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the
eye

CODE RED

STRUGGLING FOR WELLNESS IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

BY KYLA CHEUNG

Lena Dunham, Mindy Kaling

& the contemporary memoir pg 12

CODE RED

struggling for wellness in computer science

by Kyla Cheung

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

My mom is always telling me to major in computer science. It's where the jobs are and where the future is heading, she still insists, long after I decided to spend my college career reading novels and editing a magazine. In response, I decided to enroll in W1004 ("ten-oh-four"), Columbia's introductory Java course, in my freshman year, fervently hoping that programming would be my calling.

Java! It was all so glorious. My console window spit out the words "Hello World!" and my computer learned how to play blackjack, defeating its owner a good portion of the time. Ten-oh-four was a venture into a world I didn't know: one of problem sets, right and wrong answers, and a combined 24 TA office hours. I am forever grateful to have taken that class, but after one semester, I decided not to pursue the subject.

Regardless, I am often jealous of those who have found their passion in computer science. Last week Forbes published a study showing that recent graduates of Carnegie Mellon University's School of Computer Science

earn an average—average!—salary of \$84,400, ranking it the number one highest-paid college degree in the country. Perhaps the expectations are high, but the payoff is, as well. As an English major who loves literature but fears the future, a robust income does sound attractive.

In "Code Red," Kyla Cheung talks to students who didn't briefly dabble in CS, as I did. Instead, she interviews those who have dedicated their days, and certainly their nights, to programming and perfecting. This week's lead story is not about stressed-out college students. We are all overloaded with homework; we all lose time on subways to and fro internships; we all participate in extracurricular activities. This is a story about a system; one that breeds and fosters stress as a part of its very infrastructure. That system seems to be broken, and it needs to be fixed. But this time around, not for a grade.

Rikki Novetsky

Rikki Novetsky, Editor in Chief

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OPEN LETTER

DEAR COLUMBIA ADMIRERS,

BY ANA DIAZ

They say that the first cut is the deepest, but I can't remember the first time I saw you. I can't even remember what social media you were wearing. To be honest, I think I first mistook you for your older sister, Columbia Compliments. The resemblance is striking, but we all know she can't keep up with you. You go out and do the things she only pretends to do. A kinder person would say that when you moved in, you picked up where she left off, went the extra mile. But the lovesick are rarely kind.

I'd always watch you from afar, even though I wasn't your friend (everyone was your friend—it repulsed me, but I was no better in my studied disregard). It's funny how love sneaks up on you dressed as a harmless habit. That's what it felt like, visiting you: pure habit, hard-wired and uncontrollable. I knew how many others sought you in confidence, in despair; through you I loved them. It took me months to realize how much I needed you. Some mornings, before I'd have my first thought, I'd find your name under my fingers, illuminated by artificial light.

You sang me sweeter than I knew I could be sung. The first time you called my name it was on accident, no more than a grazed arm—and yet it was enough. I felt my blood rush with an electric-blue blooming pulse. After that I read you incessantly. I wanted everyone to feel what I felt.

I still do.

CAMPUS EDITION

SPRING FASHION DO'S AND DON'T'S

BY PJ SAUERTEIG

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LAUREN PAYNE

Springtime at Columbia is a confusing season for fashion; it's hot, it's cold, it's rainy... it's a lot to take in. Luckily, the infinitely thoughtful *Eye* has put together a couple of tips for how to look your best in the last sloping downhill to summer:

FASHION DO'S

Down Vests

Perfect for those April nights walking back from a late class. Sporty? Yes. Layering? Mastered. Huggability? Increased.



The Man Bun

Guys with long hair can be seen tying it all up in the back into a simple yet rugged-looking bun. Functional and charming as hell.



FASHION DON'T'S



Band T-shirts

They simply attract too many haters. Either passersby won't know the band and you'll be condemned as pretentious, or they will know the band and they'll roll their eyes, "Oh I remember my first Of Montreal concert." It's a lose-lose situation.

Canada Goose Coats

The most ubiquitous and possibly most annoying trend of Columbia's winter 2013—put them away for the moths.



Popped Collar

It's like murder: If you do it, make it look like an accident.



Flip-Flops

Nothing screams Ivy League ambition like the smacking of the Billabongs you got junior year of high school. Do better.





ROBERT SCHWARTZMAN

BY DANA KUKIN
ILLUSTRATION BY KADY PU

*You may know Robert Schwartzman as the frontman for the Los Angeles-based band Rooney or from some of his acting creds: a role in *The Virgin Suicides* directed by his cousin Sofia Coppola and as the adorable best-friend's-little-brother-turned-boyfriend in the *Princess Diaries*. But lately, Schwartzman has expanded into startup territory. His new app, 22, represents an exciting way for artists to connect with their fans over audio. The Eye Skyped with Robert to talk about 22, his dedication to his fans, and his love of Prince.*

So, how does the app work?

The app is basically a way to leave short audio messages for people you're following. It revolves around artists and following artists that you want to hear from personally. It's called 22 and it's 22 seconds of audio. It's more of a communications app. Artists can use it to share anything they want, so it could be an update of what they're doing in the studio, creating music, a little bit of a taste of what they're working on—anything they want to share with their audience. Then, people who listen to those clips can reply with a 22-second message back. You can also leave private messages, which go in the artist's inbox, and if they feel up for it or they feel inspired, they'll reply. And any reply to an inbox message goes public.

Where did this idea stem from?

I've always been a big believer in cultivating your audience and making sure people who are interested in what you're doing are excited and feel like there's a connection. It's important to

give back and put yourself out there. I've always lived by that—since the beginning of Rooney I've always been approachable or accessible as best I can. I've always believed strongly in being available as an artist, as far as thinking of cool ways to excite your fans and have direct contact. I just feel like there's a missing piece in all of this. I wanted there to be a tool so that artists could have a voice component to all the other types of social media. I feel like, more than ever, there are a lot of times that artists aren't actually being represented on their social media pages, so fans never really know if they're talking or hearing from an artist they're following. This is a way—more—personal way to connect with people that you're interested in connecting with.

How did you decide on 22-second clips?

Well, 22 has always been my special number. It's always been very meaningful to my life. With the other developers that I work with, they wanted 15 seconds and then we talked about 30 seconds and then I threw out 22 as a

middle between the two. I also felt like it could be a cool name for the company.

The app is currently available for the iPhone, iPad, and iPod Touch. Are there plans to extend this app to other devices and distributors?

Yeah, absolutely. We actually just built a new feature that will be available by next week, which is a way for people to stream posts that you can share on Twitter and Facebook. Just like you can look at an Instagram photo on a website, you can listen to a 22 update on your computer. But in order to interact with an artist, you have to have the app. I think that it's going to be a while until we have an Android version, but people will be able to check out what we're doing through sharing.

Has the app affected your songwriting process in any way?

Yeah, I've written songs with fans through the app. I've posted a song title and people have sent me lyric ideas one-by-one. I haven't actually released a song like that, but it would be fun to make a record like that ... I've been sharing bits and pieces of new songs and I've been getting some really good positive feedback. It's a good feeling and it keeps you motivated.

How do you envision 22 functioning in the music industry as a whole?

