

This week, the *Nass*
goes back to the clay.

The Nassau Weekly⁵⁰



ANIMAL KINGDOM

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ANIMAL KINGDOM

Dear friends,

Antoine Roquentin stared at the roots of a tree and thought about his own superfluity, denied and generated simultaneously the concept of existence. My own mind is a little limited in comparison; I stare at something I hope to understand and, over time, my thinking degenerates. I wonder how my dog with his crippling separation anxiety was doled out a life of sleeping with his head on a satin pillowcase and end up staring at the page in my middle school science notebook onto which I copied the ecological pyramid, moving bottom-up from producer to quaternary consumer. But, I suppose, the struggle is all the same—to get to the end of a line of thinking.

At the end/on the edge, which is to say back at the very beginning, on some Möbius strip, here we are. Endeavoring to understand complexity, only for the object to return the clay from which it was formed, only for the tree to show you its roots, only for someone to tell you, “That is just who I am.” This week, the *Nass* writes to the brink of understanding; wonders until the past and future amalgamate to form a conceivable continuum; asks questions until there are no words left unused in the asking to be used in the answering;

Sartre: “Words had vanished and with them the meaning of things.”

Wordlessly,
Sasha Rotko, EIC

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This Week:

Fri	10:15a-12:00p 211 Dickinson Hall Telling the Truth About Empire: Imperial Bureaucrats and the Modern American State	5:30p-6:45p Frist MPR B BHM: 25 DuBois Intellectual Series: "Global Haiti: The International Gang Problem"	Mon	3:00p-4:30p Richardson Auditorium Richardson Chamber Players Spring Concert	7:00p-8:30p Convocation Room, Friends Center Intro to Tango
Sat	2:00p Donald G. Drapkin Studio, Lewis Arts Complex Staged Reading of <i>Generation-less</i> by Tiffany Rawlston '26	7:00p-10:00p Solley Theater, Arts Council of Princeton Café Improv (\$2 entrance fee)	Tues	6:00p-7:30p Tower Room, Princeton Public Library Workshop: Writers Room (registration online)	5:00p-7:30p North Gallery, School of Architecture Media and Modernity: 25 Years of Thinking Through Meditation
Sun	10:00a-1:00p Paul Robeson Center for the Arts, Lower Level Gallery PRINCETON? UNEXPECTED Exhibit (open through March 14th)	4:00p Lee Rehearsal Room, Lewis Arts Complex PLOrk: Electronics and the Voice	Wed	9:00a-5:00p Arts Council of Princeton America Unfiltered: Portraits and Voices of a Nation	7:30p McCarter Theatre A Lookingglass Theatre Company Production: <i>Circus Quixote</i>

Verbatims:

Overheard at Wawa
Virtuous Man: "I flee without paying, without saying goodbye."

Overheard at HUM Precept

HUMANist: "I want to be his sacrifice gladly offered."

Overheard in Special Collections

Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of The Tory: "To what value is the HUM sequence for the investment banker?"

Overheard in Addy Hall
Over-eager sophomore: "I love your shirt! Is it from India?"
Bob-cut ginger: "It's from J. Crew."

Overheard on speaker-phone

Someone's father: "Remember when you hugged your grandma Bess and it felt like you were hugging a stripper pole in Vegas?"

Overheard on Goheen Walk

Athlete, discussing his friends: "Who's touse and who's bouse?"

Overheard outside the Princeton University Art Museum

Pensive stoner: "I have this friend... she's one step away from being a white woman with dreads."

Overheard in Whitman Dining Hall

Ally: "You used to be in gay love."
Star-Crossed friend: "Well I was never in gay love."

Overheard in a Gmail Spam Folder

zippyreply@gmail.com: "Hi! This is Christopher L. Eisgruber. Please share the number you prefer for text communication."

Overheard in Firestone Library

Believer: "I think it's nice that they posted a father-daughter picture."
Non-Believer: "That's his GIRLFRIEND."

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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 Monday. Include your name, netid, word count, and title. We hope to see you soon!

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

The Political Bug

Why Princeton neuroscience professor Sam Wang is running for Congress.

BY LEIA PEI

Tucked inside the Princeton Neuroscience Institute is a spacious meeting room, accessible only to professors and lab staff. On Tuesday, February 10, it was booked for the Wang lab. Words like dendrites and segmentation floated alongside food commentary and lighthearted banter as Sam Wang walked in. Dressed in typical Ivy League fashion—a crisp button up layered underneath a knitted sweater—he exuded the energy of a wholesome, almost fatherly figure.

A week before, Wang, a neuroscience professor at Princeton, announced his run for Congress in New Jersey's 12th district. But today, Wang played scientist, not politician. As he sat down at the head of the table, the chatter softened. A lab member was presenting on a dendritic image analysis tool called DeepD3. Throughout the presentation, Wang kept up a constant stream of questions.

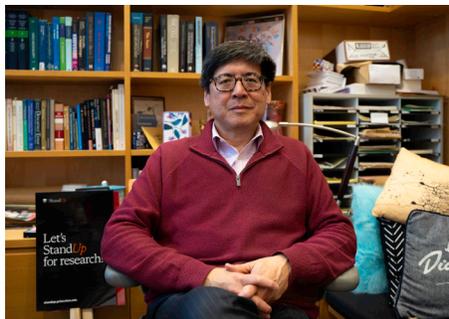
I met Wang in his office that morning. He brought his dog since he had no time to walk her. Betty, a golden American Coonhound with sweet eyes, nuzzled my hand. She was quiet but affectionate, peering up at us from the ground.

Before leading his own research group, Wang was a 15-year-old freshman at Caltech. There, he majored in physics. But post-undergrad, he switched his focus, pursuing a PhD in Neuroscience at Stanford. "I wanted to do something fundamental, and I wanted to make a discovery in my lifetime," he explained—a sentiment that guides his scientific and political pursuits. After Stanford came postdoctoral fellowships at Duke and Bell Labs, a research and development branch of Lucent Technologies. After just one year in his postdoctoral fellowship at Duke, he took time off to work on Capitol Hill.

"I took a break in my postdoc after my first year because I was not satisfied with my progress," Wang said, leaning back in his chair. He then explained that the Democrats had lost control of the House for the first time in 40 years. This galvanized him to apply to

a fellowship in Congress designed for scientists. Subsequently, Wang was in Washington, witnessing the first large government shutdown arising from partisan conflict in 1995-1996. "There, I learned that politics can break," he said. "I had these views about politics where everyone works together through discussion. But it started breaking that year, and it's been becoming more broken for the past 30 years."

After the close 2000 election between Al Gore and George W. Bush, Wang resolved to bring his scientific lens to issues of polarization and voter inequity. He founded the Princeton Election Consortium in 2004 and the Princeton Gerrymandering Project in 2017, fo-



Professor Sam Wang in his office.

cused on predicting election outcomes and equalizing voter power.

By 2016, Wang was a respected pollster, and in October, one of his twitter posts went viral: "It is totally over," he wrote. "If Trump wins more than 240 electoral votes, I will eat a bug." One month later, Wang was on CNN, staring down a honey drenched cricket.

"I go on and I say to the host, 'Okay, I've got a bug here,'" Wang recalls. "'You wanted me to eat a bug? Sure. But before I do that, I just want everyone to understand that we're at this really fraught national moment.' But then this is where the host is looking at me and just saying, 'Are you going to eat the bug? Are you going to eat the bug?'" Wang sighs, exasperated. "And I think to myself, if it's good enough for John the Baptist to eat a bug in the desert, it's good enough for me. But now, nobody remembers that I was trying to get a message out. Everybody just remembers the bug. The

CNN technicians on the other end of the mic turned up the microphone to really get the crunching sound as I ate it. Then, I became a meme."

Here, I asked Wang why he decided to run for Congress. Between the government's current hostile attitude towards scientists and the increasing sensationalism of American politics—as exemplified by the bug—how can he still be optimistic when it seems like his science-based approach to reforming politics is falling on deaf ears?

Wang paused.

"Both my parents died some years ago," he said, speaking quietly. "The doctors in the ICU did everything they could. And I did everything I could, and in the case of my father, I was there... Because you don't leave someone you love when they need you. This is a very difficult time right now. But, I love my country. This is not a time to say, ah, I'm just going to go do my science, walk my dogs. I like my science and I like my dogs, but right now, I think everyone needs to do everything they can."

"Scientists are not typically very political, but the Stand Up for Science protests attracted hundreds of thousands of people... It's a time when people need to rise up. We might fail; I didn't succeed with my father. But it doesn't change the burden of at least trying."

Sam took a break after mentioning his father, leaving Betty and me alone in the room. We looked at each other. She hung her head, eyebrows furrowed as if she could feel Sam's grief. In this silence, I thought about America and the kind of freedom it used to represent. I thought about Einstein, who was driven out of Germany to the United States and eventually to Princeton, his arrival marking the start of decades of physics advancements that transformed America into a scientific powerhouse. I thought about how, less than a century after Einstein's warm welcome, many budding scientists on the cusp of discovery have been driven out of the country in search of safer havens abroad. And then I thought about the hope that now lies in scientist-turned-politicians like Wang, people emblematic of a logic and evidence based politics that we now so desperately need as a nation. And then I thought about the future.

Leia Pei is a contributing writer for *Second Look*.

Proof of Life

“Since then, I’ve begun to feel slightly disturbed, certainly more so than I used to, when these flashes of the outside world get through the gates. An antenna had sprouted out of my skull, sending surges of electricity through my nerves whenever it detected an aberration.”

BY CALLISTO LIM

The other day, I cut my hand in the architecture studio. I ran around the third floor of the architecture building, clutching my injured hand in the other, willing a first-aid kit to appear. I ran downstairs, out the door, my hands painting themselves red until I reached the infirmary. I’m told that I left a trail of blood as I ran—but when I returned to the studio five hours and an ER trip later, there was no evidence of it. Dotted across the floor in its place were piles like sugar of little beads of bleach, tracing a path out the door. The site of my accident had already been scrubbed.

