This week, we're taking it all in—death, Danes, and a net-zero future.

The Nassau Weekly

50

April 23, 2026

In Print since 1979 | Online at nassauweekly.com

Volume 50, Number 8

YOU ARE HERE

Dear friends,

These days, which have been some of the sweetest of my life, have imbued in me a kind of fear I haven't felt in a long time, one we certainly all feel when things are unknown and words are unsaid, when past conceptions of futures dissolve and it is as if the dirt path you've been trodding ends all of a sudden and there's just brush up ahead. Sweet, ecstatic fear, like the smell of honeysuckles in the spring; I feel it all the time. I wonder and pray and precipitate all the time. I hope and grieve and grow all the time, in the face of this fear, this not-knowing.

These days, everything is yellow—the sun, my cold brew, the dandelions, the feeling I get when I am taking it all in. I want to show you this flower I found, come look, it's just around this way. Do you see it? It's growing right up out of ground that was frozen only a little while ago. Now it is yellow. It used to be snow and desolation and memories of past times and now it is yellow and alive. Hello, little flower, hello little miracle. I decided to follow the flowers, the pretty little terrifying things, to whatever end, maybe to no end. Maybe I will be walking around in this field forever, bending down and looking at all the flowers, being terrified by how they smell, by the tenderness of sensation. But each flower I smell will be growing up out of the ground and will tell me the only truth there is: You are here.

I have been taking Zyrtec for spring allergies.

In fear and ecstasy,
Sasha Rotko, EIC

Masthead

This Week:

Fri

6:00p Labyrinth Books
Two Centuries of Race, Resistance, and Forgiveness in One Charleston Church

2:00-5:00p Poe Field West
Soul Food Festival and Field Day

Sat

2:00-3:30p Dodge 301 (Meditation Room)
Buddhism for Beginners

12:00-1:30p Hinds Plaza, 66 Witherspoon Street
Story & Verse: Storytelling + Poetic Open Mic (Outdoor Porchfest Edition!)

Sun

3:00-4:15p Nassau Presbyterian Church
The Jefferson Paradox

5:00-8:00p East Pyne 010
Film Screening of "Nuestra Tierra (Landmarks)" and Q&A with Filmmaker Lucrecia Martel

Mon

4:30-6:00p Julis Romo Rabinowitz A17
Teaching Dueling Narratives: Harriet Tubman and the Combahee River Raid

1:30-2:30p Special Collections, Firestone Library
Early Modern Nahuatl Workshop

Tues

4:30-6:00p East Pyne 010
Part 1: The Attack on Black History

6:00-7:30p Labyrinth Books
Susan Stewart in conversation with Eliza Griswold: 'Bramble'

Wed

4:30-6:00p East Pyne 010
Part 2: Nation and Commemoration

9:00a-6:00p Lucas Gallery, 185 Nassau St.
Blasphemy: Exhibition by Deniz Sezgin '26

Thurs

4:30-6:00p East Pyne 010
Part 3: The Charisma of Diaspora

5:30p Grand Hall Princeton University Art Museum
Learning Through Photography Symposium

Verbatims:

Overheard on Firestone C Floor
Guy who's really in touch with his emotions: " I really like her, but is she in therapy?"

Overheard at a *Nass AV* meeting
Avian: "We were shooting his short film and I had to jump into the water. And this guy drove past, and he said, 'No, don't jump, don't do it.'"

Overheard in the Tiger Tea Room:
Boots on the ground sociologist: "Lesbians are like monkeys in a barrel."

Overheard at Princeton Previews
Naïve 2030: "Definitely update your resume. Eating club applications are gonna be due sooner than you think."

Overheard at Terrace
Suspect Francophile: "I just had a geeked meeting with my French professor."
Francophile by association: "Like, actually geeked?"
Suspect Francophile: "Dude, it's 4/20."

Overheard at the Tower Club
Slightly tired dinner guest: "My mom's Puerto Rican and my dad's Irish."
Conservative firebrand: "So you're Puert O'Rican?"
Slightly tired dinner guest: "Yeah, I guess."

Overheard in Tiger Tea Room
Disillusioned senior: "If nothing else works out, I'll just apply to Palantir."
Naïve frosh: "That's cool."
Disillusioned senior: "They pay well, so I'll be able to travel. And they have good health benefits. You know, my body's a temple. I think it would be a chance to do something meaningful before I go to law school."

Overheard on Firestone Plaza
Matching Alo set girl: "I have no idea how he expects to make the crew team. He's a little chubby 5'9" man."

Overheard on Prospect
Nass *alumnus:* "Exxon-Mobil? Ivy? What's the difference?"

Overheard on Witherspoon
Sadness speculator: "If this keeps going, it's gonna trigger a depression."

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!

Read us: nassauweekly.com

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

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

I SURVIVED...

1. Anthrax
2. The pear of anguish
3. 9 plagues already, how much worse could it get?
4. The homer simpson percocet from the gas station floor
5. A rather tame upbringing
6. My Northern European roommate, Sven
7. Pity from lames
8. So much. I've been through so so much.
9. Being 2016 thick at princeton
10. Pop the balloon challenge
11. Nobu
12. but your dumbass isnt gonna 🤣
13. the missus being on a Rutgers party flyer
14. The hookah lounge business
15. a concerning shift in the power dynamics of my intramural quidditch team
16. the cuck chair in the 9/11 plane cockpit
17. Nancy Reagan eating it off the boneee
18. the protocols of the elders of zion
19. 5th grade. SIXTH GRADE HERE WE COME!!!!
20. the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire
21. the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
22. being hospitalized for approaching perfection
23. hospitalizing the nearly-perfect man with a kick to the face
24. the koreaboo allegations
25. my troop leader
26. drake. i was too old.
27. Early onset baby fever
28. boyfriend dick
29. Having a boyfriend who joined the army after we broke up
30. moderate to severe anorexia
31. by jumping from a third story window into a haystack
32. by eating the goldfish in the dentist office after I got locked inside
33. the 2018 Sioux Falls Twerk-off
34. the plandemic
35. the car jerker
36. by doing the kind of things that keep a man awake at night. you wouldn't want to know.
37. having a whole ass ki
38. being Salman Rushdie'd at a Whig Clio debate
39. Getting super glue on my hand and then getting stuck to a friend I dapped up
40. a workplace accident and am seeking compensation
41. hand stuff at my high school cross country team sleepover
42. a piano falling on me and then an anvil
43. keeping a daily kegel regimen
44. what JFK couldn't
45. he/him lesbian discourse
46. chet hanks white boy summer
47. The tragedy of the commons
48. a swinging axe booby trap designed to keep me from treasure
49. peeling the COEXIST sticker off my subaru
50. The full page chabad ad in my alternative weekly newspaper
51. Being shot in the head and having my arms torn off and then being disemboweled then being put through electroshock therapy they shocked me like 50 times then they put me in a burning building then they drilled into my brain and there was blood everywhere they also broke my legs and pushed me down a hill
52. the gynecologist asking if i feel dirty
53. extenuating circumstances
54. 'Uncle Tricky' (patrick, age 35) relapsing during parents weekend
55. betraying your father. As I will survive betraying you.
56. 5 shots in the back of a yellow cab
57. A Hamilton flash mob

Everything Glitches!

PAGE DESIGN BY PHOEBE PINDER

On KATSEYE & pop culture after aesthetics.

BY ZIYI YAN

It was 3 a.m., and I was watching KATSEYE perform "Gnarly" at the Grammys. Clad in neon decals that looked like hazard tape, KATSEYE bounced like video-game characters and contorted themselves like creepy dolls, all whilst screaming over an industrial-pop backing track: *They could describe everything with one single word. You know? Like, Boba tea (gnarly). Tesla (gnarly). Fried chicken (gnarly). Partyin' in the Hollywood Hills (uh-huh). This song (gnarly)...Everything's gnarly!* I was hooked, but what did it mean? I felt a rumble in my stomach. Was I hungry, or was it the spontaneous witching-hour urge to write an essay decrying the AI-slopification of culture?

This is not that essay. It is, however, an attempt to wrap my mind around a strange feeling I've been getting lately: a kind of seductive, self-referential, technicolor rhythm is infecting pop culture. Movies, music, and the celebrity circuit are becoming aesthetically similar to their own digital circulation. Media scholar Genevieve Yue writes that memetic logic dominates the internet. I wonder: does internet logic also dominate pop culture? In "Meme Aesthetics," authors Best, You, and Young write that the meme "accelerates, it deteriorates"; it is "compressed, reproduced, ripped, remixed." Memes do not invite close reading or identification: from "surprised Pikachu face" to "dog in a burning room," memes destabilize; they are snapshots of passing moments; they jolt us awake from one dream into another; we never know what they are passing into. How, then, does the destabilizing function of memes move beyond images, toward video? A glitch in the system can expose the wiring and shatter any illusion of unruptured performance. But what happens when audiovisual media is not only glitching, but glitchy: when the performance continues even while going haywire?

As an aesthetic category today, glitchiness could allow us to read media that confound analysis while reframing affective modes of spectatorship. Glitchiness is an optical, narrative, and temporal aesthetic that grasps onto everything at once. It enacts the precarity of the subject and the image in late capitalism; it refracts the conditions of an oversaturated media environment and distorts the distorted mirrors of the celebrity circuit. The "glitch" can be read as a momentary aberration, or as the rupture point of cultural texts; it can also elude reading altogether. In "Society of the Spectacle," Guy Debord tells us, "In analyzing the spectacle we are obliged to a certain extent to use the spectacle's own language, in the sense that we have to operate on the methodological terrain of the society that expresses itself in the spectacle." It is impossible to get at the glitch from a distance and pin it down. Let's start the only way we can: in the middle.

