

Masthead

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The Crossword

By Sona Wink and Rohan Mehta

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

April kicks off with a 24-hour lapse in truth-telling. On Columbia's campus, April's Fools' Day coincided with Bacchanal, an epic celebration of Dionysian pleasure. Trickery ensued. A sight to behold was the throng of borg-holding undergrads, cheering for the incomparable d-d-d-Doechii (*airhorn sound*) who, to the shock of the crowd, pulled the winning prank of the day: announcing the arrival of her debut album, only to shout "April Fools!" seconds later.

As a gullible person, I approach the first of April with dread. It is a day when a word's face-value is more precarious than usual. To be an April "fool" is to believe in the sincerity of those around you—and subsequently have your own sincerity mocked. This is scary. Insincerity presents a solution, acting as an outer shield for our inner vulnerabilities. This posture can develop into a constant state of deflective irony, a habit which often prevents the expression of our true interests—those which we fear are too fringe, idiosyncratic, uncool.

But despite the deceitful manner in which the month begins, *The Blue and White's* April issue explores pockets of unabashed sincerity on campus. Madison Hu rips off her outer shell entirely in a bi-weekly Zumba class, where moments of mutual physical embarrassment yield kinship among strangers. At an annual Integration Bee, Josh Kazali watches campus mathematicians solve calculus puzzles out of sheer love for the craft. Stephen Dames critiques the philosophy of Effective Altruism, yet finds inspiration in the zealous commitment of its adherents.

In some cases, the separation between one's outer and inner layers becomes a matter of health and wellbeing. In a culture of high-achievement and competition, the outer shell is created to mask a sense of inner failure. Muni Suleiman reflects on intentional unproductivity as means of healing this stress-induced rift—a process particularly vital for Black students, who often deal with a heightened pressure to perform.

On the other hand, expressing a persona other than our own can lead to fruitful discovery. Molly Leahey reminds us, while getting to know campus comedian Naomi Rubin, that switching masks a comedic necessity. Andrea Contreras explores a newly-revived student club dedicated to BDSM—an approach to sex that involves embodying different personas in a controlled environment as a means of exploring pleasure.

College is perhaps another kind of controlled environment in which we can fluidly try on various outer layers: joining new clubs, changing up a wardrobe, switching majors. I wonder whether these masks are truly insincere. They grant us an opportunity to consider internal change—allowing our inner core to evolve at its own pace, sheltered from the outside world. Read through our April issue, and let it inspire you to try on a new mask or two.

Sincerely,
Sona Wink

BLUE NOTES

The Good Kind of ‘Extra’

Reflections on a beloved local spot.

By Tara Isabel Zia

When one thinks of the word ‘extra’, they might be inclined to think of a dramatic or unnecessary level of excess. But for Zaad, this characterization is not quite accurate. Located on 963 Amsterdam Ave, a mere five minute walk from campus, Zaad is a small Egyptian deli and grill discreetly tucked between a travel agency and laundromat.

Hosam Abdo, the owner and operator of the establishment, explains that Zaad means “extra or a lot” in Arabic. When I ask why he chose that name for his restaurant, he explains, adjusting his signature blue baseball cap, “I like it because the name means to serve more food to the people. More of everything.” Then, smiling slyly, he adds that Zaad actually has a double meaning: “When you are traveling on a short trip for a couple of days, your carry-on has the stuff you need. This is called your Zaad.”

The double-meaning of the word Zaad also represents Abdo’s restaurant: It is both ‘extra’ and just enough.

With a seating area the size of a John Jay single, one might wonder how the restaurant lives up to its name. Upon entry, however, Zaad’s size immediately becomes secondary to the warm smile and falafel sample each customer is offered. I gratefully accept both and finish the crisp, flavorful falafel in just two quick bites. The minimal wall space of Zaad proudly displays various Egyptian bills, posters of the Sphinx, and maps of Cairo, leaving little ambiguity about its origins.

Abdo immigrated from Egypt 24 years ago and has years of experience in the restaurant industry. Only briefly taking a break to get into the “business of limousines,” Zaad is his most recent invention. Abdo and his partners opened up shop during the pandemic—a time notorious for bringing countless small businesses to financial ruin. Despite a “slow” start, he notes that business picked up as the city came back to life. It now has a steady stream of regulars.

From the infamous falafel sandwich to chicken shawarma wraps to a classic burger, the small counter boasts an impressive range. My personal recommendation—seconded by Abdo—is the falafel sandwich: a tightly packed explosion of taste that puts any halal cart to shame. The fresh pita is warm and delicate, its insides brimming with flavor. With each bite, the gritty falafel mixes fresh lettuce, cubed tomato, and delightfully sour pickled onions, creating a delectable harmony. A thin layer of tahini and hummus mix at the base of the pita, which retains a soft pink color from the onions.

During our conversation, Abdo notes that my face is “not American,” and exclaims “I knew it!” when I divulge my Iranian origins. As we get to know each other, a call to prayer is projected through a speaker. I strain to hear him over the voices before I remember, with the scent of freshly cooked falafel lingering, that Ramadan has begun.

Hosam speaks politely, but without any particular animation about the day-to-day of running a small business in NYC. The conversation shifts, however, when I bring up one of my first trips to Zaad: the impetus for my article. I had been sitting at the table with a friend when an older man came in asking for food, indicating that he didn’t have any money. Before I knew it, a plastic bag was being handed over the counter, delivered with the same smile I had received upon entry. When I mention this exchange to Hosam, he breaks into a wide grin and exclaims, “That was me!”

“The business of food is life and help. If I welcome you to my home, the first thing I offer you is food, ” he explains. “I tell my guys, don’t give him just any food, not something you wish to throw out in the garbage. No. Give him a very nice sandwich, like he’s going to sell it. I want him to enjoy it,” he continues animatedly. “Because, you know, no one knows what’s going to happen tomorrow, we have to help each other.”

Zaad proves that Mediterranean hospitality is not a commodity or an aesthetic; it is a mindset. Such a mindset instructs Hosam to hand out free falafel to all customers and recognizes that people, regardless of their ability to pay, deserve good quality food. Zaad, while adapting to the pace and size constraints of the city, preserves a special tendril of Mediterranean values.

After our conversation, I make my way to Hungarian for a cup of tea to pair with the complimentary rice pudding gifted by Hosam. Drawing me out of my writing, a Columbia law student saddled with a legal tome and kind eyes strikes up conversation, and, before I know it, we’re chatting about Zaad. I pull out the rice pudding and offer him some: an act which I can tell surprises him. Regardless, he gleefully accepts. A little ‘extra,’ sure, but perhaps the best things are.

Much Ado About Nothing

Autumn Knight's multimedia exhibition explores leisure, productivity, and Blackness.

By Muni Suleiman

It was an hour into our visit to the *Nothing #26* exhibition when I voiced a potential irony to my friend: We're doing a lot of interpretative work for an exhibition that calls on its audience to do nothing.

From Feb. 3 to March 12, the [Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery](#) housed [*Nothing #26: The Potential of Nothing is Everything \(Wallach\)*](#) by American interdisciplinary artist Autumn Knight. Knight's title places the exhibition in conversation with Jenny Odell's 2019 novel [*How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*](#), in which she argues for action that ignores the internet era's demand for productivity. By bringing Odell's ideas to life in *Nothing #26*, Knight extends her own years-long multidisciplinary experiment on *dolce far niente*, an Italian phrase that means "the sweetness of doing nothing."

The exhibition's relevance on an Ivy League campus is clear. The [college admissions industrial complex](#) introduces students to an unreasonable conception of productivity at an absurdly young age. In the cutthroat arena of ACT scores and Common App essays, students are taught that they must do everything and anything to be seen as worthy by their desired schools. Doing nothing is self-indulgent. Hobbies are means to resume-build. These are the rules that govern young, high-achieving students during their formative years. In this context, "doing nothing" is not just unproductive; it's destructive.

However, as the description of the exhibition outside of the gallery explains, Knight's work relies on Blackness as a lens. She contends with indulging in *dolce far niente* as a Black person navigating socio-cultural stressors and combating structural inequalities. A moment of prose appears in one of the exhibition's videos: "I know how to have freedom ... I can take a type of freedom seriously." After rewatching the clip in which the quote appears, however, I realized that I had read those lines as questions instead of statements. "*Do I know how to have freedom from racialized social expectations for success? ... Can I take this type of freedom seriously?*"

Shonda Rhimes' *Scandal* famously contains a scene where Papa Pope explains to his daughter Olivia that she has to work twice as hard to get half of what white people have. The phrase sharply identifies the additional work required of Black students in competitive environments. It is this understanding, perpetuated by structural and systemic inequalities, that makes "doing nothing" seem like a leisure reserved for the privileged.

Though Knight does not explicitly outline a racialized *and* gendered intention, it's telling that the exhibition's videos predominantly feature women paired with expressions such as "I wish to be as beautiful and useful as a machine." "[Black girl boredom](#)" has been coined on TikTok as the phenomenon in which Black women still feel the need to get ahead during times of leisure. This phenomenon pertains specifically to a small, certain class of Black women, those who are privileged enough to attain college degrees or enter academia. User @mary.ish explained how she returns to school to pursue advanced degrees and certification whenever she is "bored." The comments are filled with women echoing Mary's thoughts, elaborating on the tendency to take courses or accumulate degrees when they're supposed to be taking a break. Of course, even for the majority of Black women who do not possess multiple degrees or have access to these spaces, there's an exceptional urge towards perceived personal productivity in times of leisure tied to the legacy of stereotypes like the Mammy.

Even in moments of celebration or vulnerability, Knight depicts a lingering capitalist ethic. For example, a corner of the exhibition features a video of water pouring in various jugs, none of them ever completely filling. Whilst this plays, a voice-over expresses frustration at the people of “this country” and their inability to be vulnerable. The voice is joined by others urging them to put a warning of vulnerability on a T-shirt and “workshop” it. It speaks to the idea that even our vulnerabilities can, too, be commodified.