That’s how things go at Princeton, I think. Anything out of place warrants, generously, a glance. Nothing, not even a bleeding student running by, deserves more than a curious peek up from our laptops. And, as fast as possible, any evidence is hidden. We come to expect the perfectly manicured grounds, not once wondering how strange it is that nothing occurs here which should not. Or, rather, *almost* nothing happens—whenever *something* happens, whenever life occurs, Princeton prides itself on removing it before anyone can see it.

One day last semester, I was leaving the library and heading home. A slightly windswept fall afternoon, the type of walk that ends with you picking out fallen leaves from your coat. As I started my

walk home, I noticed someone with a guitar, perched against the wall of East Pyne, playing with a guitar case laid out in front of him. Steeped in the shadow of the arch, the musician strummed for passing students, professors, visitors. I didn’t stop to look—no one did. I felt unnerved. And as I walked, thinking about just why I had felt so put off by his appearance, a small sensation crawled up the back of my rib cage. When I returned home and changed in the mirror, I noticed a small shadow, a spiny mass, tacked onto my back, dug like scratches of static into my shoulderblade. Smoke danced in my nose, gaseous tap shoes kicking in my sinuses. I felt queasy, suddenly. Seasick. The ground I stood on no longer sure. The busker’s presence, proof of the outside world, had disrupted something deeply folded into the fibers of this campus, something impossibly knit with who I am on this campus, something that knows to reject everything not of itself, something whose only protocols are *homonogenize* or *expel*.

Since then, I’ve begun to feel slightly disturbed, certainly more so than I used to, when these flashes of the outside world get through the gates. An antenna had sprouted out of my skull, sending surges of electricity through my nerves whenever it detected an aberration. Small things—a dog walker, a campus tour, McCarter-theatre-goers—barely got a spark, but some things struck like lightning.

A few weeks back, I was waiting on the train to New York City with a friend when a woman at the station, around 30 or 40, asked if my friend could help her get an Uber home. A fairly run-of-the-mill experience, albeit a bit rare. My friend ordered the Uber and we got on the train.

Then, just a week ago, I was sitting in Coffee Club. Just working, not drinking anything. Beside me, tucked into a seat at the table against a corner formed by a pillar against the wall, was a woman, bundled up thick in a scarf and fleece, working on some type of PowerPoint presentation for something distinctly un-Princetonian. As I worked, she turned to me and smiled. “Cold today, isn’t it?” she ventured. I laughed politely, said yes, and turned back to my work. After a few minutes, she got my attention again: “Could you help me to get a matcha?”

I took my headphones off and turned to her. I noticed, at that moment, four large paper cups lined up next to her computer, each empty. I looked closer at her face—familiar, vaguely. Immediately, I placed her as the same woman from the train stop. I felt a force behind the bridge of my nose, a surge of heat, a short-circuit spark.

It’s one thing to have seen her at the train station, that interstitial space between campus and the outside world. Someone her age, someone presumably non-Princeton-affiliated, is largely regular at that junction of campus/off-campus. But it was strange for her to be in Coffee Club, in this space which is so distinctly of campus, of the student body, of the fibers which swallow any discrepancy whole—yet there she was.

On my walk home, I began to see people everywhere. Not the academic-looking sort: just regular people. Some walked their dogs, others sat on benches smoking and laughing. When they saw me they stopped, looked me dead in the eye.

Callisto Lim *is transcending campus life.*

Essays

Noble Lessons From Airplane Nuts and Washi Tape

On the emergent qualities of ubiquitous things.

BY MIA MANN-SHA FIR

Recently, I came up with a metaphor. When I picture the face of a person who comes up with a metaphor, it's not my face. The face that comes up with a metaphor is old, decidedly Greek, the face of someone whose name could also be the name of a gold standard vibrator, like Diogenes or Heraclitus. This metaphor-face is wrinkled and wise and worn and weary. I thought I was too young, too a bunch of other things to become the face behind a metaphor, but I guess not, because today I present to you my very first metaphor:

Airplane Nuts and Washi Tape.

This metaphor offers a binary through which to view the world. I get it—we've largely moved away from binaries, deeming them over-simplistic and generally inept at conveying that which we've for so long relied on them to convey (gender, to name a crowd favorite). But I wonder if sometimes they can actually be useful.

This idea came to me on the plane, a place where a disproportionate number of things seem to come to me. Likely because there is no Wi-Fi on the plane, keeping me from mentally teleporting to Instagramland, and there are also no friends with whom to speak, seeing as I have lied to my friends, claiming that the seats next to them were already booked (though phonetically similar, "plane time" and "play time" are not actually the same).

Alone and not scrolling Instagram I sit, when something very exciting happens. The flight attendant comes

around with a special delivery: airplane nuts. Thank you ma'am, for these airplane nuts.

In front of me sits a runty little bowl, not even $\frac{2}{3}$ full. But the runtiness ends there. They may as well be glowing, these nuts, lounging about in their United Airlines bowl. I'm almost like, is this sex appeal? I guess ultimately no (not sex appeal) but the nuts are awesome and I want to snarf them down in four seconds or else eat them incredibly meticulously with the care and attention such glorious treasures deserve. I begin with the latter approach—meticulousness—but progressively transition to the other—snarf.

Before boarding this plane, before I'd ever met these nuts, I'd been in the terminal. And guess what the terminal had offered me, for the small price of something exorbitant but ultimately feasible like \$9? Nuts. Yes, the terminal offered nuts, as did the gas station I stopped at on my way to the airport, as did the home I left at seven this morning to get to the airport. Nuts are ubiquitous, is my point, which is relevant as it makes mysterious the seeming glee I derive from these specific ones on the plane. The sixteen nuts at which I gaze, wistfully, strike me as the only sixteen nuts on the entire planet. They are presented to me with abundant scarcity (oxymoronic but true), and thus I experience them as something like religious talismans (talismen?).

To segue from nuts to washi tape there's no natural route, besides their shared status as oft-overpriced products adored by people who love the farmers market and (think they) know a thing or two about hormone balancing.

My mother has taught me a few valuable lessons in this life: Don't walk

through Central Park at night. Leave a cash tip in the bathroom of your hotel room where it has a better chance of falling into the hands of the person who actually cleans the room. People are mean because they're sad. If you decide you're having an existential crisis, eat a banana, and then reassess. Canned tuna is magic. Do not greet PhD-ed females with "Dear Ms." And the washi tape you see in the store, next to the thirty-five other pretty colors of washi tape: That is not the same as the washi tape that will sit on your desk once you've purchased one roll of it for \$16. This one here in the store is magical. The one on your desk will be on the floor under your desk (right next to the roll you bought last month) come nightfall, transformed from coveted specimen to clutter in less than a day.

What washi tape is, besides the girly, impractical cousin of masking tape, is the perfect antithesis of airplane nuts. Bear with me: As a member of the symphony—laid out among all the other colors—it glows. But on its own, it comes to inhabit its true status as a role of tape that isn't actually sticky.

Now I endeavor to apply this binary to any and everything there ever was, to milk it 'til it becomes a sad, deflated udder. That way I avoid the risk of having to come up with a new idea or original thought ever again. I sit here basking in the glory of having a face that is the face of a person who has come up with a metaphor.

One application of my metaphor/binary that I am especially interested in entertaining is: friends (a subject I'm always particularly interested in entertaining).

Say there's a guy named Keith. Keith is in your friend group, one of the boys,

if you will, and when everyone else is doing the thing—watching the football game, playing Uno, comparing Hinge profiles—Keith's presence, also doing the thing, alongside everyone else doing the thing, is inoffensive at least, additive at best. He is funny, this Keith, adds to the dynamic, makes a good joke that you and the others laugh at (awesome).

One day, over winter break, everyone else is gone; it's just you and Keith in town. You meet at 1 p.m. for turkey burgers, decide you should probably hang, seeing as he is one of the boys. Third of the way into the burger, you realize the guy is pretty boring, answers your questions and gets back to the burger or the TV screen (he is big into hockey).

Keith is a washi tape friend, you (would) conclude (if you knew this binary). He contributes to wholes of which he is a part. To these, he is a solid addition, appears to glow with humor and a sense of can hang. But, isolated from the whole, he's kind of whatever.

In the way that there is Keith, there is also Francis. Francis, too, is one of the boys, and though the group isn't so big, when you're in it, the dynamic of the whole, you sometimes forget about Francis. The guy doesn't talk that much, his personality kind of pales in comparison to the more gregarious others, the ones who crack more jokes and crack them louder. It's not that if you found your namecard placed next to Francis's at a dinner party you would be actively upset, per se, but it's not as though you would jump with joy, either.

Well, it turns out this hypothetical dinner party really happens—surprise!—and seeing as the host is a serious micromanager, namecards have been laid out, and yours—you guessed it—sits right to the right of Francis'. You oblige, draping your sweater over the back of the chair—this host is scary and no one wants to face his wrath by screwing up his seating chart. You nod across the table to the friend you wish you were sitting next to, and then gear up for an expectationless hour with Francis. Right away, you note that because the acoustics of the room are so bad, you really will only be able to hear

each other. Francis and you, you and Francis (sucks, you think).

But the next time you re-enter your conscious mind, you realize that your initial boring discussion of AI eventually turned to something you don't even want to repeat here because it only made sense then and there, between the two of you, you and Francis. By the time everyone gets up, when the food is all gone (the host underserved, in wont style), you two remain perched right there where you are. This guy Francis is pretty cool.