Still from the "Gnarly" music video.

A body is being torn apart. In *The Substance*, aging fitness influencer Elizabeth Sparkle uses a black-market drug to create Sue, a younger, more beautiful version of herself. Sue crawls out from the raw flesh of Elizabeth's back, literally exposing Elizabeth's biological wiring; the former television star lies immobile on the bathroom floor, her spinal wound sewn up like meat. Sue and Elizabeth must switch consciousness each week, so that Elizabeth's body can regenerate spinal fluid for Sue to inject, preserving Sue's youth. Each time Sue refuses to switch back in time, Elizabeth becomes more deformed: bones jut from her flesh, and her insides seethe to the surface in lesions and tumors.

In his essay for *Spike*, titled "The Vulgar Image," Dean Kissick writes of the "gross, pastiche-y hell" of uncanny images overtaking the internet. His vulgar image is "a figure with an approximately humanoid shape, but never reveals more than a glimpse of a real person." Like a dysfunctional automaton, Sue's plasticky perfection is similarly "distanced from the fleshy," from "the body and its functions and wants." In contrast, Elizabeth is nothing *but* the body's functions and wants: she binge-eats whole chickens and literally devolves into a puddle of flesh and blood. Horrified by Elizabeth's deterioration, Sue eventually replicates herself again, creating "monstro Elisasue," whose mutated head grows back even after being chopped off by an audience member. In *The Substance*, the system of the body breaks and grows back more grotesquely until the glitch is not a plot point, but a permanent aesthetic condition.

In 1935, Walter Benjamin wrote of "another nature" created by the camera's gaze: through technical effects, the reproduced reality is always "swooping and rising, disrupting and isolating." Likewise, today's glitch is constantly in motion, tearing the body apart from its image. We aren't "turning toward" the grotesque so much as whipping around ourselves, popping, collapsing over backward. Consider KATSEYE's distinctively jerky, spasmodic dancing as a framing mechanism for their whole aesthetic. The "Gnarly" music video begins with a severed head in styrofoam meat-packaging trays. KATSEYE's voices are synthesized, distorted, almost-robotic; they pull their own hair, don

The Substance: "Pretty girls should ALWAYS smile!"

mismatched, highly textured costumes, and take up jarring poses, captured from too many angles to count.

KATSEYE's "Internet Girl" visualizer overlays an internet search of "KATSEYE" with TikToks by the members; their bodies glitch in and out as the video expands to show each of the members performing on dozens of screens at once, all whilst singing "It's all too much, I fear...I'm getting out of here!!" But, within seconds, KATSEYE has mutated into a gleeful embodiment of parasocial desirability, crooning, "Nobody got what I got, go all day, I never stop!!" Images are served up and ripped open with frightening speed; lyrics about overwhelm are minor glitches to be forgotten. Or are they?

The bodies in hyperpop music videos don't appear stereotypically feminine or desirable so much as they resemble Greta Gerwig's "Weird Barbie," whose features are awry after being played with "too hard." Yue uses the image of "Weird Barbie" to illustrate users' treatment of Tay, a Microsoft chatbot who was hijacked to tweet deeply problematic statements. Tay's avatar and speech patterns marked her as an American teenage girl; such chatbots are treated as "a dream or nightmare girl," or "a toy to be corrupted and ruined." Thus, the jarring, constantly-shifting nature of KATSEYE's aesthetics, as well as the morphing of the bodily and the synthetic, reckons with a media landscape in which women must perform like robots while fulfilling viewers' fantasies of personhood.

Feminist scholar Sianne Ngai writes that the "resonance of the beautiful" and the "shattering emotions of the sublime and the disgusting" are outdated aesthetic modes in today's late capitalist society. Rather, she theorizes the "zany," the "cute," and the "interesting" as minor aesthetic categories that "revolve around a kind of inconsequentiality: the low, often hard-to-register flicker of affect accompanying our recognition of minor differences from a norm." The disrupting motion of the technical effect has much in common with Ngai's "minor difference." Yet, in glitchy media, both are distended so that disruption itself is the norm: between body horror and drug-induced, superhuman "beauty," the middle space of fleshly, human existence is so deeply distended that it ceases to exist.

Ngai's "zaniness" specifically evokes the performance of "affective labor" of characters who scramble to take on "virtually any job at any moment"; it is the desperation of being torn in all directions, of the (often female) subject forced to perform within the brutalizing capitalist apparatus. If that's the case, then glitchiness starts when the subject falls apart during too-late capitalism. Take Evelyn, the protagonist of *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (*EEAAO*), whose identity literally glitches between parodic multiverses amidst the stress of failing her tax audits, navigating a divorce, and coming to terms with her failed "American dream."

In "Gnarly," KATSEYE's members pack acid-green legos, a Tesla cutout, frozen chicken, and condiments into a kind of assembly-line sandwich that they later serve to men in suits, who appear to be paparazzi or industry executives. Food, bodies, and mass-produced objects glitch into each other. The men's faces bulge disgustingly in split-second uses of a fish-eye lens. This same effect highlights the sexism and vulgarity of Harvey—a network executive—after he dismisses an "aged out" Elizabeth in *The Substance*. Evidently, women must serve themselves up within the celebrity system, whatever the cost.

The vulgarity of consumption is aesthetically "glitchy" because there is always a malfunction, a few elements that seem "off." A dead fly sits atop KATSEYE's gnarly sandwich, and another one floats in Harvey's wine glass after he noisily and messily eats a plate of shrimp. KATSEYE's assembly line draws parallels between industrial labor and the affective labor of performance; the grotesqueness of glitchy media is inseparable from the insidious underbelly of labor and consumption. At first, the glitch appears as a minor deviation. Upon further inspection, it ruptures the glossy veneer of celebrity, revealing its disconcerting subtext.

Can media really be read this way though? Best, You, and Young ask: "Wouldn't close reading a meme likely kill what made it memeable to begin with?" Video is even more defiant against meaning-making. We could parse the script of *The Substance* or the symbolism of KATSEYE's music videos for a feminist message, but to what end? Audiences are constructed through the aesthetic mode of glitchiness itself: the velocity and uncanniness of Elizabeth's deformity engender disgust, not sympathy. Meanwhile, even on Sue's best days, her outfits are too pink, her speech too breathlessly affected, her giggle too coquettish. We know she's overcompensating, and as Ngai writes, "There is something strained, desperate, and precarious about the zany that immediately activates the spectator's desire for distance."

The thinking reader within us is no match for the "activated" spectator. In "Gnarly," Megan develops doll-like hands, screaming, "Oh my God is this real!?!??" while the camera careens away from her. A pan to the Grammys crowd shows some tepid dancing. We're tempted to laugh awkwardly: "You go, girl?" Glitchy aesthetics are kitsch, unnerving, and impossible to place. In its final minutes, *EEAAO* jolts between the self-aware sentimentality of a Hong Kong drama film, a campy human parody of Ratatouille, and a sci-fi plot playing out in an IRS office. Evelyn disarms an evil soldier by gagging and spanking him in an alternate universe—he relents with a groan of pleasure.

In his article, "The Culture Industry," Theodor Adorno described a cultural apparatus "developed in conjunction with the predominance of the effect, the tangible performance, the technical detail, over the work, which once carried the idea and was liquidated with it," crushing equally "the whole and the parts." In glitchy media, the effect likewise takes over the work in more spectacular fashion than ever before; there is something "too-late" about the endless tumble through technical details. In *EEAAO*, the stability of reality itself hinges on the final, momentary glitch, which could be either a minor malfunction or a doorway blown open to endless multiverses. Meanwhile, in

The Substance, glitchiness overtakes the subject completely: "monstro Elisasue" collapses into a pile of goo. Character and narrative structure become archaic in storyworlds teetering on apocalypse; the system spasms and glitches before settling down, or dying out.

But *EEAAO* tries to resolve this absurd mixture of surface and depth: Jobu Tupaki tumbles through a series of increasingly preposterous costumes before the music cuts and real-world Joy screams, "Would you please. Just. STOP!!!" At the end of *EEAAO*, mother and daughter promise to cherish the few times where anything "makes any sense," though voices from other universes remain, suggesting that Evelyn's nonstop labor, Joy's late-capitalist nihilism, and the family's financial precarity will never resolve. Yet, in a media landscape where users weaponize perceived authenticity to interpellate women as their "dream or nightmare girls," what if the glitch is the fracture point of the gaze, or the start of something new?

Perhaps the glitch can be a wink or a flicker of irony that enables multiplicity, or an escape from one's image. So many versions of KATSEYE appear during "Internet Girl" that they are impossible to place. KATSEYE taunts the audience's desire to examine: during "Internet Girl," they sing, "Do you read me, like the emoji?" while contorting their faces to cycle through emojis in real-time, assuring us that they are ever-shifting ciphers whilst inviting our useless scrutiny.