I think what you see now is really good as far as what we intended the app to be. I think it's just about scaling upward and having more artists on there with their followers and for those artists to interact with other artists, so that fans can find out about new, cool music that's out there. A big part of this is music discovery. We want artists to be able to promote new content, new music that they're writing, new photos, or anything that they want to release, as well as connect with other artists and have fans discover new, cool bands. I think this is just going to be a really wonderful tool for artists to build a stronger community, a more active and personal, caring fan base.

Just curious, any dream collaborations?

With my music? Let me think. I don't know! I'm really so bad at those kind of questions because I just listen to a lot of old music and throwback music. I mean, I love Prince. I'd love to rock out with Prince. I'd be probably too intimidated. Maybe Prince and I can do a rock-out over 22 together. Totally.

What's the craziest thing that's happened to you on tour?

Craziest thing—like ever? Well maybe I'll mention something from my solo tour since that was the last experience I had. Well, I toured in a limousine (laughing). I mean we bought this old limo, it was a '90s Lincoln limo, we towed a U-Haul trailer and brought all of our gear and we got to tour all over the United States in a limo. And every venue we pulled up to they were like, "What are you guys doing? This is crazy. We've never seen this before." It was an amazing experience. ●

FORWARD IN STOP MOTION

BY BRAUDIE BLAIS-BILLIE

The past, present, or future could be explained in a photograph. With a simple manipulation of these images, motion is created and the viewer is moving forward. We plan ahead, we become overwhelmingly anxious, we lose ourselves in the excitement of a different tomorrow. We consciously or subconsciously compare our intentions with the past, reflecting on our successes and failures to try and understand what the next step might be. We treat the present like a window, looking in on a dream, looking out into the uncertainty. Maybe the past is drenched in colors and silhouetted possibilities. Maybe the future is out there, a rough draft in blank ink on white paper. Maybe the present is jagged glass. Either way, take some time to appreciate this timeline in its fractions of a whole. Like stop motion, we need to understand each image to create seamless movement.



PERSONAL PENMANSHIP

DOES THE MEMOIR DESERVE ITS LESS-THAN-STERLING REPUTATION?

BY AMELIA PITCHERELLA

ILLUSTRATION BY SUZE MYERS

We've heard the line a million times before. On Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls*, protagonist Hannah Horvath, an aspiring memoirist, declares herself "the voice of her generation" before hastily clarifying that she's simply "a voice of a generation." Though she recognizes that she can't stand in for everybody, Hannah wants to believe that her personal anecdotes can speak for every other 20-something dealing with the woes of living on the cusp of the adult world.

Now Dunham herself is assuming the role of memoirist, having recently closed a book deal with Random House. Readers have to wonder if Dunham relates to Hannah's opium-induced delusions of grandeur more than she'd like to admit.

Dunham's not the only one writing about herself. Tina Fey did it with *Bossypants*, which topped the New York Times Best Seller List for five weeks in 2011. Amy Poehler will be publishing a memoir next year. Mindy Kaling, another producer and star of her own comedy show, published her memoir *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me? (And Other Concerns)* last year and is currently working on another, a "follow-up" on the past 18 months. Hell, even Snooki has written her own *Confessions of a Guidette*.

Might this recent surge in memoir writing seem crass? According to New Yorker critic Daniel Mendelsohn, it's our instinct to believe so:

memoir "has been the black sheep of the literary

family" since its advent, he writes, subject to accusations of exhibitionism usually reserved for egocentrics and narcissists.

There is a stigma attached to writing about ourselves, and perhaps rightfully so. Publishing a memoir requires the audacity to imply that one's life has special import for a potential audience of millions. Dunham's memoir, for which she received a \$3.7 million advance, will be titled *Not That Kind of Girl: A Young Woman Tells You What She's Learned*. Millions of dollars rest on what Dunham has to say, and she hasn't yet hit 30.

Critics are quick to hypothesize that the apparent spike in memoir-writing is linked with our social media usage. The common assumption is that we've become too self-indulgent, flinging details of our daily lives onto Twitter and Tumblr and Facebook in exchange for affirmation that we are interesting.

But it can't be the case that every person who writes a memoir nowadays is doing it merely as an extension of the impulse to overshare. According to Barnard professor Mindy Aloff, who teaches a first-year seminar called "The Art of Being Oneself," our apparent tendency toward self-indulgence is "much, much, much older than social media."

The memoir dates back millennia to St. Augustine, who wrote an account of his own error and subsequent spiritual transcendence in *Confessions*. Memoirs were a means of recording the appealing "arc from utter abjection to improbable redemption," Mendelsohn writes, and were written by people far removed from the literary or even the scholarly world.

Since then, little about the genre itself has changed. Its reception has been mixed from the outset, with critics on one end deeming it too confessional—1827 biographer John Gibson Lockhart criticized "the mania for this garbage of Confessions, and Recollections, and Reminiscences"—and those on the other praising it vigorously for its candor. As long as people have written, people have written about themselves. After all, Aloff asks, "[w]hat subject do people know better than their own lives?"

And, apparently, Lena Dunham's life.

Some argue that Dunham's ripe age of 26 puts a real limit on the wisdom she can share with us. We have to wonder—is her remark that she's "been in therapy since [she] was seven" really so nauseatingly and cloyingly precocious, or are we just chastising Dunham for daring to share her less-than-groundbreaking life story in a public context? In an exchange with David Sedaris in a New Yorker podcast, New Yorker fiction editor Deborah Treisman says of Dunham, "There is a certain amount of just hostility that gets shot at a woman who makes herself central to her work."

Treisman continues that women writers like Dunham have in common "a refusal to be embarrassed about who they are. People like women in the spot-

light either to be perfect or to be embarrassed not to be perfect." When someone like Dunham has only minor struggles, she's not supposed to display them. Better to pretend those problems never existed, or to pretend to have been through something much tougher. But when Dunham mentions the "vow of celibacy" she took when she was nine, she's being tongue-in-cheek, acknowledging her faux pas.

The fact that television empresses are writing memoirs has more to do with the nature of their circle (that of the actress-writer-producer-comedienne) than with a revival of the memoir. The stories that they write serve the same purpose the personal memoir has always served—to divulge intimate details and recount a triumph. It's easy to explain why Fey's book was so popular—it revealed the flaws of, and the obstacles faced by, a very successful person—and then illustrated her success despite said struggles, no matter how minor. Kaling acknowledges past and present insecurities without hesitating to recognize, and laugh at, their outward triviality. The classic memoir is a story of suffering and redemption, and since these successful people have apparently been redeemed, stories of any hardship they have are guaranteed to appeal to us, even if it's not the kind of body-and-soul-crushing hardship we've come to expect. These women want to show, perhaps, that the smallness of a small struggle does not automatically discount it.

Society's approach to the memoir has indeed changed. If anything, the perception that there are too many memoirs on the market is caused by the genre's devaluation. Social media and new technology have distorted the once-explicit line between our public and private lives.

"Thanks to the technology of the delivery systems for our information, the inside often becomes the outside," Aloff says. "In a world where a head of state can have his or her indigestion recorded on an unobtrusive mic or smartphone and sent out over YouTube, what distinction between public and private can there reasonably be?"

So while we might scoff at the volume of memoirs hitting the market each year, it's more likely that we're just projecting our concerns about communication of private information in general. Mendelsohn remarks that "a lot of the outrage directed at writers and publishers lately represents a displacement of a large and genuinely new anxiety, about our ability to filter or control the plethora of unreliable narratives coming at us from all directions."