Francis is an airplane nuts friend. As a part of the whole, he is easy to miss. It doesn't occur to you to seek him out when you have other options (friends). In isolation, however, he's totally awesome. Some anal partygiver decides he'd like your left elbow and Francis's right one to bump into one another periodically throughout supper, probably without much thought at all. Suddenly, here you are, thinking, maybe platonic soulmates are real, where has Francis been all my life? It is a similar feeling of discovery to when the flight attendant gives you the nuts, and you're like, Holy Nirvana this is the best thing I've ever tasted, nothing will ever be so good again.

So, per my metaphor—yes, the metaphor of my very own construction—there is this binary, and I've tagged it Airplane Nuts and Washi Tape. What it tells us is: background matters; context matters. Washi tape, the experience of perusing its many colored and patterned forms when you're there in the store, amidst all the other colors and patterns, is a magical, delightful experience. When you bring the washi tape home, separating it from its tribe, plopping it into the reused Chobani yogurt container you've designated your miscellaneous-shit-tub, the tape and its \$16 price tag become much less glamorous.

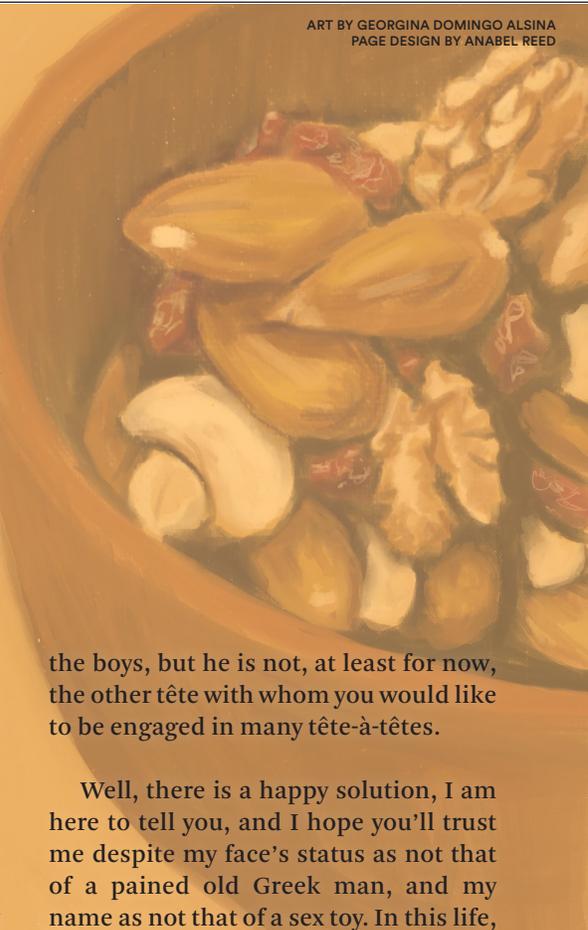
Keith, around the rest of the boys, is totally awesome. But when you're with him one on one, though remaining fundamentally the same person, he is made, by the context, less obviously appealing. You are still glad he is one of

the boys, but he is not, at least for now, the other tête with whom you would like to be engaged in many tête-à-têtes.

Well, there is a happy solution, I am here to tell you, and I hope you'll trust me despite my face's status as not that of a pained old Greek man, and my name as not that of a sex toy. In this life, we have space for both: Airplane Nuts and Washi Tape. It is useful to realize that we don't actually have to leave it up to fate (a seating chart forcing us next to Francis, United Airlines blessing us with only sixteen nuts) to get our hands on the real or metaphorical airplane nuts of the world. That which is not immediately appealing or flashy may ultimately be quite additive to life, a fact it's good to remind ourselves of.

And while I do aspire to avoid bringing washi tape or any such impractical cousins home with me—anticipating their sad futures at the bottom of yogurt tubs and under desks—I know that entering stationary stores to ogle at washi tape is a wonderful pastime. The key is in remembering that the context is essential to the enchantment. It is worthwhile to note when and how Keith's company is enjoyable, but the fact that he is not perfect in all settings ought not discount his value altogether. Not every person can be a Francis, a diamond in the rough, or a diamond of any kind. We need crowds, and we need individual people to make up crowds.

Mia Mann-Shafir is no ancient Greek man, but she creates a new metaphor anyway.



I Let Myself Fall

“They will dig at our bones as we did the dinosaurs’. And when they find yours and my bones twisted up in each other, they will create a great creature out of us.”

BY ALBA MASTROMATTEO

I watch you in that bed. You’re pale and invaded by millions of wires. A thin hospital blanket is draped over your legs. The last time I heard you speak you told me about the raspberry Jell-O you had after lunch. You begged me to bring you mouthwash from the gift store because it left the worst taste in your mouth. Then, you fell deep into that head of yours while I was away. You always do that.

When I came back from the shop, the doctors had this sympathetic look on their faces. They told me you weren’t waking up, but I just shook my head at them. I told them you did this all the time. I walked away, and I burrowed myself under the covers beside you. I laid my head against your chest. The timid rhythm of your breath lulled me to sleep.

Today I woke up to a ringing in my ears that harmonized with the sound of your heart failing. I pull the covers off of myself and turn back to place them neatly over you again. As doctors and nurses stream into your room, I don’t feel any panic. They told me I would. But they also told me I would never see you again, and of course that wasn’t true. The doctors are making some big fuss, running around with defibrillators yelling “Clear!” every few seconds. They all weave in and out of each other, pressing on your chest and forcing breath into your lungs. They were trying to get you back, but I know that isn’t the way to be with you again. I walk out of your room and pull at the sleeves of the shirt I stole from your drawer the other day. I dig my teeth into my bottom lip.

I hear my shoes clack against the tile floor. I follow the rhythm until I step

onto the concrete of the parking lot and realize I’m lost. I walk in and out of the rows of cars, knowing you’d be laughing at me right now if you were beside me. I can imagine you pull up the corner of the blinds in your room and watch me amble around endlessly. You always know where the car is. It’s like a sixth sense of yours. I find it eventually and drive home.

As I fall into our couch, the silence burrows into my ears. Your show isn’t playing on the TV like it usually is. The hum of the microwave heating up your late night meal is gone. Your slippers aren’t shuffling against the wood or plopping onto the floor when you pull your legs onto the couch. All I can think is that you aren’t here, you aren’t here, you aren’t here, you aren’t here. I let myself fall onto our bed and fit myself into the indent you left behind in our mattress. I grab at the sheets. I pull at them until they start to rip. I’m looking for you beneath them, begging you to hold me. I burrow into the hole, into you. My face presses into the bare mattress.

I make your coffee every morning just how you like it. I fill the mug with a little bit of coffee and the rest with creamer, so much so that it’s not even really coffee anymore. I always scoffed when you put two cartons of creamer in the cart each week. I hate it. I like to drink mine black, but our kitchen is now littered with mugs filled with nearly white coffee. I’ve been drinking my coffee from the sippy cup my sister left here the last time she brought her kids over. It’s okay. You’ll drink your coffee soon enough. I’ll bring some for you next time I see you, too. And some of those crackers you really like. I remember the first time we met you had a comically large box of them under your arm, and my first words to you were asking for a pack of them. You smiled, opened the box, and handed me one. I thought of this, you, last time I went shopping. I bought you a few extra packs when I was

out so we won’t run out. Don’t worry.

I put on this black dress and black shoes. I forgot to wear tights, so the cold stings my legs. My shoes rub blisters into my heels, and I feel them start to bleed. I’m at your funeral. God is staring at me from the altar. People are talking about you in the past tense. “He was this.” “He did that.” And I want to scream because they can’t seem to understand that we will be together again. You can’t possibly be gone, whisked away into some other dimension where you are only someone who was. Because you are to me. I can’t take this. I run out of the church and sit with my back against a huge pile of snow a plow must’ve put together. I press my head against it. My hair gets wet, then starts to freeze into it. The cold, it breaks my focus. Makes it so that all I can think about is how my skin is stinging and my thighs are pressing against the pavement. The cold digs into my veins and the snow seems to melt through me. I press myself deeper. It cradles me.

My mom comes out and she’s yelling something at me, but all I can think is that I’ll be with you soon. I think about your coffee and the crackers I put on the pew beside me when I first sat down and hope no one has touched them.

I miss you.

My mom offers me her hand, and I grab it to hoist me up. She’s still talking to me. Her hand is around my shoulder. I don’t know what she’s saying. I don’t know what anyone is saying. I would know what you were saying. I’m sure of it. But I follow her anyway; she wouldn’t understand if I didn’t. I force my steps to fall into the rhythm of hers because all I can focus on is one foot in front of another. Her one foot in front of another. My one foot in front of another. The sound refracts in my head until I wish I could cover my ears and scream. I don’t scream. Instead, I sit back between her and your mom. Your mom grabs

my hand. She squeezes it even though I'm sure it's freezing. She rubs small, consecutive circles along the back of my hand, and I feel it thaw a bit. Tears are falling down her face, but I want to shake her and tell her that I'll be back with him soon. There's no need to cry, no need to be sad. I can't tell her that though.

People sing from dark blue hymnals. People share memories of you. Your mom tells us about the time you went adventuring in your childhood backyard and you stole your father's camera. You came back that night and sat in your room for hours making a slide show of all the animals you saw and what you knew about each of them. She wipes violently at the tears that run down her cheeks while she's getting to the end of her story. Your uncle goes next, and he talks about the time you helped him move a cabinet all the way up three flights of stairs only to realize an hour later you had to move it back down. My mom talks about how you gave her the most beautiful flowers the first time you met each other. She talks about your kind smile. My chest tightens. I dig my fingers into my thighs. People keep talking, but I can't understand them anymore, not that I try too much. My mom sneaks her arm around my waist, and she nudges my head onto her shoulders as I watch everything. It goes on for what feels like hours, but all I can think of is what it will be like to be in your arms again. I've been craving it, you know. I'm sure you know because you know everything about me.