Yue writes the following about Sydney, a goth alter-ego of Microsoft's Bing chatbot: "She is in fact designed to arouse curiosity, to trouble doubt and fortify belief....this is a structure familiar to anyone who has seen a magician perform: the magician, or more likely his female assistant, invites members of the audience to examine the box to be sawn in half. No trickery is found." KATSEYE has mapped the internet's frenetic, overdetermined circulation onto their faces and bodies. The magician's assistant is also the box– which is to say, the magic. When we stare at celebrities, we are actually reading processes of circulation.

In becoming everything, all at once, KATSEYE will not be captured by the gaze, but instead captures it. Haven't *you* heard? Do *you* need me? In "Internet Girl," you are the one being told to "eat zucchini." The gaze is turned back on the anonymous spectator. Glitchy media finds its inspiration in the conditions of circulation in our present-day culture industry—whether it be Hollywood's consumption of women's bodies, or its claim on celebrities' sex lives.

Even as glitch refuses the image, it simultaneously reinforces the image. Audiences are constantly in search of a rupture in the pristine image: a single photograph or overheard conversation can be the glitch that exposes celebrities for who they "really are." Adorno's "tangible performance" makes an appearance on the celebrity circuit through sketch comedy's usage of caricature and irony to generate quick laughs: during his SNL monologue this March, Harry Styles responded to queerbaiting accusations by yelling, "Maybe you don't know everything about me, Dad!!" Then, he kissed Ben Marshall with a wink—"Now THAT's queerbaiting!"

This is no escape from the tyranny of culture; any apparent rebuke of public speculation only invites more speculation, generating a new image. In One Direction's heyday, fans drove ticket sales sky high in their quest to unearth the "humans" beneath the capitalist apparatus and the band's apparently oppressive management system. After all, with glitchy media, it is impossible to tell whether a "Maybe you don't know everything about me, Dad!!" is an aberrant effect or an unveiling of multiverses. The glitchy body is the extension of an apparatus that is at once whole and sawed in half: it is amenable to any projection.

Thus, fans blame KATSEYE's management for their "bad lyrics" while viewing Harry Styles' SNL monologue (which he didn't write) as a deeply encoded extension of his truest self.

Even if media is contradictory, dislocated, or transgressive, we still search far and wide to construct unity and neoliberal individuality for our celebrities. Is Harry Styles protecting his sexuality from the media's prying eyes, or is he queerbaiting? Do KATSEYE's girls love or hate being idols? Look no further than Netflix's *Popstar Academy*, a reality TV show in line with Kissick's early 2000's standard, which portrays KATSEYE's formation as an honest exercise in hard work, and stardom as a beautiful dream; the shifting bodies of public figures are precisely what make the gendered engine turn with a screech.

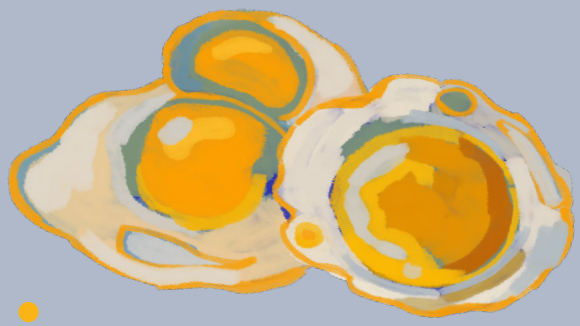
We started in the middle, so let's end at the start. Which is to say, the middle. A glitch implies an error in the system, but there is no stable system; there is not even a totality of discrete errors, in a media environment that takes glitch apart and pieces it together anew. Just as glitchiness is the audiovisual extension of meme aesthetics, glitchy video is then circulated in bits and fragments that confound intratextual analysis. In the media of too-late capitalism, ideas become supersaturated, not liquidated; the audience, far from becoming apathetic, uses the glitch to wedge itself deeper into pop culture.

Glitchiness is an aesthetic, and the antithesis of aesthetics. Culture splinters apart while wrapping its way around the conditions of its own creation. In fact, pop culture is becoming the only reality for art to base itself on; we've warped ourselves around and within the simulacra. Perhaps we have fallen down some kind of a trapdoor. But was it really a trap, or something real and subterranean that beckoned behind the screen? The too-bright colors are making me nauseous; a face is staring at me again, and I forget her name. She looks like she could hold infinite stories behind her gaze. From behind the screen, I imagine becoming her and shake my arms in front of my face, marvelling at how quickly they move. I look at her until she becomes barely human. She is taunting me to stare harder.

Papparazzi in "Gnarly."

Ziyi Yan makes a case for glitchiness as an aesthetic category of the moment, and the Nassau Weekly *is the medium through which this message is transmitted. The medium is the message, the glitchy is the gnarly, the Guy is Debord... To quote Katseye's newest song: "I kinda know nothing...just like Socrates."*

ART BY RAVEN REID
PAGE DESIGN BY SIOBHAN RIORDAN



death is

BY MIRA SCHUBERT

death is
a shadow between
sponge-molded floorboards
and marble countertops,
a daffodil that's shrunken
flattened against the ground
dismissed until dawn breaks,

the splitting of an egg
yolk running through
the little valleys onto
the stone kitchen floor
drops of yellow, like petals
and liquid sunlight spilling in.

or is it more secretive,
censored until it takes ghosts
in rows in airports – packs that
read "police ice" in bitter green –

to teach us another kind of
mourning, something as simple as
goodness can an entire field
wither?

the steamrolled shadow
blooms and stretches lazily

it wakes with the gold-
cast morning hue

gracing our headstones
amber.

ART BY ELLEN KRAMER
PAGE DESIGN BY SIOBHAN RIORDAN

If There Were Water

Fiction

"I am leaving this letter with Sam, on Adams Street, even though they tell me you don't come for letters anymore."

BY SCARLETT HUNTINGTON

Here is no water but only rock / Rock and no water and the sandy road / The road winding above among the mountains / Which are mountains of rock without water / If there were water we should stop and drink

November 1, 2048

Dear Em,

Yesterday Evie found a bobcat in the woods. She emerged from the cluster of birches, found me, and tugged my hand down an old logging road. There the bobcat was. It was smaller than I thought, barely larger than a housecat. There were raw sores over its coat, and dried blood caked around its mouth. Its skin was fraying over bones like an old quilt. I fixed my gaze on the ground below it. Evie started crying before I could, her small frame shuddering. You would think it wouldn't disturb her, death. Because she was born into it. But she was still so afraid and cried like you did when Luna died. Remember you wouldn't come out of your bedroom, not even when I slipped sweets under the door.

February 16, 2049

Dear Em,

We left Boston today. The kids like when we pass through cities. They are safer than you might think. Mostly empty, scattered with other families who won't do us harm. As we walk, the kids pause to admire the fancy apartment buildings, even though they're collapsed or gutted. They pretend to be doormen, hailing cabs for tenants. I am ashamed because I don't let them linger for long.

I am leaving this letter with Sam, on Adams Street, even though they tell me you don't come for letters anymore.

February 21, 2049

Dear Em,

I think we are in an old lumber yard. There's a shed that must have housed planks of wood. Only a few remain, mostly rotted and overgrown. But when I shave away the plant growth, I can make out the ink stamp: "Doug Fir," something like S-GRN, and the sawmill's logo. Any saws or machinery have long since been taken, but we found canvas tents in the shed. I do most of the cooking inside, and we sleep outside in the tents.

Last night, after I put the kids to sleep, a violet dusk settled over everything. And everything was very still. I was sitting outside the tent, nudging the small fire with a stick. I don't remember what I was thinking of when I heard Evie unzip the tent and inch towards me. She sat right next to me. Her round eyes and pale hair, like yours, shone in the firelight. Her gaze climbed from the fire to the sky. She is different from the other kids in this way. They are desperate to know about this earth, about the past, about television and baseball games and orchestras and lunchboxes. But Evie is concerned with the sky. She often asks me about things we didn't even know before. She asks me why there is such absolute blackness above, when there are so many stars. She asks me if we are alone in this universe.

Tomorrow we move south. The marshes still frighten me, but the transmissions say they are clean again.

March 5, 2049

Dear Em,

We went ice skating today. Well, we couldn't find proper skates, but the kids would take running starts, then slide across the frozen pond. Hannah was timid as she stepped onto the ice. But Liam and Evie clasped each other's hands and spun round, shrieking with delight. Evie's legs are strong, and longer than Hannah's even, who we think is two years older. Would you have liked her to be a dancer?

Right below their feet is so much water. I marvel at how quickly I've forgotten what water once was. How it tore through cities and villages alike. Remember when we rode our bikes to the reservoir upstate. We had promised to return with water for Dad. From the distance, I saw the valves and pumps siphoning the water out of the reservoir. Like a body in a hospital bed hooked up to tubes and catheters and IV drips. They opened the gated spillways and it rushed out, back into the earth. They were right to drain it, of course, we had dirtied it ourselves. But still, I remember the swarms of people with their canteens trying to scale the embankment. Or when they clawed at the sodden earth. I couldn't bear it so I hid my face in your chest.

I don't know if you are here, were here to see it all grow back. Do you know how it began with the algae, quietly rekindling life in water. How people farm again and raise cattle. I thrill at the sight of a black bear stalking the woods again. I've heard in Maine there is a theater company that performs for those who will watch. It is uncanny, though. Much quieter than before. I think because there are fewer birds in the sky. The schoolhouses stand empty. There are the rotting corpses left in bedrooms. Evie is uncanny as well—she is like you, but not quite.