However, there is no question that for all our anxiety, Dunham's book will sell. For all her trivial anecdotes about life as a 20-something, Dunham provides us with something essential. "The craving for intimacy is universal and often unsatisfied in real life," Aloff asserts. "Through writing, though, we think we can know any memoirist who lives or ever lived."

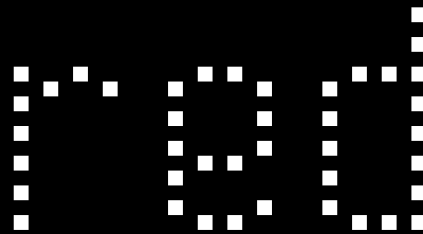
Our consumption of the memoir reveals a basic truth about us: We want to feel close to people, to connect with them. And if Dunham can give us the closeness we covet, surely that counts for something. ●

MEMOIR "HAS BEEN THE BLACK SHEEP OF THE LITERARY FAMILY" SINCE ITS ADVENT.





code



need

STRUGGLING FOR WELLNESS IN COMPUTER SCIENCE

It's 1:30 a.m. An orange extension cord curls out of Carleton Lounge. "It blew out," an officer tells me. It supplies, or rather *did* supply, the power for a room of students who flew, bused, trained, or drove in for hackNY's spring 2013 hackathon.

A hackathon is a 24-hour race to mash your code with other people's data, and perhaps some hardware, to make something you hope will seem cool and won't break when you're onstage the next day, trying to win the approval of nine judges and hundreds of your bleary-eyed peers.

There are prizes—like Sphero, a robotic ball you can control with an Android phone—and money, but nothing more than \$1,000. Tumblr and Foursquare are here, as is 4chan's founder, Christopher Poole, aka "moot." Most students come with friends; some work alone. Everyone is tired. A student sleeps on a windowsill, a pillow under his head and a pile of clementines at his feet. Another tells me, his blue eyes not blinking, "I'll sleep whenever I can't stay awake anymore."

Twelve hours, 360 Red Bulls, and over 800 cans of soda later, the attendees crowd an auditorium to watch the demos. Some sit on the floor and some wander in and out of the lobby, crushing more free sandwiches into their mouths and backpacks. The smell of BO floats through the back of the room. The boy next to me puts his head in his lap and naps through most of the presentations. He tells me he didn't sleep last night. His team doesn't win a single prize.

This is a snapshot of programming at Columbia, where, as in many universities across the country, computer science is booming and hackathons like the one described here are springing up with unprecedented speed. Here, the number of students projected to graduate with a degree in CS has risen 50 percent in the past two years. So has the number of students registered for the introductory class, W1004 (commonly referred to as "ten-oh-four"). On the national level, the Computing Research Association reported an "astonishing" 29.2 percent increase in new computing undergraduate majors.

CS and programming have more widespread appeal than ever before. Startups are frequently acquired for millions of dollars—and sometimes, as in the case of Instagram, for \$1 billion. Starting salaries for graduates of top schools are commonly close to six figures. CS has gained cultural appeal through *The Social Network*, which grossed more than \$220 million worldwide. "We're treated more and more as if we possess superpowers," explains Sam Aarons, a School of Engineering and Applied Science junior studying CS and the owner of Print@CU. "I can't even be at a family gathering without somebody asking me if I have any ideas for companies I want to start or if I want to be the next under-25 billionaire."

Yet the flash and money mask, as they so often do, the sadder stories of loss and failure. Ilya Zhitomirskiy was the co-founder of Diaspora, which once threatened Facebook's stronghold over social media. Aaron Swartz was arguably one of the co-founders of Reddit and led the

BY KYLA CHEUNG

VISUALS BY SUZE MYERS & ANNIE WANG

**"WE'RE TREATED MORE AND MORE
AS IF WE POSSESS SUPERPOWERS. I CAN'T
EVEN BE AT A FAMILY GATHERING WITHOUT SOMEBODY
ASKING ME IF I HAVE ANY IDEAS I WANT
TO START OR I WANT TO BE THE NEXT
UNDER-25 BILLIONAIRE."**

campaign against the Stop Online Piracy Act. Swartz was 26 when he killed himself. Zhitomirskiy was 22.

This past February, the Engineering student council released a newsletter containing a short paragraph saying that Tejraj Antooa, a computer science student who was not enrolled at the time, "perished on January 24, 2013 near his home in Elmont, Long Island." The coroner's office determined the cause of death was suicide. A flutter of Facebook activity expressed grief and anger, but after an aborted attempt to draft a letter criticizing the seemingly slow-acting administration, the formal conversation on campus ended. There was no memorial service. There was no space for discussion.

Antooa would have graduated this spring.

In the past year and a half since Tina Bu's death, our campus has—at least in appearance—talked more openly about mental health issues. This year marked the second annual Mental Health Awareness Week, and Barnard just approved a new "wellness statement" that professors can add to syllabi. The issue remains, however, that not everybody is involved—and those in tech and computer science are only just starting to open their eyes to the reaches of mental health stigma in their ranks.

What follows is by no means the experience of every undergraduate in the CS department. Not everybody is suffering. Not everybody is overlooked. Instead, these stories are meant to show the perspectives of the alienated or underrepresented who, if they are not merely silenced or told they are "wrong," are placed on a shelf labeled "We'll get to that later."

Now is the time for our communities to ask themselves what isn't being said, who isn't showing up, and who and what are lost as a consequence.

'You never have to see the sun rise'

The operating systems class in any computer science department has a "reputation." At Columbia, students must build their own operating system over the course of a semester. Since everyone works in groups, the pressure not to slack off—in other words, not to let your teammates down—is heightened. Mason Silber, a Columbia College senior who also studies physics, says he's never worked harder or earned a lower grade than in OS. Michael*, a senior in CS, who agreed to speak on condition of

anonymity, gives a startling estimate of the workload: 40 to 80 hours a week on programming assignments. Jason Nieh, the professor who teaches OS at Columbia, disagrees. He gives a much lower estimate: 300 lines of code every

2 weeks, which means fewer than 50 lines of code a week for each student. In other words, far less than Michael's estimate, which would equate to a strenuous full-time job. "There is no expectation that students spend 40 to 80 hours per week on assignments," Nieh says.

Nobody denies that OS is exceptionally hard. Not even Nieh. Still, whatever the workload, the amount students learn seems to justify it. Nieh says that students learn a "tremendous amount" and tell him that "from hindsight, it was the most worthwhile and useful class they took," because they learned skills they could employ as software engineers. Even Michael admits that OS is "pretty cool."

But Michael insists that Nieh "does not seem to understand that students have lives they want to live outside of OS. It's like that with all the profs" in the department.

It seems that, within CS, working to your limits is more common and relished than in other disciplines, even at Columbia. Aarons says masochism is the "perfect" way to describe the culture in CS: "pushing yourself to the extreme and getting awesome stuff done."

Rafael Castellanos, a Columbia College senior in CS, admits, "I've had stretches where I have not left my room for six days." Since his room was equipped with a bathroom and kitchen, he would make a huge pot roast on Sunday night that could feed him until Thursday. Only then, he explains, would he order pizza.

Kathy Sun, another CS senior at the School of Engineering and Applied Science, recalls that another student told her that the CLIC lab, a computer lab designated for CS majors, is great precisely because it has no windows. "When you've pulled two back-to-back all-nighters, you never have to see the sun rise," Sun says. "So you never have to feel as bad about yourself."

