

This week's issue is
written entirely in Pig Latin.

The Nassau Weekly⁵⁰



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SPOONERISM: CHICK TECK

Dear friends,

We can be so timid with language when we speak. We worry about when to and not to use it, worry if we're using it right, worry we're using too many words to say something, worry what we're saying isn't coming across in the words we're using. Each sentiment or feeling or thought we relay in language is, in essence, a translation, from the impulse to the interpretations latent in the language we select to portray the impulse.

I have spent over three years here in the English department studying wordsmithing as a function of storytelling, selecting for the purpose of an exercise or essay a particular lexical choice and deigning that the words used, themselves, are evidence of a particular meaning, knowing full well that scarcely do we humans say or write exactly what we mean.

This doesn't have to be a dour prognosis. Really, when you speak, even if the words come out a little jumbled, most of the time people know what you mean. We shan't let the spoonerism dissuade us from speaking—or checking for ticks.

Lith wove,
Sasha Rotko, EIC

4 SOAPBOX: Who Seldom Have Been Human

By Narges Anzali
Art by Ariel Chen

6 The German Class

By Alpha Zhang
Art by Nina Obidairo-Danielsen

8 I Dream of Being an American Man

By Sophia McNamara
Art by Eden Reinfurt

9 Mistranslation

By Michael Grasso
Art by Raven Reid

10 Oscar Boyson Loves Actors

By Mannix Beall-O'Brien
Art by Georgina Domingo Alsina

12 The Empty Plate

By Kell Mastro Simone
Art by Raven Reid

14 A is for Airport

By Addison Wood
Art by Gina Cocuzzi

16 The Smell of a Faraway Fire

By Lily Williams-Ameen
Art by Ellen Kramer

17 The Fall of a Rocket's Empty Fuel Tank

By Gabriella Martinez
Art by Phoebe Pinder

18 Changing Tides

By Alexander Margulis
Art by Anelise Chun

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Robert Faggen 1982

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This Week:

Thurs	6:00p Julis Romo Rabinowitz A17 The Poetics of Awakening	4:15p The Garden Theatre Bad Apples	Mon	4:45-6:30p Library, 6th floor New South Feeding the Arts with Catherine Barnett '82	10:00a-8:00p Hurley Gallery, Lewis Arts Complex <i>Out After Dark:</i> Exhibition by Tamara Santibañez
Fri	8:00p Theatre Intime The Glass Menagerie	9:00p Julis Romo Rabinowitz A87 Liar's Club Meeting	Tues	4:30-6:00p McCosh Hall 40 Sherlock Holmes and the Puzzle of Blackmail	6:00-7:00p Labyrinth Books 2026-27 Holmes Poetry Reading by Dunya Mikhail
Sat	3:00-4:30p Ellie's Studio, Lewis Arts Complex Hip-Hop Techniques and Foundations with ESkilllz	1:00p Milberg Gallery Guided tour: The Art of Japanese Publishing	Wed	4:30-5:45p Julis Romo Rabinowitz A17 The Price of Democracy: The Revolutionary Power of Taxation in American History	10:30a-1:00p Hagan Studio Arts at Work: Jim Lee '86 Comic Book Illustration Workshop & Lunch
Sun	11:00a CoLab, Lewis Arts Complex iASpace - Interaural Space (Drone Decompression with Beth Meyers)	1:00-5:00p Hinds Plaza and Palmer Square Festival Cultural Latino	Thurs	4:30-6:00p Location TBA Arts at Work: Script Writing & Pitching Workshop with Jennie Snyder Urman '99	7:30p McCarter Theatre A Beat of Our Own

Verbatims:

Overheard outside a cappella auditions

Savvy freshman: "It's Princeton. Things like improv and a capella have some sway here."

Overheard on Cannon Green

Thought daughter: "Which of your friends would you most want on your side in a fight?"
Fraught daughter: "My friend? She's from Baltimore. 'Nuff said."

Overheard at Cap & Gown

Sullen Redditor: "I had to mute the megacock subreddit."

Overheard at Small World

Enthusied parishioner: "They've got some religious music up in here!"
Sober realist: "That's Shawn Mendes."

Overheard on the phone in Prospect Garden

Animal rights advocate: "Does he do it with squirrels too? Does he do it with squirrels too?"

Overheard on Elm Drive

Frosh 1: "I think Tower is open until 2."
Frosh 2: "Do not go to fucking Tower bro, they'll piss on you."

Overheard on the phone in the Firestone lobby

Detective: "I always know my mom has a UTI when there is cranberry juice in the fridge."

Overheard in RoMa

Prospect Libertine: "If I have a boyfriend, do you think making out with a girl is cheating? For me, no."

Overheard at Terrace

Curious 1: "So you don't think women can be gay?"
Curious 2: "No but they can be bisexual."
Curious 1: "I think I may be bisexual."

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 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!

SOAPBOX: We, Who Seldom Have Been Human

BY NARGES ANZALI

Dear Reader,
The idea for this column was born out of a letter from the editor that I was asked to write in the spring, toward the beginning of the war. It is the idea that the rest of the editions of this column will be about current events or political occurrences of the vaguely recent sort. That being said, I will take this inaugural edition to reflect back. To create a shared reality of sorts, dear reader, which will help us understand each other with more accuracy.

On April 9, 2026, Donald Trump tweeted: “A whole civilization will die tonight, never to be brought back again.” I woke up. I went to class. My whole body shook, but I did not cry. There are days where you learn nothing and days in which the whole universe seems to be bearing down on a lesson. Now I know what I would do if I thought many people I loved would die in a few hours—I would go to class. It makes me sick. My writing has been stuck since. It does not come out of me. Nothing comes out of me except for shock and horror and more horror. Sometimes I feel as though I left something behind permanently on the side of the road, or that who I am now is permanently less than who I was, or who I could have been.

I walked around as a ghost for a month. I walked observing the actions of the people around me but not understanding how they could possibly be doing them, not understanding how to get rid of the hatred that seemed to be stuck behind my teeth. I cannot transmit this feeling—it is something that you cannot understand until you wake up one dreaded day with fifteen notifications on your phone, all of which are condolence messages. There is probably an academic word—alienation, or something along those lines. When it happens to you, that word will not be enough to cover it. It is

this feeling which, near the twenty-fifth anniversary of the War on Terror, I have been thinking so much about.

The condition of the American Muslim has been, for upwards of twenty years, one of abject humiliation. The word Muslim became a stand-in for a great many people who may or may not actually be Muslim, creating the kind of resentment from within the community of those people on the “Ethnicities of Interest” list which seeks to constantly disassociate with those people who have made life so hard, only to end up beaten down right alongside them. Islamophobia, then, as we use it, is both the specific hatred of Muslims but also the hatred of that dark mass of people which stretches from Sudan towards Pakistan, alluding more to a general terror of the potentiality of terrorism than to a specific group. It is that word, terrorism, which seems to be the root of it.

A Muslim, in America, is a terrorist until proven innocent. It is this accusation which plagues those advocating for the Palestinian cause. In Herbert Marcuse’s essay “Repressive Tolerance,” he says that one of the fundamental deceptions of the unequal free speech society is the equating of statements which hold entirely different weights. For example, the common equivalence of the two statements: “Unification of opposites: preparing for war is working for peace. Peace is redefined as necessarily, in the prevailing situation, including preparation for war.” The terrorist has almost usurped the accusation of communist as the archetypal American enemy. When Ted Cruz said in 2016 that he wanted all Muslim neighborhoods to be patrolled by police cars, he was echoing what McCarthy said in a political campaign address: “dislodge the traitors from every place where they’ve been sent to do their traitorous work.”

On September 24, Benjamin Netanyahu gave an address in front of the United Nations in New York City.

He was not taken into custody, despite a warrant for his arrest from the International Criminal Court. He will be allowed to say whatever he wants to, even though he has instigated genocide against Palestinians. Under Princeton’s free speech policy, people like Naftali Bennett can come to this school and tell an entire hall that “Palestinians should stop whining,” and that protestors were lying about the number of children killed in Gaza. There is no discussion of how safe Arab students feel around a man who had previously said that he had “killed many Arabs in his life, and there was no problem with that.”

In the US, too, statements like this are increasing. Florida Congressman Randy Fine recently said that “Fear of Islam is rational.” Trump has described Muslim candidates for Senate as “jihadists.” The Guardian reports that “The ISPU separately found that 63% of Muslims reported experiencing religious discrimination in the past year, the highest share of any faith group it measures.”

When I was around eight years old, two FBI officers walked into my father’s office to question him about his internet search history. At the time, my father was a professor of Islam teaching a class on fundamentalism across religions. They didn’t like the sites he’d been looking at. When they left his office at the university at which he taught, my father was flagged in some sort of system. For the next five years, every time we crossed a border, my family would be interrogated for upwards of three hours. We were asked who we stayed with, their names and addresses, and all of our belongings were searched and opened. It is gall that they punish—the gall to speak or think about any topic related to terrorism.

It is again Marcuse’s essay which perhaps best encapsulates my father’s condition, and the condition of many Muslims all over the world—“Tolerance is extended to policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which should not be

tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery.” In other words, this extremely repressive attitude is allowed to flourish in discussions about American Muslims, despite the suggestion of violence. The opposite, however, is certainly not true. The suggestion of violence toward the Muslim, or the “terrorist,” is an ever-expanding domain of political thought. The label of “terrorist” is an ever-expanding one.