For Knight, the landscape of the interior is exploited by the attention economy. Illustrated faces that adorn some surfaces in *Nothing #26* feature eyes which look in various directions with no central focus and are underlined by bags which emphasize the very labor of attention. The exhibition’s only sense of centrality is produced by a black chair which sits on a circular, rotating platform. With it sit clay formations that seem to attempt, but never quite create, an imitation of a “perfect” clay animal on the outer edge of the platform. Following its motion with your eyes or your feet feels like running on a hamster wheel. Apart from nausea, it also imparted upon me the idea that we can never be as efficient as a machine that does not tire, nor can we perfectly recreate moments of creativity generated by doing nothing.

Both Odell and Knight recognize that it is chance encounters—happenstances, disruptions, and time wasted—that makes living worthwhile. Life is made meaningful in times of leisure, which are scarce in a culture that champions efficiency and productivity above all.

Nothing #26 examines “nothing” as an intentional pursuit towards nonsense and unproductivity. In her videos, Knight handles common objects, such as gloves or a banana, in ways that seem nonsensical. But within such seeming meaninglessness is where free-range creativity can truly arise. Her work allows visitors to engage in as much or as little labor as they like; they determine what is worth simply seeing and what is worth extensively interpreting. They can, as Knight commands in the exhibition’s brochure, choose either to “do something or nothing here.”

The Annals of Amateur Zumba

A staff writer seeks connection in Dodge Fitness classes.

By Madison Hu

In her one woman show “Kate,” Kate Berlant jokes that the masks we wear as individuals in society are rarely, but inevitably, torn off in moments of unexpected physical strife: sickly bent over a sink/toilet/some other unlucky vessel, surrounded by strangers, letting all the day (or night’s) wrong things out, silently begging for mercy, primal and sweaty, entirely human and unforgivingly vulnerable.

In this particular moment, Kate says, we are experiencing the rarity of being our unencumbered, unmasked selves in front of others.

This semester, I have been making use of the Dodge Fitness Class Pass and would like to define my latest personal experience of such mask-tugging. I spend every Tuesday and Thursday night in Zumba classes, amateurlly shaking my hips and flipping my hair, desperately trying to keep up with a routine within the voyeuristic panopticon that is the Dodge Gym Aerobics Room 3, where I am not only fully visible to my peers stationed outside of the glass, but also to my peers within. My fellow Zumba dancers include, but are not limited to: former classmates, future classmates, that one person I *always* see in the dining hall, people I had in a small seminar with that I say “hi” to on college walk for a month after the seminar ends but never again, professors I love, professors I don’t love, professors I don’t know yet but will know next semester when placed in their eight-person seminar, graduate students who could be my TA, graduate students who will teach me next semester when placed in their eight-person seminar, and other Morningside Heights residents I am bound to see everywhere.

My junior spring has been devoid of the regular group of friends who know me wholly and vulnerably; most all are studying abroad. Their locations on Find my Friends dot the globe, and their absence has pushed me into looking for that familiar interpersonal comfort through a new medium.

And so, I spend my time in the depths of Dodge, where I am both incredibly visible and wholly vulnerable, my mask ripped completely off in one foul, voluntary swoop.

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Just below the thunderous rumble of the Dodge Gym track runners, above what may as well be the center of the earth (the courts where you can watch your friends’ intramural teams compete), and through the looking-glass wall of windows flanked with Doric columns (that are themselves flanked by athletic blue wall padding) is the fluorescently-lit, glossily laminated workout space that is Aerobics Room 3.

It is to this place that I descend biweekly, like clockwork. I check in with a student on an iPad sitting at a folding table, and duck into my safe corner in the back left of the room, where I can clearly see the instructor and myself in the mirror, but still be neatly tucked behind a few rows of people. I then attempt to slyly but always awkwardly pull my sweats off the wide rubber sole of my seven year old Nikes, widening the band to touch as little of the bottom of the shoe as possible. I lay my jacket on the pile of yoga mats behind me and balance my water bottle on the base of one of the punching bag men that line the walls.

The space, one-half of which is covered in reflective or transparent surface, is voyeuristic not only in build, but in intrinsic nature. Here, I am on display to those guaranteed to be in my close vicinity for as long as I

am at this school—here, my mask-less self assumes a unique proximity to most every type of person in the university community, ranging from professors to other undergraduates to graduate students to staff.

In this room, I observe my familiar fellow Zumba dancers—with whom I've developed parasocial relationships due to their proximity to my most vulnerable self—prepare: the couple who stands at the front and knows every move, whom I imagine met in this class and had a chance moment of connection as they walked out together, have a conversation solely through the mirror; the gaggle of professors who stand in the right corner, not shying away from dancing their heart out around their potential students, get in the zone, stretch, breathe; the one person in the front center who is very obviously a trained salsa dancer scrolls on her phone, and I imagine her one day teaching our class like our instructor, who told me about her dance background and the fact that the Zumba licensing takes a day, but the fitness license takes year. Maybe the others in the class feel as vulnerable as I do, maybe they don't, but there's a sort of familiarity, a beauty to showing up to class and maintaining relative anonymity, engaging in a mutually understood contract that we all engage with for some individual reason.

I measure my wingspan, making sure I won't smack anything during my work out because that would be *embarrassing*, and then get to work, perfecting the Zumba routine I've spent all semester memorizing. I move with my class, creating a sort of confused amoeba-like structure that's constantly brushing close to processes of mitosis, as I continuously get my lefts and rights mixed up. I let myself dance like—and kind of because—it feels like everyone's watching.

After an hour of dancing the same familiar routine to the same familiar remix of music, with the same familiar group of people, I pull my sweats back on, hang my jacket on my forearm, precariously balance my water bottle in my free hand, and thank Celeste for another great class. Wholly familiar and vulnerable, I move with the rest of my class out of Aerobics Room 3, up the stairs, and out of Dodge. Our masks harden as we move into the cold air, but we rest assured that they will come off again next Tuesday.

Inside the Beehive

Twelve of the mightiest math minds, yet only one can reign supreme.

By Josh Kazali

On March 3rd, a stirring could be felt across campus. Perhaps it was a *sine* wave passing in the breeze or the chattering of chalk and graph paper. Today was an important day. For me, it was my 20th birthday. Yet for mathematicians across campus, today was the final round of the Integration Bee, an annual math competition hosted by the Columbia Mathematics Department that crowns one lucky math whiz each year as the fastest integrator this side of the Hudson. The week before, calculus professor George Dragomir sent an open invitation to the student body to prove their mettle in the first round of the Bee, where they raced to solve as many integrals as possible in one hour. From those students, the twelve best performers moved on to the final round. And so, when I could have been enjoying cake and ice cream, I instead plunged into the SEAS—where the mathematical waters run deep and murky.

I hadn't thought about an integral, let alone solved one, since my high school calculus class. Three semesters of academic indulgence on obscure anthropology seminars and lectures on Virginia Woolf had allowed my imagination to run wild, leaving me with a romantic model of the world of advanced mathematics. I thought, of course, of *Good Will Hunting*: a young Matt Damon gazing at equations, his eyes lit aflame by his own manic genius; a cocky German professor standing at the helm of a packed lecture, tortured by his own limitations; flocks of M.I.T. students ogling a chalkboard where the mysterious wunderkind had performed mathematical magic. I wondered if I might bear witness to Columbia's own wicked-smart prodigy.

I arrived at Pupin 428 ten minutes early. The pale fluorescent lights revealed an empty, windowless lecture hall, save for Professor Dragomir who, despite his solemn, steely demeanor, cued a gaudy Spotify playlist called "Pop Frequency." I slid into a hard wooden chair and as the minutes ticked by, the Integrators trickled in. Some were silent, steeped in anxious anticipation of their impending trial, but many embodied the paradoxical confidence and nerdiness inherent to the mathlete. As friends greeted each other and compared solution strategies and short-cuts, a brewing nervous energy combined with the exciting social environment in the room, creating an atmosphere that was genuinely electric.

An Integration Bee is a duel *mano a mano*, wherein two competitors get two minutes to solve an integral, scribbling on the chalkboard in front of the audience (which, to my surprise, had swelled to a solid sum of over twenty spectators). When the integral was projected onto a screen, the competitors set off on their calculations and the entire room buzzed with excitement. Not only were the competitors busy solving, but everyone *else* in the room was also working on the problem to prove their own prowess alongside the competitors. I might have been the only person in the room writing sentences instead of derivations.

For my fellow humanities students struggling to fulfill that science requirement, a problem looked something like this:

$$\int_0^1 \frac{1}{\sqrt{x} + \sqrt[3]{x}} dx = 5 - 6 \log(2) \approx 0.84112$$

Since this was all Greek to me, I turned to the person sitting next to me, an alternate who was subbed in and integrated until he was knocked out in the semifinals. I asked, stupidly, "How hard are these problems, really?" The answer, he said, was complicated. Some are like puzzles, where once you figure out

the key, the answer unravels quickly. Others are big messes of number work that must be weeded through as fast as possible. Sometimes, working at breakneck speed, a Eureka moment turns out to be a disappointment, and it's back to the chalkboard.

If I was going to find a Will Hunting-style virtuoso here, it would be Akshat Yaparla, SEAS '24. He met me outside of Mudd on a windy March afternoon, fresh from his office hours as a TA for computational linear algebra. I picked him out early at the Bee, not only because I recognized him from the fourteenth floor lounge in John Jay, but because he formed the center of a rowdy group of math students enthusiastically comparing solutions and strategies. Out of the many competitors, Yaparla seemed to be having the most *fun*. He was the one who suggested that instead of starting at the chalkboard, competitors start from behind the podium, leaping over the table to begin scrawling their answers. In our conversation a few weeks after the Bee, he spoke of the competition with more amusement than seriousness. Is this what drives the champion integrator? Is it all just fun and games?