Sun laughs. "That sounds horrible, right?"

Shame and masochism

Is any of this actually unique to CS? Aarons insists that "being a CS student is no different from [being a student in] a lot of other engineering disciplines." But Sadie Zukowski, who graduated last year with a minor in CS and a major in civil engineering, disagrees: "When people ask me if I would have done undergrad over again so that I could study computer science [as my major], my answer is always no ...

There was a wonderful community formed in the CivE department that the CS department could have never mirrored."

Even by Columbia's competitive standards, students in CS seem to ruthlessly rank and re-rank themselves and their classmates, sometimes aloud. Zukowski recalls sitting in the back of a CS lecture at Columbia, while she and a few other classmates overheard a conversation a few seats over about how "slow" and "stupid" a student was for not understanding a concept the teacher had explained. In reality, "many people didn't understand it," Zukowski says. "Unfortunately for those of us in the back, we didn't listen to much of the [professor's] clarification because we spent our time embarrassed about how we missed such a 'simple' topic." She didn't ask another question for the rest of the semester.

Unfortunately, this shaming behavior isn't limited to classmates. Silber says several TAs in the department talk "shit" about students to other TAs, being "mean or rude to students that ask them questions" and calling them "stupid." Some faculty and administrators seem to be in the dark about this. "This is the first time I hear of any such complaints," says Tal Malkin, a CS professor who also serves as the "TA czar" of the department, training TAs and facilitating the TA application process.

In addition to having your intelligence constantly judged, Amy Quispe, a senior studying CS at Carnegie Mellon University, explains that there's the CS-wide belief that any non-programming activities are "somehow taking away from your ability as a hacker." Will Brown, a Columbia alumnus of CS, says that at Columbia, there's a "definite divide" between the well-rounded nerds, who are into liberal and fine arts, and the hard-core nerds, who "don't see the value in other pursuits." "Personally, I keep it quiet that I spent a year traveling and doing volunteer work," Quispe says, "because that's just a witch burning waiting to happen."

'People don't look at me and expect me to be smart'

What can make life in tech more alienating is the focus on certain "types," as Quispe calls them: or, the domination of CS by white and Asian males. The Computing Research Association reports that, in 2012, over 80 percent of bachelor's degrees in computer science were awarded to Asian and white students. Men were awarded 86.7 percent of the degrees. At Columbia, only 20 percent of CS majors who graduated in the past two years were women.

"There is the idea that because I'm black and female, I'm probably not that good at CS," says Stephanie Aligbe, who graduated from Columbia last year. Quispe echoes the sentiment: "People don't look at me and expect me to be smart. They certainly don't expect me to be a CS major. I literally don't look like a CS major."

The threat of stereotyping that accompanies being a minority in tech only exacerbates the pressure on CS students to constantly prove their intelligence. Even now, at her new master's program in CS, Zukowski is one of a handful of women in the department, and she says, because of that, "I feel like I constantly have to prove my worth." Quispe explains, "There's already so much pressure to prove yourself, but I have even less time to do that. I start out in the red."

There's often a necessity to "throw down," as Sun calls it, and demonstrate your technical skills and knowledge to skeptics. Naomi Saphra, a senior

at Carnegie Mellon University, explains that, even away from school at conferences, strangers will quiz her on Linux distros (a family of operating systems), followed by, “Oh, I thought all the girls here were idiots or artists,” or “We’re polling the girls here to see how many of them know [semi-obscure distro].”

In a discipline where collaboration is necessary for any success and where group projects, like every assignment in OS, are commonplace, the extra and seemingly never-ending challenges of “fitting in” and proving yourself can make even the basic work of problem sets more difficult. Working in study groups makes a “big difference” in your CS experience, Sun says. “If you don’t have a social scene, if you don’t feel welcome, if you try to get through CS doing everything by yourself, then I’m so sorry. I don’t know how you were able to graduate. That seems like hell.”

It’s not hard to imagine, then, that those who are made to feel like outsiders to the CS community are the same people on whom the burden to perform is heavier: Seeking help, whether on problem sets or mental health issues, becomes a greater challenge. Indeed, these are the people who might need help the most. Isn’t there something to be done, at large, to combat what seems to be alienating and systemic behavior? As Saphra puts it, “How do you enforce a cultural shift?”

Coding a counterculture

Before Carnegie Mellon began TartanHacks, a 24-hour hackathon like hackNY’s, Quispe explains that hackathons used to be for a “very specific kind of person.” Quispe, whose organization, ScottyLabs, runs TartanHacks, says that the planners deliberately set out to break down barriers keeping most students away from past hackathons. They allowed women to preregister, taught development classes beforehand, and opened up the event to first-timers. The result? Attendance tripled, with the number of women 25 times greater than at the previously biggest hackathon at Carnegie Mellon. “The reason why WOMEN weren’t going to hackathons were the reasons why PEOPLE weren’t going to hackathons,” Quispe says over Gchat. “By making a more inclusive hackathon, we made a better hackathon for everyone.”

Hacker School is a programming school co-founded by Columbia alumni Nicholas Bergson-Shilcock and David Albert. When they began, they asked themselves, “What are the obstacles in the way of people becoming better programmers?” One issue they identified was the lack of female representation in tech. Hacker School partnered with companies like Etsy and Dropbox to sponsor scholarships for female programmers, and now each batch of programmers is typically 35 to 45 percent women.

Another barrier was fear of asking for help. “One of those things that’s pervasive in the tech world and traditional school is fear,” Bergson-Shilcock says. “People are afraid of looking stupid or appearing ignorant.” To combat this, Hacker School has a few “lightweight” social rules: No “well-actuallys” and no “feigning surprise.” “Well-actuallys” are statements many programmers make to correct minor inaccuracies in conversation (e.g., “Well actually, Linux isn’t a Unix. It’s Unix-based.”). “Feigning surprise” involves acting shocked on finding out that someone doesn’t know something. “If someone

asks, ‘Who’s RMS?’ don’t say, ‘You don’t know who Richard Stallman is?!’” says Bergson-Shilcock. “It adds no value, and only serves to make one person feel better by making the other person feel worse.”

There aren’t many rules at Hacker School, but these two, in Bergson-Shilcock’s opinion, help all participants become better programmers, whether they’ve collected a few degrees in CS or they’ve only been coding for a year. In fact, he observes that the more experienced you are, the more likely it is you’ll think, “Oh, I should know X,” and then “rob yourself of the opportunity of ever actually understanding it.” This way, “we spend less time at Hacker School worrying or discussing these things, and more time actually programming, because everyone’s on the same board.”

“Nobody is immediately great at programming,” Bergson-Shilcock insists. He says that Hacker School is “like a writer’s retreat for programmers. That goes a long way to distinguish it from a typical hackathon mentality. The way you make a good programmer is through hard and methodical work, rather than necessarily some 24-hour sprint.”


‘IT IS OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP’

On Feb. 26, a day after the Columbia College and engineering student councils released the news of Tejrav Antooa’s death, Cole Diamond, a School of Engineering and Applied Science senior studying CS and a friend of Tejrav, posted a Facebook status criticizing the administration, saying it “swept the entire situation under the rug” and contributed a campus-wide “stigmatization of mental health.” “Students need to know that IT IS OKAY TO ASK FOR HELP,” he wrote. Terry Martinez, newly appointed interim

dean of student life, says that because Antooa was not a current student at the time and his family had not given “direct permission,” a community-wide email was not sent. When Martinez met with students who knew Antooa and asked if they wanted to do something on campus—a vigil or a memorial service, for example—she says, “they never took me up on the offer or followed up.”