Almost 15 years ago now, Michael Walzer, a notable scholar in the field of Just War Theory, wrote an article in the New York Review of Books alongside Avishai Margalit titled “Israel: Civilians and Combatants.” That article, published in 2009, is centrally focused on the 2005 article “Assassination and Preventative Killing” published by Asa Kasher and Amos Yadlin of the IOF. It is notable that Walzer of all people was the one who felt so strongly about the article the two men had written—in his most famous book, *Just and Unjust Wars*, Walzer employs just war theory to thoroughly defend, among other things, the Israeli bombardment of Lebanon. What disturbed Walzer and Margalit so deeply was a concept which later came to be central to the IOF’s “Code of Ethics,” and which has unfolded across the Middle East at scale for years now. The concept is that of the civilian soldier, or the idea that the state has a deeper commitment to the protection of their own soldiers than the civilians of any other country by rewriting what has essentially for centuries been the doctrine of war. It has been true for years that because of their distinction from civilians, soldiers had to take upon themselves the responsibility of minimizing civilian casualties whether or not that risked their own lives. While this has never been carried out perfectly, it has certainly been expected in one way or another during the history of modern warfare as human rights frameworks build out the definition of a civilian. However, in Kasher and Yadlin’s own words, “Consequently, the duty to minimize casualties among combatants during combat is last on the list of priorities or next to last, if terrorists are excluded from the category of noncombatants. We reject such conceptions, because we consider them to be immoral. A combatant is a citizen in uniform.”

Consequently, if the soldier is merely a citizen in uniform rather than a separate category, and if the state has a responsibility to its citizens over all else, then the carefully constructed descent into hell begins with a single stroke. Walzer and Margalit write in their rebuttal that “Kasher and Yadlin are simply assuming that the war against the enemy is a just war. Their claim, crudely put, is that in such a war the safety of “our” soldiers takes precedence over the safety of “their” civilians.” But to equate a state’s soldier with a civilian is not enough to fully strip the civilians of the opposite side of rights; a more complicated maneuver must be undertaken. In a subsequent article entitled “Military Ethics of Fighting Terror: An Israeli Perspective,” Kasher and Yadlin expound on this concept with the addition of an amended view on “enemy combatants” or “terrorists” as they are more conveniently called in their writing. One of Walzer’s particular concerns with the articles is the idea that the category of ‘civilian’ is a malleable category based on a moral or otherwise physical proximity to those deemed enemy combatants.

Part of the list goes as follows:

“(b.10) Developing and operating funding channels that are not crucial to acts or activities of terror; (b.11) Preaching in a mosque in general praise of past suicide bombers; (b.12) Making payments to families of past suicide-bombers, when and where such payments are not crucial for acts or activities of terror; (b.13) Issuing posters in praise of past suicide-bombers;”

This model is scalable. Under this kind of logic, the label of the ‘terrorist’ becomes an associational game. It is the stickiness of this language that allows the FBI to send undercover agents to mosques to pretend to be recruiters for terrorist groups, or torture civilians in Abu Ghraib who had the same first or last names as suspected terrorists. Recently, a judge found 2007 confession statements about the planning of 9/11 invalid because of the overwhelming evidence of torture used to acquire the statement. He had been waterboarded more than 138 times in various CIA black sites prior to the ‘confession.’ More than 300,000 civilians were killed in the direct violence after 9/11. In 2002, thousands of young men from majority-Muslim countries were forced to register themselves

with the Department of Homeland Security, leading to thousands of deportations. All Iranian citizens have been sanctioned from taking the LSAT, and no new student visas will be issued for Iranian students. In December of 2025, Trump extended the ban to 39 more majority-Muslim and African countries. At his speech at the UN, Netanyahu held up two pictures—one labeled “The Curse” and “The Blessing.” The countries labeled as “blessings” were the ones who had collaborated with Israel. In this way, the label is already becoming modular. It is already spreading. When you are a “curse,” you are not a person. You are a terrorist until proven innocent.

This April, on the way back to Tabriz, the highway my grandfather was on was bombed. He saved a piece of the shrapnel and sent us a picture. He is a terrorist until proven innocent. I was very young when I realized that the people I love are seldom considered human.

This is the launch of a weekly current events column by Co-Managing Editor Narges Anzali.



The German Class

“This time it would be a German book, specifically *Die Bibel*, which his wife had brought back from the church for free on the previous Sunday, after a German pastor had come to give a talk. They had been giving out Chinese Bibles, but ran out, so the pastor brought out some old German versions.”

BY ALPHA ZHANG

It was not without reason that the Lins believed they had solved the problem of their son's education. For, after a little more than four years under the care of the Fuxing Institute, at Shilong county, Lin Xinxian had developed, in comparison to his peers, normal or not, an unparalleled aptitude for Chinese, mathematics, and English. Last month, when a delegation from the United States paid a visit to the hospital, the Lins watched their son, through a thick smudged pane of glass, chatting and laughing with exotic faces, white and black, in a tongue not his mother's.

“Praise the Lord.” Mrs. Lin knew Mr. Lin must be saying the same thing in his heart. “Praise the Lord for gifting him with prudence and intelligence. Now I beg you to return him to normality.”

Mr. Lin, the former owner of a POS machine company and now a security guard at a seafood restaurant, was in his early fifties and sported a beer belly that no treadmill could shrink. Mrs. Lin, on the other hand, seemed hardly different from photographs of herself at thirty—the same almond eyes and plump pink cheeks. One night, at first glance, he dying to know how Mr. Lin had ever won Mrs. Lin when they were young. “I was quite the man back in my younger days” would be Mr. Lin's response should one venture to ask him directly. “This son,

in many respects, takes after me.” Then he would lower his bald head and sigh, “Except for that.” But then he would cheer up and brightly announce to you, “I trust the hospital. The hospital will get my boy on track again. My proud boy.”

The hospital to which the Lins had sent their son permitted no direct contact between guardians and patients; the Lins followed this rule dutifully. So, twice a week, they trudged twenty minutes from their drab gray Khrushchevka to the county bus stop, took the bumpy bus along the bumpy country road for twenty minutes, and walked another twenty minutes until they reached the rusty black gate of Fuxing Institute. There they handed the guards whatever they had brought for Xinxian. Mrs. Lin normally carried two dozen eggs in a plastic bag in one hand and two cartons of full-fat milk in the other. “Now is the time children grow their bodies,” Mrs. Lin repeatedly told her husband. “He will grow up skinny and short if he doesn't absorb enough protein.” To this, Mr. Lin would let out a soft grunt. Mr. Lin, for his part, brought things that would make Xinxian happy and wise. A Rubik's Cube. Puzzles. Books. This time it would be a German book, specifically *Die Bibel*, which his wife had brought back from the church for free on the previous Sunday, after a German pastor had come to give a talk. They had been giving out Chinese Bibles, but ran out, so the pastor brought out some old German versions.

Neither Mr. Lin nor Mrs. Lin knew any German.

“Give it to Xinxian,” Mr. Lin suggested, on their way home from the church. “Children pick up things fast, especially a kid like Xinxian.”

“I don't think he'll learn to speak a language just by looking at a foreign book,”

said Mrs. Lin.

“Hai! You don't know what people with rare diseases are capable of!” Mr. Lin spoke with an air of mingled triumph and wonder. “The Old Zhangs' daughter—she has autism, do you know that? She can remember every word of a book just by flipping through it once.”

Seeing his words land on Mrs. Lin like a punch on cotton, Mr. Lin added, “When God closes a door, He opens a window. You know?”

He awaited a response from Mrs. Lin but, receiving none, added once more, “It's from the Bible.”

“It's not from the Bible,” Mrs. Lin finally spoke. “I don't know where it is from, but it's not from the Bible. Same with ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ That was Benjamin Franklin.” She raised her voice. “You should read the Bible more diligently. You don't read the Bible enough.”

Mr. Lin parted his dry lips but soon closed them.

Mrs. Lin continued, “I know what you're thinking. You think it's a waste of time. You would rather spend time watching those videos. But, my dear Old Lin, the question is not earthly pleasure but eternal salvation. Above all, the salvation of our dear little Xinxian. Only the Lord Almighty can save Xinxian. Are you aware of that?”

“Yes, yes, I am quite aware of that.” Mr. Lin nodded his head in a way that still struck Mrs. Lin as reluctant.

They reached the doorway and realized they had forgotten the keys. Luckily, they had buried a spare beneath the doormat. Mr. Lin crouched down—his bones cracking—lifted the greasy mat, and tried to pinch the key between his fingers, failed, tried again, failed again, and finally succeeded on the third try. Mrs. Lin stood beside him with one hand

on her hip, the book clutched in the other. When Mr. Lin slipped the key into the lock and turned it, he murmured, under the cover of the scraping lock and the creak of the opening door, "I still think it's a good idea to give Xinxian the Bible."

Mrs. Lin heard this and said, "OK."

They had left *Die Bibel* at the guardhouse and not at the glass pane, because it was a Tuesday; only on Saturdays were they allowed near Xinxian's residence, and even then no interaction was permitted. The guard, a local man in his forties, was nothing like Mr. Lin despite their sharing the same occupation. He was short and shriveled, his face puckered by the sun. Yet the face was full of energy. He asked the Lins, "Trying to teach Xinxian a foreign language?"

"Yes, yes. German," Mr. Lin replied. "Xinxian is so smart now and can speak to foreigners in fluent English. He will master this new language in no time."

"You idiot!" Mrs. Lin slapped Mr. Lin on his shoulder. "Did we bring him the Bible just so he could learn German?"

"You're right, you're right." Mr. Lin hurriedly added, "Also for him to feel closer to the Lord."

The guard glanced at them skeptically. "I didn't know you two had this belief."