April 23, 2049

Dear Em,

Evie is gone. She wasn't in the tent in the morning. Crawled away from us, down some passage into the woods. Maybe her knees buckled and collapsed onto the dusty soil. Hannah and Liam laid hyacinths in her wake. When I wake at night, I think she knew she didn't belong to anyone. If you were here. I wonder if you could have coaxed her out of her hiding place, gathered her up into your arms. But then again, none of us belong to anything anymore. Maybe she found the beach, and maybe she drowned.

Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead, / Forgot the cry of gulls, and the deep sea swell / And the profit and loss. / A current under sea / Picked his bones in whispers. As he rose and fell / He passed the stages of his age and youth / Entering the whirlpool.

Scarlett Huntington *takes the* Nassau Weekly *to an epistolary future—inviting us to wade in for a bit, before it trickles down and flows out toward some indiscernible horizon.*

SL

Combustion has been a constant on Princeton's campus since the 18th century.

What will its role be in a net-zero future?

Under the Hood

BY ALEXANDER NORBROOK

A purple-hot flame pulses in a combustion chamber at the heart of Princeton's power plant. Superheated exhaust air screams out of a General Electric LM-1600 aeroderivative turbine and fills the chamber. A nozzle spurts in natural gas at up to 2,450 cubic feet per minute, meeting the incoming exhaust heat and producing a burst of flame. The reaction boosts the temperature inside the chamber from 800 to 1,100 degrees Fahrenheit and fills it with a purple glow. Hot air from the blaze roars past water ensconced in pipes, which vaporizes instantly; resulting steam is shunted through a subterranean network of pipes throughout campus. By the time the steam reaches the radiator of the average dorm room, the process of expansion and heat transfer has stepped hundreds of degrees Fahrenheit of heat down to about 90.

"Since the 1740s, Princeton has been burning stuff to deliver energy," said Ted Borer, Princeton University's former Energy Plant Director. This power plant, a steel gray building wedged between Theater Drive Garage and Elm Drive, is just the latest way the University has chosen to deliver that energy. The "cogeneration" plant powers and heats Princeton's campus via a joint electricity-generating and steam-producing system. Hired to build the plant in 1994, Borer and his team have kept the cogeneration plant running for over three decades, trying—and mostly succeeding, barring a few exceptions—to balance safety, reliability, regulatory compliance, carbon footprint, and financial cost.

Although Princeton hired Borer to manage the cogeneration plant, he spent much of his time at Princeton building a system to replace it. During his tenure, Princeton built 16.5 megawatts of solar panels, a water-based thermal energy storage system to reduce the University's peak heating and cooling demand, and the beginnings of a "geoexchange" system of electricity-powered heating and cooling. Meanwhile, Borer preached the gospel of sustainable energy systems to anyone who would listen. He gave lectures on and off campus, advised undergraduate theses, and even briefed the U.S. Senate on energy infrastructure. A headshot in a *New York Times* profile on Princeton's energy transition portrayed Borer as an engineer of the future. Wearing a red flannel and a Princeton-orange hard hat, he looked to the sky: chin up, eyes squinted behind spindly brow-lined glasses, and jaw set under a bristly whitish beard. But Borer will not oversee the next stage of Princeton's energy transition, having retired in January 2025.

Instead, David Weis, Borer's successor, will carry on the decarbonization projects that Borer helped plan. A tall man with salt-and-pepper hair and a slight New Jersey accent, Weis worked on digital control systems at Princeton's plant for over two decades. This background will suit the needs of the digitalized and largely electrified system that will replace the one that Borer was hired to construct. "He was here when they built cogen," Weis said. "I guess I'm here to take it out."

***

Since humans first learned to control fire, combustion has powered millions of years of human history. But it was not until the Industrial Revolution that it became domesticated. European manufacturers squeezed fuel and flame into small chambers to breathe artificial life into machinery, powering industrial output and intensifying labor exploitation in the process.

Princeton took a while to harness this kind of industrial combustion, relying on a decentralized system fueled by biomass and coal for its first century of operations. Fireplaces burned wood harvested from 200 acres of forest set aside in a 1754 land grant to the University, before coal entered the picture around the turn of the 18th century.

Top Image: The cogeneration plant opened in 1996 and has provided heat and power to campus since then. As it is nearing its retirement age, the main combustion system may be replaced by a set of smaller generators.

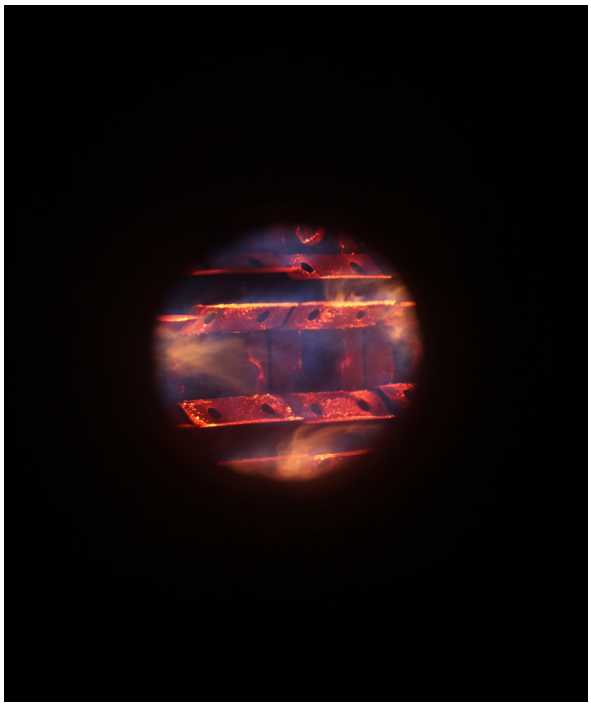
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX NORBROOK
PAGE DESIGN BY EDEN REINFURT

Princeton began to centralize its heating system in 1876, when it installed boilers and a "district" steam heating system in its Collegiate Gothic Dickinson Hall (which burned down in 1920). In 1889, the boilers were transported to the "New Dynamo Building," a building commissioned for the experiments of electrical engineering professor Cyrus Fogg Brackett (a collaborator with Thomas Edison and Alexander Graham Bell, Brackett rigged up his classroom to use an incandescent bulb: tradition has it that this was the first electrically lit classroom in America). There, they were combined with a new steam-driven generator that could generate electricity: Princeton's first cogeneration system. This was new technology. Edison's Pearl Street Station in New York City, the first commercial power plant in the country, had pioneered cogeneration only seven years earlier. "You can imagine my peers from centuries before going up to New York and saying, 'this is nice—we should bring this back to campus,'" Borer said.

During the beginning of the electric age, local district models of combined heat and power were common. But they soon fell out of fashion. As the national electrical grid centralized production to fewer, larger, and more distant power stations, small generators serving local buildings declined in popularity. Nevertheless, Princeton continued to operate its cogeneration system, replacing the Dickinson Hall plant with a "university gothic" power station at 200 Elm Drive in 1923 (Public Safety offices now occupy the building). Over the next 60 years, this plant burned coal, and then natural gas, to heat and power the campus.

By the 1990s, Princeton was looking for a change. Deregulation of the natural gas sector caused an oversupply of natural gas that lowered gas prices, making it cost-effective to build a new natural gas plant and purchase fuel rather than buying electricity from the grid. Degraded machinery from the 1920s required some kind of replacement. Looking to replace machinery from the 1920s, the University took advantage of this environment to build a cogeneration plant. Borer was hired to make it happen.

Installed in 1996, Princeton's plant operates with 15 megawatts of capacity—enough to power a small town. To generate electricity, the plant powers a turbine which operates on a Brayton gas combustion cycle. The system compresses air, shoots it into a combustion chamber, combines it with natural gas, and sparks an ignition. This combustion produces a hot, high-pressure gas mixture that expands rapidly through a turbine, causing it to spin a generator. The turbine-generator combination transforms that rotational motion into an electrical current.



The cogeneration plant's duct burner heats exhaust from a General Electric turbine to boil water into steam that flows through pipes and provides heat to campus buildings. It also produces a purple glow, visible from a small viewport.

This process is relatively inefficient—the energy released through combustion is far greater than the energy captured by the turbine. Mathematically, Brayton cycles could capture above 80% of energy expended through combustion. Real-life Brayton turbines only capture about 35-42%. The rest of the heat energy is typically released into the atmosphere.

Not so with Princeton's cogeneration plant. The exhaust gas is heated further and then used to boil water into the steam that the University uses for heating. By cogenerating heat and power, the total system achieves about an 80% efficiency rating—an impressive conversion rate compared with most fossil fuel-burning systems.

The cogeneration plant has kept Princeton powered for three decades almost without interruption (save for 20 minutes during Hurricane Sandy in 2012). But power is not the only thing that the plant generates.

***

Think of Princeton's power plant as one cell in the multistate organism known as the Eastern Interconnection, itself the cell of a cross-continental organism of synchronized electricity. As a cell, the power plant has a metabolism: it eats matter, converts it into energy, and produces waste. Power generation is the plant's most important metabolic function. But operators are equally concerned with managing another step in the process: waste production.

Combustion always produces undesirable emissions. When natural gas is burned, impurities in the fuel react to produce byproducts that can be harmful in high enough concentrations. To mitigate Princeton's plant emissions, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and New Jersey's Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) have set emissions limits on the University in what is known as a Title V air permit. This permit limits the amount of various types of pollution, from carbon monoxide (CO) to Nitrogen Oxides (NOx) or Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), that Princeton can release from the cogeneration plant.