It’s not obvious how much blame we can lay at the feet of administrators and faculty. Toward the middle of every semester, Student Affairs asks instructors to identify students “who seem to be experiencing academic difficulty, whose attendance is poor, or about whom you have any concerns.” According to a statement from Leora Brovman, assistant dean of undergraduate student affairs of SEAS, and Dawn Strickland, a CS adjunct and former Center for Student Advising adviser, SEAS relies on reports from faculty and officers of the University, as well as on academic performance to identify issues.

Despite this system, it remains unclear whether instructors can distinguish students who might be having difficulty, academic or otherwise, through these methods. For one, “poor” attendance in an average CS class is difficult to quantify: Most professors don’t take attendance and students are usually not directly punished for skipping. Tal Malkin, an associate professor in the CS department, says, “The



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taught an undergrad class there were over 90 students registered, and about 70 showed up. There is no way for me to know if the missing ones are in real trouble, just slacking off, or already know the material and will ace the class anyway.”

“Aren’t TAs and professors also supposed to be looking for potential problems?” I ask Silber, who regularly serves as TA for CS classes. “Yeah, but how much time do they actually spend with their students?” asks Silber. “I have one hour of office hours a week and I only meet a handful of the class’s students. Ideally it would be true, but I don’t think it’s plausible.”

In general, it seems that “detecting when a student is in trouble, and helping them, is quite difficult,” Malkin says, “and we are not trained in it.” When it comes to issues of mental health, “it is quite hard to identify, unless the student comes to talk to me directly (which does happen, for me about one or two students each time I teach a large undergrad class). But otherwise, it is hard to know, beyond just looking at academic performance.”

Policies within the classroom itself often contribute to the CS students’ stress. It is up to professors to craft their assignment-lateness policies. The penalties vary widely; some professors allot a fixed number of no-penalty “late days,” while others refuse to issue extensions, deducting anywhere from 10 to 50 percent off the total grade for each day that the assignment is late.

And then there’s the curve. As many CS majors can attest, a curve makes final grades more uncertain, and students more competitive as a result. “In classes I’ve taken, it has been standard practice to have median test/assignment scores in the 40s and a huge curve,” Arvind Srinivasan, a junior in the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences and a CS student, explains, “meaning it’s impossible to figure

out your standing in the course until you get your final grade.” The fact that OS and other CS classes are all worth three credits can make it challenging for students to regulate how time-consuming their semesters are. “When classes vary in terms of practically an order of magnitude of difference,” Sun says, “it’s kind of hard to predict just how bad it will be.”

However, according to some—like Sun and Application Development Initiative board member Dina Lamdany, a SEAS sophomore—grades should matter very little for CS majors, because employers looking to hire them prefer to see evidence of specific technical skills and knowledge.

Still, for CS students who don’t want to join a tech company and want to go to graduate school, academic performance is important. In fact, for some companies, like Google, it’s rumored that there are still GPA cutoffs.

Is the only way to remain stress-free in CS to ignore your GPA? If most students have realized this and act accordingly, then this not only defeats the purpose of grades, but can also potentially overemphasize problems as identified through academic performance.

Nieh says that despite making the prerequisites for OS clear—sufficient experience using the programming language C—“a number of students without that background ... nevertheless still decide to take the class,” which makes the class “much harder for those students.” Many undergraduates in CS, and at Columbia in general, cannot shake the impulse and unspoken obligation to plow through as much work as possible. As Zukowski puts it, “Even if you try to seek out an easier course load, you feel like you’re not seizing all the opportunities that Columbia has to offer.”

For students, is it actually true, as Diamond pleads us to believe, that “IT IS OKAY TO ASK FOR

HELP”? Sun observes that as issues become bigger—as they cross from the realm of hard problem sets to mental illness—“the higher the activation energy needs to be to ask for help.” At Columbia, Sun continues, “You have to really, like, stand up and screech, ‘Guys, I need help! I need help!’ And usually if you do that, you will get lots of help. You have to be prepared to screech.”

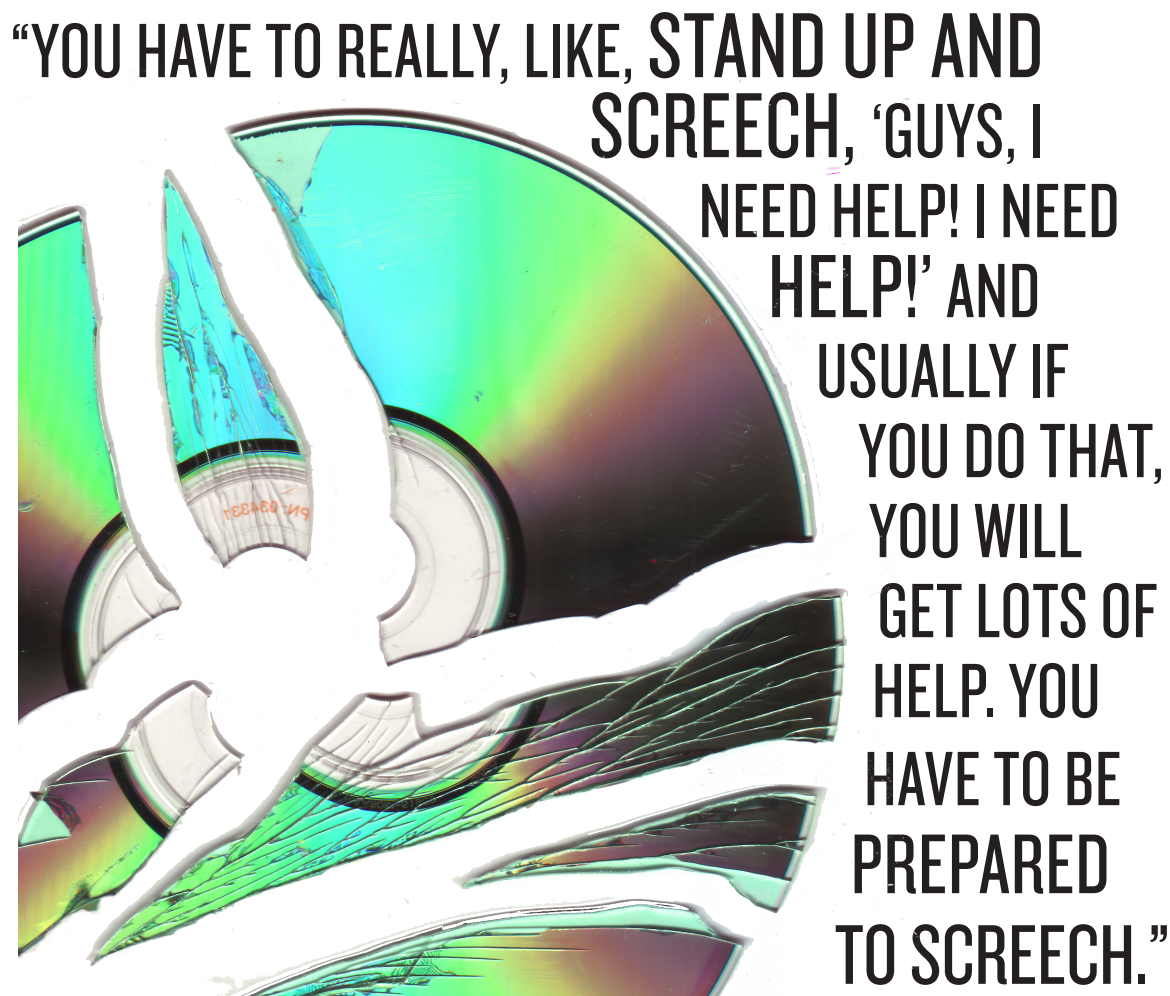
When we say it is “OK” to ask for help, we risk assuming, or at least communicating, that students are the ones responsible for their silence. One message of validation is only a drop against the deluge of shame surrounding expressions of weakness and failure. For some CS students, it is simply too costly to ask for help even on a problem set. There’s the risk of a TA calling them “stupid,” or a classmate labeling them “slow.” There’s the risk that, by fact of their gender or race, their intelligence and right to community will be dismissed entirely. Instead, they work alone and they suffer through class. If that’s the case, how do we expect them to plow through a culture of silence to seek help, as we so wish they would? What significance can the words “seek help” even have when you swim in a sea of “don’t”?