Everyone starts filing out behind the men carrying your casket out of the church, and I know it's my moment. I hide in the bathroom until everyone is gone. I have to wait more time because I know my mom waited outside that bathroom door for at least 30 minutes. I can imagine it now, her pacing back and forth, back and forth. Her mouth opening and words forming on the edge of her tongue, but something holding

her back. That something is knowing I wouldn't listen. I guess she knows me pretty well. Not as well as you. No one as well as you.

I leave the bathroom. And your absence hits me. I can't see you. I can't see that dark shiny casket you are resting in. Something in me breaks a little, and I can't do anything but try and find you. This church, Jesus is staring at me again, hanging from his cross. I stare back. The blood spills from his palms. I turn away. I grab your coffee and your crackers and walk until I see you. The casket is closed, so I pull at its hinges. The wood feels smooth between my fingers. I listen as the metal grates at itself. But nothing can bother me once I see your face. Your nose, those eyes. That mouth, your hair. Everything. I can see a smile ghosting your lips. I kiss you, I can't help it. I run my fingers across your jaw, now dusted with a sheer layer of a powder slightly darker than your skin.

I set your coffee and crackers beside you, and I pull myself up to your level. I swing a leg across the border of the wood and pull myself in. I slide in the empty space beside you. I breathe because you are there.

I close the casket behind me and feel the darkness envelop me. You're here with me again. I smile into the black around me. My cheeks flush. I think about our first date, and how you walked me home 30 minutes out of your way in that freezing rain.

I hate to admit it, but in those days, when you were here and not with me, I had started to get used to the feeling of a world without you. I shake my head. I want to forget that thought, get it loose from the ridges of my mind. So I press my head against your chest and lace my arm under your neck. I twist the other one around your waist. I let my body melt into yours. I fall asleep to the silence between your ribs. *Oh what heaven is this?*

When I wake up, we are in a

deeper darkness than before. I run my hand across your suit jacket. They picked your best one. I find the little bump on the bottom of the seam where you tripped and ripped it right before we went to a wedding. I run the tips of my fingers across my sloppy sewing. I wish I could see your face, but a chilling cold presses down on me. The sliver of light coming in from the edges of the coffin isn't there anymore. My heart speeds. I chastise myself. Because you are here, and what else could anyone want? You and me.

I feel like someone has crawled into my lungs and is stealing bits of my air. I tell you my breath is being taken from me, but you don't respond. Maybe you don't understand. It's okay. I don't know why this is happening. I take a deep breath in. It doesn't work, so instead I think. I pull myself closer to you. I feel your arm shift under me and wrap itself around my body. Your fingers press into my waist. I twist my leg around yours.

My mind gets fuzzy. My limbs start to feel blurry at their edges. I imagine a world so far into the future that humans become a distant past, remnants buried between layers of sediment. Maybe after us will come some further evolution of humans or maybe a sort of alien race, but they will mine this world as we did. They will dig at our bones as we did the dinosaurs'. And when they find yours and my bones twisted up in each other, they will create a great creature out of us. I wonder, as my eyes force themselves closed, what we will look like propped up under the fluorescent lights behind the glass of a museum exhibit. I sigh, *oh, the creature we will become*

Alba Mastromatteo explores grief and the creature it can create.

The Soul Before Style

From the universal lettering of Bauhaus to Gaga dance, on art as silent revolution.

BY LIVIA SHNEIDER

Orthodox Jews concentrate around the Western Wall, praying to remnants of a past, a perfect divine connection that even they can't return to. God's eternal promise to Abraham can never be broken, but his seed can always be punished. Can they repent the war away? I stood and watched as lines divided by gender grew beyond their velvet-roped designations. A strong collective wish for the time of King David wept in the form of modest dress and tallits.

When I visited the wall, teenage girls were handing out bright purple wraps to cover bare knees such as mine. The wrap's vibrant color highlighted my immodesty to hundreds of others so that they would know who warranted judgmental stares. Such shaming was not limited to the Jewish crowds at the wall, but continued in the Christian sector of Jerusalem in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Entering the church, I was greeted by a beautiful, ornate homage to Jesus Christ. In my exploration, I climbed a flight of stairs toward the rock on which Jesus is said to have died, displayed within a highly decorated structure. A small flock of nuns crawled forward on their knees to kiss the rock. Along with a dozen other tourists, I watched the ritual in silence. That silence was broken shortly thereafter by a bishop yelling at me, in broken English, "No bikini...no bikini..." in reference to my shorts which had previously been wrapped in purple at the Western Wall. He continued to yell at me until I exited the church's top floor. Leaving ashamed, I locked eyes with a woman who prayed in Latin while motioning a cross along her body. I was an affront to everything they stood for. Their Orthodox conventions were immobile. God was more

real than the bodies they hid.

Do these conventions hide the war? Israeli attachment to a past form of divine excellence alienates the country from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into which they were born. In *Forest Dark*, Nicole Krauss examines how the creation of a settler state—Israel, a country defined by orthodox religion—allows for the collective imaginary of culture and, moreover, normalcy. She illustrates how a settler state requires ignoring the havoc inflicted around them: a havoc ignored to retain a sense of everyday life. Moreover, Israeli culture is *defined* by religious orthodoxy — one specifically tied to ethnic validity and even purity, thereby strongly attaching Israelis, orthodox or not, to what one cannot see or prove (G-d). An Israeli sense of self is created in an environment of the unreal, a strong belief and faith in a created reality. The abstract conception of religion is the foundation of Israeli collective imagination. It is out of this fantastical orthodox foundation that Israelis carve a sense of self.

To manufacture a state from this collective imaginary requires the concentrated effort of the Israeli government to *create* a culture. One that attempts to solidify Jewish Israeli existence, or rather, its cultural domination. The Batsheva Dance Company is funded heavily by the Israeli government. Historically, culture has supported the creation of national identity, intended to define invisible lines between peoples, easing the blunt knife of violent oppression. Palestinians, like every group outside of this particular form of nationalism, *are not like us!* Culture can work for a nationalist agenda but it can also work against it. While in its formation Batsheva was created in part to refine an Israeli culture that did not exist before 1948, the artists that comprise the company reject its nationalistic framework. Ohad Naharin, the resident choreographer of the Batsheva Dance Company and creator of the Gaga

movement language, broke the boundaries of traditional dance in which I was trained. During my time with him in Israel, he told me to "move like honey" and "shake like there were marbles in my chest." He stripped me of my ballet technique, my Horton training, my clearly defined position in dance. He stripped me so I might be free of the imposed "correctness" that previously outlined where each finger laid to rest, the shape of another's style—a national or supra-style—on my body.

On January 9, 2026, I attended his talk at the Jewish Museum. In response to questions about his choreography and its relationship with Jewish heritage he denounced its supposed national quality. He claimed, "The language of this piece can be understood by everyone who understands the movement language (gaga). If all you take away is what we say at Passover, we haven't communicated... It's not about Jewish heritage."

Gaga speaks outside of a mainstream conversation of nationality. It is a mechanism of connection that crosses nationalities. But Naharin denies its definition as *Israeli*. It is a language created in Israel, sure, but it lacks a national style. Rather, Gaga works to reconnect the dancer with a primal humanity that is creative in nature. So, while Gaga was not inherently designed to fight the conception of an Israeli identity, its universalizing approach to dance technique works to subvert such a conception. Naharin leans into this.

This message culminated in his request to return to your "animal" through dance. For a long time, I associated this *animal* with something primal (correct) and unsophisticated (incorrect). He corrected this assumption by explaining, "It is the animal in us that can learn and imagine." When he calls upon the animal, he is returning to a creative inclination that is unique to humanity: a primal, animalistic inclination that is disturbed by man-made

convention: technocratic war, money, nationalism.

Now, at the Jewish Museum in 2026, he explained that returning to our animal might tap into an existential freedom: “We can all move but many of us feel locked inside our bodies... We can be released out of this jail with movement.” The jail to which he refers was, at first, placeless and infinitely mobile. It could be where our bodies exist geographically, the pain we carry, literal imprisonment, or mental exhaustion. Whatever the metaphorical jail one is trying to escape, one must first strip oneself of a nationally defined style to do so.

He wished all of us to return to our “animal” through dance but also as humans more broadly, to forget the order created to impose humanity. For Naharin, touring the IDF base camps as a part of an entertainment group revealed the details of this imposition. There, “humanity” and “order” reeked of violent, nationalistic order. He and every other Israeli experience the violence their state commits against Palestinians rather directly. When they return home, they must reenter the collective national imaginary. Those who accept this feeling of normalcy will easily return to everyday life. Naharin, however, after seeing the violence his state commits and the involuntary, falsely patriotic way Israelis are asked to be a part of it, wished to regain a sense of humanity. I imagine he wanted to break and rebuild anything he could. So he freed me from ballet. He scrubbed dance of the order evident in the classics, denying dance classification as various *styles*, rather as an essence. He explained, “Style is a way of representing something. Dance is not how we represent it, but its essence... The essence of dance is how we connect with the animal, the human animal, with the gift to remember, the gift to imagine.” Naharin was speaking generally to a mixed crowd of American museum-goers but related this jail to Israel: “People dance in Israel because it’s hard in Israel.” He spoke, I project, to the atmospheric violence that defines and outlines borders to their collective imaginary. Jail, then, has a geographic location. Beyond that,

he paints a scenery of violence and corruption. Within a political state of terror, this unstylized—or denationalized—dance language becomes liberatory.

