

When they go inside Gavin fills a large glass with ice and water and stands at the sink while he chugs it, then refills it and chugs again. The cabinets in the kitchen are a pale gray-green with brass hardware. Lizzie flips through the pages of the newspaper that's been left on the counter, from late August. She is laughing as Gavin goes through glasses as though he's never quenched thirst, then reaches out her arms and opens and closes her hands, like clams, asking for some. Gavin sets his cup on the counter, grabs her fingers and places them on his shoulders, then takes her waist in his hands and begins to dance. He is leading their movement and singing.

Dum da da dum da.

They dance for a few moments, like that, Lizzie almost limp in his arms.

I was asking for the water, she whispers.

He kisses her across her face and she tugs at his ears. Gavin turns away and refills the glass. Now there is only ice in half of it, and she can't tell if she is thirsty, but drinks it anyway.

Laila Hartman-Sigall *grabs the* Nassau Weekly*'s hand and drags us to a family Thanksgiving dinner. Things are getting serious. Fingers-crossed...*

ART BY EDEN REINFURT
PAGE DESIGN BY SOPHIA MACKLIN

Diamond in this Room

By GAVIN STROUD

We all want the melt of you
the pulsing red ocean
full of brine,
combed by pearly topsail shimmers

imagined to infinity but never really making slices,
want to drive a four-fathom pike
down and down and lose it on the way.

Fathom comes from old english
when it used to mean "embrace" or "outstretched"
because it's six feet across a man
fingertip-to-fingertip when he's on his back.

But what have we got of your embrace?
I'll tell you what I have,
what scraps I keep
to warm myself on nights like this
(anyway I'm not alone).

Tonight I've drunk so much
I'm the only one who sees
what it is: there's a house
in back of your place
after dark when open the unblinking light-eyes,
and all around servants haul shiny black boxes.

Now you're dancing downstairs
with the open-mouthed pieces of someone's parents
who sent them out into this deathless war
for a paste-gem crown that dissolves in bathroom mirrors,
from the naked skin wet and yet unclean
and you won't be the one to clean it.

And I won't be the one to do it to you,
the one to cut you deep
to get the taste of your mean-it breath
the feel of all the clutching and pressing
the sound of promises to half-die for it.

Later I go downstairs
after checking my face in a mirror
bare of precious things
to find you are gone.

The diamond in this room
the house is shuttered
and I shut my eyes too
prying out into that dark
waiting for a pulse;

Bad Men, Suffering Women,

"The more we view certain expressions of gendered being as untrue, the more we reinforce in ourselves and others that there is a 'true' way to be a woman or a man, trapping ourselves in the same conservative discourse we claim to abhor."

By NARGES ANZALI

Recently, I went to the doctor's office, and they did not believe me. I lead with this fact because in most aspects of my life, I do not experience a great deal of sexism. But recently, I went to the doctor's office knowing exactly what I had: an ovarian cyst. My primary care doctor told me that it was likely just my IUD. The nurse practitioners at the health center questioned me for twenty minutes about yeast infections and UTIs before begrudgingly recommending an ultrasound.

I had exactly what I thought I had, only a little worse. An ovarian cyst that was 6cm big, almost the size of my ovary. I had a ping pong ball lodged in my guts. I did not know how to write about it.

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The discourse about performative men has only exploded since the beginning of the year. Actually, I've gotten a little tired of reading the words. The more it's repeated, the more it seems to lose its meaning and gain traction. The archetype itself is fairly easily recognizable: as the writer Chibuzo Emmanuel describes, "he never passes up an opportunity to wax lyrical about women's rights. Tote bags decorated with sprightly colored Labubus, T-shirts with texts like 'THE FUTURE IS FEMALE,' and feminist texts...deployed loudly to signal his progressive leanings. Bonus points if he drinks matcha and shops at the female section of clothing stores."

If you've been on the internet in the last year, you get the concept. At best, many of my friends seem mildly amused. In more recent months, what they feel is closer to disgust. As Cosmopolitan magazine so eloquently notes, there are "worse things that a guy could do." So why the increasing ridicule?

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I was raised in an Islamic household. The self, in this household, held no inherent quality. My parents told me all the things that you hopefully tell your children: that they are smart, that they are kind. However, there were no such comments when I did something mean—in a framework of discursive formation, you can only be kind if you are being kind. You can only be intelligent if you are being intelligent. The soul, then, has no absolute. Being neither evil nor good, it simply is. You must urge it, through action, towards good. In the context of the hijab, this presents itself through the ideal of modesty—that it does not exist as an inherent quality in us, but can only be performed as a task. We are not inherently modest. We must make ourselves that way.