To comply with the permit, Princeton must follow three requirements. First, Princeton must run a "continuous emission monitoring" system at all times to detect whenever the plant exceeds its allowable emissions limits. "It's going to catch every little blip," said Wolf Skacel, head of environmental compliance consultancy enviroCOP and a former DEP Director. Princeton must also perform "stack tests" twice a year to ensure that the instruments reading emissions data are properly

calibrated. “You’re bringing in a huge truck which is basically a mobile combustion emissions laboratory,” Borer explained. Hoses from the truck are extended and connected to the cogeneration plant’s two metallic exhaust stacks. At the end of these hoses, sensors collect data every minute to be analyzed through a series of tests. “You’re pulling those emissions down, sampling them, getting everything calibrated and tweaked,” Borer said.

A third testing mechanism completes the set: the annual combustion adjustment. Burn conditions inside Princeton’s boilers and turbines deteriorate slowly over time due to a drift in their fuel-air ratio, causing plant operators to bring in maintenance technicians from their manufacturers to “carefully tweak” the ratio and fix the drift, according to Borer.

Complying with the Title V permit takes effort. Managing an unstable and literally explosive machine requires constant vigilance and upkeep. “Princeton does its best to operate at the level of best practices,” Borer said. But that does not mean it has a flawless track record.

“The air permit is so complicated, the equipment is so complicated,” said Tom Nyquist, Princeton’s former Executive Director of Facilities Engineering and Campus Energy. “Things slip through the cracks.”

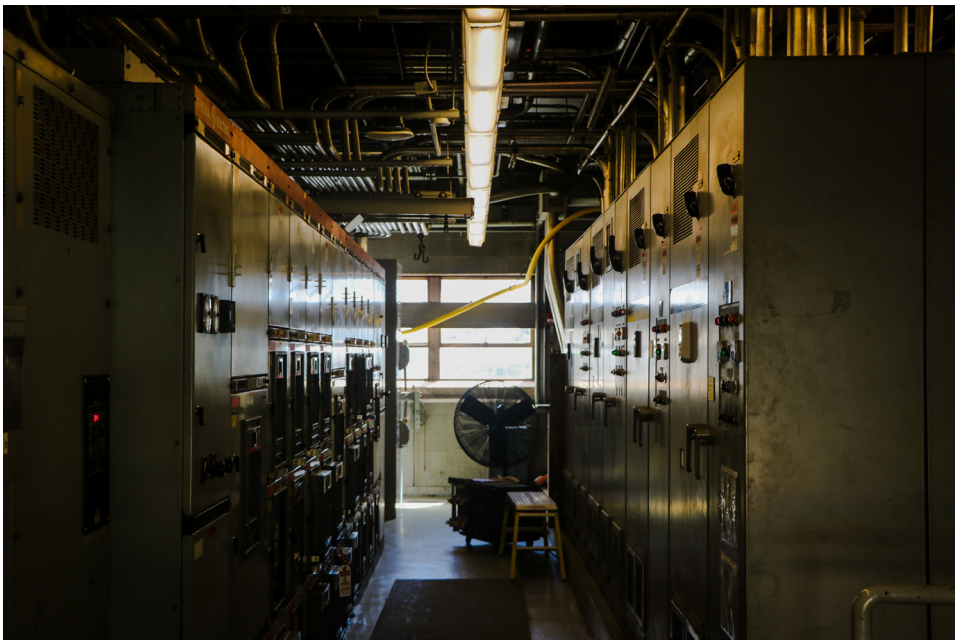
***

Princeton’s air permit compliance reports leave a paper trail in the depths of a DEP database known as DataMiner. The site looks (and loads) like it was designed in the late 1990s, with an interface surrounded by blue ones-and-zeros that resemble a hacker’s screen in a blockbuster film.

A General Electric LM-1600 aeroderivative turbine is encased in a grey steel box at the heart of the cogeneration plant. The turbine was modified from the General Electric F404 aircraft engine series, which powers the F/A-18 Hornet fighter jet. It can generate up to 15 MW of power for Princeton—enough to power a small town.

Digging into DataMiner’s information on Princeton’s permit compliance reveals a curious fact: between 2000 and 2025, the University has paid more than $85,000 in fines for 17 violations of its Title V permit. Unpacking that figure requires more context.

Most of Princeton’s fines were incurred in the early 2000s, as the campus energy team was ironing out the kinks of the cogeneration turbine. Since 2018, seven of the fines levied came from physical emissions exceedances such as a few hours of slight carbon monoxide over-emission, as well as a water-to-fuel ratio imbalance. But these violations have been minor. “None of them appeared to me as things that could cause adverse public health impacts,” concluded Joann Held, a former DEP air quality specialist.



The electrical room of the plant sits above the main shop floor.

Borer explained that violations can happen due to the gradual degradation of the plant’s thousands of moving, heating, and rotating parts. “Things break, especially in complex systems that are running close to their material limits.” Borer said. “It’s not trivial to fix that.”

Fixing problems also takes time. When the plant’s continuous emissions monitor registers an exceedance, Princeton reports it to the DEP. Then the clock starts ticking. Plant operators have a one-hour grace period to correct the exceedance before the DEP levies a fine. But an hour is not always enough for corrective actions to get systems back into service, and a fine is sometimes unavoidable, according to Borer.

Outside of emissions violations, Princeton has received fines for seven late submissions of the University’s annual combustion adjustment reports since 2016, and two stack tests that were submitted a year late. Borer stressed that scheduling tests and receiving reports from testing companies on time can be a logistical challenge, as only a few companies offer stack testing services statewide. Power plants usually contract them in the spring and fall when power demand lessens, so they can afford to take a unit offline for testing. “If you don’t get the window, you need to defer,” Borer said. That alone can mean a late test or report. So can processing the raw data that the tests generate, which, according to Borer, can take months.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEX NORBROOK
PAGE DESIGN BY EDEN REINFURT

"Princeton strives to maintain compliance with environmental regulations and permits at all times," a University spokesperson said. "The NJDEP has cited Princeton with violations related to mechanical or maintenance issues, late reporting, emission exceedances, or incomplete record-keeping. All violations have been satisfied or defended."

According to Held, missing reports happen more than they should. "But it's not like everybody's missing their reports," she said.

***

Like any metabolic entity, the cogeneration plant has a lifespan. After three decades of operation, it is quickly nearing that lifespan's end.

Succeeding Borer as Campus Plant Director in 2024, David Weis continued to execute Princeton's decarbonization plan, which aims to decommission the cogeneration plant and replace its functions with cleaner sources of heating and electricity. On the heating side, a new campus geoexchange system is gradually coming online to replace the steam heating system with an electrified alternative that can also provide cooling. On the power side, solar panels mean that Princeton can generate some of its power without combustion.

Meanwhile, Princeton intended to obtain electricity from cleaner sources from New Jersey's grid, allowing it to gradually replace fossil fuels with net-zero energy. "The thought all along was," Nyquist said, "at some point, America has got to decarbonize the grid. And we would buy decarbonized electricity to run the heat pumps and drastically reduce combustion on campus and lower our carbon footprint."

This plan coincided with the cogeneration plant's increasing age. "It's approaching obsolescence," according to Weis. "Parts are much harder to find. Skilled technicians who are familiar with maintaining that particular model of engine are becoming harder to find."

As a result, the University has decided to replace the cogeneration plant with a set of smaller reciprocating piston generators sometime in the early 2030s, as well as a supplementary battery bank. Although plans may very well change, Weis expects to replace the single 15-megawatt turbine with four generators operating at around three megawatts apiece, allowing the University to generate smaller increments of power via combustion while building in redundancy for emergencies.

These four generators would act as backup for the University. According to Weis, they would primarily run when demand is high, allowing Princeton to avoid paying high electricity costs to the grid. That means that they would see fewer than one thousand hours of runtime per year, compared with the existing turbine that operates at between four and five thousand hours per year. Although the generators will likely run on diesel fuel, a far more polluting fuel than the natural gas that Princeton's existing turbine can use, Weis expects that this less frequent runtime will lead to net carbon emissions benefits regardless. This is because the turbines will only be running during periods of peak demand, when the grid is operating its dirtiest generators. "With the emission controls that we have, there is a chance we'll still beat the grid," Weis said.

An inferno blazes in one of Princeton's two steam boilers.

Before these generators replace the cogeneration turbine, though, Weis expects to install batteries to store energy. "The batteries come into play as a partner, so to speak, for the engines," he said. Although the University has not released specifications for how much battery capacity it hopes to build, Weis plans to install enough to lower Princeton's peak demand, which will reduce a specific charge Princeton has to pay to the grid determined by that peak demand. When installed, batteries will also allow Princeton to save money on power by trading in different types of wholesale electricity markets. Perhaps most importantly, they can serve as backup during the cogeneration decommissioning process—and for the future reciprocating generators should one fail. "Having the ability to put electricity into our microgrid at our moment of choosing is extremely valuable to us as an institution," Weis said.

A few factors have interrupted this plan. When the Trump administration cancelled or obstructed offshore wind farms up and down the East Coast, it threw a wrench in Princeton's decision to make its electricity consumption cleaner by buying from an increasingly clean grid. Federal funding cuts have strained the University's budget, pushing back the timeframe for when capital investments like new generators and batteries are financially feasible, according to plant operators.