"It's an Integration Bee, right?" Yaparla told me. "A bunch of math people get together and do integrals at the end of the day." Unlike the tortured genius I had imagined (or perhaps hoped for), Yaparla had no delusions of grandeur following his victory—he wore the crown with humility. Of course, don't mistake his dismissive attitude for lack of interest in the subject; to hear him speak about his interests makes that much clear. A computer science major by trade, but a mathematician at heart, Yaparla described the feeling of solving an equation with ecstasy: "Once you solve that five hundred piece puzzle, you're like, holy shit. I'll get a high for like half a day."

It's the laurels that he claims less interest in. "It's like, OK, cool, I have a nice scarf," he said about his title. That's not a metaphor, by the way—Yaparla's prize was a blue and white scarf, with an integral and a buzzing bee hand stitched into it by Professor Dragomir. Yaparla's biggest lesson from his career as a Mathlete: vanity and pride only detract from passion. Math, it turns out, isn't all collaboration and sunshine. Yaparla told me that if I looked closer, I would find thick webs of egoism and competition, imbuing the stifling, subterranean air of Pupin with the stench of pride and jealousy. "That's the part I'm not a fan of," he said. "I don't want this place to go M.I.T. overnight."

I thought of the less fortunate integrators in the room that night who left without a title, retracing the steps to their fatal blows and scorned by the sense that the solution was only a few motions of chalk away. The taste of defeat is always bitter, particularly when it comes to something as personally significant to STEM majors as mathematic ingenuity. The title—silly though it may be—clearly meant more to Yaparla than he let on. When I asked him if he'd be defending his title next year, he laughed it off, but seemed to be up for the challenge. "I'll show up there. I'll have my scarf."

No Wrong Notes

Coffeehaus jazz night draws a crowd.

By Henry Astor

Over clouds of cigarette smoke and rumbling chatter, a voice beckons for any musicians in the crowd. It emerges from Malaika Friedman, pianist and self-proclaimed “evil mastermind” of five-piece jazz ensemble Threat Midler, during Coffeehaus Jam Club. A primarily jazz-focused concert and improv series, Coffeehaus is held every other Thursday in the tavern-esque living room of the Alpha Delta Phi house. The brainchild of ADP member Oscar Lloyd, CC ’25, it began last fall with just four Columbia students and now is a notable, recurring campus event that attracts young players from other colleges in the city. Malaika treks up to ADP from the New School, while Threat Midler’s trumpet player and budding composer Caleb Davis hails from the Manhattan School of Music.

It’s a convivial and open atmosphere, seemingly absent of the *Whiplash*-ian melodrama one might associate with the jazz scene. I learn that Caleb and Malaika have known each other since high school jazz camp, while Nadav Beary, the drummer, is a classmate of Malaika’s. Grace Kaste, CC ’26, and Stephen Park, CC ’24, the band’s bassist and guitarist, respectively, are Columbia students who met Malaika through Coffeehaus sessions. A few days before the show, Kaste told me about how Coffeehaus has grown into a source for musicians at Columbia and beyond to expand their networks: she’s already secured gigs through Coffeehaus as a first-year student. Nonetheless, she has had to overcome some trepidation—a big stage with many talented musicians and even more eyes can be intimidating.

On a campus where most students spend weeknights deep in their books, Coffeehaus acts as a beacon of fresh energy drawing those who seek a different type of Thursday evening. The tradition has grown largely due to word of mouth and the desire for an unpretentious environment. “There’s a big issue with academic jazz, where it feels very exclusive and high-minded, where you have to know all the standards and the [chord] changes to even get into those circles,” Lloyd explains. Intentioned to create a space for fresh exposure, experimentation, and engagement for those new to the genre and seasoned jazz players alike, he especially enjoys witnessing students’ first introductions to jazz. It reminds him of his own relationship to the music, as he has no formal jazz training himself. Corroborating this mission, Kenny Schultz, CC ’24, a saxophonist who regularly jams at ADP, shares that audiences at ADP don’t care what notes or keys you play in, as long as you play loud.

As Schultz alludes, the popularity of Coffeehaus sometimes comes at the expense of the music. One night after the mass of bodies became so thick that it was impossible to see the performers, Friedman asked the crowd to lower their volume so that all instruments, particularly Kaste’s upright bass, could be audible. “Jazz is a bit of an aesthetic at ADP,” Kaste admits, alleging that some listeners are more interested with posting a cool-looking Instagram story than the immersive experience. Drummer and regular Coffeehaus player Taylor Briggs, CC ’24, has a less cynical take: “It’s difficult when people are rowdy, but I would rather perform to a rowdy crowd than no one at all.”

As two of few women in the [Louis Armstrong Jazz Program](#) at Columbia, Kaste and Briggs navigate a male-dominated and sometimes misogynistic environment. “I always have to fend for myself,” Kaste remarks, lamenting that she sometimes feels as if she’s “the last man standing” after witnessing women quit jazz at Columbia altogether. Briggs compares her experiences in jazz environments to being a major in the physics department where most of her professors are men. She explains the difficulty in navigating male-dominated spaces when there aren’t other women around for guidance or representation.

Kaste has also been subject to overt misogyny. Once a male bass player at ADP “didn’t put it together that [she] was a bassist,” despite her name’s appearance on the billing of the event, then proceeded to explain to her the use of a bass—an instrument she’s played since the 6th grade. She also recalled being asked if she was upset for not smiling while playing, despite male players doing the same without question.

There’s much to be improved, but the optimism I encountered from both musicians was palpable. Kaste and Briggs insist that Coffeehaus remains an indispensable outlet and source of joy for musicians. Briggs wishes to see Coffeehaus’s ability to promote off- and cross-campus collaboration continue to flourish. Kaste hopes to see the school recruit more female players into the jazz program, employ more Black instructors that better reflect the origins of jazz, and anticipates making more friends and improving her playing at Coffeehaus. For his part, Lloyd is prioritizing improving inclusivity at Coffeehaus—a show featuring an all-female ensemble is in the works. “At the level of academic jazz, it tends to be very white and very male, which is just a terrible [representation] of the actual roots of jazz,” he expresses. “We need to reflect that the roots of jazz are in Black musicians, and that includes Black female musicians as well.”

Dear Mr. Brody

We need you. Yours very truly, America.

By Iris Chen

Letters to Mr. Michael Brody Jr. typically begin with a confession.

“I must say I feel a little embarrassed writing to someone I don’t even know asking for money,” one begins. “I guess not embarrassed enough not to write.”

Others describe him as “generous” and “wonderful.” They paint him portraits, write him songs.

In 1970, Brody, the 21-year-old soft-eyed heir to a supposed 25-million dollar margarine fortune, announced that he would give all of his money away.

“I’m gonna cure the problems of the world,” he promised, pouring his voice through television screens nationwide. All you had to do was write a letter.

Today, most of them remain unopened. Upon request, students can sit inside Columbia’s Rare Book and Manuscript Library and hold these dreams deferred, such as the following, in their hands:

“Dear Mr. Brody,

Our family has needed a lift for many years. Though nothing can take the place of a negligent father, money will greatly help my mother for our debts. Please give \$9,000.

I wish I could have given it to them myself. Thank you for your help.

Love,
Eugenie Pedersen and Family”

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The situation devolved within the year. Beyond sporadic donations—hundred dollar bills handed out at Times Square, a handful of answered letters, and offerings to those who lined up at his door—Brody’s money largely remained his own. By 1971 he was in a mental institution; three years later he committed suicide.

Critics since then have not stopped speculating; they frame Brody as a nutty hippie, high on drugs. But even then, very little was known about the man. Society’s relationship with its idols, as such, often tells us more about the audience than the star; to have been betrayed, one must first have had to believe.

And in 1970, people believed not just in Brody’s generosity but his sainthood: “I prayed that the Lord would sent [sic] someone to help the poor and he did.” Others believed that he had created “the most wonderful event that has ever happened in the United States.”

Saint or Samaritan, Brody was an indubitably American figure, venerated for his great luck to have been born rich and his great egalitarian impulse to hand it out.

By volunteering to give his money away Brody showed the average American that he was on their team—and conversely, that they were on his. A loan reeks of laziness and beggary, but a gift implies that Brody's beneficiaries were selected—a chosen people redeemed by their moral fortitude with which they would achieve world peace.

John G. Crocker certainly thought so. "I'd like one hundred thousand so I could give away some too," he wrote in his letter.

But in all of this it was not Brody who kept the letters coming.

As Brody's wife, Renee Dubois, said in an interview for *Dear Mr. Brody*, a documentary on the cult figure: "He told me his story of his mother dying when he was little and being very lonely. And I told him about my life, and being very lonely, basically ... All of a sudden you have a missing part of your life."

During public appearances with Brody, Dubois did not speak. When things got uncomfortable she became a place for him to look, someone who would smile and affirm.

Brody was this person for the average, lonely American. "People say that you shouldn't chase rainbows, but when you're desperate I guess you try anything," wrote Richard J. Williams, a veteran who had five operations to keep his leg from falling off. In Brody, there was finally an audience to his pain. He and others shared with a stranger things they would not tell their parents. They asked for thousands of dollars having "never asked for anything" in their lives. Others wrote in, asking not for money but for his company. "If you have any property suitable for hunting, I would like to come to New York and hunt some rabbits ... I just want to get away from everything here."

However, in order to relieve people of their loneliness—the vain hopes and debt that mangled their everyday dignity—Brody forced them to confess and to thereby acknowledge it all. There is unintentional cruelty in this but not one that Brody alone generated. Rather, this cruelty is far more original, stemming from the disjunction between our expectations for life and the lives that we actually experience.

Keith Maitland, the director of *Dear Mr. Brody*, reminds us that "there was always positive and well meaning intention." At 21, Brody was buried by a magnitude of woes to which God has not yet been able to respond.

Faithfully, we now preserve the evidence that he tried.

...

Maitland and his team ultimately wanted the letters to go somewhere where they would be opened and read. Columbia was the only institution in New York that would allow for this.

"Nobody has exposed what's inside this envelope to oxygen since January of 1970," Maitland tells me as I handle a letter. As such, there is a "little bit of magic" inside them—magic that we now inherit.

"Take a breath. Open that letter. Share in that bit of time travel."