In this context, the performative man is fascinating. In the Western mode of discursivity, the ethical body is one that is formed through its conflict with the world. Therefore, the performative man is something of an abomination. If we define their hobbies—primarily those which are 'rewarded' societally, at least in the sense that they are things that women value and may catch their attention—as integrating into society, then we define the disgust against them as an inherent assumption that *the inside does not match the outside.* We are assuming, then, that they are betraying themselves and, indeed, us, who adopt these hobbies of the intelligentsia against the brutality of the world. Therefore, we go about it the correct way: forming ourselves through struggle. While they, whose actions are incentivized, are derided precisely because it is assumed that action could never change what is inside of you—that this is a fixed quantity. A man, in other words, will always be a man.

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When I went back to the doctors after confirming that I had an ovarian cyst, the only thing that they told me was to take Advil. A month later, I went back complaining about severe pain and discomfort. The Sunday after that, the cyst burst and started hemorrhaging blood into my uterus.

In her article "The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain," Leslie Jamison says of the 'sick woman' trope that "the moment we start talking about wounded women, we risk transforming their suffering from an aspect of the female experience into an element of the female constitution, perhaps its finest, frailest consummation." Then how do I control my discursive self? If I have no choice but to be ill, all over the place, constantly, unmanageably, depressively, what occurs to my femininity? If men are told that their selves are warring with the world, then maybe women are told that their selves are made sick by it—hence the constant warnings to us: that birth control is overly hormonal, that food makes you bloat, or otherwise its toxicity will overtake our delicate nature.

Jamison continues: "A 2001 study called 'The Girl Who Cried Pain' tries to make sense of the fact that men are more likely than women to be given medication when they report pain to their doctors. Women are more likely to be given sedatives." My illness is viewed as a discursive truth of my being, then. I am sick as in my soul is sick; I am drawing attention to my soul, not my body. In this way, the performative man and I are strikingly similar; we are assumed to be manifesting symptoms that are false to the inner being—that are, in some way or the other, well-intentioned but fake.

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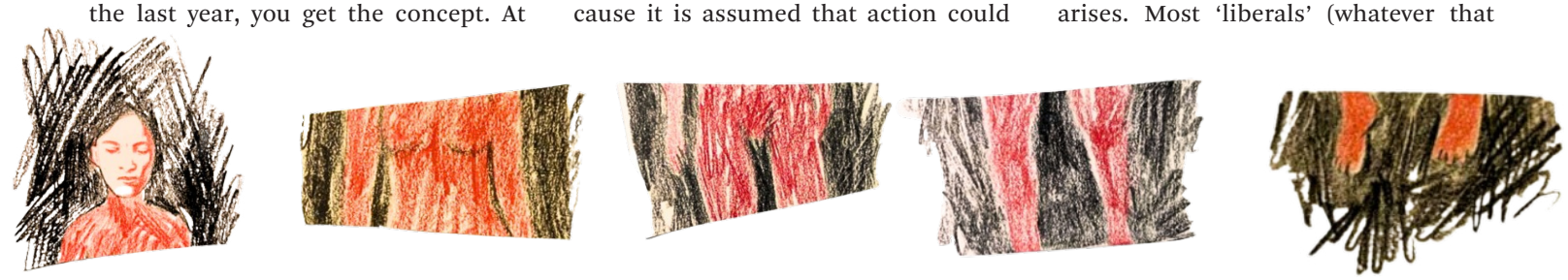
Here an inconsistency in discourse arises. Most 'liberals' (whatever that



ART BY EVA MOZHAEVA
PAGE DESIGN BY SOPHIA MACKLIN

and The Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain

means in the US anymore) would agree that gender is fluid. Or if not fluid, at least that it is subject to change, precisely because it functions as a societal construct with which one defines oneself. Therefore, the enchantment with the sick woman or the bad man cannot stand. It is an inconsistency in terms.

Judith Butler says, "If there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process...an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification."

Gender is formed cumulatively through a series of actions, similar to the self. For example, I am not really a woman because there is a woman inside of me, which is how it is often explained to kindergarteners. I am not even a woman because I wear women's clothes, which I don't really. I am a woman because the series of actions and mannerisms that I adopt identify me with the idea of a woman, which society then takes to mean that is what I am. The more we view certain expressions of gendered being as untrue, the more we reinforce in ourselves and others that there is a 'true' way to be a woman or a man, trapping ourselves in the same conservative discourse we claim to abhor.