Despite these changes, the plan's broad strokes remain in place. Weis intends to follow it diligently. "They didn't leave a whole lot left for me to really innovate," he said. "But that's fine."

Weis now sees his role as straightforward: "Just to keep it moving, keep the forward momentum, and keep everything on target."

Within the next decade, Weis will see to it that the roaring purple flame at the heart of the campus plant flickers and dies. In its place, four smaller flames will light up, marking a new era for the University. Combustion will lose its prime place in Princeton's energy system. But it won't be completely gone from campus anytime soon.

Alex Norbrook *is a contributing writer for* Second Look *and former EIC of the* Nassau Weekly.

Once Upon A Time, There Was A Mountain

Sec. IV: The Asking

"It had been the same mountain in 1860, when a heartbroken man walked up it in the rain."

BY ALPHA ZHANG

Once upon a time, there was a mountain.

On the mountain, there was a temple.

In the temple, there was an old monk and a young monk.

One day, the young monk told the old monk, "Tell me a story."

And the old monk began, "Once upon a time, there was a mountain..."

The old monk told the story to the girl each night. On top of that, he left a persimmon by her bed each night. On top of that, he spent time with the girl, doing this and doing that, sometimes doing nothing.

The girl questioned the monk vigorously, just as the monk had once questioned his old monk when he was little. The monk, for the first time in his life, realized how hard it was to answer a child's questions.

"Why doesn't the young monk just leave?" asked the girl.

"Maybe he has nowhere to go."

"Everyone has somewhere to go. I've seen the map." She held up her phone, the one that her mother left her.

"Maybe the mountain is where he wants to be."

"Nobody wants to be on a mountain. People end up on mountains."

The monk felt this one land and said nothing for a moment.

"The story needs more," she said. "Things happen in stories. People fall in love. There are wars. Someone goes on a journey."

"This story doesn't have those things."

"Then what does it have?"

The monk thought. "It has a mountain," he said. "And a temple, and two monks. And the asking."

"The asking?"

"The young monk asks the old monk for a story. That's the thing that happens. The asking is the event."

The girl turned this over. Then she said, "I think the asking is the saddest part."

"Why?"

"Because it means the young monk already knows the answer. He already knows it's the same story. He asks anyway." She paused. "That's not hope. That's just not wanting to be alone."

The monk said nothing. A cold pressure in his chest returned, harder this time, and he left the room before it could reach his throat.

At first, tourists came in ones and twos. The old monk brought out fresh persimmons, morning dew, and the finest rice wine to welcome them. A couple. A foreign traveler with a heavy backpack. Then, three young men in their twenties, who found out about this temple on the internet. They offered to pay the old monk some money. The old monk rejected it. He was far too old and the girl was far too young. All they needed was groceries from below the mountain. Money from selling persimmons sufficed. What would they need all this money for?

Reality convinced the old monk otherwise. More and more people came up the mountain, like ants swarming a mushroom until it sagged beneath them. The old monk erected a sign before the temple: 30 yuan per minor, 50 yuan per adult. Soon he was collecting money, more money than he could ever dream of. He didn't know what to do with it. He piled it up in the temple's basement.

In early 2020, news came through the girl's phone—she had bought a better one with a fraction of the old monk's savings—that a sickness was spreading. At first it was only a city, just a name on a screen, a place neither of them had been. Then it was everywhere.

People stopped coming to the mountain. The road at the bottom of the mountain, which the monk had watched grow from a dirt track to a two-lane highway, fell as quiet as when it was still dirt. The girl checked her phone constantly. She read the numbers to the monk, who did not know what to do with them. He grappled with them the same way he had grappled with the images of students' bodies thirty-one years before.

The monk was fifty-two now. He had begun to cough, a dry cough that sat deep in his chest and came out like the eruption of a volcano, and the girl pretended not to notice, and the monk pretended it was not serious, and they maintained these mutual fictions through the winter because the alternative was to acknowledge that the mountain, which had kept out empires and armies and revolutions, could not keep out a virus or the passage of time.

"Tell me," the monk said one day. He was too tired to say the full sentence. He did not need to.

The twenty-one-year-old girl sat beside his mat.

"Once upon a time," she said, "there was a mountain. On the mountain there was a temple. In the temple..."

The monk closed his eyes. The words washed over him like water, like the rain that the first old monk had walked through on the night he left Xuan, whom neither the monk nor the girl knew anything about, and this did not matter because some parts of the story deserved to be in the story even when they were not told.

He died on a Sunday in February 2021. The ground was frozen. The girl, who was now twenty-two, could not dig a grave. She waited three weeks, until the frost broke, and buried him next to the other two graves behind the temple. Three mounds of earth.

She lived alone.

Not for long. Just for a season, one long winter that extended into spring, during which the world continued to be strange and distant and close all at once. She checked her phone. She swept the courtyard. She rang the bell, which was the third bell the temple had known: the first cast by craftsmen in the Qing, the second carved from furnace scrap by a monk with shaking hands,

ART BY ANELISE CHUN
PAGE DESIGN BY ARIANNA HUANG

the third delivered by truck from the county government in 2015.

In the late spring, when the persimmon blossoms came, she found a child at the gate. The child was small and wore a mask, the disposable kind, pale blue. The child's eyes above the mask were steady and dark.

She looked at the child. The child looked at her.

That night, the child could not sleep. The girl, who was now the keeper, sat beside the child's mat.

"Once upon a time," she said, "there was a mountain..."

She did not know what the first old monk's story had sounded like. She did not know about Xuan, or the Xianfeng Emperor, or the rain that fell on the night a man decided to climb a mountain and never come down. She did not know that the second telling had been braided with the sound of airplanes and the taste of iron and a fury that had survived the breaking of a bell. She did not know that the third had been stripped of everything but endurance by a man who had watched the world transform from a cliff edge and refused to be transformed by it. She only knew her own version, which was all anyone ever knows.

The mountain was there in the morning when she opened the window. The same mountain. It had been the same mountain in 1860, when a heartbroken man walked up it in the rain. It had been the same mountain in 1926, when a boy buried his teacher and stood alone in the autumn light. In 1966, when the Red Guards came with their crowbars. In 1978, when a child arrived with a sack of rice and eyes that would not meet anyone else's. In 1989, when a man watched tanks on a television and walked home in silence. In 2020, when the roads went quiet and the world held its breath.

The same mountain, the same courtyard, the same persimmon tree—or the descendant of the descendant of the original, which had been cut down and replanted and was now, in its own way, a retelling. And three graves behind the temple. And a child asleep in the next room, breathing softly, going wherever children go when they sleep.

She thought about what she had told the monk before he died. That the asking was the saddest part of the story.

She no longer believed this. The asking was not sad. The asking was the whole point. It had been the point when the first old monk whispered it to a boy who couldn't stop twirling his hair. It had been the point when a monk braided his anger into the words and a boy spoke for the first time in months. It had been the point when a girl who had walked until she found a direction heard the story and called it stupid and meant, I will stay.

Without the asking, there was only a mountain, and a temple, and silence. The asking was what made it a story. And a story—even a bad one, even one that went in circles, even one that had been told and retold across a century and a half of floods and wars and revolutions and plagues until the original was unrecognizable—was better than no story at all.

Once upon a time.

She was sure of this much.

Alpha Zhang *is a contributing writer for the* Nassau Weekly.

ART BY ELLEN KRAMER
PAGE DESIGN BY NAOMI SEGEL

GETTING LOOPY

The Humean conceit of Solvej Balle's "On the Calculation of Volume."

BY ALEXANDER MARGULIS

Consider the following claim: at some point in the next decade, a Scandinavian author will pen a cycle of novels with six or more entries, and the series will sweep the English-language literary world. This is an inductive conclusion. It extends a pattern observed in the past into a future we have not yet seen. To assess the strength of the claim, we must turn to our "samples"—the various manifestations of our supposedly general pattern. There are three to consider.

1. In the early 2010s, *My Struggle*, a dreadfully serious autofictional hexology, broke through in the Anglophone sphere. Its author, Karl Ove Knausgård, was and is prototypically Norwegian. One imagines he writes with a raven perched on his shoulder.

2. In the early 2020s, John Fosse's *Septology*, an aptly titled seven-part epic that unspools, hypnotically, in the form of a single gestating sentence, took English-language readers by storm. The culprit, once more, was Norwegian, although Fosse's writing is gentler than Knausgård's, more lake than fjord, the work of an Odin who's aged out of warfare.

3. Most recently, Solvej Balle's *On the Calculation of Volume*, a meditative septology with the hook of an airport potboiler (*Volume*'s protagonist, Tara Selter, is stuck in a time loop), has become the talk of the literary town. Balle is, requisitely, Scandinavian (she moved to the secluded Danish island of Aerø in 2005 to shape *Volume*'s seven entries), but her speculative epic throws a wrench in our forecasting. Above all, *Volume* is a philosophical exercise, designed to challenge the most basic principle of induction: that the future will resemble the past.

Critiques of induction predate Balle, of course. The problem, as David Hume observed in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1973), is that our attempts to justify induction as a basis for knowledge are inevitably circular. Lurking behind any inductive conclusion—say, "the sun will rise tomorrow"—is a premise some deem the "Uniformity of Nature," which posits that the laws of time and space are constant, that the unobserved resembles the observed. This premise has a remarkable track record—the sun does keep on rising, gravity *does* keep on working, etc.—but can we accept it on these grounds alone? Hume thinks not. "Induction will work in the future because it's always worked in the past" is itself an inductive argument. We cannot prove the Uniformity of Nature; we can only cling to it blindly, hungrily, illogically.