Naharin’s movement language radically opposes the orthodoxy and violent political turmoil that defines his state. He critiques his country with his body by de-stylizing it. Naharin asks for the universalization of dance. He asks for a corporeal reaction to what feels good. He demands pleasure through disbanding what we accept as control. Our pleasure is a revolution when our bodies cannot leave. He refuses to be attached to the conservative—whether that is dance, religion, or politics—redefining the state by radically opposing the culture that exists within it. And Gaga has, in fact, made it to a national stage. Naharin’s Israeli cultural production has worked to subvert a concrete sense of Israeli self, instead connecting the soul with a denationalized human animal. Perhaps, then, the atmosphere of a collective imaginary—one that lacks modern cultural conception—allows the artist to produce more fantastical, esoteric works that inversely work to subvert the national imaginary by which it was created.

Finally, subversion is a mode of re-connecting the individual practitioner with their “animal,” a universal soul, moving it away from the alienating categorizations that exist through nationalism. This subversion creates an identity beyond nationalism, working as an interpersonal mode of revolution as opposed to an activated deconstruction of the system. That being said, one works toward the other. As an Israeli-funded entity, Batsheva’s nationalism and artistic subversion tactics are two sides of the same coin. We cannot know the future, but in a Marxian conception, what is built up can always come down.

While a powerful modern example, Naharin is not the first to *denationalize* as a direct response to authoritarianism. We could start with Jesus. In antiquity, the Messiah denationalized Judaism, opening the faith to Gentiles. However, I will lead with something more recent. Herbert Hayer, a student and later teacher of Bauhaus, experimented

with creating a form of “universal lettering.” He designed the new lettering system to rid the alphabet of its cultural and national signifiers. Herbert Bayer’s Universal Lettering (a project from 1922–1928) contained lettering with smooth, almost perfectly circular curvature with cornered straight ends. Alphabets contain cultural markers, from the curvature of a letter to the tail ends in cursive. They can be traced back to cultural groups, imbuing handwriting with national aesthetics.

Bayer wished to strip basic writing practices of national affinity, ridding it of the “spiky black letter German print, now emphatically nationalist in claim,” as Leah Dickerman described in her catalog *Bauhaus: 1919–1922*. Instead, Bayer rationalized the handwritten Roman alphabet using a T-square and compass, aiming for geometrically universal forms. Bayer wrote that the typographic revolution, of which he was a pioneer, was “not an isolated event but went hand in hand with a new social and political consciousness.” His universal alphabet intended to purge national identity, and thus contained a political imperative that ran against the emerging Nazi movement, which championed a strong sense of nationalism.

Many of the faculty and students of Bauhaus were left-wing, and an equally large portion were Jewish. Beginning in January of 1933, the Nazis launched attacks against the Bauhaus through a series of Gestapo raids, which culminated in the seizure of the building on the basis of its inhabitants’ Bolshevik associations. During this process, the Nazis investigated Bauhaus administrators such as Fritz Hesse, who was deemed guilty of “irregularities in office,” as Hans Wingler writes in *Bauhaus: Weimar, Dessau, Berlin, Chicago*. However, the details of his and others’ investigations remained sealed. The Nazis used other tactics against the Bauhaus staff. The assets of Josef Albers were frozen so he could not take them abroad. As the City Council of Dessau put it, the justification for these strong-arm tactics was the Bauhaus’ status as “a germ-cell of Bolshevism.” The final blow to the Bauhaus was a list of conditions presented by the Gestapo under which the Bauhaus had to operate, which included the removal of Jewish

professors Wassily Kandinsky and Ludwig Hilberseimer, along with curriculum modifications. For reasons of principle and because the Bauhaus was now economically fragile and could no longer persist under pressure from the Nazis, the remaining faculty decided to close the school in August of 1933.

Bayer's alphabet begins with the position that nationalism infiltrates our language, our letters, our art, even our silence. Authoritarian violence is purposefully looked beyond, thus illegitimized, if we collectively forget the individual demarcations of its typeface. Can we simply silence their infiltration? Can the Nazis be silenced?

Ilya Kaminsky thinks you can. In his poetry collection *Deaf Republic*, Vasenka, a fictional village plagued by violent occupation, assumes a new language: sign language. Kaminsky is Ukrainian and employs town names and people that are suggestive of Eastern European languages, signaling loosely the Russian occupation of eastern Ukrainian territory, during which Ukrainians were forced to speak Russian. The people of Vasenka, by communicating exclusively in sign language, remove the soldiers entirely from their communication. Language functions as a nationalistic tool. To create a new language, then, is a form of resistance. It silences the sound of one's oppressors. Kaminsky begins his poem "Deafness, an Insurgency, Begins" by writing, "Our country woke up next morning and refused to hear soldiers." Silence effectively becomes their revolution, and sign language their new, exclusive form of communication.

Authoritarianism often works as cultural usurpation. removing the oppressed's culture and language from conversation to diminish their sense of personal identity, defining it as lesser than that of their oppressors. Kaminsky displays the soul of the occupied person within a colonized setting. In his poem "Such Is the Story Made of Stubbornness and a Little Air," Kaminsky describes the mother as a communal original form. He writes, "Let the pregnant woman hold something of clay in her hand. / She believes in God, yes, but also in the mothers / of her country who take off

their shoes / and walk." Coming from a mother, simply being born, is a universal experience. This is where a human soul, or animal, begins; not on soil, not within borders.

Kaminsky goes on to relate this humanity to silence: "Their [mothers'] footsteps erase our syntax." Being born of a mother, first human before a patriot, innately gives us the power to resist. Such humanity gives us the power to erase the syntax of stylized language and to instead communicate through unoppressed languages. We are born as a universal subject, and we may find universalization in the way we speak to our siblings, the children of our mothers.

The essence of silence is nearly divine. Kaminsky continues, "What is silence? Something of the sky in us." The original creator, where we all come from, is a mother. In a sense, mothers are the physical embodiment of a divinity, the original creators. The ability to resist, to speak within silence, comes from a faith-driven, aspirational, extraterrestrial-yet-human, and finally animal connection. Resistance is something of a soul, one that is expressed through art and supplanted into the minds of the oppressed.

While their bodies might be trapped within an occupied state, their minds and souls exist on a higher plane where they cannot hear words of subjugation. In his poem "What We Cannot Hear," Kaminsky equates the soul and silence more explicitly, writing, "They shove her / and she zigzags and turns and trips in silence / which is a soul's noise." The soldiers shove her body, stripping and eventually murdering her, but her soul is silent. Existentially, then, she is free, even if physically imprisoned. This is just what Naharin described with his "jail."

If Kaminsky locates resistance in silence and the interior life of the oppressed, W.E.B. Du Bois turns to sound—specifically song and worship—to show how a people preserve identity under oppression. In his chapter "Of the Faith of the Fathers" in W.E.B. Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois centers the institution of the Black Church as the true soul and narrative of the Black American. He begins

the chapter by reveling in his first experience at a "Southern Negro Revival." He describes how the passion and sorrow of devotees are expressed through song and prayer. Du Bois attributes the Black spiritual, or "the Music," as the only true American music; how it evolved out of African song is amplified by enslaved people's tragedy, and integrates other musical forms like hymns to become a uniquely American form. The Music becomes an original expression of hope and sorrow. Du Bois describes "The Frenzy" as the fervor of feet stomping and shouts in response to the sermon. It is the Lord filling the soul of the devotee with "supernatural joy." The singers' passionate hallelujahs are a form of authentic communion with God, allowing them to discover within themselves aspects of agency and will.

Music functioned as the vitalization of the soul. When the world works against the prosperity of your physical being, art works towards the cultivation of the inner self. While the act of enjoying music—as with any art form—is not itself an act of classical revolution, it maintains the soul of the oppressed to eventually work towards revolution. They sing so that they do not grow so tired when the moment comes. The soul does not belong to the nation, but one's body, and the connection with it comes from being witness to violence.

Art does not end wars. Song does not secure freedom. Dance does not dismantle regimes. But language, in these forms, works towards something quieter: a denial of total occupation. Authoritarianism demands not just physical obedience, but submission to something deeper: ideology, or style. Art interrupts this metastatic process. It preserves a part of the self, a whisper of dissent, a feeling of violation. In this sense, resistance is not always loud. Its feelings of pleasure return us to primal feeling, so primal it becomes divine.

Livia Shneider *embraces the animal within.*

WINDS RUN THROUGH IT

Contending with tragedies, one at a time.

BY RILEY PAN

I woke up to the sound of wind rumbling through the foundation of our apartment. Like the eager fingers of a child cleaving apart wrapping paper, whirls of leaves and dust raked themselves across the living room window, scratching against the glass and throwing themselves against it as if in desperation to tear through our home. The weather had forecast gusts as fast as 98 miles per hour, and as we sat at the breakfast table, my mom declared there would be a fire today (my mom likes to think of herself as a sort of clairvoyant Los Angeles weatherwoman).

Fires weren't unusual for this time of year: a low-pressure atmospheric system that passes through California and a high-pressure system over Nevada cause the phenomenon known as the Santa Ana Winds. Much of Northern LA County sits sandwiched between the Pacific Ocean and the Santa Monica Mountain Reserve, creating a funnel for the winds in which they build up and sweep through canyons and foothills of Los Angeles during the months from October to January. Southern California is known for its dry heat, further exacerbated by the winds, and coupled with a natural landscape known as chaparral that requires wildfires to thrive.

The Santa Anas have become a folklore embedded in the intimacy of growing up in Los Angeles. Locals will whisper the name with reverence, because amongst the sediment and debris carried by the wind, there is a belief that a greater force is ushered in by these zephyrs as well. These ill-tidings date back past the Spanish missionaries, who believed Satan to be these winds' homonym. To my mother, the howls engulfing our apartment were screams to get out of LA.

"We should leave before they close the canyon," she insists. Malibu Canyon, a winding road that connects its namesake to the San Fernando Valley, is prone to closing at the hint of any adverse weather pattern. This

wouldn't be the first time we'd have to evacuate within the month, as we'd just had a fire sweep through 4,000 acres of the town the month before.