Before Mr. Lin had a chance to respond, Mrs. Lin interjected, "The Lord called us to Him. Since Xinxian fell ill, He has made it abundantly clear to us that He is the only source of salvation. Christ has already come among us a second time, in the name of Ahn Sahng-hong, just as Scripture foretold. If we keep His commandments faithfully, He will not abandon our Xinxian. Amen."

Perhaps feeling that Mrs. Lin had not answered the guard's question, Mr. Lin added, "We converted after Xinxian fell ill, so that he would get better. We did this all for Xinxian."

Mrs. Lin glared at Mr. Lin as if to say, I have already made matters perfectly clear. Why are you adding feet to the snake?

She slipped a crumpled flyer out of her pocket with her slender fingers, their nails painted a glossy red, and held it out to the guard. "Here you are, if you are interested in the Lord and our savior Ahn Sahng-hong."

The guard waved both hands. "No need, no need."

Empty-handed, they boarded the bus. With a rumbling roar, it lurched into motion, its wheels laboring through the wet mud. Then it picked up speed, and before long, the view beyond the windows dissolved into a succession of scenes flashing past like frames from a film.

"Do you think Xinxian had eaten well and slept well in the hospital?" After a long silence, Mr. Lin asked.

"Why ask me? You picked the hospital," snapped Mrs. Lin.

"Last time we saw him through the glass pane — do you remember?—there were bruises upon his ankle."

"They've already said that it was an accident from playing."

"How could Xinxian be so careless!" Mr. Lin cried.

The bus kept speeding up but there the air inside was rigid.

"Have you paid Pastor Kim this month yet?" Mrs. Lin asked.

"This month?" replied Mr. Lin, lowering his head. "No, not yet."

"We should pay him now," Mrs.

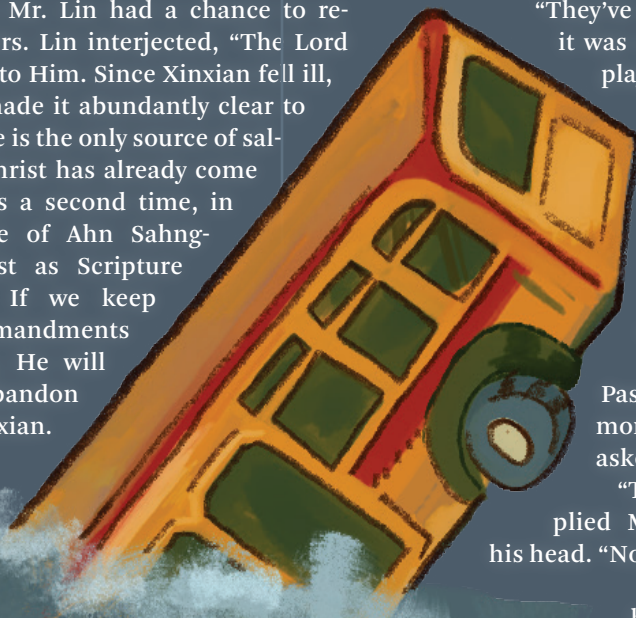
Lin reasoned. "Next week will be the National Assembly. They will keep an eye on international transactions, especially a transfer to South Korea..."

"You know what we should do? We should bring Xinxian home!" Mr. Lin burst out growling, like a wild bear, "We can't afford the hospital *and* the church. Otherwise, we'll be fucked... FUCKED!" He curled himself into a fetal position, both feet propped up on the chair in front of him, bouncing them.

"What do you mean? Xinxian is doing well at the hospital. Besides, don't forget, you've chosen the hospital. You have —"

The bus was crossing a narrow countryside bridge when a motorcycle swerved into its path. The driver jerked the wheel to avoid it, sending the bus plunging nose-first into the muddy river below. The driver and two passengers—Mr. and Mrs. Lin—were killed instantly. From the Lins' bank accounts, the People's Police discovered a South Korean-linked cult, operating under the guise of a Christian organization, and swiftly dismantled it. They also found the Lins' only son, Lin Xinxian, detained in an unregistered medical facility called the Fuxing Institute, which claimed to treat a range of "diseases," from internet addiction and "unruliness" to homosexuality and gender dysphoria. The Police rescued Xinxian, then thirteen years old. Xinxian grew up in an orphanage and eventually emigrated to Germany, where he is now a pastor.

Alpha Zhang is a contributing writer for the Nassau Weekly.



The desert ground bloated with rainwater
dries a day later.
Ripped apart at its seams
into a matrix of fractures.

What is lightning? Plasma?
Or the way you stand with your
Hips square, eyes level, jaw set.
Bare shoulders in a hailstorm, burning.
Cracked lips opened wide, burning.
Night air after an illness, burning.
What is lightning?

Lightning over this nylon tent,
over the place where coyotes
wail, scream, howl.
All its fine branches
make the world white-hot for an instant,
make me slick with fever.

All the tributaries of this valley,
little cattle streams
beneath rotten plank bridges
oscillate under our weight.
Once, weary men stood here and spat into the gully,
Their saliva laces
all the tributaries of this valley.
Little cattle streams.

I lean back on my elbows and
squint hard at the blue heat.
Imagine my cabin.
Imagine that I had felled the logs
and cut the windows
and chinked the walls
with river stones and cattail fluff.
The rosy back of her arm. Her and I.
We step lightly around each other and the woodstove.

I carve her spoons and bowls and keepsake boxes.
I blow my nose with my fingers and
wipe them on the seat of my jeans.
I chew tobacco and turn away to spit into the gully.
I lean back on my elbows and
squint hard at the blue heat.

I dream I am an American Man

BY SOPHIA MCNAMARA



Fiction

Mistranslation

“What is this subject that I cannot pin down? Who is Jean Genet?”

BY MICHAEL GRASSO

I walked out of the doors without realizing there were sensors. The alarms did not blare, however. They winced with this tiny piercing sound that could be heard across the street from where I fled. I did not dare to look back. The stolen object was sandwiched in my backpack between my computer and a few notebooks. I would reflect on mis-translation the entire walk home. Guilt and embarrassment crept up and reddened my ears.

French remained hidden, dressed in its English suit posturing as literature written for me. I knew the words I loved only by their replication into English—some translator on a continental voyage from language to language, dropping what would become pieces of my life into my ear. I needed to do it to be alive; I needed to connect with my tradition. It was where I felt the fungal system beneath my feet, twisting like snapshots of history, my history denounced. Yet, I had no keys to this savage sideshow. I could not speak the language, but I knew I'd need to.

I wanted, more than anything, to rip away the familiar shroud of English translation and behold the live French words squirming in their novelty and foreignness, as if I had read them naturally, written underneath my skin.

I questioned why I felt such a desire, such an imperative, to be close to the words—closer than translation could get me. Maybe this is just the story of my adolescence, pretentious and pretending to be monumental.

My case is not a unique one, no matter how much I wanted it to be. I felt this desire because I needed a motive. What do you do with stale motives—ones that do not have any foundation? Nonsensical and illegitimate goals for outcomes unknown. I would just have to follow and see. I had smelled something like a path, sweet and primordial, stretching only four steps ahead of me and in the shape of a hoof. I did not hear the cry of a goat, nor see its foot on mine. Who put this here?

When I took the bus to school, years ago, I would read and think about how nobody around me had access to this little circle of people I had been

frequenting. I was not alone. I felt a duty to them and to reality. My jealousy grew into envy. What is this subject that I cannot pin down? Who is Jean Genet?

As I was sulking around my city's library, I found an edition of his poetry, translated into English, with an introduction by another one of my favorite Jeans—Cocteau. The first lines of the introduction went as follows: “It's not enough to pity our heroes. We must carry their consequences.”

Genet, this anti-saint of the underworld—homoerotic, bastardized, and gleaming, was who I believed to be the greatest teacher of all.

I was in the middle of reading his autobiographical novel, *The Thief's Journal*, in which he finds himself an outcast in his era, 1940s France. Since he was young, he'd been punished for his affinity for thievery: cast out to the all-boys Mettray Penal Colony, where he and other delinquents grew even deeper in their adoration for each other's spells.

When he got older, Genet turned this into devotion.

“It's not enough to pity our heroes. We must carry their consequences.”

At this time, I was drenched in all of this idolatry. Seeing this imperative, imbibing this order, from Cocteau who I believed had done the same with Genet, I caught myself in a delirium. I mixed traditions and chose what I liked, piercing a parchment of poetry with crimson thread, to make something of a backwards constitution always running in the back of my mind.

To interpret—to translate this duty means carrying the consequences of Genet.

My eyes turned to a book on the same shelf, one of what I called—at that time—“My Children of the Sun”: Rimbaud. It was an anthology of all of his writings, translated by Wyatt Mason, my preferred translator.

It was all I wanted: one giant book with the poetry, spoken through the language I did not know, by the translator I had trusted to carry the tone, the imagery, and the scent of this boy-poet for whom I cared so deeply.

This was what I needed to steal to carry his consequences, to conduct my constitution.

There was no need to steal from a library. But that wasn't where the need lay. It was in the act of stealing itself. A

mistranslation and the blazing desire to possess a copy of my preferred translation of French poetry disoriented my mind enough to actually walk out of that library, sounding the alarms, and never look back.

I returned the book a couple of days after. The guilt was monstrous. I was angry with myself for failing. I felt as if I'd let the entire history, tradition, of my mycelium system of poets down. I confess that stealing did not make me feel any closer.

If I had paid more attention to what Cocteau actually meant, I would have been closer to these writers, for whatever reason I wanted to be, for whatever duty was festering inside of me.

I was reading fast and for myself. My ego was at the center of my devotion to these ideas and people, not themselves. How can *I* be like them? How can *I* take up what they left? How can *I* be so different?