Perhaps there is, too, a possibility that through their action, 'performative' men can also change the core of their beings. Our cynical belief in their unchanging betrayal of the self perhaps betrays something more sinister in ourselves: that we do not believe that we can change—or rather, that we believe there is something in other people and in ourselves that is *always* and *unequivocally* harmful.

—

I was in a lot of pain. I was not allowed to skip any of my classes. I was sleeping, mostly, and hiding from everyone I knew, and wondering why I was so miserable. My doctors would not give me painkillers.

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Jamison's conclusion to the 'Grand Unified Theory of Female Pain' is that "The wounded woman gets called a stereotype, and sometimes she is. But sometimes she's just true." What I want to add to her commentary: that this is precisely what gender is. Sometimes, the way we perform it is a stereotype. But sometimes it's just true. And by framing some things as inevitable parts of our experience, we fail to interrogate their existence. If we tell women they will always be in pain, then we fail to take that pain seriously—and fail to seriously look for alternatives to it.

If my doctors had taken me seriously the first time I complained of pain, I could have had a surgery that popped the cyst two or three weeks after it started developing, saving me three months of pain and severe depression. But that didn't happen, because I had to convince them of the pain, and by the time they did believe me, they didn't think the surgery was 'necessary.' It was not necessary to save me pain because presumably, I'm used to it.

Who would Sylvia Plath be if she hadn't been unable to leave an abusive marriage? Who would my grandmother be if she hadn't been forced to marry young? When we refuse to think past the 'conditions' that are thought to be inherent to our souls, we refuse the discursive form of our souls: that in the presence of different choices, the pain did not have to exist at all.

PAGE DESIGN BY RAVEN REID

NASS LIST

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT...

1. DAT PUSSY
2. Das Pussi
3. your fertile crescent
4. Pregnant chicks kissing
5. the tory's new poetry section
6. Queering the normal
7. AI... how is no one talking about that?
8. the big beautiful BILL
9. the big beautiful BBL
10. how we are on a floating rock in the vast emptiness of the universe. Like, damn...really puts shit into perspective
11. how apparently someone is named 'gleb'???
12. the danger of a single story
13. why Zohran Mamdani's first visit as mayor must be to Tel Aviv
14. serving woke the old fashioned way
15. the hasidic tunnels. I feel like we all forgot about that.
16. How some are replying to this email thread "just for fun." As a motivated young person, however, I saw a deeper opportunity in this prompt. Here's what I learned.
17. I got to ✅express my creativity and🗣️show my dedication to my own success. Recruiters are always watching and measuring your commitment, ESPECIALLY in the Nassau Weekly's email threads. It's up to YOU to stand out🎯in a sea of unpassionate candidates.
18. how this bitch a ho. Met her at the store. You know how it go.
19. how the armenians are down. i'm not worried about russia. im not worried about putin, cuz this is his pussy. it's the whites and the latins, anyone got a problem with it cuz im indian too. im vietnamese, this bitch is trying to free the world. so who's gonna sell me my iphone today? who's gonna sell me the biggest iphone in this house?
20. post email clarity
21. how Jake Gyllenhaal didn't bottom in the mountains with no lube and a bussy full of beans just for y'all to act like he's some brand new actor
22. twink birth
23. India's Right-Wing Raves: Hindutva, Zionism, and psychedelic trance by Masha Hassan
24. how when they say here comes the airplane it's not actually a plane but rather green vegetables
25. how mama and dada will just disappear sometimes when we're playing games???
26. If you can save up wishes on multiple shooting starts to make one really big wish
27. how i'm sitting my white ass down and listening
28. how that Xan Francisco got me looking and moving like Mr Bean, I ain't saying shit
29. i have that shirt too kinda
30. a large uncut hose of a cock flaccid across skin inked with a pentagram
31. the man inside me
32. the trenton strangler.
33. gemeinschaft
34. marx's failure to account for dubai chocolate matcha latte
35. how im so wet 😭😭
36. how my puthy hurts 🥺
37. That special box where women hide all their deepest secrets.
38. The parallels between olivia pope and fitzgerald grant and sally hemings and thomas jefferson
39. Antidisestablishmentarianism
40. that time i used a glow in the dark flavored RCA condom
41. bisexual girl who got her septum pierced and it didn't hurt at all
42. getting iShowSpeed's 2028 presidential campaign off the ground
43. biting the hand that feeds
44. the summer i spent interning at a small family-owned defense company
45. the summer i spent depressed and enduring multiple health issues
46. How harry styles wore a dress once and never again
47. Niah schnap.
48. how by the time you finish reading this sentence a football pitch of forest was cut down
49. securing the Albanian vote
50. your digital footprint