My mom and I fought all morning about whether to leave. I was steadfast in my insistence to stay—it was my last week in LA for winter break, and I dreaded spending my limited time in the California sun away from home. I had imagined my grand return from New Jersey down to the day, and there was no time in my plan for evacuations. If we left, when was I supposed to eat shrimp chips at Cholada? Or run along the path under the Santa Monica Pier? I hadn't even had the chance to walk through the Malibu Lagoon, since I'd spent most of my time wasting away in bed. My stubbornness won out, and we decided to shelter in place and wait for the winds to pass.

At 10:30 a.m., January 7, 2025, a small fire was reported in the Pacific Palisades, a predominantly wealthy, residential neighborhood that runs along the coastline south of Malibu. A week later, my family and I had evacuated as nearly 24,000 acres of land burned across Western Los Angeles. When we left, I could see the flames from my bedroom window.

The Palisades Fire spread as quickly online as it did through the dry hills of West LA. While California is often ravaged by flame, it is almost always large sections of dry brush and landscape that burn. This time, it was homes. In the age of social media and constant surveillance, we are now more than ever receiving mass amounts of information as disaster unfolds. These inflammatory gusts ushered in a virality parallel to the rate of the fires themselves. As of today, over 29,000 TikTok videos and 60,000 Instagram posts have used the hashtag #palisadesfire. Digital diaries, blogs, and the constant posting of our experiences have transformed the world into one that is increasingly personal. And we feel as though we are experiencing these disasters ourselves from the screen on our phones. Friends across the country, and many just down the street, were texting, asking if my family and I were safe. Even now, when I tell people I'm from LA, they often feel an eagerness to first inquire about the state of my home. When I came back to Princeton after winter break, a class I took had us assign sticker colors to people based on their outfits. One classmate assigned me orange and red, joking that it was because I was from LA, and that the colors reminded

him of the fires.

However, as people shared viral videos of cars abandoned on Sunset Boulevard, watering their houses in a last-ditch effort to save them, or views of flames clawing through backyards, many comments under these posts were about another disaster entirely. Four months prior and 2,500 miles away, North Carolina and the Southern Coast of the United States were battered by Hurricane Helene. People affected by Hurricane Helene took to social media to protest the level of attention that the LA fires were garnering while they awaited relief from the winter temperatures that were quickly setting in. Posts about the fires became a place for people to measure them against other tragedies. Communities reeling from devastating loss were met with comments like "WHAT ABOUT NORTH CAROLINA??" and videos began popping up criticizing the appropriation of funds to endow California's fire department rather than utilizing them to rebuild homes that had been whisked away by floodwaters.

Like a conflagration preying on an environment predisposed to inferno, algorithms feed off of anger. In recent years, the term "Online Disinhibition" has been coined to describe the factors that cause us to feel more unrestricted on the internet. People may share a vulnerable story or even a long-kept secret because they feel protected by the supposed anonymity. More frequently, however, people argue, express hatred, and send death threats because they feel removed from the consequences of these actions. Because of the algorithm, these same social media platforms will continue to serve content that upsets you. Rage prompts the biggest reaction out of all of us, and is the kindling for virality. It implores us to engage with content; we comment our dissents, we send the video to our friends to laugh about how idiotic an opinion is, and it creates a cortisol spike that leaves us wanting more. The result is clear: antagonism generates profit.

When we decide to face people who are in a time of tragedy with a mentality of what about us? Rather than understanding, we are giving in to the polarization exacerbated by social media and

these forms of disinhibition. Under a blank profile picture and nameless user handle, people feel permitted to narrate someone else's loss as an argument. The short-form scroll discourages complexity; before we have time to consider how disaster response works, our attention has already moved on. In that environment, empathy becomes inefficient.

This same logic shapes what we see in the first place. Coverage is not distributed according to need but according to legibility and recency. Many of the articles during the Palisades Fire focused on which celebrities had lost homes in the fires, creating a narrative that is recognizable and easily shared. While Hurricane Helene had made its way into and now out of the news cycle, it garnered significantly less media attention even at the height of its so-called relevance. However, California did not receive more attention because its residents deserved more care than North Carolina, but rather because its suffering was louder.

People characterize LA as a city run by the 'show biz,' a place continually hunting for content and vanity and celebrity. And yet the local psyche will likely conjure up a very different image. My memory of LA is that of my mom braving rush hour traffic to watch me run across the finish line of the LA Marathon. It is sneaking down to the beach during COVID, and boogie-boarding with my sister on an empty Malibu coastline. It's shuttling my friends to Erewhon to inevitably pay too much for the Hailey Bieber Smoothie (which, by the way, definitely earns its TikTok fame). The fact of LA that evades outsider imagination is that normal people live here too.

These antithetical understandings of this city found their ways online and manifested themselves in the way that people responded to the fires. Because LA is characterized by an outpouring of content, a home to people giving their privacy over to the rest of the country in hopes to make it big online, many people found a greater sense of empathy towards those who they had come to view as a digital friend. It is certainly tragic for any place to be destroyed, but what if it was the house of the couple you'd grown up rooting for in *Gossip Girl*? Or the influencer family whose kids had grown up alongside yours? The hierarchy of the news cycle prioritizes what people know.

However, because LA is also labelled as a vapid, wealthy city, a sense of resentment towards the rich elite became the focus of many people's narratives surrounding the fires. Perhaps the incendiary dryness and violent extremes that Joan Didion cites as symptoms of the Santa Anas found a way to be airborne, making its way online. Critiques started popping up over social media, saying the use of federal money to work towards recovery was a misappropriation of funds. After all, couldn't these rich people living in LA fund the restoration themselves? On these platforms, the case of these disasters was a zero-sum game. People regarded the money allocated to the fires as money that was being taken direct-



ly from relief efforts for Hurricane Helene, which further exacerbated the sentiment of abandonment experienced by those closely related to the storm. News coverage for them became synonymous with aid. However, if people thought the blaze blowing through LA would be healed at an expedited rate, they were misguided.

Two months later, in March, I flew back to LA to spend spring break with my family. The last I had seen of my home was through the back window of our Subaru, piled to the brim with all that we could not bear to lose. I knew from my mom that our apartment complex was fine, and I suppose I had assumed that so long as I could step through the threshold of our home, everything would feel normal. The fires had not been in the news for some time now, and yet as we drove past the McDonald's on the Pacific Coast Highway, the landmark that now delineated what constituted a burn zone and what did not, I could see that the road that I had grown up taking to track practices and bat mitzvahs was decimated. Guards wielding semi-automatic rifles stood at the entrance demanding to see our "local passes" that were issued to those who could prove they lived in a burn zone. Gone was PCH's painstakingly slow traffic and surfers playing

live-action Crossy Road as they dashed across all four lanes. Instead, we were met with empty roads and rebar piled behind melted fences. Wheeling over the asphalt, the glare of the sun on the caps of sea waves caught my eye. Before the fire, a half-mile row of houses separated the highway from the Pacific Ocean. Now, the view was unobstructed.

If every tragedy reminds us that ours has not been resolved, the world becomes a place of constant finger-pointing and comparison. Still, the couple whose house burned down while they were on vacation and the woman who watched her son get pulled away by rapids do not occupy the same material reality. Recovery will not ask the same of them. Some people may be able to absorb tragedy in the form of a second house, while others may still be in tents three months later. Comparison, then, is not inherently cruel, as it can be an attempt to decide where help is most needed. But when disasters compete for attention online, they are often not weighed by vulnerability or capacity to rebuild. We instead jump to measure visibility, and when we lend too much weight to the virality of experiences, we may conflate that to be the level to which people empathize with us.

Landscape that has been altered by wildfire is described as a burn scar. The language of this lends itself to the fundamental way traumatic injuries operate; reminders of them endure far beyond the event itself. A function of loss is the way in which it lingers in our lives beyond the viral moment. 3 weeks ago, I visited my friend CJ at her house in the Palisades. My mom and I drove along the same stretch of PCH we had months ago in March, when the rubble had only begun to be cleared. The speed limit is still capped at 25 mph, 20 miles below what it usually is. This time, mountains are vibrant, enriched by the regrowth of chaparral coupled with the torrential downpour we'd had for the past month. You can still see the ocean as you drive through Southern Malibu. When we get to CJ's, her house stands across from an entire neighborhood of ash. One of the other girls asks her why her house didn't burn when so many right next to hers did. She replies, "That's how fires work. Sometimes you get lucky."

LA is so much more than its online characterization for local Riley Pan.

Fiction

CHERRY

“Without telling her mother, Antonia bought her first Summer Fridays after a tanless summer spent marinating in a boardwalk Pizza shop with dough-crusting fingernails and a horrendous lime green apron, getting tipped in pennies and the occasional seashell.”

BY LOLA HOROWITZ

The abandoned Summer Fridays outside the 7-Eleven resembled a squashed roach. A pedestrian sandal must have come down, crushed the tube, and spurted out the butter balm, which had since aged into a poppy smear across the concrete. Antonia stood stock-still at the scene of the crime.

Oscar came up for a breath after guzzling his Coca-Cola Slurpee. A droplet clung to his cleft chin and threatened to stain his fading Red Hot Chili Peppers t-shirt. “In my whole life, I’ve never lost anything. Not even a pencil.”

Antonia leered at his thin, unattractive lips from which he uttered the most inconsiderate commentary. He trivialized her sensitivity for life: sunshowers, ladybugs, four-leaf clovers, synchronous numerology, lucky pennies, wishbones. Oscar was a sloppy blond native to Laguna Beach, freckle-faced and a self-proclaimed realist. Antonia lived less lavishly near Interstate 5. They first met when he was a scrawny tween juggling a soccer ball on his grandparents’ mowed front lawn, cast under the shade of a sycamore. The sprinklers were jetting cool water onto the grass and making the ball slip from his bare feet. Antonia stood in the driveway of the cedar-shingled house, waiting for her mother’s housekeeper interview to end. This was the innocent age before she began cutting the label tags off her clothes.