CAMPUS CHARACTERS

Naomi Rubin

By Molly Leahy

Mr. Dong, a washed up high school teacher, wants desperately to be “in” with his students. When an offer to share his “Walking Dead disc set” doesn’t land, he turns to the next most viable option: finding *and doing* cocaine. After more hilarity unfolds, Mr. Dong—played by Naomi Rubin, BC ’23—steps to the front of ADP’s packed living room and announces emphatically, “Guys, I found the cocaine!”

The audience bursts into laughter. The set ends.

Rubin is the former president of Third Wheel Improv and has been an active member since her freshman year. Shortly after her set at ADP with Third Wheel Improv, I caught up with Rubin one morning at Wu & Nussbaum. Within minutes, I was struck by the immediacy with which she welcomed me into her world. Like a good improv set, she is engaging, vibrant, and animated. I couldn’t believe how well we were hitting it off, but then again, I can’t help but think Rubin is the type of person who could hit it off with anyone.

Like any comic, Rubin loves making people laugh. She believes that laughter is curative—medicinal even. As a child, when her mother was sick with Crohn’s disease, Rubin would often go into her mom’s room to try and make her laugh. “The motor turned on for me very early just because it was something I always wanted to do,” she reflected, “and then I think once it turned on it went turbo mode.”

Around eight or nine, Rubin was switched from theater camp to comedy camp, where she performed her first comedic character: Mrs. Beetleheimer. At the camp show, a young Rubin, dressed in a “very Jewish motherly costume,” walked into the audience to do crowd work. As she shared this story with me, Rubin stepped into the Mrs. Beetleheimer character outside Wu & Nuss. In Beetleheimer’s voice, she recalled saying to an audience member: “Red pants on a white theater seat? Not flattering!”

“I just remember trying to play to the crowd,” she reminisced, “I just had so much fun with it.”

After Beetleheimer, Rubin was all in with comedy. Growing up in West L.A., she sought out any and every opportunity to deepen her craft and, of course, have fun with it. As a kid, she attended comedy and improv camps. In middle school, she braved an improv class as the only girl among a swarm of boys. As a teenager, Rubin performed weekly at Second City Hollywood as a member of their teen improv show, Detention Hall. “That was like getting my Malcolm Gladwell 10,000 hours,” she remarked. “Getting stage time like that consistently was an invaluable opportunity.”

Rubin also lied about her age in order to take classes and see shows at Upright Citizens Brigade. “I would see shows,” she reminisced, “and then it would just make my enthusiasm for improv tenfold.” During one particularly memorable show Rubin saw at UCB, there was an earthquake. “I was looking at these improvisers,” she told me, “and I was like, What are they gonna do?” The scene playing out happened to be a radio show. Staying in character, the improvisers acknowledged the earthquake. Then they checked in with the audience and continued the show. “I just loved that.” Rubin smiled. “Make sure there’s still trust, and then you just keep going, you improvise through an earthquake ... I was in the audience with the biggest, widest eyes, biggest grin. I just tried to soak it all in.”

On her own, Rubin is an unquestionably talented improviser and comedian—but on stage with Third Wheel, she becomes a force to be reckoned with.

The connection between members of Third Wheel is palpable on and off the improv stage. Walking with Rubin around campus, we ran into three other Wheels, all of whom she enveloped in a massive post-spring break hug. “Third Wheel has been one of the best things to happen to me in my life,” she exclaimed. When I later asked her what accomplishments she’s most proud of, she answered, “I’m proud of the people.”

There’s a concept in improv known as “group mind,” when improvisers become so connected that they know, intuitively, where a scene is going and what will happen next. “That’s happened in Third Wheel more and more this year,” Rubin told me. “It makes our shows so much fun because we can be out there doing a scene and we all have this little glint in our eye.”

Although improv is Rubin’s passion, her comedic talents extend well beyond: she’s also a writer, stand-up, and actor. Rubin has contributed to [The Sweaty Penguin](#), a website and comedy podcast about climate change, and [Broadway Beat](#), an online outlet for satirical Broadway news. In 2020, she wrote a Seinfeld screenplay, [“The Pandemic Episode,”](#) which she later filmed and starred in.

On [Rubin’s Twitter](#), you can find short videos that feature her doing characters, spoofing trends, or pretending to have a roommate auditioning for the Blue Man Group ([a video which was retweeted](#), much to Rubin’s excitement, by the group’s official account). Rubin has also performed original musical comedy at venues across the city like [Stand Up NY](#) and [Asylum NYC](#). And this year, she started as a production intern on “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver.”

In September, Rubin debuted a web series that she wrote and starred in called [“Subletters.”](#) The six-part mockumentary follows Rubin and three new roommates, played by her friends, as they adjust to living together. “As I was writing it, I was having so much fun developing the characters over a series of episodes,” she explained. “Suddenly it was like something clicked for me, like ‘Oh, this is the kind of writing that I’m really connected to.’”

I asked Rubin at the end of our last conversation about what she wants to be doing in five to ten years. “I hope I will have tried a lot of things,” she answered. Her list includes joining the SNL cast, touring longform improv, writing a TV show, and acting in a comedy role for film or theater. “I hope that, whatever I am doing, I am happy doing it ... And I think I will primarily be happy if I’m working in anything tangentially related to comedy,” she concluded.

When Rubin is performing, you can tell that she’s been doing this a long time—10,000 hours even. But perhaps more importantly: you can tell that she loves what she’s doing. Talking to Rubin about her relationship to improv was a joy.

Rubin explained that the line between improv and life was blurred early on. “It really shaped how I approached my outside life,” she expressed. Improv teaches people to support one another, to listen, to say yes to everyone’s ideas, and always, to have fun. “Nothing’s too serious,” the comedian reflected. “You don’t have to prepare as much for, you know, life.”

It’s no wonder why Naomi Rubin feels so strongly about improv and Third Wheel: she’s found a world that is as utopic as it is fun.

Mazen Alsafi

By Schuyler Daffey

Mazen Alsafi, CC '23, enters Joe's Coffee with assured strides. It is, undeniably, the walk of a runway model. Alsafi is long-limbed, his face strikingly symmetrical, and his gaze intense. But it is not just Alsafi's physical image that exudes casual confidence—he speaks softly and measuredly, how I imagine Norman Maclean's voice to sound. This is the voice of someone, I realize over the course of our conversation, who knows himself deeply. This is apparent when he identifies the legacy of Malcolm X as a personal inspiration. Not only do their identities align as Black Muslim men, but Alsafi admires how “Malcolm took accountability and made his flaws open to the public.” Alsafi is conscious that he, too, is “someone who is growing and learning.”

Recently, Alsafi has focused on growing his modeling career. He was originally scouted by the New York-based modeling agency Brigade on Instagram, where his account is a stylist's haven of bold patterns and chromatic colors. His early fashion inspirations, Lil Wayne and Kid Cudi, are clearly reflected in his clothing selection. In one photo, Alsafi styles a statement pair of feathered black pants with a white collared shirt and matching gold embossed sunglasses. In another, he wears a chunky cream sweater over a collared shirt and a silver chain necklace as he stands nonchalantly in front of an incandescent Eiffel Tower. His photos are artfully angled; unfocused yet unpretentious. There is something magnetically cool about his account, like the man himself.

At 21, Alsafi has achieved more in his brief career than many other models have achieved over the course of their lifetimes. He first debuted on the runway just over a year ago when he [walked for Telfar](#) during New York Fashion Week. A brand Alsafi has long admired, Telfar's recent and meteoric growth in popularity is evident in the prevalence of their leather ‘T’-embossed bags. Telfar Clemens, the brand's Liberian-American founder, has become an icon for Black and queer representation within the fashion industry through clothing designs that defy constrictive gender norms and celebrate Black culture.

When he first walked for Telfar, Alsafi recalled, the brand's commitment to panoptic Black representation shone in all aspects of the show. Beyond the clothing, Alsafi was paired with predominantly Black staff members who could expertly style Black hair textures and highlight diverse complexions. This was incredibly significant for Alsafi, who spoke of the systemic injustices faced by Black models within the fashion and modeling industry: being exotified, being overlooked for jobs, and being inadequately styled for Black hair and skin by makeup and hair stylists.

Reflecting on this experience, Alsafi describes sauntering down the platform's elaborate spinning ramp wearing a hoodie and maroon skirt, ill-fitting boots (so big that Alsafi had to place socks at the front of them), and glasses with an embedded camera recording a livestream from the model's perspective. Yet Alsafi didn't receive his confirmation call for the show until 10pm the night before. He vividly remembers his ecstasy in that moment, “jumping around, shouting, calling [his] closest friends to tell them the news.” Alsafi then mentions to me, in his characteristically modest manner, that he spoke with Clemens at one point during the day: “I told him, ‘This means a lot more than you think. I'm a big fan of your work and love buying pieces.’”

Since his debut in February 2022, Alsafi has continued to delve into different avenues of modeling. He was photographed for an [Autumn Essentials editorial](#) in the November issue of *GQ Middle East* and has walked for Gabriela Hearst twice ([most recently in February 2023](#)) dressed in red from head to toe. The day of that show, Alsafi remembers pulling an all-nighter for his Spanish class, highlighting his dual roles as both student and working model.

Yet these disciplines aren't distinct for Alsafi: he is not solely a student or model, but a student of fashion. Alsafi mentions almost offhandedly that he [walked for Rick Owens](#) during Paris Fashion Week this past February. It was a "full circle moment" for Alsafi, who, during the pandemic, had connected with like-minded fashion enthusiasts on Discord over Owens' designs. Along with his online fashion community, Alsafi would craft presentations highlighting Owens' avant-garde silhouettes and monochrome tones as part of the designer's instrumental role in turning gender conventions in fashion on their heads.

That all being said, Alsafi's appreciation for the art of fashion and modeling is unquestionable. Meeting the geniuses responsible for designing the clothing he wears on the runway makes him "feel like a kid again." Where others might look to the future in these encounters, fantasizing about the global renown to come, Alsafi recalls his past.