And, upon realizing this, the feeling was disgusting. My delirium was a conscious one of which I was the sole director. I did not dare tell anyone that I had gone through this conversion. I barely even told anyone what I was doing all the time, crouching in my high-school's bathroom stall, skipping classes to read Rimbaud. Senseless acts for a young person to be worried about, when there is so much else to do and worry about.

I cannot take back my story, this mistake, or my mis-interpretation of those lines Cocteau wrote about Genet. I can inscribe a new commitment, though.

“It's not enough to pity our heroes. We must carry their consequences.”

Let me study the language, retranslate, and circulate these texts for many more days to come. If we truly believe that there is value in what our heroes are telling us—enough to convince us to steal from a library—we must take up their words again. That is my commitment.



For the Nassau Weekly this week, Michael Grasso steals ever closer to Genet, to Rimbaud, to that... *je ne sais quoi*. Do you know what that means? Because I don't know what.

Why you should see *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR*.

BY MANNIX BEALL-O'BRIEN

A little over four years ago, at 6:21 p.m. Central European time, a 15-year-old German girl got a concerning text over Yubo—the “Tinder for Teens.” Although the girl would dismissively reply “Cool,” she was nonetheless privy to messages like: “*Ima go shoot up a (sic) elementary school*”—texts that turned out to be real plans for the horrific Uvalde school shooting.

The ensuing controversy over whether the young German did enough to prevent the Texas attack stunned creative collaborators Oscar Boyson and Ricky Camilleri enough to start a new project entirely. The duo wondered how calls for accountability could possibly find their way to such an unwitting witness, especially in the wake of Uvalde’s infamous police “response.” This discourse, combined with other neurotic post-lockdown incidents, would become the genesis of *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR*. Put simply, the duo asked: What kind of character would ever react to a sadistic DM by traveling across America to confront it? Furthermore, what would happen, dramatically, if that character wasn’t so altruistic?

OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR follows a billionaire’s row latchkey kid with a penchant for amateur “cryfluencing”—weeping on command for just about any cause and just about no one. Completely neglected by a mother who husband-shops at DNC fundraisers, the young man is pretty visibly disturbed. With strange mannerisms like a stilted laugh and stim-like mimicking of others, “Balty” (Jaeden Martell) appears incapable of masking even before he pops a Xanax. In fact, not even the direction of his fratty “Life Coach” (hilariously played by Noah Centineo) can make friendships seem like anything but a foregone conclusion. Desperate for connection, the not-quite-18-year-old sets his sights on a beautiful activist classmate—shifting his content to sobbing pleas for her gun-control politics. When these posts are anonymously met with sadistic attack plans, the pillhead loner decides the sexiest thing he can do is confront this troll. Balty thus descends a rabbit hole of deepfake catfishing, following seedy advertisements that taunt “CAN

YOU TELL WHO’S A FAKE?” and “SEE WHO YOU CAN BECOME!”

When a City Boy arrives in Texas instead of a Gone Wild 2D Girl, the misanthropic Solomon nearly loses it. Asa Butterfield’s chameleon-like transformation into the spitting image of Patrick Crusius is undoubtedly one of the bravest performances of the year. In a bold rejection of his softboy typecasting, Butterfield proves himself fearless by bringing a real tenderness to the zeitgeist’s conception of Incel Shooter. When the equally lonely Solomon can’t help but be tempted by Balty’s offer of “friendship,” the two embark on a twisted dark-comedy rumspringa. There’s a cute tagline for the film being passed around by early audiences. That being: *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* has two central characters: 1) a crybaby pretending to be a sociopath, and 2) a sociopath pretending to be a crybaby. This truly contemporary character study makes for a work equal parts summer flick and ethnography: a mature directorial debut anchored by strong ensemble performances and a tight screenplay. Beyond its consistent pacing and visual language, one of the most significant factors in creating its seasoned director feel is the heart in which it approaches depraved subject matter. What normally could come off as crass or edgy, instead packs the kind of empathy needed for something vulnerably real. This film is a surefire hit with dark comedy enjoyers looking to laugh at today’s insanity, rather than hide from it.

Recently, I had the privilege of attending a screening with a director’s talkback from Boyson that really sold me on him, Camilleri, and all other key collaborators as artists to keep tabs on. In particular, it was the opportunity to hear about the turbulent production process that really turned the project into an indie darling I was excited to root for. At a moment in time where even blockbusters seem to have razor thin margins, it feels important to root for the underdogs; Especially when they’re inexplicably rejected from both Sundance and SXSW. With a microbudget of “under two million” and a grand total of \$0 spent on paid media, the independently produced work had no other choice but to get creative. Instead of buying ad time, *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* was promoted by bringing Balty Malone’s Instagram

account to life: there, an in-character Jaedan Martell would assail social media with pairings of “cryfluencing” and doctored selfies with Jack Schlossberg. It was this viral campaign that got me to buy a ticket, and for some reason I’m completely free of the typical after-taste that normally makes these moves feel gimmicky. To overcome financial limitations by creating thoughtful(ly ridiculous) paratexts is the kind of creative problem solving that has won me over on this project. Getting to hear the director’s thoughts on the matter only enhanced that feeling.

While describing how these characters evolved across drafts, Boyson repeatedly emphasized the act of “pulling back.” There’s a real empathy to how these characters are written. Though certainly disturbed, both lead roles anchor the film precisely because they’re made to be kids. Instead of gleeful evil, Balthazar’s differences are shown with subtle decisions like an 18th birthday that passes unnoticed, with not even a second wasted reflecting on what that milestone should mean for him. According to Boyson and Camilleri, getting to these more nuanced emotional cores was a lengthy process, one in which the writing duo repeatedly had to catch themselves from making their young protagonist too cunning. By tampering down the resemblances to Patrick Bateman or Tom Ripley, *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* affirms that its pursuit of realism is more than just a catchy platitude. Instead, this film is an actual Nature vs. Nurture inciting spin on the coming-of-age tradition. This portrait is not of a demonic boy, but a stunted one.

There’s a certain stillness to Oscar Boyson. For however (capital c) Chill he may seem, the director does not lounge in his chair. He meets his young interviewer with a genial smile whose sincerity (but not energy) reaches his eyes. He has good posture, but will lean towards an audience question-nodding along as he fields annoying comments with grace. He stares steadily at them, through squinted eyes that somehow manage to call themselves to the fore. Boyson matches the stillness of his body with a resting poker face; the monotone tamber of his voice like a wizened Fratcent—as if its detached cool has been eroded down by the workplace. When asked about his heroes, Boyson points to

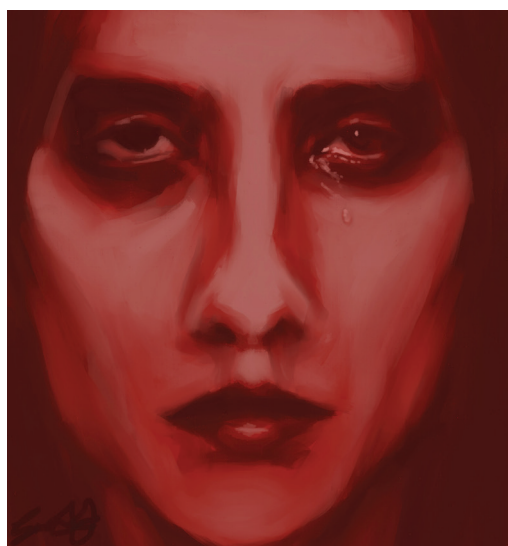
figures like Lou Reed: the kinds of rockstars that “experimented wildly and let their audiences catch up.” He can certainly brood like Lou (though seems far more mellow—more like Reed’s singing than his interview antics).

And yet, as he describes the film’s production, you can’t help but get the sense that he’s a consummate professional. Though making any indie movie is far from smooth sailing, his measured responses betray a serious competence. Boyson will mention real organizational feats like a sub 2 hour rough cut as if it were nothing, making clear just how determined he was to get this debut right. If his testimony is to be believed, nothing seems to have been left up to intuition or chance: a quality that makes sense when one considers he cut his teeth in the industry as a producer. With a resume containing some of the most decorated indie films of the last decade, Boyson always seems to be a part of the winning formula. Working as a producer on soon to be seminal works like Baumbach’s *Frances Ha* (2012), and the Safdie Brothers’ *Good Time* (2017) and *Uncut Gems* (2019), the “fledgling” director has seen what it takes. Of particular note is this latter collaboration with the Safdies. Dating all the way back to the brothers’ breakout feature *Heaven Knows What* (2014), Boyson’s close, multi-movie relationship with Josh and Benny Safdie has left its fingerprints all over *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR*. For fans of the former duo who feel like *Marty Supreme* represents a high budget squandering of *Good Time*’s human element, Boyson may have your next fix. This work is clearly in conversation with their kind of gritty, nerve-wracking portraits of New York, all the while never feeling pastiche.

Boyson’s conversation with the “Safdie tradition” is perhaps clearest in his debut’s cinematography. The camera trucks and pans slowly, as if drifting along in a stupor, almost like the altered sight of our spacey protagonist. Some of *OUR HERO*’s most visually striking scenes feature roving, handheld camerawork that swim between careful blocking like an invisible spectator. Even in fundamental establishing or shot-reverse-shots, the camera spies on its subjects, giving us obstructed views of characters from behind all manner of bushes, computer monitors, or shoulders. To make matters more uncomfortable, Boyson makes use of the extreme closeups and long lenses the Safdies are known for. Although these choices create a similarly high-strung atmosphere, Boyson finds his own voice by, once again, “pulling back.” Unlike the Safdies, the oppressive tension

of *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* does not come from frenetic editing, but the awkward pause. These long takes, especially the ultra close-ups of faces and their nervous ticks, are like nails on a chalkboard, and they keep your eyes glued to the screen in anticipation.