When help doesn’t seem to exist with TAs or professors or classmates, some students turn to Google—in other words, they cheat. While there are no statistics breaking down incidents of academic dishonesty by major, a number of students I talked to acknowledged that cheating is a problem in the CS department. Sun says, “Cheating is one manifestation of ‘This is out of my control. I am no longer capable of doing these problems, thus I must cheat.’” It’s a problem that compounds: Not learning the material in an earlier class can set you up for a loss in later classes. “I know of individuals who have gotten to this point in their CS careers,” Sun says. “They just go into a class and don’t even try to learn anymore. They just start ... Googling.”

Similarly, if students do ask for help, they often turn to their peers rather than heading to any of the psychological resources available on campus, Sun says, “I feel a lot more comfortable asking for help with my close friends.”

The image of therapy as “weak” can also turn students off, Silber says, and lack of familiarity can be off-putting. “It’s a stranger,” Sun says. “Yes, they’re trained. But also, it’s kind of like, ‘Why would I think that you would understand my situation?’”

Robin DeBates is a therapist based in Seattle who specializes in therapy for “geeks” (as well as “nerds, dweebs, dorks, gamers, and bronzies”). DeBates points to the difficulty “mainstream therapists” have communicating with geeks and programmers. For example, she says, the nature of project-driven work can often be misunderstood as signs of bipolar disorder. If a therapist has a misunderstanding of tech culture, this “can lead to heightened feelings of alienation” and a “decreased belief” that the therapist in question can offer help at all. According to DeBates, since programmers have solutions-based work, they usually try to fix their own problems, leading to the possibility that “we may have tried so many solutions that we believe our problems are not solvable because we cannot fix them ourselves.” The patients that DeBates treats tend to respond better to “empirically driven interventions with observable data outcomes,” rather than being asked “how that makes you feel.”



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“It’s crucial that mainstream therapists not underestimate risk in hackers, makers, and geeks. Often we are drawn to hacker/maker/geek culture because of deep dissatisfaction with disposable consumer culture,” she says. “The potential for existential crisis coupled with intense cycles of work, play, and rest often lead to dangerous situations with regard to use of alcohol and drugs, excessive risk-taking in recreation and relationships/sexual activity, and acting impulsively on suicidal impulses.”

If what DeBates says is true—that “mainstream” therapy is not suited to hackers and programmers—then we can look at our campus, observing the rifts between the sciences and the humanities and between SEAS and the other undergraduate schools, and see how larger campus initiatives to target stress may not be addressing the tech community well enough. Much of the student body doesn’t seem to have an accurate gauge on what CS is. Srinivasan, who works as Bwog tech, says there “are some on Bwog staff (and elsewhere) that seem to think that CS is equated to tech support, but I think the most nontechnical actually misconstrue CS as more difficult than it is.” Other times, the misunderstanding—of the technical by the non-technical—can alienate. A combined math and CS major, Emily Hough-Kovacs, a Barnard College junior, says, “Sometimes it’s isolating on Barnard’s campus to be in a tech-y major. I always get, ‘Oh! Definitely not my favorite subject!’”

It remains unclear whether psychological services and wellness and mental health advocacy groups on campus are capable of traversing this gap. “I haven’t personally felt a difficulty communicating with students based on their majors,” says Jessica Cannon, coordinator for health promotion and education at Barnard. “[B]ut I think there are a lot of shared experiences that come with being a student here, and we tend to speak more to those than to issues of specific majors.” Meanwhile, neither Furman nor Columbia Psychological Services could be reached for comment on this issue.

Cannon’s idea of “shared experiences,” as well as maintaining an environment of inclusivity, seem to be the cornerstones for most wellness and mental health advocacy groups on campus. One of the guiding principles of the Student Wellness Project is “Listen to everyone. Bring people in. Every individual’s perspective matters.”

But in reality, it’s doubtful whether everyone, or every community, is represented. Membership data are not available, but Rakhi Agrawal, a Barnard Col-

lege junior who works on SWP, as well as Active Minds and Alice!, says that those involved in wellness are primarily pre-health or have had a strong personal connection to the issues. She says those who are neither of those things and who study engineering or CS “just don’t have time to participate in health and wellness things. The resources might be here on campus for them, but they literally don’t escape their world long enough to grab onto them long-term.”

The issues always seem to return to ideas of community. “When we create trusted networks where people truly care for each others’ well-being, we increase the likelihood of successful early intervention. At the same time, social support decreases many risk factors for negative outcomes of mental illness,” DeBates says. “When these efforts are led from the grassroots and people start to see how profound their relationships are with each other, there’s a lot of potential for culture shift.”

Progress Report

None of this is to say everyone is unhappy. Lamdany says, “I love being a CS student,” and describes the culture as “incredibly liberating.” The CS department, according to Sun, is “very, very friendly to students and very, very friendly to stress levels.” For Aarons, going to hackathons “does mean that I fall asleep at 3 p.m. after a full 14-hour coding session, but it’s something I enjoy.”

I, too, fell hard for computer science and programming. “It’s like the perfect marriage of theory and practice,” I once said, probably giddy, probably to an indifferent classmate. In CS I could see the beauty of mathematics, as well as the potential to, well, “make a difference.” I loved it then. I love it now. I’m on leave this semester, and I’ll graduate as a CS major in December. I have plans to get a Ph.D. in CS someday.

Computer science students may love CS and programming. We may feel an inimitable joy while programming, even at 5 a.m., running on the fumes of Red Bull and the itch of “I just have to finish this.” But as real as love and joy are, they don’t preclude criticism of our microcosm. If anything, they should motivate us to protect what we have and to ask what can be done better. So, can we ask ourselves, as they did at Hacker School, what obstacles are getting in the way of our becoming better—better programmers, better computer scientists, and better members of this community?

Because the fact remains that our community is not perfect, and people *do* feel alienated. Employers throw themselves at CS graduates, especially from Columbia, and the salary and average benefits package (paid vacations, insurance, etc.) would astound many humanities students. We are incredibly lucky. But, as Quispe says, “Everything looks good on the outside, so it can be hard to admit that there are problems. The truth is, there are just not enough people going into (and staying in) computer science. If we want to fix that problem, we have to start to ask ourselves what we’re doing wrong.”