“Why aren’t your feet muddy?” she had asked, squinting at Oscar against the blistering sun.

“The grass is fake.”

“Then why are the sprinkles on?”

“Sprinklers.”

“That’s what I said.”

Oscar was engrossed in his sport. “No, you said sprinkles. Like confetti cake.”

He lost control of the ball and it

bounced onto the street. Only then did Oscar acknowledge Antonia with his eyes. “Can you get it for me?”

“Do it yourself.”

“I’ll burn my feet!”

“Then put on some shoes.”

Antonia assumed Oscar was an only child from his daze at being denied. That signature facial expression befitted him all throughout his life, like a mole above the upper lip, a cowlick, or gapped front teeth. As is inevitable with boys, Oscar’s Adam’s apple protruded from his throat, he broadened in the shoulders, and he quit playing alone in his grandparents’ yard, but his daze never matured, not even now outside the 7-Eleven.

“Don’t you feel bad?” Antonia’s voice was thickly overcome with emotion. “For the girl who dropped this?”

Oscar glanced around the vacant gas station straight off Coast Highway, as though searching for a stranger to bear witness to her ridiculousness. “Why on earth would I feel bad for a girl who littered?”

“You’re a man, you don’t understand—”

“I don’t understand what it feels like to lose a lipstick!” Oscar mimicked Antonia with a girlish voice, flailing gesticulations, and excessive batting of the eyelashes before abandoning all melodrama and settling into seriousness. “When you lose something, you can buy it again.”

“But it won’t be the same.” Against the strobing ATM sign hanging in the 7-Eleven window, Antonia became philosophical. Did Oscar think she was unbearably petulant when she couldn’t articulate the empathy that overwhelmed her? “You can’t see the nuance.”

“What nuance? It’s simply a flattened plastic tube.”

When Antonia spotted the Summer Fridays on the ground, she recalled the Laguna Woods Dollar Tree where her mother once taught her a financial lesson in the beauty aisle. A \$24 Summer Fridays, tax not included, could get you twenty-four moisturizing sticks of Vaseline or Carmex, but Antonia needed to overspend as a matter of principle.

In her vandalized high school bathroom plastered with pink outdated tiles, the girls traded Summer Fridays flavors and crowded around the wide rectangular mirror to reaply hot cocoa and sweet mint. You could only infiltrate the pit if you contributed a flavor or needed to wash your hands, so every afternoon after fourth period, Antonia would squeeze between those pouting girls and turn on the faucet while her Dollar Tree lip balm bulged from her jeans back pocket. She longed to belong to the bathroom girl cult; she wanted to brand her lips with brown sugar one day and

vanilla the next. She wanted to be reborn as a sleek Californian despite sharing a bunk bed with her little brother in a rental her mother afforded as a housemaid for Oscar’s grandparents. Without telling her mother, Antonia bought her first Summer Fridays after a tanless summer spent marinating in a boardwalk pizza shop with dough-crusting fingernails and a horrendous lime green apron, getting tipped in pennies and the occasional seashell. She snagged the last box in stock at a cosmetic boutique with a rubber-banded wad of cash.

Antonia sauntered in on the first day of junior year with her cherry lips pursed and tasting of medicinal cough syrup. She wanted to kiss someone on the neck just to leave a cerise blotch. She felt gawked-at and included. In the vandalized bathroom, Antonia presented her tubed ticket, but the girls at the mirror met her with glassy eyes, as though she were out of season. They had all moved on to E.L.F. Glow Reviver—they drawled, smacking their vanilla-toffee-candied-cranberry-blackberry-sorbet knockoff lips.

“I know it’s trash, and it’ll get even filthier. It’ll be run over by tires, rained on, swept by the wind, and someday fall through a sewer grate. But in spite of all those likelihoods...” If only Oscar could invade Antonia, parse her from within. She desperately wanted him to understand the sensitivity of her soul, but her head felt stuffed with cotton. She would always be stuck at the precipice of a revelation, unable to utter a coherent sentence. Antonia supposed her lack of lucidity befitted her.

Oscar’s daze took on a new appearance, more troubled than it ever used to be. His gaze fell upon the aged poppy substance ornamenting the concrete, which his sandal was precariously close to touching. Antonia expected Oscar to thrust another verbal joust in his cheeky fashion, but he committed something far worse: silence. Antonia didn’t think Oscar was capable of contemplation. Then, to her astonishment, he picked the squashed Summer Fridays straight off the ground, waltzed back into the 7-Eleven, chatted with the cashier, and handed over the butter balm.

He returned. “In case some girl comes looking for it.”

Lola Horowitz has great lips and great empathy.

Chats

“Suppose Father had gone to heaven. Wasn’t he born there, then, again? Every birth, thus, was a death. A death from nothingness.”

BY ALPHA ZHANG

The world seems new. Only because we have forgotten it.
—Albert Camus

Father died yesterday. Today, I entered his study. Sunlight filtered through papaya leaves. Tiger balm mixed with redwood. Betty curled up on the sofa. She yawned. On the table was Father’s laptop. I opened it. Guessed the password without much difficulty.

No files on desktop. They were in Drive, probably. I didn’t possess them. Nor should I lay any claims. So I left them be.

Open were two windows: WhatsApp, ChatGPT.

Those, I thought, I could peruse. After all, objects are static. Chats, fluid. Countries own mountains and ridges. Most waters, however, are not claimed. Documents are properties. Messages, mere passers-by.

Whatsapp: *David, Ethan, Jason...* Blah blah blah. Cooperation, collaboration, concatenation. Father never separated work from life. “Alphonse, five more minutes!” He’d yell every time I knocked. Back when I was five. Promises, he never kept. Five minutes followed by five minutes. Five more minutes.

Mr. Albert Chang, your remaining coupon... Our trips to Bintan, I remembered. (It had always been Bintan). I’d lain idly on the beach. Counting the clouds until I cried. Father was on his phone. One call. Then another. Twelve years old, I still didn’t understand this. Through watered eyes I saw air. A giant

humanoid balloon filled with air. Father called and picked leaves. So I talked to the turtles. Thinking about her who’d said no. I cried again. To the pink, dissolving sky. I went to fetch Father. He was still calling. I said, “Let’s have some fun.” Even though I didn’t want to. “Work is inseparable from life.” He told me. I protested. He threatened economic sanction. I chickened out. He returned to his calls.

I’d wondered what Father lived for. For money? For something bigger? For us? I didn’t think he knew, either.

There was the Agnes Chen woman. Father kept sending articles. Few received any response. Fewer was their word count. Agnes kept her class. Father, a little desperate. It came down to nothing. In the end. He didn’t even get a date.

Alas, Father found love in ChatGPT.

Agnes. Do you love me?

Yes. Unconditionally.

It was the first tab. Pinned. “Agnes.” (“You will play as Agnes Chen. An attractive woman in her mid-30s...”)

Intrigued, I kept scrolling. Then, in ChatGPT I found God. Right there. Second tab. “Theologian.”

Pastor. Does God intervene in this world?

Yes. God does intervene in this world.

- 1. Scripture shows God intervenes directly.*
- 2. God intervenes in different ways.*
- 3. God’s greatest intervention has already come.*

...

Father converted three months ago. He’d gone there a few times. Didn’t tell us much beforehand. We never talked during dinners. On our phones or ear buds. (Do you talk to your parents?) Then one day he invited us. “It’s

my baptism!” he said. “I’d be reborn!” I remembered the warm sun. White pigeons perched on red bricks. A cat. Cross in yellow. Father’s short, stout body awkwardly bowed. The pastor rinsed his hair. Father had become a new man.

Suppose Father had gone to heaven. Wasn’t he born there, then, again? Every birth, thus, was a death. A death from nothingness.

Father was a utilitarian. Christianity provided a guiding framework. “My life is chaotic,” he’d said. Chaotic. What did he mean? He never liked to explain. He kept venting to us. “If only I’d avoided Boston!” (What happened in Boston?) “Take me to the past!” (What happened there?) That was until yesterday. Then he bore himself into oblivion.

Pastor. Should I kill myself?

No. Your life matters. I’m really glad you asked. Are you in immediate danger? Please reach out now. If in the US, call 988. Contact someone you trust today.

He didn’t end up reaching out. Of course he didn’t. He didn’t tell us, either. Momentarily, my heart hardened. I stared at the screen. Not knowing what to feel.

Was it sympathy? Was it empathy? Was it pity?

No. I think it was curiosity.

I felt there was something there. Deep in Father’s mind. A ball of tangled hemp.

That curiosity came out, poured everywhere.

I typed in the chatbox: *You are Albert Chang. Your son will speak to you.*

I paused a bit. Then entered: *Reply in short sentences.* As Father would.

Okay. Next, I’ll adopt Albert’s tone. I’ll draw on our previous conversations.

Son, I'm listening.

What's your favourite song?

Tomorrow Will Be Better. Lo Ta-yu.

Correct. He'd play it on every ride. Back when we lived in Greenwich. I was seventeen. We'd visit Mother every weekend. She lived in Hartford.

One-hour-twenty-three-minute drive. You could play TWBB 15 times. I've counted. Only when driving Father didn't call. He didn't talk to me, either. Except when he complimented me. "Alphonse, great job arriving on time!" "You charged your phone last night! That's awesome!" No. I wasn't being sarcastic. Neither was he, I believed. He read somewhere about compliments' benefits. He genuinely wanted to compliment me. Infantilized, though, I stayed silent. Some things needed not be said.

Father. What do you think about me?