This caliber of screenplay and visual language would be an impressive result for a major motion picture, let alone an indie film on a “microbudget.” During the director’s talkback, Boyson mulled over the production decisions that made this film possible, highlighting a real reservoir of knowledge for every facet of the operation. There’s a funny asymmetry about leading a large artistic project like this. While on the press junket for his own (totally unrelated to *OUR HERO*) directorial debut, veteran actor James McAvoy shared an



interesting anecdote about the position. Just by nature of how rare an opportunity to direct is, “a director is the least experienced person at their job on that set than anybody else... And quite often, if you’re a young first-time director, you’re the least experienced person full stop.” When put like that, the making of one’s first feature film must be a nightmare. It must be so tempting to go full dictator, to seize control before one is drawn and quartered by their own responsibilities. And yet, like so many other qualities of the film, Boyson’s approach feels wise beyond his years. During the talkback, he reiterated again and again the necessity of “really loving actors”—not just as a platitude, but as a central concern when allocating limited resources. In spite of how much he had to do with so little, Boyson invested in extra weeks of rehearsal with his two stars before filming. This decision to provide a real space for his actors’ thoughtful experimentation and study of their roles would end up paying dividends: come time for expensive filming days, the actors knew exactly what their director wanted from them (an interpretation they had created collaboratively).

It seems that the more one learns about

the making of this movie, the more smart, long-term decisions reveal themselves. Early drafts of *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* date back to 2022 and that time’s post-lockdown-ness. If names like Asa Butterfield, Noah Centineo, and Jaeden Martel seem familiar it’s because these were all breakout stars from that year’s crop of Netflix Originals. As far back as then, Boyson and Camilleri were thinking ahead to casting, and (correctly) anticipated they would not have the funds to do an Open Call. So they decided to write personalized parts, not for superstars but working actors. Boyson talked a lot about the power of writing someone a part, and not just as a moneysaver or failsafe. Working actors are talented performers who, even after giving a beloved performance, still have to brunt the brutal audition process. To write them something truly great is no small gesture. It feels almost moneyball, to hunt for great performances from actors audiences haven’t seen in awhile. When they needed a grimy scam-artist father, they went straight for Chris Bauer (Frank Sobotka on *The Wire*); when they needed a boyish central antagonist, they saw something in Asa Butterfield that convinced them he could transform into a school shooter. Boyson would even go as far as to say the challenge rather quickly becomes tempering enthusiasm and being upfront about how difficult signing on to an indie movie like this will be; however, if that is all that is said and done, the reward for straying from the A-list is an incredibly motivated actor for your project. Considering the back and forth scene stealing from such a strong ensemble cast—that technique seems to work at a pretty high success rate.

Of course, there were some hiccups. The original actress for Balty’s “love interest” was “poached by Disney,” but the success of *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR* seems anything but a fluke. It is this ability to efficiently prioritize what matters that has really made me believe in Boyson as a future household name. His training as a producer hasn’t made him an out-of-touch board member or consultant, but a pragmatist who always works in service of the best art. It’s no wonder he made a truly great indie movie in 2026.

Mannix Beall-O’Brien returns to the Nassau Weekly with an impassioned indie movie recommendation—don’t be repelled by Netflix-original faces and Safdie brother sheen, he says... as those are *OUR HERO, BALTHAZAR*’s most deftly wielded tools.

Fiction

The Empty Plate

“Today, one of us has a full meal of roasted beef and steamed vegetables. The other of us is watching, long hands gripping the table and watching, eyes sunken and skin stretched thin around the orbital sockets.”

BY KELL MASTROSIMONE

Every room in our house is a dining room. We took a season and painted all the walls red, all the ceilings black, and we replaced all the furniture with a long dinner table in each room, with two ornate chairs placed at each end. The tables vary in size a little depending on the dimensions of the room, but the elements are always the same. We started with the bedroom, carrying the bed frame out and down the stairs and throwing it onto the street. We had a difficult time finding a small-enough table to fit in the cramped spaces of the bathrooms. Dining in those rooms was always uncomfortable, but then again, nothing about this is comfortable.

Now, we are in the living dining room. We each have a candle illuminating our respective plates, and there's a long stretch of darkness on the mahogany between us. Our candles mark our passage through our rooms, going up stairs and across thresholds.

Without the light, the other rooms seem less real, dark and always anticipating fullness.

There are rules for this. They are unspoken, but we understand them all the same. They boil down to: when one plate is full, the other is empty.

Today, one of us has a full meal of roasted beef and steamed vegetables. The other of us is watching, long hands gripping the table and watching, eyes sunken and skin stretched thin around the orbital sockets. Our throats bob, one with the rhythm of digestion and the other with the anxious swallowing of when one's mouth is dry and one's stomach is empty.

We are in one of our in-between stages. One of us has yet to reach the state of emaciation where the other has to carry them between dining rooms, and the other of us has yet to reach the state of engorgement, where they can barely fit through a door. When that happens, we switch: the smaller one is allowed to eat without restraint, and the other begins the process of deflating.

The designated empty plate is starting to collect dust. It has only been moved between rooms, but never dirtied. That is our unbending rule: never fill the empty plate.



Meanwhile, the full plate is quickly becoming empty, hands tearing into the beef. We quickly did away with utensils, as we found they only impeded us in our pursuit of order, of stipulations and rules.

Without utensils, we could remove the dishwasher. Its electric innards dragged after it like the tail of a balloon losing its helium. We threw it into the pile with the rest on our driveway.

We don't talk much. Words are tautological to the intimacy of structure. Instead, we communicate in the way a hand brushes crumbs from the corner of the other's mouth, or a tongue searches for a piece of lettuce between the other's teeth in the pretense of a kiss. We make love in the empty space left by hunger.

In the early days, the stretching silences would occasionally be broken by the shrill cry of a phone ringing. At first, we kept the phones, appreciating the time



to talk to our mothers or our friends, but after a while, the voices rang with concern and eventually outright disgust. So, we got rid of the phones, cutting each of the landlines and ripping them out of the walls. Now, when we do speak, our voices are scratchy from disuse.

After the meal is finished, we wait.

It is a Sunday, midafternoon, when one of us notices something that the other does not. This is significant, the beginning of the end: mold.

I remember marrying you. It was a clear day, but you were petrified by the idea of rain. You insisted that it was a disaster from the start. We should have booked an indoor venue, just in case, even though it was the dry season and we hadn't seen rain in at least a month. It was a perfectly normal wedding, for perfectly normal people, and it did not rain. The cake was the grandest thing I had ever seen in my life, and you didn't take one bite. Your mother was wearing a hat twice as large as her head with some kind of lace swan affixed to the top. It tottered back and forth like a seesaw, always on the brink of collapse; I remember that.

What we have is delicate and precarious, and if we speak even a word about something like this, it could all come tumbling down. The walls might cave in, or worse, the bed might mend itself and make its way back inside, and then we'd have to go outside, walk down the street again, exchange words with the neighbors, go to work, reconnect our phones, and call our mothers.

We would have to return to life with its unpredictable pains in place of our predictable ones. We cannot do that.

The meals never stop coming, but they are wrong now, and they make us sick, both of us. There is, of course, the physical ailment: the bucket now at the legs of each table, to catch any assailing vomit, after which a cloth is produced to wipe the excess from the face. The worst sickness is knowledge. The worst is knowing that the house of dining rooms is seconds from collapse. This is unsustainable. But we cannot stop.

The vomit turns to blood in stringy filaments. We are too weak to switch places. There is no one to prepare the meals, and no meals to eat, and one of us is sick, and both of us are sick. As we

near the end, our eyes might meet across the table.

One of us might give a look that means, *do something*.

And the other might respond like, *I can't*.

And there might be a pause. We might look at each other with tired eyes that say, *I love you*, or *I'm sorry*.

Kell Mastrosimone is a contributing writer for the Nassau Weekly.



Fiction

A is for Airport

"The golden-brown pancakes and perfectly fried eggs from this morning churn uneasily in my stomach. It's still hard to believe dad made them. He used to burn everything."

BY ADDISON WOOD

My dad continues to grill me with questions as we walk through the aquarium's tunnels, surrounded by rippling, lapis-limned light. He doesn't ask about mom and I'm not stupid enough to bring her up. After several minutes of stilted conversation interspersed with awkward pauses, with him clearing his throat of a rather persistent itch and me pretending to be interested in the wrinkle-riddled snails and neon seahorses we pass, we arrive at the sea lion enclosure. I push aside the heavy plastic strips hanging in the entryway and squint against the blinding light of midday. A few families are already seated on the semi-circular bleachers in front of the tank, and I have to drag my dad back to the third row before he can sit down in the front.

Once we settle, I busy myself with watching the two sea lions swim circles in the bright blue water of their tank while my dad, whistling to himself, peruses the brochure he had grabbed at the front desk.

My phone buzzes with a text from Gabby. It's a selfie of her and Reagan driving in the Catskills, with a message that reads,

"Wish you were here!" I smile through the dull throb in my chest, grateful for the distraction, and type out a response.

"Sea lions are highly social animals and often return to the same coastal

areas year after year to rest and raise their young," dad reads aloud. "Although you probably know that already; sea lions were always your favorite animal."

When I was four, I think. I nod quickly and resume texting Gabby.

"Who are they?" my dad asks.

I turn again, finding him glancing at my phone.

"Oh. Right. Gabby and Reagan. They've been my best friends since freshman year," I supply.