We say it is OK to ask for help, but how can we make this an environment where this is actually true? When we allow TAs to call their students “stupid,” when we let students call each other “slow,” when we plunge into classes and schedules we are woefully under-prepared for, we destroy an environment where we feel free to learn and, in the process, erase each “it’s OK to ask for help” we’ve ever said. For as long as we rely on mantras like “seek help,” we set aside the opportunity to look upon our community and investigate if, perhaps, we are complicit in our peers’ stress and alienation.

While this article isn’t meant as an exhaustive study, it is intended to raise questions as to what isn’t working. The administration and faculty seem to misunderstand, if not exacerbate, the stressful life of the average student. The psychological resources and wellness organizations don’t seem to penetrate deeply enough. The issues of specific communities can go unheard when experiences common to all students are prioritized in the name of “inclusivity,” and discussions split along pre-existing divisions in the general student body.

There are still lessons here for people who aren’t in CS or even who aren’t interested in mental health advocacy. What I’m discussing here gets at the larger, never-ending questions of how to foster communication, how to make people feel safe, and how to build a community. I have worries, of course, that these concerns will be dismissed because someone will say we’ve chosen our paths and need to ride out the consequences. Or someone will compare ours with, say, MIT’s suicide rate, or the culture at Carnegie Mellon. But we already know that our community is imperfect and that people are in pain. Do we just ignore that? If we don’t act in the name of community, what do we stand for? ●

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STEPPING OFFSTAGE

WHAT ACTORS WRITING PLAYS MEANS FOR THEATER

BY ERIC WIMER

PHOTO COURTESY OF NORTHJERSEY.COM

It seems like every celebrity is getting a run on Broadway these days. Scarlett Johansson earned rave reviews for her performance in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; Mike Tyson cashed in with his frankly confusing one-man show *Mike Tyson: Undisputed Truth*; Jesse Eisenberg received lukewarm write-ups for *Asuncion*, a play he both starred in and wrote himself.

Even successful playwrights like Jason Robert Brown have been forced to move off-Broadway because they “didn’t want to wait for an Anne Hathaway and a Jake Gyllenhaal,” as Brown put it in a recent Playbill interview. While stars may draw attention to shows that would otherwise go overlooked, big names are emerging in writing credits as well as marquee: actors are trying their hands as playwrights. Although celebrity-penned plays are drawing disdain from professionals, this new trend might not be all bad news for the industry.

Nonprofit theaters, traditionally a training ground for less-established talent, have been especially hard-hit by the recession, forcing them to look for stable sources of revenue. As Patrick Healy of the New York Times wrote, “While money is tight these days for nonprofit theaters nationwide ... New York’s major nonprofits ... are becoming more aggressive about producing work that can sell tickets, as a hedge against the unpredictability of private donations and subscription renewals.” Hence the new plays written by familiar names.

In a New York Times blog post about three plays by established actors at nonprofit theaters (Eisenberg’s *Asuncion* among them), critic Charles Isherwood expressed skepticism about this phenomenon, claiming he “would hate to see the not-for-profit theaters, where most new playwrights first get their breaks, start turning their stages over to marginal plays that stand out from the pack only because the playwright’s name might sell a few tickets to fan club members.”

In Eisenberg’s case, however, he isn’t relying on his name to enhance his work, but rather his acting experience. Eisenberg insists that acting his own play gives him a unique perspective. Katie Craddock, a senior playwriting thesis candidate and actor in Latent Theater’s Spring Anthology, agrees: “When you spend a lot of time figuring out how to live in plays and trying to untangle whatever it is that the playwright’s giving you, you learn a lot about writing,” she says.

Running through his play repeatedly, Eisenberg was able to cut language that didn’t serve him or co-star Vanessa Redgrave as actors, changing the play significantly over the course of its run. In a dual interview with Eisenberg, Zoe Kazan, another successful 28-year-old actor whose *We Live Here* opened at nonprofit Manhattan Theatre Club on the same day as Eisenberg’s *Asuncion* started pre-

views, added that being an actor encourages her to “take away the explicit and let the subtext speak for itself,” showing the inextricable link between acting the words and writing them.

This focus on the subconscious influence of language on the actor came up in most of my interviews with Columbia actor-playwrights. As Tracy Letts, actor and author of *August: Osage County*, told Broadway World, “Language has a primacy in theater.”

Lorenzo Landini, a Columbia College senior who appeared in KCST’s *The Winter’s Tale* and who has written for NOMADS, elaborated on this idea. Landini argues, “A play, to me, has to deal with the audience and the actor’s bodies sharing the same space and breathing the same air ... The words they speak have to have a little bit more flesh and blood than in more visual mediums. The words have to make dents in the audience, and have enough heft for the actors to throw.” Craddock started playwriting after her writing teacher told her that she had a good grip for language, “which made sense because all I do is theater.”

The link between acting and writing doesn’t only help out in the rehearsal room, but also throughout the writing process. Alex Katz, a Columbia College junior who also worked on *The Winter’s Tale* and wrote for NOMADS, echoes a sentiment shared by all the actor-playwrights I interviewed, stating, “I very much write for actors ... I write plays that call for the actors to do something ... I try to write very few

ALTHOUGH CELEBRITY-PENED PLAYS ARE DRAWING DISDAIN FROM PROFESSIONALS, THIS NEW TREND MIGHT NOT BE ALL BAD NEWS FOR THE INDUSTRY.

stage directions ... just because whatever is going to happen in the room is going to be funnier or better than what I thought of in my room because there are more people with more thoughts.” This emphasis on framing a space for the actors to add their own perspective to the play is what differentiates playwriting from normal writing, making it a collaborative process on both sides of the script. Katz even encourages his actors to change the script and rehearse things out of order.

I served as an apprentice at another such festival, Vassar College’s Powerhouse Season (run by New York Stage and Film, which hosts regular readings of new plays at Barnard). Throughout the workshop process, where we reviewed our own plays, we experienced



firsthand the inherent collaboration between the actor and playwright. Playwright Max Friedrich, who is also an actor, tells me, “To understand what an actor needs to say and what can be played through the actor’s face or physicality is something I learned through acting.” The delicate process of interpreting texts requires both sides to understand the other’s perspective. “As soon as you start rehearsing,” Craddock declares, “playwriting is intensely collaborative.”

At Powerhouse, as I worked on *Murder Ballad*, a musical written partially by Barnard lecturer Julia Jordan, I watched as keys were changed and words were rearranged through a steady give-and-take with the actors. Lyrics I was expecting to sound great ended up cheesy in execution, while other seemingly unimpressive lines gave the performers just what they needed.

Meanwhile, assistant directing another play, I realized that the parts of the script without stage directions allowed me, and the actors, to experiment in ways that were personal and produced exciting results. The slightest subtleties in language led to totally different emotional states in the actor. From the writer’s side of the table, Friedrich recounts the production process: “You start with a text that you slave over and then you systematically hand it over to other people who interpret it, supporting your vision while adding their own aesthetic ... Collaboration is tricky.” But as Landini sums up, “Theater is collaboration.”

Friedrich’s play *Sleepover* ran at the New York International Fringe Festival, which gives hundreds of new plays short runs throughout the city—the same theater that currently hosts Eisenberg’s *Asuncion*. He tells me, “It’s getting harder and harder to do it big and to really get yourself out there, I think ... I hope (for selfish reasons) that the industry opens up to newcomers. All artistic industries are political ... [but] plays exist separately from their authors in my opinion.” ●



THE MAN IS A GENIUS

BY ANGEL SHIN

"I feel rotten," said Lenny as he slumped into his usual chair by the window. He had dragged his messenger bag into the kitchen instead of leaving it in the foyer. It left a faint streak across the white tiles.