In Syracuse, where Alsafi spent his formative years, creativity of this scope and intensity was suppressed. For Black youth especially, dreams are "thrown under the rug" by teachers and other adults. A first generation college student for whom "money has always been a constant struggle growing up," Alsafi initially felt a responsibility to pursue the lucrative premedical track. But during Covid, he experienced a crisis of uncertainty, "questioning myself, and my purpose, and what I wanted to do." He has since switched to a double major in African American studies and sociology. When I ask him if he has any regrets, he responds simply: "I'd rather do what I want to do than live for other people."

Alsafi's life has been broadly defined by his adoration of the fashion industry, but he is also highly motivated by the flaws he observes within it. For one, he is critical of the industry's commodification of activism, recounting his experiences with brands who adorn clothing with figures of Black political activists as a form of empowerment. Alsafi considers this counterproductive to the figures' original messages: "If there's not any action or political activism or organizing behind that art, then what is it good for?" This also reflects Alsafi's greater existential preoccupation with his work, which he vocalizes halfway through our conversation with a sudden weight and urgency: "How do I allow my art to be a guiding factor in the greater struggle?" He is acutely conscious that art alone cannot enact neither economic nor social progress for oppressed peoples. However, he does believe that it can inspire and alter perceptions, potentially driving people to be changemakers. It is all a question of intent.

Alsafi's modeling career barely scratches the surface of his catalog of creative projects. His most recent creative venture is [Abolish](#), a multimedia organization that he founded with close friend Daequan Brooks, an Africana studies major and Senior Fashion Designer at Stony Brook University. The pair intend to position visual art, film, and design as "a barometer for political work and liberation struggle" not solely for Black people, but also for oppressed communities around the world. During our conversation, he showed me a necklace that will be released for purchase on the *Abolish* website in April, its silver chains attached magnetically on both sides by a pair of handcuffs. The chain is broken with the separation of the handcuffs, symbolic of breaking bondage toward liberation.

As an intern at Brooklyn's Institute of Justice, Alsafi also shows this dedication to liberation by working to combat mass incarceration and the over-criminalization of people of color. He's set to begin research on New York's justice system, specializing in bill reform laws and altering inherent pre-trial weaknesses within state legislation. Alsafi's experience observing court cases and researching the punitive operating styles of prisons has made him realize that, "for prison reform to occur, we need to dismantle the system itself."

The nexus of Alsafi's diverse array of interests is his desire to help others. Whether advocating for liberation on the runway, with *Abolish*, or through the criminal justice system, Alsafi's passions are all bigger than himself. This is never more apparent than when he asks, amid our conversation, about me and my interests. It is actions like these that are at the core of who Alsafi is: an individual who is interested in other people.

In the future, Alsafi envisions himself living somewhere in Europe or staying in New York, a city he heralds as a mecca for creativity. Fueled by the balancing act of learning, modeling, and professional work he must maintain, Mazen Alsafi refuses to be confined by a single label or definition.

FEATURE

Rethinking Kink

Conversio Virium's revival is expanding conversations about sex and consent on campus.

By Andrea Contreras

Content warning: This feature contains content related to sexual violence.

“This is going to sound really bad but ...” A pink-haired first-year pauses to laugh, slightly red-faced. The awkward laughter is a nod to our yet more awkward environment—an overlit Butler study room on a Monday—but the five other present members of *Conversio Virium* chuckle along with her. We’re about half an hour into the meeting and the phrase “*this is going to sound really bad but ...*” has been said several times. But as our members are growing comfortable with each other, the nervous edge to the conversation is wearing off. *No, just say it*, they coax her. She uncrosses her fishnet tight-bound legs and leans forward towards the group to continue divulging details about her introduction to BDSM. Her fears subside, because no one thinks it’s weird, no one thinks it sounds “really bad.”

Since the beginning of 2023, *Conversio Virium* (Latin for “exchange of power”) has met every Monday night to discuss all things bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, and sadism and masochism.

Conversio Virium's revival comes after a five-year gap in kink representation on campus following the cessation of a previous iteration of the club in 2018. When this year’s incoming students realized that CV was no longer active, a group of first-years—Christian, Sophia, and Lily—began a Discord server with the intention of reopening the club. Right now, their main focus is on “building community again,” says Sophia, CC ’26, CV’s treasurer. Last semester was dedicated to planning: deciding what they wanted meetings to look like, establishing a safe club culture, and getting the word out. CV’s return to the broader Columbia community has been a slow process, partially because the club is not formally affiliated with the University. This means they are unable to officially reserve event space or receive University funding, leaving them to congregate in reserved Butler study rooms. As of early spring, they have six consistent members, an executive board of four, and the Discord open to any interested S&Mer. “I would love it to be something where people on campus know that it exists and that it’s a place you can go if you’re interested in experimenting,” says Lily, CC ’26, CV’s secretary.

Conversio Virium's current incarnation is modeled after the lore of the club’s debaucherous prime. The oldest student-run university kink club in the country, *Conversio Virium* was founded at Columbia in 1994 as a radical space for sexual self-expression and liberation. Beyond BDSM discourse, the early iteration of the club was known for its lascivious [hands-on events](#): flogging demonstrations, dominatrix presentations, and rope-tying basics, among many others. Unsurprisingly, CV became a target for bemoaned moral conservatives looking to attack what they perceived as the liberal university agenda.

Immediately upon its founding, a campus Christian group petitioned the University to expel the club from campus for “[promoting unjustifiable violence](#).” When Columbia acquiesced, groups across the city rallied behind CV. Robert B Chatelle, board member of the UAW National Writers Union, wrote to the club to condemn the University’s censorship in December 1994. “I am not part of the BDSM community myself, but as a 52-year-old gay man, I know well the pain and indignity of discrimination. I have a great many friends within your community, and they are good, caring, and decent human beings,” he wrote. Columbia reinstated CV the following year, but its controversial status on campus remained.

In 2006, an undercover reporter for the *New York Daily News* sat in on one of Conversio Virium's flogging demonstrations to craft a salacious [article](#) on academia's kinkiest elite. The piece catalyzed immense national discourse, largely questioning Columbia's institutional ethics for funding a club dedicated to sex. [Ann Coulter](#), Fox News darling, admonished CV members as the "biggest losers on campus" seeking to "coarsen the culture." She even encouraged Fox to run a poll of CV's members to see how many of them "grew up sleeping in the same house as their father," implying the club existed as a coping mechanism for childhood abandonment.

The subsequent media eruption had major impacts upon CV's public nature. According to the current e-board, the uproar forced CV to go underground, which eventually led to its demise in 2018 as the club lost traction. Now, a central goal for Conversio Virium's revival is returning to the early days of unabashed openness. "I want people to be touring the school and I want their dads to get pissed off. Like, 'Oh my God, this school is sex positive,'" says Lily.

In the '90s and 2000s, Conversio Virium was a symbol for sexual liberation and free speech on campus. But beyond Morningside Heights, CV's location grounds the club in New York City's radical queer history. Barely 25 years prior to Conversio Virium's founding, The Eulenspiegel Society ([TES](#)), the country's first nonprofit BDSM and fetish organization was established in New York. Members convened in private homes and makeshift locations such as theaters and churches to discuss and practice BDSM with others. But beyond kink, TES's roots were distinctly political. A central figure in New York's LGBTQ+ activism and the 1970s sexual revolution, TES operated under the philosophy that "sexual liberation [is] a prerequisite for a 'truly free' society," with a strong emphasis on the liberation of sexual minorities. In addition to sexual play, TES created a variety of social communities across the city, tightening queer solidarity.

Throughout the following years, New York became populated with legendary S&M spaces, predominantly serving gay, lesbian, trans, and polyamorous leather folk. The Hellfire Club, the Vault, the Anvil, and the [Mineshaft](#) in the Meatpacking district became havens for radical sexual expression. In the midst of the AIDs epidemic, these clubs also became support networks for open community discussion and the promotion of sexual safety. But in 1985, as AIDS ravaged the city, most of these clubs shut down when NYC mayor Ed Koch ordered for the forcible closure of any spaces where sexual activities occurred. The criminalization of sexuality in the midst of a public health crisis devastated sexual subcultures and their safe havens. Most of New York's most iconic BDSM clubs were unable to survive the '80s and '90s crackdowns, and the growing gentrification of the area has made most spaces nearly impossible to revive.

While BDSM is perceived as a subculture of mostly white, gay muscle men, BDSM also has strong importance to sex-radical feminists and Black communities who were interrogating the dynamics of power in sexual play. The Eulenspiegel Society's first president, Black leatherman [Jack Jackson](#), was credited with making kink and BDSM accessible to queer people of color at a time when it was a predominantly white space. In Paddles, Manhattan's oldest BDSM dungeon, [Black women and femmes](#) made it a point to challenge the boundaries of the body in their exploration of domination, performance, and the oppositional gaze in their sexual lives.

BDSM spaces have long been established as important havens for community-building and action for sexually marginalized people. In its early days, Conversio Virium was known to collaborate with the Eulenspiegel Society, although the extent of their integration is uncertain. Today's CV engages with the same practices and philosophies of BDSM's subversive history. Conversio Virium always has been, and still remains, largely queer. Some members spoke about finding the club through Columbia's queer newsletter, as well as the large overlap between CV and GendeRevolution, the gender non-confirming

student organization on campus. CV hopes to boast a diverse club population. “There’s not a lot of representation of people of color or queer people; even switches aren’t represented. It’s a very specific way of looking at things that I think is very fetishized for the male gaze,” says Lily. CV’s co-president Christian, CC ’26, agrees that full, diverse representation is essential for creating an equitable dynamic among CV’s members. “It’s very important to me that we have queer people, women—like there’s not a power structure where there’s men telling us what to do,” says Lily.