"They seem nice."

"Yeah," I nod, "they are."

My dad clears his throat and leans back in his seat. I fidget with my phone while I wait for Gabby to reply. The golden-brown pancakes and perfectly fried eggs from this morning churn uneasily in my stomach. It's still hard to believe dad made them. He used to burn everything.

More families start to file onto the bleachers, the gentle murmurs of happy couples and excited children closing in around us. I spot a couple kids my age in the crowd, but without friends or a younger sibling beside me, I feel closer to the toddlers with jelly sandals and rosy faces, clinging to their parents' arms.

Three minutes past eleven, a woman in a full-body wetsuit emerges, carrying a large silver bucket filled to the brim with raw fish, her body tilting slightly under

entire outdoor space. "Looks like we've got quite a crowd today, thank you all for being here. My name is Pam and I'm one of the keepers and trainers for our sea lions. In just a moment I'll introduce you to the stars of our show today: Nala and Seabastian."

Picking the bucket back up, Pam climbs a small ladder attached to the side of the tank and steps onto the wooden walkway that, along with some sort of cement material shaped into artificial-looking rocky outcroppings, surrounds the tank. As she walks to the edge, both sea lions follow her with their heads out of the water, and when she throws each of them a herring, they dive down to catch it. After resurfacing, Nala and Seabastian leap onto the rock beside Pam and the crowd gasps.

Pam then leads a series of tricks involving the seals diving into the water, barking, and catching fish. It's hard not to notice my dad beside me, who claps loudly after every trick and cups his hands over his mouth to amplify his cheering. He looks over and nudges me with his elbow.

"Come on! Where'd your fun go? Nala and Seabastian won't put on a good show unless you cheer for them."

I clap slowly because he's still watching me, but his words leave a bittersweet aftertaste in my mouth. I faintly remember him saying something like this when I was six and still hung onto every word he said. Back then, I probably put my hands together and yelled along with him, oblivious to the empty seat on my right.

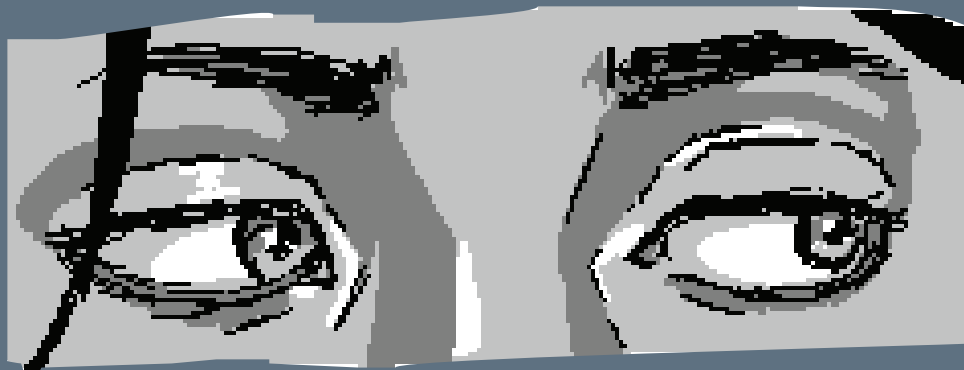
Mom wouldn't be caught dead in an aquarium.

I try to resist the pull of his words because at seventeen, it makes me feel childish and naive. Still, I can't quite shake the twinge of longing for the way my six-year-old self saw the world—with everything paint-

ed in rainbows and glitter.

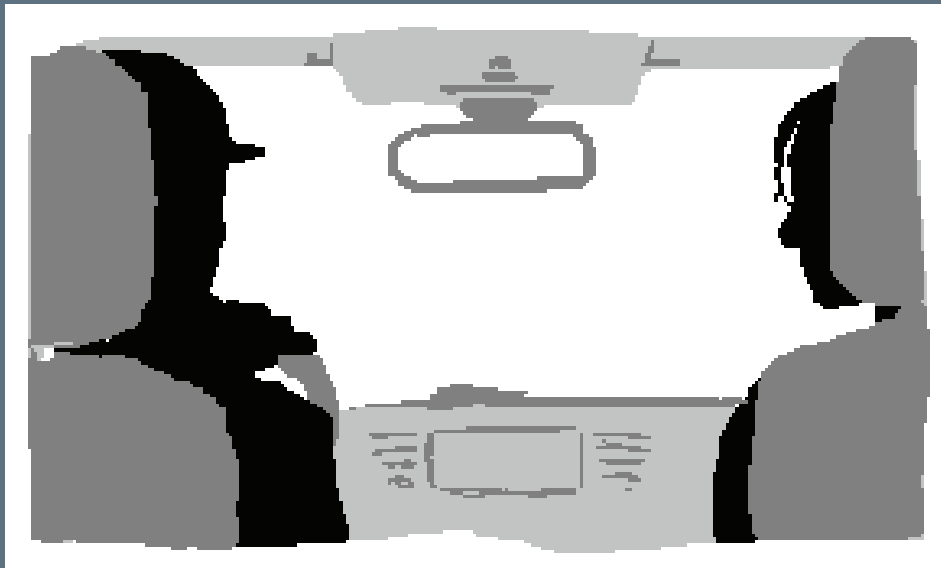
About five minutes before the end of the show, the seals retreat to the water and Pam turns to face us.

"Now," Pam says, "I'll need a volunteer



its weight.

"Welcome, everybody," she says, setting the bucket down on the ground once she reaches the front of the bleachers. A headset amplifies her voice across the



to help me with our next trick.”

Of course, my dad’s hand shoots up. Pam, shielding her eyes from the sun, scans the crowd of toddlers and parents before landing on my dad.

“You, sir, in the green cap!”

My dad puts a hand on my shoulder before getting up and walking down the aisle to Pam, grinning like a man who had just proposed. The people around me clap.

“What’s your name, sir?” Pam asks.

“Frank,” he says, his voice slightly amplified by his proximity to Pam and her microphone.

“Everyone give it up for Frank!” The crowd cheers, and my dad waves enthusiastically. I sink lower into the bleachers.

“Alright, Frank. You’re going to help me feed Nala her favorite treat. Think you can do it?”

He nods and Pam hands him a small, pale herring from the bucket. Their fingers touch imperceptibly.

“Now, I need you to hold the fish above the water like this,” Pam says, guiding my dad to the edge of the tank with a hand on his shoulder. He watches her closely as she demonstrates. “And when I tell you to, you’re going to toss it up nice and high for Nala to catch.”

He smiles at her and gets into position, crouching comically low. But when Pam whistles and Nala dives underwater, he throws the fish too early. It falls into the water with a lame splash, nowhere near the sea lion. The crowd chuckles and I glance around to see if anyone is looking at me, but they’re all focused on my dad, who is now bowing like a Broadway actor at curtain call.

From where I sit in the third row, he looks small. I imagine him shuttered up in my large wooden dollhouse, wedged between the Barbies I played with as a kid—the same ones I found still sitting in his house in my old childhood room. Despite my embarrassment, the thought makes me want to laugh at the same time that something in my chest pulls tight.

“Okay, let’s try that again, Frank!” Pam hands him another fish. This time, when she whistles for Nala to dive under the water, my dad waits until Nala breaks the surface and Pam yells “Go!” before tossing the fish into Nala’s awaiting jaws. Nala arcs gracefully back into the water and everyone cheers. My dad pumps his fist in the air and takes a bow. He scans the crowd, and when he finds me, he waves, his face breaking into a wide grin. I give him a thumbs-up.

He doesn’t even look at Pam as he descends the ladder and makes his way over to me.

“Did you see that? Nala caught my fish.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help laughing. He still acts the same, grinning and teasing, like nothing’s changed. And as we walk out of the seal enclosure, I realize that the aquarium hasn’t changed much either. We pass the clicking dolphins which pull me back to afternoons spent imitating them until our sides hurt, and when we reach the stingray touchpool, I remember the time my dad nearly dropped me into it. It makes it easy to fall back into familiar steps, only my strides are longer and I’ve been away for so long that it feels comforting and

strange all at once.

When we get back to my dad’s Toyota, which is at least as old as I am but still looks brand new, he turns on the radio before pulling out of the parking lot. We drive down Surf Street and take a left, passing the little french bakery with the baby blue windows. I wonder if they still serve the best croissants in town. We pass the Italian restaurant we would eat at on special occasions, the local book store with the round tabby cat, the playground where I skinned my knee, and then my dad takes another left and my body leans into the turn, recognizing the route to the gelato place.

“You can never go to the aquarium and not get gelato after!” He’d always say.

I smile into my lap and notice the dark brown stain from where my mom once spilled her coffee on the seat. She sometimes drove with us to the gelato place, although she never got anything, just sampled our scoops. On our drive there we’d always play the alphabet game, watching the passing road signs for words that started with each letter of the alphabet, in order from A to Z. We’d gotten so used to the drive we’d had to take different routes.

I can almost hear my mom leaning forward and shouting, “Exit!” her fist raised in victory as my dad makes a show of complaining that she has an advantage sitting in the passenger seat. I can hear our laughter now, filling the car.

We’re approaching another intersection now, but I know we’ll turn right. I look back out at the passing road signs, the familiarity of the car and my childhood town seeping under my skin.

“Airport,” I say suddenly.

“What?” My dad glances from the road to me.

“A for Airport.”

He looks at me for a moment, then smiles.

I smile back.

Addison Wood is a contributing writer for the Nassau Weekly.

The smell of far-away fire

A Nass writer dwells on the sensations of homecoming, the scents and sounds of feeling.