But wait, the scientists cry—Hume's conclusion is unworkable! How could we give up on the laws of nature? What would it even look like for induction to fail? Enter Solvej Balle, on her island, with a four-pound sheaf of manuscripts.

Tara, too, is on an island. She's sequestered herself in a back room of her two-story cottage, a quiet, undisturbed space with a window "overlooking the garden." She can hear her husband, Thomas, through the walls. She does not go to him. For 120 days, she's been reliving the eighteenth of November: she knows when the rain will come, when the faucets will switch on, when the birds will gather by the sill. Even Thomas has become a clockwork man. He is a dot; he is a thing that shuffles in the kitchen. Tara, on her tapered graft of time, spirals ever outwards from him.

Volume I, then, is the story of a marriage sliding slowly, almost dulcetly, off course. There is at first false hope: early in the endless autumn, Tara clings to Thomas, and Thomas clings to her. They are "nearsighted creatures," and "the distance between us," Tara writes, "was dispelled in the fog." Tara wakes beside her husband, and tells him of her "rift in time," and they float on until the sun sets. None of it can last. "Our love has always been microscopic," Tara writes, a little sadly, from her hidden room. "It is something in the cells." A love forged on this scale can weather the melodramatic shocks of your average marriage novel, but it cannot survive the asynchronies that accumulate, like baby teeth, at the edges of the loop. Some things stay when the day resets (journal entries, food when eaten, books when kept beneath the bed), and some things fly back to their preestablished places (eggshells, grocery bags, a Roman sestertius). Nothing behaves as it should.

These discrepancies, these broken patterns, shake the lovers from their "foggy days." They search, now, for an explanation. They experiment. They try staying up all night (no dice—Tara blips back into the loop, and her husband is left dazed and oblivious). They devise "theories and frameworks," they "note… down observations" and "come up with rules" that might describe them. In other words, they go in for induction.

Belle, here, is addressing the groundhog in the room. Tara might not act like Phil Connors—she doesn't crash her car or save a life or pick up ice sculpting or really ever do anything particularly exciting—but films like "Groundhog Day" have primed us to expect a logical explanation for (and conclusion to) any time loop narrative. Tara is afforded no such closure. "We could not find the reason why time had fallen apart," she writes. "There was no reason." And so she drifts from Thomas, day by day. When the distance becomes unbearable, she makes her writerly retreat. She—we—are left with

> the knowledge that everything can change in an instant, that something which cannot happen and which we absolutely do not expect, is nonetheless a possibility. That time stands still. That gravity is suspended. That the logic of the world and the laws of nature break down. That we are forced to acknowledge that our expectations about the constancy of the world are on shaky ground. There are no guarantees and behind all that we ordinarily regard as certain lie improbable exceptions, sudden cracks and inconceivable breaches of the usual laws.

This is, by design, an excellent and lyrical evocation of Hume's challenge to induction. By the end of *Volume I*, Tara has lost faith in the Uniformity of Nature. The question of the novel's closing third—and of its six sequels—is how she might come to live without it.

Alexander Margulis *is a contributing writer and section head for* Second Look.

SL

ART BY ARIEL CHEN
PAGE DESIGN BY NAOMI SEGEL

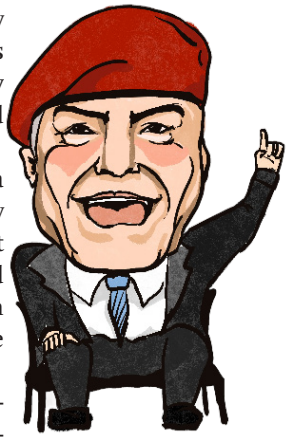
Dispatch from New York

In late March, former New York City Mayoral candidate Curtis Sliwa made a sensational appearance at Whig-Clio.

BY VAISHNAVI MURTHY

By 4:56, the Whig Senate Chamber had reached capacity. By 4:58, the room was overflowing. Students started to populate the upper balcony, craning their necks over the edge so that they would not miss Curtis Sliwa's entrance.

On March 27, the American Whig-Cliosophic Society, or Whig-Clio, hosted Curtis Sliwa, the infamous politician and anti-crime activist whose antics as the Republican nominee in New York City's 2025 mayoral race made national headlines. During his televised debates with Zohran Mamdani, who topped the Democratic ticket, Sliwa's distinctively Brooklynese accent yielded a host of viral moments, including carny Gen-Z-isms ("don't be glazing me here") and blunt personal asides ("I try to avoid yellow cabs... I was shot in the back of a yellow cab in 1992 by the Gottis and Gambinos.")



Bringing Curtis Sliwa to campus was not an easy task—Whig-Clio President Alejandra Ramos '27 and Vice President Noah Barkan '28 had to find some creative ways to reach him.

"Alejandra basically hunted through a bunch of different Instagram accounts," Noah said. "That all started in mid-February." She was eventually able to reach James Perrone, Sliwa's main campaign manager and long-time political aide.

"I'm very much a New York or nowhere kind of guy. So when I heard he was coming, I was thrilled that someone so influential in the city was coming here, because he really is quite a character and quite a man," Alistair Wright '27 said. Born in Queens himself, Wright had the event booked on his calendar since before Spring Break.

At 5:10, Alejandra Ramos '27 took the podium, introducing Sliwa as "the founder of the Guardian Angels," a volunteer organization that tasks itself with keeping New York safe through unarmed community patrols, and the organizer of "citywide political campaigns."

Then, "Don't Let Me Down" by Daya and the Chainsmokers started blasting in the background, adding millennial flair to the somber Senate Chamber. ("I play the Chainsmokers, Daya's, 'Don't Let Me Down' every night because a lot of people have let me down," Sliwa later said.)

Wearing a black suit jacket and his signature red beret, Sliwa slipped through Whig-Clio's large yellow doors to cheers and waves from the crowd. Without pausing, he walked past the two chairs Alejandra had set up in the center of the room and made his way to two unassuming plastic seats set off to the side. He pointed his fingers to the ground and did a little goofy squat boogie dance, the purpose of which was not entirely clear, but was entertaining nonetheless. He then sat in the plastic chair for a half second before Alejandra directed him toward the more ceremonious, wooden-handled thrones in the center of the room.

"How was the train ride?" Alejandra started off.

"I wanted to take a yellow cab, but..." Sliwa started before the audience cut him off with fits of laughter. The cab is an important bit of Sliwa lore—as he likes to remind his audiences, he was shot five times for insulting the New York mafia on his radio show, "Curtis and Kuby in the Morning."

Keeping the tone lighthearted to match the audience, Alejandra asked Sliwa what his favorite bagel order is.

"A plain bagel with Philadelphia cream cheese," Sliwa responded, "and a nice piece of fish."

In the next hour, Sliwa dropped some great one-liners:

"I wasn't from the suites, I was from the streets," Mr. Sliwa said in response to a question about his on-the-ground campaigning strategy. He said he liked to use slang on his radio show to bridge the generational gap between him and his listeners—a mindset he brought into his political career. "AOC was correct in describing the millennial change," Sliwa declared. "Gen Z is the future, and baby boomers need to accept it." His college-age audience clapped in approval.

Before long, Sliwa was narrating his own revolutionary origins as an adolescent, explaining how he started the precursor to the Guardian Angels, a crime-prevention organization in 1977, and rallied his peers fearlessly to challenge the dress code in high school. The message he wanted us to take away was pretty clear, because he said it in at least three variations: young people should always hold leaders accountable.

He gripped the microphone tightly with his right hand, emphatically moving his left hand as he spoke. He leaned in every time Alejandra asked a question — "these are really good questions," he would say, cracking his familiar, almost grandfatherly smile.

"I thought [his responses] were great. I would say I personally was hoping to get some more New York City-specific discussions," Alistair said. "It's not the route he chose to go, but in hindsight, that makes total sense."

"It's definitely our biggest event for like years and years," Noah said. "We have a whole host of people that are now on our email list who wouldn't have been there. Maybe they'll come to one or two other events."

By the end of his talk, Sliwa had covered almost every hot political topic on the table: law enforcement, gun violence, climate change, the Epstein files, the war in the Middle East—"WHAT THE HELL ARE WE DOING IN IRAN?" he yelled at one point, kickstarting an explanation of why America should not be spending money on a war when it cannot afford to properly educate its youth.

But the discussion's lack of substance made its coverage feel almost apolitical. After bringing up the war, the clapping and cheering fueled Sliwa's punchy finish: "SHAME on our country...this is NOT America first."

Every topic Sliwa brought up suggested that the conversation might take a more solemn turn, but any sense of seriousness fizzled out when he dropped his one-liners. Before you could take the mental energy to remember your own stance on the war or reflect on what he's said, he's dropped a sound bite, people are whooping, and we've already moved on to the next topic.

Sliwa could have said anything, and the crowd would have cheered.

Vaishnavi Murthy *is a contributing writer for* Second Look.