Today’s Conversio Virium has big goals for its revival, many of them embedded in the rich history of BDSM history. But CV is also entering a new social landscape, where college students have developed vastly different philosophies on their sexual practices and behaviors. A [2019 study](#) revealed that between 40 and 70% of adults had fantasized about BDSM, and around 30% regularly engage in kinky practices. Another [2021 study](#) showed that among female college students, 58% reported having been choked during sex, with a quarter having been choked by age 17. No longer a monster of the margins, breath play, roughness, and kink are seen as a normal part of having sex—however, with that normalization comes a frightening casualness which ignores the details of consent. [One third](#) of men who reported participating in “rough sex practices”—choking, slapping, gagging, and spitting on their partner during consensual sex—mentioned that they wouldn’t ask whether their partner was into it, either before or after sex. Women regularly reported not being asked before being choked, and that sex with men often involves an “inability to negotiate nuance” within otherwise consensual interactions.

Conversio Virium is the only club at Columbia that is dedicated to conversation and community building around sex. On campuses across the country, conversations about sex are confined to topics of sexual assault prevention and consent. While these are crucial conversations, they create an environment where our understanding of the dynamics of sex are defined by fear, violence, and trauma. The desires of many students, particularly women and femmes, to explore their sexualities in college are often dampened by the ubiquitous, prophetic notion that [one in five](#) students will be sexually assaulted on campus before they graduate—statistics which have not improved despite the increasing prevalence of discourse about sexual assault prevention.

Consent as it is understood today pretends to engage with sexual autonomy. Research on [sexual interactions on Columbia’s campus](#) has proved the landscape to be laden with unkind sexual interactions, even when they are, by definition, consensual. This is because the University’s (and society’s) definition of consent is reduced to a yes or no question, often attached to the status of sobriety. Because sex at college is so often casual, conversation about how it will go, beyond establishing consent, is often cut off. Framing consent as a yes/no binary reduces sex to a commodity, one in which conversation and exchange is cut off, one in which sex becomes mechanical and scripted.

Despite being equipped with all the tools for radical sexual liberation, a [2019 study](#) at Rutgers University on the sexual behaviors of Gen Z concluded that teens and young adults today are having comparatively less sex than previous generations. Media has given us the label of “puriteens”—and often, we hear of young adults self-identifying as “femcels,” and boasting their “celibacy era.” Social scientists have attributed this decline in sexual activity to a decrease in alcohol consumption, the pandemic, the growing prevalence of online dating, a decreasing stigma around virginity, and an increase of queer-identifying populations who differently define sex. However, some sex researchers such as Rachelle Hampton and Debra Soh attribute this shift to [changing beliefs](#) about the dynamics of power within sex among young people.

Growing up in the #MeToo movement has made many young women, femmes, people of color, and queer people reckon with the fact that the power dynamics of sex with cisgender men have not changed even

decades after the sexual revolution. In an increasingly queer, radical, and socially conscious generation, considering how to change these dynamics while remaining liberated and sex-positive is complicated territory. Rather than finding triumph in the sole act of having sex, young people are increasingly questioning what sex is for, whom it serves, and what they aim to experience from it. Young people seeking pleasure often know they won't necessarily find it through casual encounters—the [orgasm gap](#) reveals as much. But in looking at sex through an equity lens, women, femmes, and people of color are beginning to think critically about the normative power dynamics which have deprived them of adequate pleasure and sexual autonomy.

BDSM reimagines consent, power, and pleasure entirely. The yes/no question, while not thrown out the window, is greatly expanded through its two models: Safe, Sane and Consensual Kink, and Risk-Aware Consensual Kink. A primary aspect of BDSM is the process of sexual “negotiation,” which frames the entire sexual encounter through constant dialogue. S&Mers talk about sex before it happens; they negotiate and agree upon how they want to feel, what they want to experience, what they know they enjoy and what they might enjoy, what their boundaries or triggers are. During sex, after sex, the conversation continues. “It’s about feeling empowered to ask for what you want out of sex—without being shamed for it—so you can have the sex you want to have with the people you want to have it with,” writes [Mallory Yu](#) in conversation with kinksters at the National Coalition of Sexual Freedom. Through this model of understanding consent, autopilot goes out the window. Instead of a rote action, sex becomes an interpersonal experience filled with trust, improvisation, and imagination.

Since its founding, consent has always been at the forefront of Conversio Virium’s educational practice. CV’s early events include “Beyond No Means No and Yes Means Yes—Practices Consent Strategies,” “Negotiating Better Experiences,” and “Trauma Informed Kink.” In these events, CV members would participate in [interactive workshops](#) on the different models of consent in BDSM, as well as different ways to talk to their partner about their sexual interactions. Consent is practiced and discussed in many ways at CV: beyond sex, the club also uses these models to build a safe and comfortable environment for its members. “Talking about consent is very important within a club that focuses on BDSM activities,” she said. “So even though we’re all very familiar with the standards of consent ... it’s still really important to all of us that we continue to talk about consent. What does consent look like within our meetings? What does it look like to consent to a conversation about sex? What does it look like to be aware of your ability to rescind consent as we talk about a lot of different things?” For example, to account for discomfort, trauma, or triggers, CV implemented a conversational “safe word” within their meetings to allow members more control over the discourse. “Bring that word (Prezbo!) in conversation and everyone knows that means it’s time to change the topic,” Lily explains.

In the future, CV hopes to become an official Columbia-affiliated organization. With funding and the ability to reserve space, the club would be able to restart educational demonstrations and expand their community. While Conversio Virium’s current membership is predominantly experienced kinksters, the club is seeking to make the space more accessible to the BDSM-curious and budding experimentalists.

Decades ago, when the media portrayed Columbia’s kinksters as a cast of debaucherous pleather-clad freaks, CV was framed as entirely at odds with Columbia as an academic institution. Salacious descriptions at the club highlighted the contrast between the Hamilton classroom as an educational bastion and the club’s activities within it as a desecration of the Ivy League. Today, while there is a certain hilarity to the image of six first-years doing a kinky show-and-tell in the stress-filled halls of Butler’s fourth floor, this is not the content clash it seems. Conversio Virium is, primarily, an educational club, filling an important gap in sex education and discourse with the alternative pedagogy of kink. The fact that they convene in an educational space aligns rather perfectly with their mission. They are not just

having “wild sex,” as those articles profess, they are talking and thinking intentionally about how they are having sex, and how they are engaging with other people, in a way that is almost shockingly normal. Sure, there’s some laughter, some awkward pauses, some check-ins along the way, but isn’t that the way it all should be?

THE SHORTCUT

The Hunt

Sadie Wade-Stein

The following is an excerpt from a longer piece, the entirety of which is published on the Blue and White's online April issue.

Trigger warning: the following contains references to domestic violence and assault.

Tom is smoking L&Ms with his better hand. On the other, three fingers are warped with scars from years before we met. I have heard him tell four or five different stories about what happened, but I don't think any of them are true.

"What do you think, Ren?" Tom crushes a third butt under the toe of his boot. "Are we gonna get out of here on time?" He gestures to the opening of the loading dock at the stretch of desert in front of us.

"Depends on when this truck shows up."

Tom knows more than me, but I'm his boss. This doesn't seem to bother him. When we first met, he asked me over and over again how a girl like me had ended up here, and I couldn't answer him. It humiliated me to be called that—a girl—as if this difference between us could matter.

"You coming over tonight?"

"What're you making?"

"Killed a hog and I finally finished processing it," Tom says.

Even when Tom doesn't have a kill, he pulls things I've never eaten before from his chest freezer because, in his words, there's more to life than the way I've been living.

Recently, I've started to think about sleeping with him. There is something to love about his ruined fingers and crooked teeth. I imagine his fingers carefully unwrapping the butchered pig.

"Okay. You want me to bring anything?"

"Cider. Or something smoked."

"Yeah, alright."

The truck pulls into the bay.

"Here we go," Tom says.

Tom's house sags at the base of a red bluff. It is badly kept and practically windowless. The walls are painted sickening pastel colors, and all the rooms are only half full. The first time I visited him, I thought Tom might be squatting there.

I knock hard on the screen door.

“Come in!” Tom yells.

I find him in the kitchen, pulling the promised hog’s glistening shoulder from the oven. He has all of the windows open, but the heat is unbearable.

“What did you bring me?”

“Cider, like you asked.”

Tom nods toward the fridge. His kitchen is three walls of turquoise cabinets and thirty year old appliances that form a U, the house’s odd dead end.

“What’d you do last night?” Tom asks. He takes two forks to the shoulder, pulling it tenderly apart.

“After work?”

“Yeah. I thought I saw you driving toward Sonia’s.”

“She wasn’t around.” This is a lie, but I know Tom will have more to say if I tell him the truth.

“Jesus, Ren.”

“What’s your problem with Sonia?” I settle myself against the fridge. It’s not the first time we’ve had this argument, but I want to know what he hasn’t been saying.

“You’re going to get yourself into trouble.”

“No, I’m not.”

“If she said she doesn’t want to see you, she doesn’t want to see you.” He stops what he’s doing to point at me with one of the forks. The shoulder is almost completely mangled on the bottom of the pan. “I’m worried about you.”

“Fuck that,” I say. “Just drop it.”

Tom stands there, still holding the fork, like he is getting ready to say something more, but he doesn’t.

I like that Tom cooks for me. He’s too big for his own kitchen, and the utensils look clumsy in his hands. There’s something tender about it. I’m sure he wouldn’t do this for anyone else we work with. The women would think he expects something and the men would hate to be made useless by his skill.

Tom uses two of his scarred fingers to move the tortillas around in his cast iron pan, flipping them occasionally.

“What’s the story there,” I ask.

“What are you talking about?”

“Your fingers.”

“You know the story.”

“I know about five of them.” I pull another cider from the fridge.

“Then you know enough. I fucked up my hand.” Tom pulls the tortillas from the pan and replaces them with four more. “And stop drinking those,” he adds. “They go with the hog.”

I return the unopened cider. “What is this anyway?”

“What’s it look like? Tacos.”

“You killed a pig and made tacos.”

“What was I supposed to do?”

“Roast it on a spit and put an apple in its mouth.”

“This isn’t that kind of pig and you know it.” Tom is getting annoyed, and starts flipping the tortillas over and over, barely letting them rest on each side.

Finally he says, “The real story’s not dinner conversation.”