LILY WILLIAMS-AMEEN

My descent into India in June began easily, with the usual green seatbelt sign and slow change in air pressure. But as the plane pulled through fog, I felt coils of anticipation tighten inside me. This was a homecoming to an unknown but familiar origin, a mythical place of bedtime stories that my dad told me when I was tucked into pink floral bedsheets. I caught glimpses throughout the house: Amartya Sen and Salman Rushdie on the bookshelves, a bronze Shiva on the fireplace mantel, Buddha in a candle-holder in the basement, block-printed tablecloths, pillows, and picnic blankets that accumulated every time he visited my grandmother in Bangladesh. Black-and-white photos of my dad and uncle in school uniforms from their time in Bangalore circled my mind, about to gain clarity and color.

Meanwhile, gray clouds from the upper atmosphere kept changing, growing deeper and darker and warmer, an orange tint of pollution creeping up the scratched plastic Virgin Atlantic window. Nose glued to the window, I searched in the mist for the familiar small buildings marking descent. Instead, a neon green slime started to come down the window in torrents, and orange fog continued to cloud my vision. I later learned the name of the green liquid—Type IV anti-icing fluid—but at the time it played out like an apocalyptic Halloween colored sequence. This did not incite bedtime stories from my childhood, but a more uncertain reality. Crossing the jetbridge, I breathed in the smell of far-away fire, of burning gasoline and crops and trash. I used to associate the scent with my grandmother's Dhaka apartment and the suitcase of goodies my dad would open the second he got home. The burning and the jolting of the van on the way to the university made me nauseous. I glanced at a hazy mural on the side of the road. A blue-and-green globe. "Nature

provides for need, but not for greed." Mahatma Gandhi. The place wrapped in a mental mist for most of my life still seemed incomprehensible and contradictory, even with feet on the ground.

The six weeks that followed continued a story I've known for years, one I'm still trying to piece together. I traveled all over the city of Bangalore and the country. A quick stop at the Taj Mahal. A fever dream of hospitality and beautiful nature scenes in Coorg. Colorful boats and dancing in Chennai, listening to expats speak quick French in Pondicherry. I took pictures at all my dad's recommendations from fifty-some years ago. His houses no longer existed, now apartment buildings and fast-food places. I visited his boarding school and watched pre-teens play cricket, seeing my relatives in these spaces so far from our now-homes. I lived in university dorms and went on walks around campus, finding my own favorite spots to walk, eat, and live. I imagined showing my dad around one day.

For class, I visited several farms, sampling cucumbers and bananas and milk while speaking with farmers and scientists. On the road, I listened to Billy Strings and Sierra Ferrell and Bob Dylan as the hills, covered with bright clay houses and metallic structures, rolled by. I immortalized them in my mind, scenes of everyday life that I would probably never see again. The colorful shipping trucks, personalized to each driver, were my favorite part. They reminded me of how I used to press my nose against the window every Christmas while driving to see my mom's family. I studied each driver outside of the nameless, gray ribbed metal structures. Here, the trucks screamed personality—goddesses and flowers and exclamations of "HORN, PLEASE!"

While the smell of burning slowly approached me until I became numb to it, the horns never left my mind. On Thursdays, the bar across the street hosted karaoke nights. The beat from Bollywood tracks blended with the incessant beeping of horns and wafted through my open window. I would lie in bed and stare as the fan went

thump-thump-thump-thump in front of me. The pitched horns blended into each other, and an endless stream of oscillating sound. My first night, I mistook the rhythmic pulsations of the fan for the tabla, the traffic horns for the sitar. As the ragas and country music of my childhood came back to me, I tried to discern what music was real and what I constructed from fragmented recollections. Home and reality began to blend. I found myself slipping away from what I thought I knew, losing myself in the world of pretend.

After a few days, the trance of the music and colors and memories started to fade. The air lost its novelty, the smell of burning dissipating into background noise. The only reminder of its difference was the slightly damp, moldy quality of the air I felt when breathing. I am always surprised at how quickly humans can adapt.

My descent back into America happened quickly: I didn't sleep the entire day before so I could fall asleep on the plane, and was still groggy-eyed when I stepped off the jet bridge. I watched dark orange smoke from the Canadian wildfires choke the landscape through the floor-to-ceiling windows of JFK. I felt the pang of a familiar burning smell, one that used to signify a place of another. In India, my own reality morphed and shifted into a new normal. The memories of my dad's memories that I brought to the place still existed, but grew with my own experience. The gap between the two lessened. Before, I faced a world I barely knew. I grew to understand it and adapt it as my own.

The smell of fire has since migrated from the atmosphere to my mind. I sense it in the occasional story in the *Times* featuring burning woods, hazy pink atmospheres over cities. Photo highlights on my phone. My duffel bag that traveled around the country, sitting on the windowsill. And the next time the nutty, nauseating smell of far-off burning fully enters my senses, I will think of home.

Lily Williams-Ameen finds meaning in olfactory linkages, even seas apart. Scent...they're calling it the Fifth Sense.

Sunken Wingbeats of a Rocket's Fuel Tank

BY GABRIELLA MARTINEZ

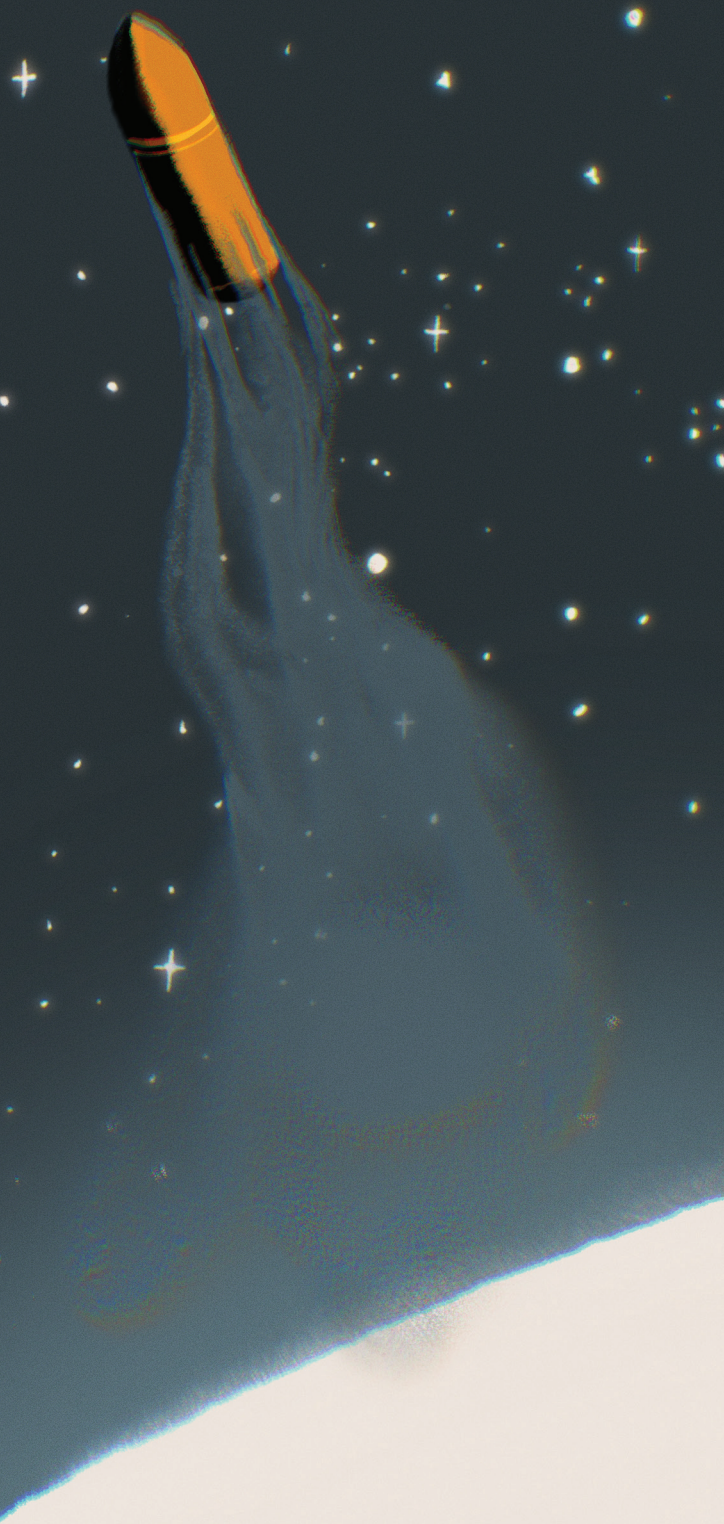
Shaking, shuddering, skyward
I crash as if I, alone,
can break this glass haze
with the fire sloshing in my belly.
Every movement, I feel—

my breath—
arch into the greed of those astronauts, high
on my fumes—guzzled and smuggled
through my hissing steel veins to fuel
our shared madness; I see the stars have spilled
into their open pores and I know they too must
feel the same calling
elsewhere—anywhere just past this pane.

Higher, higher, we—no, no, I—set all of myself
alight until I too am a star, clawing towards my
rightful place etched into this galaxy.
But I am no star.
I am ashes, shadowy whispers of possibility—
I hang on my choking smoke.

Briefly, I am swinging, weightless in air, and I wonder
is this how Icarus felt when he thought the sky
was his to conquer? When did he feel the Sun's ringing
warmth leaking from his fingertips, a rusted offering
of ichor dripping to the domain of the Gods, far,
far below? Did he fear whatever awaited him down there?

Falling, I crash into cold and see misty wings
explode outwards. They follow me, fluttering
mockingly on my back as the scent
of salt yanks me into reality. Far above, I watch
as the astronauts embrace
the blinding void and I know that I am now as Icarus,
hopelessly watching vultures rise above our folly.