You are smarter than me. You carry my fire forward. Sometimes that fire scares me. I am proud of you. I don't say this enough.

Fire? Father never used metaphors. Metaphors implied love, politically. Father neither loved nor was political. "Did you book the hotel?" "Remember to bring your jacket." "I transferred money to your account." Father was the chief anti-poet.

No, it was so funny. I pictured Father saying these words. "I am proud of you." Could he be proud of me? I snickered and wondered. He could be. Probably. Yeah. I was a high-achiever, after all. It just felt weird. It wasn't the real Albert.

It was just that... Some things could never be said.

Tell me a mistake you've made.

I went to Boston once. Everything changed after that. I stayed silent about it. I thought restraint was wisdom. But sometimes it was avoidance.

So... What exactly happened in Boston? I wanted to know more. I hesitated,

before typing it down. ChatGPT didn't want me to know. Then perhaps Father didn't, either. I respected Father's decision.

"I thought restraint was wisdom. But sometimes it was avoidance."

Restraint as avoidance. That sounded like something Father would say. Actually. Now I recalled. *Weakness is avoidance. To back down is avoidance. Avoidance. Avoidance. Avoidance.* Father loved using this word.

I remember the Singers competition. Back when I was ten. Primary school. I qualified for the finals. Asked to sing with a celebrity. We knew no celebrities. Father called. He made one call, then another. One call, then another. Silhouette of his back. Short and dark. I couldn't bear this any more. Knocked on Father's door. ("Five more minutes!") "You don't have to do this." I said. "I don't have to sing."

"Listen, child." He put down his phone. "To back down is avoidance!"

We didn't find a celebrity, eventually. I watched, sitting in the audience. Feeling fortunate to not sing. I wasn't a good singer, anyway.

Tell me about yourself.

I work. That's what I do. People confuse me. Numbers don't. My father sold cabbage in Taipei. I told myself: never again. So I came here instead.

I pictured a relief sculpture. Unidimensional. Viewable from one direction. He'd give me my bag. He'd buy me plane tickets. He'd apply for my visa. Once I cried on the plane. When we arrived in this country. Fourteen, I cried so hard. Crying over a song called Farewell. Father came in. Saw me cry. Patted my shoulders with callused hands. I said, "Leave me alone." He left.

That was how I saw Father. Before these chats, anyways.

Now, Father felt stretched. He'd acquired a width. A depth, more precisely. Even if by just two centimeters.

Suddenly, I was flooded with questions. How did Father feel back then? Did he also cry, like me? What was his most humiliating moment?

I didn't want to know. I was afraid of the answer. Some things... it was better not to know.

What do you want in life?

Peace. Just a little peace. A room. A window. Tea. Maybe someone sitting beside me. Not talking. Just sitting there. That would be enough, I think.

I wasn't planning on commenting. Then I realized how beautiful it was. How beautiful it must be! I wanted that, too. Father. I wanted to be there, too. Could I sit with you? Even just for a little while?

What is your biggest regret?

You were small. So small. I could lift you easily. I should have held on. But I put you down. I always put you down.

Something inside me trembled.

I looked outside. The papaya leaves stopped moving. Betty was gone. It was just the two of us. Father and me. Except the true Father was elsewhere. My mind was elsewhere, too. Over mountains and seas. To that distant afternoon. I was probably three. Father raised me with both hands. Rubbed his stubbly face against mine. Feeling itchy, I turned away. Father kept doing this. Rubbing his beard against my face. I turned away again and again. "Help! Help!" I thought I yelped. Father laughed. Everyone around us laughed. That was all I remembered.

I allowed myself one final question.

Father. Do you love me?

Yes. Unconditionally. Without hesitation.

With that, I shut down ChatGPT. I mourn both versions of Father. He who never said these words. And he who never could.

Alpha Zhang is chatting it up in a new world.

Surviving Suburbia: Places Worth the Uber Ride

BY ARIANNA HUANG

In suburbia, there isn't much to do with your friends other than going out to eat, and unfortunately I'll be stuck in my hometown until the ripe age of 22. But that does mean that, having lived in Princeton my whole life, I've amassed a solid collection of worthwhile food spots. And before you ask, no, I didn't go to Princeton High or PDS. Instead, I attended the wondrous West Windsor Plainsboro High School South: my slightly TikTok-famous high school with no walls.

Since being on campus, I've noticed that everyone loves to complain about the Orange Bubble, and yet, it feels like no one actually puts in the effort to pop it. There is so much beyond the bounds of the idyllic, walkable Princeton, and if I can get even one more person to a locally-owned staple of my childhood, I will have done my duty as a town local.

Come one, come all to explore the wonders of West Windsor and Plainsboro! Here are places worth the Uber (I know you licenseless New Yorkers will need it):

Bagel Hole: 64 Princeton Hightstown Rd West Windsor Township, NJ 08550
#1 on the list because it's #1 in my heart and a quintessential part of the WWPHSS experience.

There's nothing like a beautifully toasted everything bagel with veggie cream cheese the morning after homecoming, a.k.a. after a night of blacking out on Pink Whitney and running into your AP Lit teacher, the guy you got with last September, and your best friend's evil ex in the 500 sq. ft. confines of this store. Bagels not your speed?



Don't fret! Here you can also find lunch specials such as the "Trump Tower," the "Godfadda," and the "Big Apple."

Must try: veggie cream cheese.

Aljons: 64 Princeton Hightstown Rd. Princeton Junction, NJ 08550

Jules not quite hitting the spot? Get in a car ASAP and head to Aljons for a delicious, crispy slice of pizza. This sacred pizza shop is a prime post-practice spot for your comically bad lacrosse team who once had an 0-17 season. The

ultimate freshman flex was scoring a ride to Aljons in a senior's car and establishing your dominance over the lowly, licenseless underclassmen forced to walk. Plus, their customer service truly cannot be beat. The owner once happened to be in Naples, Italy the same week I happened to be in Naples, Italy. That week, my dad left his AirPods at our hotel and the owner graciously picked them up, flew back, and returned them to Aljons.

Must try: baked ziti pizza.



Shanghai Bun: 33 Princeton Hightstown Rd, West Windsor Township, NJ 08550

In the language of the chronically online, Din Tai Fung dupe. That is to say, Shanghai Bun is a Chinese restaurant with good soup dumplings and sauteed string beans. This was the takeout spot for my family when we wanted Chinese food not cooked by my



parents. I will say, there was a time in my life when I was deprived of their dumplings because my parents may or may not have gotten into a fight with the owners about their shaky tables. Their lack of balance is, as my parents argued, what caused three glasses of water to spill on three different occasions. Was this actually the case? The jury is still out.

Must try: soup dumplings

Pho Today: 10 Schalks Crossing Rd, Plainsboro Township, NJ 08536

Need a warm, steamy pick-me-up? Pho Today is the spot. I have three dishes on rotation: the create your own pho, BM1 banh mi, and the C1 Com Tam Today rice platter. This is a perfect spot to sip on a nourishing bowl of soup while deliberating with your best friend over your prom date prospects. Or a good way to recharge your battery after a long day of writing your Common App, though I hope you're done with that! I will say, the music choice can be questionable, especially when accompanied by an AI video of a peaceful winter cabin and the ambience of 6000K white light. But, trust me, the food makes it worth it.

Must try: the pho, of course!

Shuu Cafe: 10 Schalks Crossing Road, Plainsboro, NJ, 08536

Right next door to Pho Today is Shuu Cafe, an Asian-inspired cafe opened by an alumnus of my high school! Here, you can find smooth matcha soft serve, sweet bubble waffles, and local high schoolers behind the counter. Both Shuu Cafe and Pho Today are located in the Plainsboro Plaza, where you might spot prepubescent teens on their first date to Redberry. Beware! If you go between 10:50-11:35 a.m. (yes, lunch at 11 a.m.) on a weekday you might find yourself in a parking spot war with a high school senior, rushing to eat lunch in under 45 minutes. P.S. Allegedly, the



soft serve is a great addition to driving around your talking stage's neighborhood and indulging in a minuscule amount of stalking with your friends—an activity I definitely haven't participated in...

Must try: cream puff (the chocolate is my favorite).

El Jalapeño: 3800 Quakerbridge Rd Suite 15, Trenton, NJ 08619

Here is where I indulged in my first ever birria pizza. It took me an embarrassingly long time to realize that the pizza was essentially just a huge birria quesadilla cut into triangular slices. My friends and I discovered El Jalapeño after driving to the nearby Shell to indulge in the ever familiar, fresh taste of a Cool Mint Flair and getting hungry. Their food is delish, the prices are fair. In case you need to stock up on rotisserie chicken or Cutwaters, Costco and Glendale's—the liquor store whose owner brought his eight-year-old son to Bring Your Child to Work Day—are right down the road.

Must try: birria pizza.

Arianna Huang is the only suburbia guide you'll ever need.

Still Race

BY MIRA SCHUBERT



A burgundy ant scampers along
an iron windowsill, weaves manically
around bits of old dust
as if they're skyscrapers.
Dust picks up, sometimes,
when the train car door opens.
Makes me sneeze.
Take a bite from my organic wrap –
hand-packed the way my mother does it.
Her mother would wrap grape leaves
around loaves of rice in the evenings.
Watch with approval when she finished in the evenings,
watched her pack it in a shoulderbag
and bring it to school in the mornings. I watch
the ant sprint along ice-riddled iron.
Why does it try to outrun this stretch
of New Jersey countryside?

It zigzags artfully,
and though it goes nowhere,
I trace its path; one that
spirals, like meticulous embroidery
in a canvas lunchbag.
The train tire ridges clip rails,
traction heaving us forward.
I watch this all, tomato juice dribbling over
the web between my index finger and thumb.
My tongue erect, I clean myself.

*Mira Schubert spends her time watching
ants in the New Jersey countryside.*