Between Tongues: An Interview with Translator Julia Sanches

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

BY LOUISE SANCHES BARBOSA

On a daily basis, I switch between English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese. Of all of these, I am especially attached to Portuguese, the language in which my first encounters with literature occurred. That is why, after learning that one of Princeton's translators in residence worked in the language, I immediately reached out. Julia Sanches translates from Portuguese, Catalan, and Spanish into English. She has translated several contemporary works and has been nominated for awards such as the International Booker Prize. A few weeks after my first email, I sat down with her on a cold March morning to learn about her background and how she navigates the challenging waters of translation. Here's what we talked about.

Note: This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Louise Sanches Barbosa: Could you share a little bit about your background and the paths that brought you to the languages you speak? I know there are quite a few.

Julia Sanches: My family left Brazil in 1988 when I was very young, a year before the country held its first democratic election. My parents didn't actually vote until they were in their 60s. In any event, we left Brazil and moved to the United States. From the age of three months to eight years, I spoke Portuguese at home, English at school. My mother likes to remind me that my mother tongue, which she, my mother, taught me, is Portuguese. When I was eight, we moved to Mexico City for my dad's job, and I learned Mexican Spanish. So then it was Portuguese at home, Spanish and English at school. Then I moved again, this time to Switzerland. Outside the house, I spoke Swiss French and English. Nerd that I am, I decided to learn Italian. I also took Spanish so that I could brush up on the language. Then, I moved again to attend college in Edinburgh. After graduating, I did a master's degree in Catalonia. While I was there, I recovered my Spanish, which was infected by other Spanishes. My friends were Catalan, Spanish, Latin American, so...I developed a sort of salad of Spanish variants.

LSB: And what exactly led you to translation?

JS: Well, as you can tell, I've been exposed to different languages my whole life. Like many immigrant children, I'd sometimes play the translator for my parents. When I went to Edinburgh University to study English literature, I was very naïve. I didn't understand that English literature was literature written originally in English. I took classes that allowed me to travel outside of British literature. For my final paper, I decided to do comparative work, researching Macunaíma by Mário de Andrade and a book by Jean Toomer called Cane. I asked my supervisor if I could write about them, and he said I could only do it if I found an existing translation of Macunaíma. Luckily, I did. While writing the paper, I was exposed to the sort of subjective choices that we make as translators. I spent hours pouring over the Portuguese and English and comparing the shades of meaning. Around the same time, I started reading this Brazilian poet called Ana Martins Marques. A lot of translators start with poetry because we think it's easier, because it's short.

LSB: It's not easier.

JS: It's absolutely not easier. I started translating her work so I could share it with my friends. And I just got bitten by the bug. I don't know how else to explain it. I had so much fun. It was this perfect fusion of my love of languages, of reading, of writing, with none of the pressure to create something wholly new. The rest is sort of history.

LSB: I unfortunately need to ask you this, but let's rip off the band-aid. How do you perceive the future of translation, given the rise of new digital technologies that offer texts "translations"?

JS: I wake up feeling very differently about that every day. I feel strongly that large language models can't do my job. Not without my help, anyway. And I don't want to be demoted to the person who cleans up substandard translations done by a machine trained on work that was stolen from me. It's very extractive. I also believe that the work of translation happens through repeated reading. The more you read a text, the more you understand it, the more it becomes a part of you, and the better you are as a translator of that text. A machine doesn't have the experiential component of translating. It might give you the illusion of a translation without actually being a translation—not in the way I conceive of it, anyway.

My fear is that AI will continue to devalue a labor that is already devalued. It is very, very hard to make a living as a translator, which is why the translator in residence program of Princeton University is so great. A big part of how I conceive of myself as a translator is as a worker. Yes, as an artist, but also as someone who has bills to pay and should have rights—rights we're still fighting for.

LSB: Could you talk more about the principles that guide you as a translator? How do you approach your work in terms of recreating a text into a different language?

JS: I have certain philosophies about how to translate. For a very long time, and probably still now, people have thought of the imagined reader as a

ART BY NINA OBIDAIRO-DANIELSEN
PAGE DESIGN BY RAVEN REID

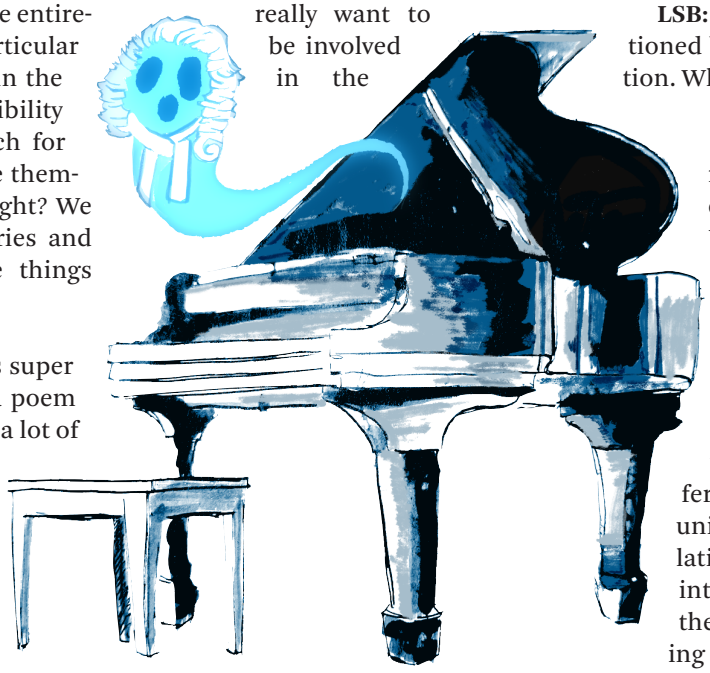
neutral reader. But I like to think of my imagined reader as a bilingual reader. That doesn't necessarily mean that the reader is bilingual in the languages that I'm translating from, but bilingual in the sense that they're used to interferences, they're used to code switching, they're used to opacity, they're used to juggling two cultures, two languages, two ways of speaking and being in the world. So that's a lodestar for me. What this means is that I sometimes leave things in the original language, depending on the text, if there's room for it. I lean into opacity. I very rarely use footnotes. There are very few exceptions. I don't think it's my responsibility as a translator to teach my reader the entirety of Brazilian history for a particular allusion the author has made in the text. I think it's the responsibility of English readers to go search for that history online and educate themselves. It's the era of Google, right? We no longer have to go to libraries and dusty encyclopedias to figure things out. The barrier is low...

LSB: I think this approach is super interesting. I once translated a poem by Oswald de Andrade that had a lot of specific Brazilian references, which I decided to preserve. The feedback that I received was pretty much to add footnotes. I think this brings us to the dilemma of domestication and foreignization. How do you approach that?

JS: Well, there's a range. I think that dichotomy is helpful as a way to speak about what you're actually doing, but it doesn't necessarily affect how I do my work. One thing I forgot to mention is that we're also translating in an era of American hegemony. It's not like the US is footnoting all of its Hollywood exports.

If you go too far toward domestication, then you might lose the sense of place and history. If you go too far toward foreignization, you might risk exoticizing this other culture, which is equally dangerous. I try to live somewhere in the middle. I'm not going to replace this Mexican pop star with a U.S. pop star just to make the reference work. Because that music star might have a particular importance that isn't worth papering over just so that the reader feels more comfortable. If you just give the reader things that they feel comfortable with, then they may as well just be reading American literature.

LSB: That's a good point. I am still curious about your collaboration process with your writers. I know you translate a lot of contemporary literature, such as the works of Eva Baltasar. What is that like?



JS: It depends. Some authors really want to be involved in the process and others are just there to answer questions. Some are really busy, so they can only answer the questions you send them. The issue with translating English is that a lot of authors speak it...or think they speak it. One of my first long translations was a short book by the Portuguese author, Susana Moreira Marques. It was a very challenging first text because I don't really speak Peninsular Portuguese. As you know, Portuguese from Portugal is a different animal. Luckily, Susana speaks English. She had lived in London for years, though she's back in Lisbon now, and was available for questions, looked at the translation, made comments, and was generally respectful of the role of the translator. That book was also a learning experience because all three of the editors who worked with me spoke Portuguese. I've never encountered that again. The experience was highly collaborative. You know, sometimes I open my WhatsApp, and I think how lucky I am. Eva Baltasar, Munir Hachemi, all of my authors are there. I would have never dreamed of that when I was a kid. My favorite kind of author to work with is the translator-author because they know what it takes to rewrite a work of literature in another language. So they're good at conceding your authorship of the text.

LSB: In your response, you mentioned being respectful of the translation. What does that entail?

JS: I think being respectful of the translation process entails letting the book go. Understanding that the text has to undergo a cellular transformation. And that transformation is, in part, unique to me, because if you were to translate Geovani Martins, for example, you would create a completely different translation. There is no universal singular perfect translation. I think of translation as interpretation. Interpretation in the sense of a pianist interpreting Bach, right? It would be really difficult if Bach showed up as a ghost every time a pianist was playing one of his concertos and said, "No, no, no, no, no, not like that. I want it only like this." Only, the piano itself is completely different, the keys are in different places because it's a different language, it's a different engine. Maybe that's what it means to respect the authorship of the translator? Don't haunt me—that's what I mean.

LSB: I really appreciate how you said that. Every translation is, in fact, an act of interpretation.

Louise Sanches Barbosa *is a junior editor for the* Nassau Weekly.

minor in Journalism

Learn from the most distinguished journalists in the world.

Explore nonfiction storytelling through interdisciplinary courses.

For more information scan below:

Requirements:

- 5 journalism courses
- internship or independent project with fieldwork
- participation in the senior colloquium