Since when does he care about dinner conversation?

Tom refuses to look at me for the next several minutes, carefully layering each of the tortillas with pork, onions, cilantro, green chilis.

ESSAY

Long-Term Commitment

Effective Altruism provides a popular—and potentially dangerous—approach to modern ethics.

By Stephen Dames

“Could you guys keep it down?” the girl at the neighboring table in ButCaf walked over to ask. “This conversation is insufferable.” After a moment of stunned silence and a quick apology from both of us, my interviewee Nicholas Hazard, CC ’25, resumed speaking almost immediately, apparently unfazed. He’s used to the criticism.

Hazard is a member of Effective Altruism. Although the organization’s identity and aims remain the subject of heated debates, its members generally seek to answer the question: How can we do the most good with finite time and resources?

[The Centre for Effective Altruism](#) was formed in 2011, but the movement predated the institution by several years, if not decades. While EA as a movement has existed since the mid-2000s, most individuals who have not attended one of their workshops or read one of their books have heard of them from one of two personalities: Sam Bankman-Fried or Elon Musk. Bombastic and controversial billionaires both, Musk and Bankman-Fried have, at one point or another, given money to or been associated with EA. Bankman-Fried in particular was identified with EA until his fall from grace last December, and he supposedly was an active participant in EA circles for a number of years before his indictment. Once Bankman-Fried’s alleged crimes came to light, however, the organization distanced itself from him as much as it realistically could.

But these billionaires are not the whole picture and, in fact, consume an outsized share of the spotlight. Their celebrity obscures the growth of an organization that has only gained in power, money, and notoriety both at Columbia and in the world more generally.

...

A mix between a French salon, a professor’s apartment, and the office of a start-up, the “EA apartment,” as it’s known, is unadorned but well-furnished. It has ample seating on plush chairs, couches, and a fluffy carpet. With high, bare ceilings, the space is ample yet strangely sterile.

Two Columbia student EA members live there, and the student group uses the space for events and seminars. I visited recently for a meeting of [the Arete Fellowship](#): an 8-week reading group and seminar exploring the core tenets of EA, most notably the question of how one can do the most good. Participants meet once a week for an hour after reading or watching an hour’s worth of material in advance of the session. The weeks progress like a typical seminar, with discussion leaders, a syllabus, and a designed focus for each class.

However, this is no dorm room bull session—the discussion is not free-form but well-moderated. Designated discussion leaders serve as proto-professors. The readings are mostly if not exclusively produced by EA-affiliated organizations and individuals, consisting of reports from nonprofits, think tanks, and charities, as well as books and journal articles. A selection of notable EA-affiliated books rests on the windowsill behind my seat, among them William MacAskill’s canonical *What We Owe The Future* accompanied by Peter Thiel and Blake Masters’ *Zero to One*.

The moments before the meeting felt like a spell in a doctor's office waiting room. I was expectant, slightly hesitant, but also keen to figure out what this was all about.

The two discussion leaders, Hazard and Columbia EA president Dave Banerjee, CC '25, as well as the three members of the night's reading group sat in the room with me. The former president of EA and current co-VP of the AI Safety Program Rohan Subramini, CC '24, later estimates that in the past three years, that room (or one like it) has hosted about three to four hundred Columbia students, all of whom chose to take part in one of EA's many fellowships or programs. This semester alone, Columbia EA is offering at least five separate fellowships—some with multiple sections per week.

Written in brown marker on a whiteboard in front of the group were the letters "I—T—N." They stand for Importance, Tractability, and Neglectedness, an important framework EA has for looking at what they call "causes," or global issues in need of attention. By calculating how important, tractable, and neglected a cause is, an EA adherent identifies the optimal causes to support in order to "maximize" the amount of good one can do. This "maximization of good" often takes the form of figuring out how best to divide and donate one's capital, a strategy that, to me, feels if not privileged towards the wealthy, then at least targeted to them.

Following this framework, today's discussion is on "existential risk," a key idea in EA and a major point on the syllabus. The Stanford Existential Risk Initiative, itself an EA-affiliate, defines existential risks as, for example, "extreme climate change, nuclear winter, global pandemics (and other risks from synthetic biology), and risks from advanced artificial intelligence." As Hazard said in our interrupted interview, "existential risks have increasingly become the focus of most people who are using EA to guide their professional choices." It's easy to see why.

While the likelihood that any one of these "existential threats" *individually* occurs is fairly small, according to EA-affiliated philosopher Toby Ord's book *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity*, the chances of an existential catastrophe occurring in the next century is a terrifying 1 in 6. In other words, it's a worldwide game of Russian roulette. While many doubt Ord's odious estimate, few if any in EA would question the existence and importance of existential risk. Many within the organization pledge to try to mitigate the effects or stop these from occurring. During the discussion of these existential risks, I noticed a slight but distinct apocalyptic undertone—a focus on the end of the world that made it seem not only possible, but nigh.

The strategy pursued by many EAs to "effectively" do good in the world is to pick a career where one is making a targeted and positive impact, which, to them, is quantifiable. Driven by concerns about these "existential risks," many EAs pursue careers in AI research, medicine, or the nonprofit world. For example, Subramini, a physics-turned-CS major, hopes to pursue a career studying how to align AI with human values: "I've switched to being a computer science major, in large part, because I think the influence of AI on the world is likely to be very large and could go very well or very poorly."

Besides existential risk, nearly all EAs consider such issues as global poverty, disease protection, or animal welfare to be highly important, tractable, and neglected causes. Banerjee told me that he has taken a pledge (common among EAs) to donate at least 10% of his income to targeted effective causes throughout his life. Currently, most of his donations go to animal welfare charities; indeed a seemingly disproportionate percentage of EAs are vegans, and most care deeply about animal rights. Banerjee sees it as an issue he can directly impact: "When I think about those causes [existential risks], and I compare them to animal welfare, it's just so hard for me to seriously compare these two issues because on one

hand, I'm seeing animals being tortured for their entire lives, in conditions worse than the worst forms of torture we've ever inflicted on humans, and I think this is a really hard question to reconcile."

Upon hearing Banerjee's reply, one thing stood out to me besides his impassioned plea: the varied—and seemingly contradictory—frameworks of thought that inform EA's program. While the organization does not purport to have a single credo or ideology, there are two discordant strands developing within EA regarding their strategy for achieving "the good": one emphasizing donations towards select groups focused on solving present-day "causes", and another on choosing careers that can best help solve "existential" problems.

These approaches are best exemplified by two separate and equally influential EA-adjacent non-profits: GiveWell and 80,000 Hours. While GiveWell focuses on the "cost-effectiveness" of donations to certain charities—attempting to quantify or "maximize" the "effectiveness" of one's donation—80,000 hours devotes itself to advising "people with an undergraduate or postgraduate degree" and "who live in rich, English-speaking countries: especially the U.S. and U.K." on how to pick a career which has the most "impact."

Although their approaches are not mutually exclusive, these organizations do appear to represent an essential schism in EA. Yet, it is also in this schism that we see our first essential component of the EA movement: to whom it pitches itself.

While these two approaches do appear to be quite different at first (and are different to an extent), they both are philosophies for the global 1%: those with significant education, money, and privilege. It seems like these people, and these people alone, are the changemakers for EA.

...

Within this "schism," there is one concept that seems to drive the discussion more than any other, and seems to profoundly matter to most of these EA "changemakers."

Uncomfortably shifting in my seat, I listened as Banerjee and Hazard explained the basic EA program in the seminar, with both of them coming back regularly to a seemingly central concept that I didn't quite recognize: longtermism. Trying in vain to remember the concept from the EA literature I'd read to prepare, I jostled the Peanuts Christmas mug that sat on the table in front of me, Snoopy smiling along with my confusion.

"Longtermism is the argument that not only do humans living right now have moral value, not only do animals right now have moral value," Banerjee expanded later in his interview, "but perhaps beings that have yet to exist also have moral value."

Moreover, many longtermists would say that we should place the same or a similar moral value on someone yet to be born as someone who's alive right now. A contentious subject among EAs more generally, the debate certainly rages at Columbia: Subramini is a longtermist, Banerjee is at least sympathetic, and Hazard is ambivalent. But few, if any, EA members have no opinion on longtermism and the potential implications that the idea has for the movement and the world.

Longtermism, as an idea, struck me almost immediately as something different—something radical. The proposition that all future beings have innate moral value is not self-evident, and is, at its core, controversial.

When one concerns oneself with the horizon of future possibilities it would seem to be easy to lose track of present suffering. Moreover, a philosophy that only concerns itself with “existential” risk has the potential to momentarily forget, or even shrug off, “lesser” risks. Mass exploitation and death seem like small potatoes when compared to the end of everything.

It was also at this point that I couldn’t help but feel the essential *maleness* of the room and how this philosophy seemed to give and take away agency to those it deemed to be worthy. In a room where nobody was capable of carrying a child, I couldn’t help but wonder what longtermists think about abortion, and whether or not the rights of the theoretical descendants of a woman superseded her right to have or not have them.

Soham Mehta ’24, a former Arete fellowship participant, told me that longtermists “see the horizon of our moral concern as essentially infinite.” Mehta, however, is no longer involved in EA. He ceased being involved with the organization formally, skeptical of both longtermist philosophy and the EA movement at large. “With longtermism, there’s the paradox that way more people are always going to live in the future,” he said, “than live presently. When are you going to care about people who live now? You’ll always have an excuse to not care about poverty now.”

While still discussing longtermism, Mehta points out the mostly unsaid class dimensions of EA. “It’s a really good excuse for rich people to donate their money to really eccentric causes that you can rationalize as being more effective, but aren’t actually more effective.”

...

During that first EA meeting of mine—sitting on the folding chair in that airy, pale living room—I found myself thinking of a quote found in Scott Turow’s 1978 memoir *One L*, an account of the trials and tribulations of his first year of Harvard Law School. The author describes how, in the process of “learning to love the law,” one learns a second language he dubs “Legal.” “Of course, Legal bore some relation to English—it was more a dialect than a second tongue—but it was very particular,” he writes. “Moreover, throughout Legal I noted an effort to avoid the normal ambiguities of language and to restrict the meaning of the word.”