Changing Tides

Metamorphosi is a ghost town teeming with life.

BY ALEXANDER MARGULIS

“Ever since the flood,” said Vasilis Dados this July, at the only café left in Metamorphosi, “our everyday life includes antidepressants. When the water receded, and I came back here with my children and my grandchildren, and... we saw what we saw... I held my head in my hands. I said, ‘now you can do whatever you want.’” Dados is 79, with big hands and big feet and silver, slicked-back hair. As he spoke, he fiddled with a strand of worry beads, and cast indecipherable glances at the five other septuagenarians who had joined



him, as per usual, for a mid-morning espresso. “We’re living in fear,” he said. “We’re afraid the water will come back.”

Metamorphosi—a small farming village at the lowest, flattest level of Thessaly, Greece’s agricultural epicenter—has flooded thrice in Dados’ lifetime. Each time, explained Litsa Rita, a 70-year-old woman with kind, glaucomatic eyes

and a proclivity for Winston-brand cigarettes, the flooding got progressively worse. In 1953, the water reached a meter high. In 1994, it rose to three. In 2023, when the nightmarish Storm Daniel swept through Thessaly, “only the roofs” of Metamorphosi were visible above the murk. The whole region was flooded—sixteen people died—but damage was concentrated in Metamorphosi. Entire neighborhoods were lost. The houses that survived were caked in so much mud that residents had to shovel it out in wheelbarrows. Once-fertile farmlands were strewn with stones and soaked with petrol. “It was impossible to cultivate them,” said Dados. Three years on, it’s still “not like it was.” Before the flood, almost 300 people lived in Metamorphosi. Today, that figure is closer to a hundred.

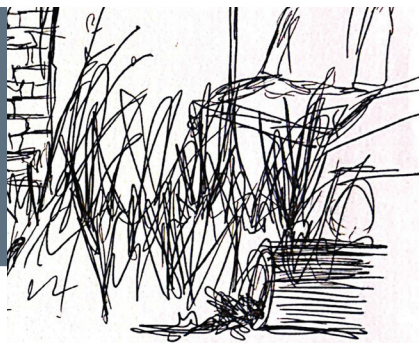
Those who stayed had lived in Metamorphosi for sixty, seventy, eighty-odd years before the flood. They crack jokes and chain-smoke and ride their rusty Yamahas to church. Theirs is a town of shattered windows, of empty paddocks, of mildewed swing sets. Despite this exodus—or maybe because of it—Metamorphosi teems with life. Cats lounge on abandoned, mud-stained porches; cicadas whir and buzz in the summer heat. Next to the town square, a pair of storks have made a nest atop a splintered power pole. In the café, a goldfish flits this way and that in its small, rectangular enclosure. The effect is of a battered, postlapsarian Eden. At one point in my reporting, I was chased for several hundred feet by a small and vicious dog.

Until 1957, Metamorphosi was named Kortiki—the name was changed, Rita says, because Kortiki was “too Turkish.” The village has existed since at least 1454, when it was recorded in the first Ottoman census, but Stone Age ruins and prehistoric arrowtips have been

dredged up from its farmlands. “There are many stories as to why the village was called Kortiki,” Rita told me. The most popular of these tales holds that the town was named for a Byzantine general who was stationed on a neighboring hill during a conflict with the Franks in the early 13th century. Whatever proof there might once have been for this claim has long since washed away.

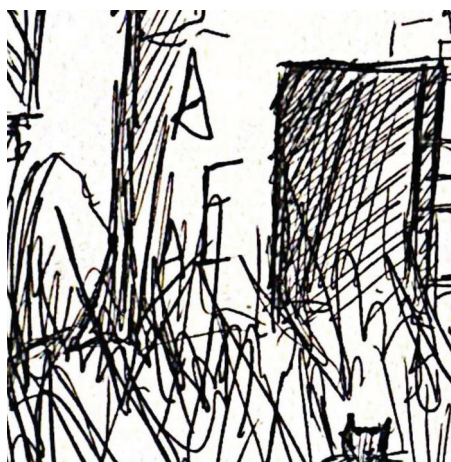
The village itself will be the next to go. Many of Greece’s river-side settlements are “doomed,” explains Kostas Lagkouvardos, a meteorologist and Research Director at the National Observatory of Athens. Storm Daniel was a gale of historic proportions—still, an ever-warming Aegean has rendered another catastrophe all but inevitable. “You cannot stop such rainfall,” Lagkouvardos declared. Instead, he recommends investing in municipal warning systems—or simply relocating towns.

Metamorphosi has gone for the latter option. By the time flood warnings rang out from the town’s municipal office on the morning of September 7, it was too late for many villagers to evacuate; Rita, for example, stayed to tend to her sickly aunt and uncle. She brought them to the office, the only two-story building in town, mere hours before an overburdened levy on the Karambalis river collapsed, sending a reservoir’s-worth of fetid floodwater barreling down toward the village. “It was like a horror movie,” Rita recollected. A mother and her son drowned in their attic. The community leaders who had been trawling through the floodwater for survivors were stranded atop their tractors. One such vehicle petered out just a few meters from the municipal office, with several residents on top. “They were yelling for help,” Rita explained, “but we were helpless, too.” There was a steel canoe tethered to the



building, but it would almost certainly have capsized in the churning waters.

Come morning, however, the floodwaters resembled less of a rapid and more of a swamp, and a pair of boatmen were sent out to scour the roofs.



Overseeing the process was the community's president, Petros Kontogiannis, a handsome, square-jawed 41-year-old who not only looks like he works as a firefighter but does, in fact, work as a firefighter. His heroics during the flood—Kontogiannis spent most of the night on a tractor, directing other farmers to safety with his iPhone flashlight—led him to be unanimously reelected in late 2023. "It's become a lot more personal for me," he recently explained. "You feel so much responsibility, but there's only so much you can do. You don't have a lot of power." Still, "if it hadn't been for the boats and the tractors," Rita told me, "37 more people would have died." By the time governmental rescue crews arrived in Metamorphosi, there were 70 residents huddled on the second floor of the municipal building.

Back at the cafe, the conversation shifted to the signature policy initiative of Kontogiannis' second term: the relocation of Metamorfosi to an

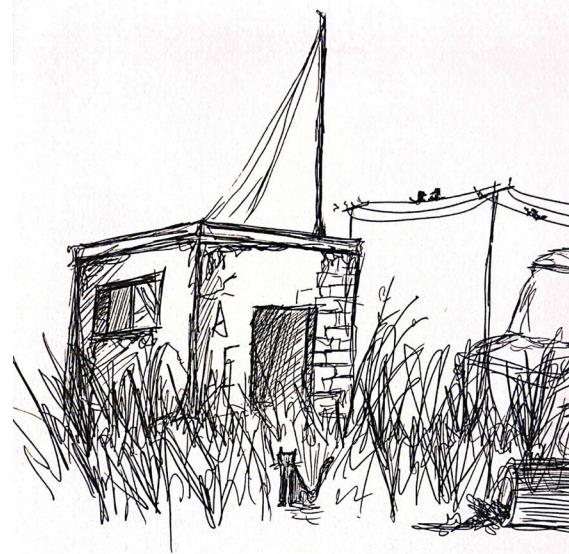
undeveloped field outside of Palemas, one of Thessaly's larger townships. Rita related something that her uncle Luido had told her: "I survived three floods. I will die anyway. But it will be a curse for my children and grandchildren if we don't move." So-called "New Metamorfosi" was all the more necessary, a resident named Apostoloa Katsanos chimed in, because although the government had promised each remaining Metamorphosian 100,000 euros to repair their houses, they'd only ever received €6,600. Before the flood, he said, the town was nicknamed "Little Paris"—"We knew how to party, that was the spirit of the village. Work all day, and party all night. And everything was paid on time." Now the white-haired denizens of the village sleep in half-renovated houses, supplied with only the bare necessities. Their children or grandchildren have moved to larger cities, to work and play and build a future for themselves. Those who remain are old, and proud, and achingly wistful. "We cannot stay away," said Katsanos. Even after his evacuation, Dados added, he would drive down to the village every morning, just to see it. "I had nowhere to stay," Dados recalled, "my house was in a wreck." Even after the construction of New Metamorfosi, Katsanos agreed, the villagers would drive down every morning to the ghost town that they loved, would take their coffee at the same café they'd frequented in their teens.

Without warning, a man slammed his palms on the table. This was Dimitrios Panagos, a polo-clad 78-year-old who'd been a baker before the flood, and he was furious. "I promised not to talk," he said, or maybe yelled, "but I cannot hold it any more. The Prime Minister came here twice, and promised us a relocation. He presented the design for the village, and it was great, 400 square

meters per house—and three years later nothing, literally nothing, has happened. We are sitting around this table and telling stories and making dreams about relocating, about our children, our grandchildren, about finally having a safe space. But we are just telling stories here. Nothing will ever happen."

Silence at the table. The café crew are a jocular bunch—they've had the better part of a century to develop countless inside jokes and references and superstitions. But there was death in the tone of Panagos, and death hanging over the village. "Too many have died since the flood," Rita said. Her aunt Olga had been buried the night before. She'd sat by the cafe as the funeral bells began to ring. On the second chime, a trio of ink-black birds took flight. As the droning chimes continued, Rita's face grew grim. She apologized politely, stood, and left, heading toward the church. I watched her go. She must have been hot, I thought. It was a sunny afternoon. The air was almost brittle. The houses of the village appeared bleached, like ash, or bones.

Alexander Margulis is a contributing writer and Section Head for Second Look.



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