Like Turow at the beginning of his legal education, I found myself an outsider looking in on a tight-knit, rarified world that spoke a language that seemed like my own but that, for all intents and purposes, I could not speak. The terms they used felt like a motley mix of Silicon Valley buzzwords, philosophical idioms, and phrases that belong in a non-profit meeting room, collected in a dialect that I penned hastily in my notes as “EAish.”

After several weeks of this immersion in the EA milieu, I caught myself slipping more than once into the EA lingo: thinking in terms of “causes,” approaching problems through the “ITN framework,” and using phrases in my writing such as “capital allocation” and “global governance.” The language is pervasive and, to me, that seems like the point: In redefining language, one can redefine the world.

But to what extent does EA actually *want* to redefine the world, and how do we know that they will go about it in an ethical way?

Many EAs identify either themselves or the movement at large with utilitarian philosophy. While some don’t accept this label willingly, it’s easy to see how the movement may be stuck with it. While EA and

utilitarianism are hardly ideologically identical, it would be hard to argue that they don't share many views, and that utilitarians and EAs could often find common cause.

Theoretically, many EAs would view two lives saved anywhere as more valuable than a single life saved in one's own community—a pretty boilerplate utilitarian position, but radical nonetheless. In her much-publicized talk at an EA conference at Berkeley in 2016, Ajeya Cotra puts a classic EA position quite succinctly: “Choosing from our heart is unfair.” Moral intuition is rarely at home in EA, and the unquantifiable is seldom welcomed.

Utilitarianism, as a philosophy, is not intuitive to me. Mehta agrees, objecting further: “What's the point of mechanically doing good if you're losing your capacity to connect with your community—for example, caring about small-scale change, like working in a soup kitchen in the US?” he asked. “That is objectively less effective than becoming a quant and then donating your money to fund vaccinations in a foreign country, but you should still work in a soup kitchen because that's part of what it means to lead a full, grounded life.”

The notion of a “full and grounded life” does seem to be foreign in most EA circles. The inherent value of your own life—not merely as a vehicle for good—is not often emphasized. Instead, humanity is thought about as an abstract idea: a cause to be advanced, and a group to be saved. While noble, this crusade seems to come at the cost of our individual humanity, and the role that humanity plays in our local communities.

Furthermore, Mehta finds fault with EA's lack of engagement with the local community, and its focus mostly on educated professionals, or in this case, college students: “I think if EA ever did anything beyond education in Morningside Heights,” he said, “that would be anathema to their own philosophy.”

Carol Chen, GS '23, another former Arete fellow, also felt uneasy about EA's quantitative and utilitarian side: “The whole idea that we should allocate resources purely out of a maximization of measurable goals seems to me to be anti-humanistic, and also not aligned with projects I personally wanted to take on.”

The conflict between the quantifiable and the unquantifiable is a difficult one and seems to make humanities majors like Chen feel as if they were caught in a bind: “That brought me into kind of a cognitive dissonance,” she said, “because on one hand, I think I am committed to trying to do good in the world beyond my selfish or hedonistic pursuits, but the other I just couldn't see myself being an AI researcher, or being someone who just dedicated myself to these concrete goals.”

Given the opportunity to get anything across to me at the end of our interview, Hazard made a counter-argument worth considering: “Effective Altruism shouldn't cancel out our sort of intuitive moral associations with people—treating people around you well, but also showing concern for our local communities,” he said. “If you think of it, empathy is the foundation for Effective Altruism.”

Hazard made his case compellingly and convincingly, and, to me, the idea of empathy as the foundation for EA seems exactly right—that's the problem. In the idea of empathy, there is an inherent separation between the self and the other, where one doesn't form bonds based on common cause—which would be solidarity—but instead attempts to view the world from the perspective of the individual “empathized with.” This is an altruistic worldview.

This idea of the inherent separation between the empathetic and the empathized is something Mehta discussed with some EAs when he was in the fellowship: “They told me verbatim that human progress is

'heavy tailed.' What that means is a few people—you could call a cognitive elite—produce the bulk of things and move humanity forward. The everyday person doesn't, but a Columbia student who's already been filtered to an extent fits the bill. It's much more worth their time to focus on Columbia students who are producing that 'heavy tailed' progress."

This is not a solidaristic companionship with those around you but is fundamentally high-minded: a 'cognitive elite' empathizing with and potentially helping the non-elite.

...

Later in his book, Turrow describes how by learning "Legal" he "had the perpetual and elated sense that I was moving toward the solution of riddles which had tempted me for years." To be honest, at the end of my time in the EA world, I didn't have this feeling that Turrow describes. I didn't feel elated, moved, or even all that convinced. But what I did feel from all of the EAs around me was an incredible sense of passion, honesty, and dedication—one that did light a spark in me.

Mehta put it best: "They're very kind people. I think one thing you find in EA is that there's not much artifice on the level of individual members—I think the people really do care ... They really sacrifice because they really believe in what they do. And that's refreshing."

The EAs I met were always trying to be effective at their altruism; honestly evaluating their own actions was an essential part of their life. When I asked any of the EAs that I interviewed if EA influenced their way of life, all said versions of "yes, definitely." They are decidedly not hypocritical, and all act on their beliefs with a conviction that is frankly, from a non-believer, inspirational. Coming from the sarcastic and pessimistic political world I seem to inhabit, this honest idealism was refreshing.

While not necessarily rooted in any EA doctrine, this idealism reinforced in me the idea that passion and belief are not features to be embarrassed about—they ought to be striven for. Change doesn't come about through incoherent pessimism (a plague on any college campus) but through actionable and passionate belief.

We all too often fall into the trap of unactionable abstractism—and I would argue EA does as well sometimes—so instead of being armchair elitists, we must embrace the embarrassment of true belief, of faith, and start to believe again.

Thirteen Interludes From Vacation
By Zibia Bardin

The following is an excerpt from a longer work.

1.

I visit my grandmother. Outside, the earth presses its face into a pillow.

My grandmother's back is to us when we come in. Her spine is jagged and veers like an unresolved conflict in impossible directions. Her hair is bright white. There's not a lot of it. I feel there are great big oceans between each piece of me today. Continental drift. Her room is filled with things, a telephone, magazines, old receipts, flowers, oddly placed framed photographs, rolls of paper towels. The objects seem to have been lifted from the backdrops of other people's lives and piled here.

She is very slowly eating a meal: chicken, broccoli, mashed potatoes, apricots. Everything is blended. Chicken smoothie. Next month, she will be 100. Her picture from the navy is hung very high on the wall, right next to the fire alarm. She blinks out at me from it in dark lipstick and satin skin. I wish I had known her then. Everything I had planned to say to her has been slowly turning to sand in my throat for the past hour, so I don't say anything. I sit in the armchair next to the bed and drift. She lets me.

2.

Jeffrey drives and plays the radio, which announces to us something about a fifty-thousand year old comet, to which he remarks, "I'm very suspicious of that. Who was around to say that it was fifty-thousand years old? Who was around back then?" Last semester, I had to memorize a lot of stuff about carbon dating. I look out the window. The cars go. Carbon exists in two isotopes. We can tell time by looking at rocks and measuring electricity inside them from thousands of years ago. It is beginning to rain. Jeffrey tells me he thinks the government did 9/11.

I am trying very hard to get my driver's license. I am still working on parking.

Jeffrey is the driving instructor I hired.

3.

DRIVING TEST RESULT:

FAIL

SCORED ITEMS:

FAILS to ADEQUATELY observe/use CAUTION: 10

FAILS to SIGNAL: 5

POOR engine CONTROL/ accel

eration: 10

DELAYED BRAKING/ABRUPTBRAKING: 10

INATTENTIVE to traffic: 10

-LANE MARKINGS.

4.

Image One: The sky spreading over itself at dusk: a spilled glass of water on a paper tablecloth: the blue whale in the Natural History museum. This is my favorite color.

Image Two: Your eyes against the flush of September and the godly green of the trees behind them, I leaned over on my knees to look at them better. I barely knew you then and I was completely porous to your every word, gesture, the way your eyes held light like a baseball glove.

Image Three: I am sitting behind you in the canoe. The down on the back of your neck is gold and you are wearing a red bathing suit with no back. The water is black-green. Sometimes when someone says something funny, you turn to look at me while you're laughing.

Image Four: It's raining a little bit on the roof. We all went up here to see the fireworks but they had ended by the time we got there. The wind is light blue and I can feel each rib cage expand and contract next to me. Someone is passing around a bottle of champagne. They gave us a new year. I think to myself that my grandmother was born in 1923.

5.

There's so much held in an interlude, a second, a glance, the moment before the lights in the movie theater come back on—and in this case I'm stoned in the back row sandwiched between my parents, weeping at the end of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, because everything is not everywhere all at once, everything is certain, immediate, at once love and the warning of its end.

Going, going, going... And I am watchingwatchingwatching.

Permanently trapped in the projection room,
unable to to unsee the beauty which flashes before me.

the sky, your eyes, a red bathing suit;

I grew vines out of my head that I hoped would one day traverse glass
but no matter how much I called in the rain the cat was gone.

The body forms energy minimized structures;

An arrow aimed for zero,

and all this, the colors, like a long sun set, is a dying of the light, is the end of days:

I plan every word but I end up in the arm chair with sand in my throat,
asking if it's alright if we just sit here for awhile.

And how is it that the descent into zero can passes through this,

your inopportune phone calls,

words flapping under my skin like seagulls at the beach:

and all the while the blue's being wrung out of the sky again.

When you left I carved my heart out every night but in the morning it was full again.

and I can not, for the life of me, stop this filling,

the drop, the fallingness of standing still—

I had my finger on the mechanism but the trick didn't work,

or else I never learned how to pause the record,

how to pull any kind of trigger anywhere,

how to make a very small path through sand

but just wide enough to get your shoulders through,

even in the rain, even in the dark.