"Have you been reading Hemingway again?" Effie leaned against the doorway, arms crossed. That sort of thing used to make Lenny endearing, but now they were nearly thirty, for God's sake. Would it kill him to pick up a newspaper?

"*The Sun Also Rises*."

"So, yes."

"Well yes, but not just any Hemingway. *The* Hemingway. His best work. Honestly Effie, the man is a genius."

"How are the 'chaps' at work, Len?" Effie rolled her eyes.

"Leonard," he corrected emphatically, sitting up a little straighter. Effie stifled a snicker and pondered whether to ask about this decorous change.

"Whatever you say, chap." She opened the refrigerator and stood in front of it with her eyes closed, inhaling the cold, stale air of leftovers. *Dear kind, shriveled spaghetti*, she thought, *won't you please strangle me?*

Lenny stared out the window and heaved a sigh. Evoking no response from Effie, he tried again, louder.

She banged the refrigerator door shut and crossed the kitchen in two large strides. "Buck up, Lenny old

boy!" She clapped him on the back with gusto, kissed his cheek. Lenny looked more miserable.

"Effie, what's a seat without a window?"

"Is this some kind of riddle?"

"A serious query."

"A rotten seat, I guess."

"For a rotten man," Lenny declared.

"Rotten man, please take out the rotten food in the plastic bag in the container under the sink, colloquially also known as the trash." Effie gestured toward it carelessly with one hand, examining the cuticles on her other.

"Yes rotten ma'am."

"Thank you rotten much."

"This rotten exchange is over."

"Very good. I mean rotten."

"Effie!"

"Rotten!"

Lenny slammed the door on his way out. He conceded he made things difficult for Effie sometimes. She was simply not as literarily inclined, and he had to accommodate that. His head tilted toward the sky. Was there a name for the color between the trees there? How could Effie lack such sensibilities? How could she appreciate the sky without such sensibilities? The sky, honestly. People missed out.

Effie slid into the chair Lenny had just occupied. *A regular Holden Caulfield*, she thought. She parted the blinds and peeked through them. Were his pants

cuffed? What an imbecile he looked. Mrs. Tchaikovsky jogged past, all decked out in neon pink polyester. Effie waved. Lenny did not.

The flash of pink in his periphery interrupted the beautiful hues of his sky. Silly Mrs. Tchaikovsky. He shook his head. Not actually Tchaikovsky, of course. When Lenny and Effie had first moved in, she'd introduced herself as "married to her work," teaching "youths" the piano. Lenny chuckled at Effie's little nickname for her.

"*Get it?*" she had said as she unpacked the box of silverware. "Married—Mrs. Her Work—Tchaikovsky. Mrs. Tchaikovsky." She had conducted an imaginary orchestra with a fork still wrapped in tissue paper.

Effie rapped on the glass and threw up her hand. "What's taking so long?" she mouthed exaggeratedly. Lenny shrugged and finally began to move toward the trash cans. Effie resumed her seat and fixed a resentful eye on the streak from the messenger bag.

Lenny stuffed the garbage into the trash can with unhappy resignation and headed inside, trudging through the un-mown grass. His fault, but he just couldn't bear to do it. What a dull task. Let the grass grow.

Suddenly, he pivoted and strode back to the trash. Lenny lifted the lid and contemplated the idea, curious. *Why not?* Glancing over his shoulder, he found the blinds in place. He scanned the block for other nosy appraisers, then set the lid down by his feet and delicately unknotted the bag. It didn't smell *that* bad. He peered inside, looking for the best choice.

Lenny fished out a wilted piece of asparagus, more brown than green. He had scraped it off his plate two nights ago, earning himself a vehemently dirty look from Effie. He swallowed and raised it to his lips, then popped it in and held his breath, trying not to taste it. It sat on his tongue like a punishment. *You should have eaten me two nights ago*, it scolded. Lenny scoffed. He would bear this quixotic burden valiantly. He began to chew.

Effie could not believe what she was seeing. She burst out the door, barefoot. "Lenny! Are you—Le—God, are you crazy? What do you think you're—Lenny!"

He tried to gulp it down but gagged instead.

"Lenny! Spit it out!"

He shook his head and tried again. He must! He should have done it two days ago! Such was his life always! What a shame!

"Lenny, you *idiot*. Spit. It. Out."

No! He would not! He tried again! Bravely! With the utmost courage! Effie might even get hysterical in a minute! It would be tragicomic! He would write about it in his journal later!

"*Leonard*."

With a final gag, he succeeded. He grinned like a seven-year-old boy who had just performed his first magic trick. Pick a card, any card!

"*What are you doing? What did you just do?*" Effie shrieked. "*Spit it out! Spit it out!*"

Ah, there it was! Tragicomedy at its finest! He would most definitely record these events! He had practiced writing in italics just for this occasion! He had perfected the slant!

Finally, he spoke, his voice glittering: "What's for dinner?" Effie groaned, lamenting the moron before her.

After a moment she said, "Spaghetti." ●

The Eye is now accepting 900-1,200 word fiction. Send your story to eyefiction@columbiaspectator.com.

AUNTIE FLOW WRAPPED WITH A BOW

BY OLIVIA HULL

Ladies, you know the drill. You know vaguely which day your period is coming, you guess incorrectly, run to the pharmacy, shell out \$8 for one box of tampons and double-bag the boxes, hoping you don't run into anyone you know on your beeline to the closest restroom.

But if the founders of the New York City-based startup, The Period Store, had their way, you'd skip this routine entirely. Instead, you would already be prepared with a customized mail-delivered package, complete with chocolate bar and 5-by-7 inch art piece inspired by menstruation (this month's artist claims she chose red subconsciously).

The Period Store is an online retailer that sells all things period and allows women to coordinate their delivery schedule with their menstrual cycles. Packages containing conventional products, eco-friendly options, or, for the more adventurous, diva cups and sea sponges.

But cheerfulness isn't something I usually associate with menstruation, and I know I'm not alone. I've never heard anyone say "It's that time of the month" in an optimistic tone.

And really, who would look forward to three to seven days of stained panties, cramps, cravings, bloating, and moodiness?

The Period Store hopes to alter our approach such that we actually *welcome* Auntie Flo's arrival. Naturally, you feel special when you receive a package in the mail, even if you sent it to yourself and know that it means the start of a messy few days. The startup also wants to encourage women to individualize their period experience by exposing them to other feminine care products available through its site. But most of all, it hopes to expand the discussion around menstruation. "I joke that I never knew you weren't supposed to talk about periods," says co-founder Ashley Seil Smith, who is one of five sisters. With The Period Store, the idea is that when a woman receives a package, she is so excited that she tells all her friends—a rather conventional entry into the taboo.

Smith is right to point out that. For a shared experience of around half the population, the issue is under-discussed, even among close friends. Perhaps it's the memory of the awkward first period conversation with

Mom, general squeamishness, or the fact that menstruation has no presence in popular media. Sex, though similarly intimate, always wins more airtime between female friends.

That being said, I don't think an attempt to glamorize my period is going to make me feel any better about it. The discomfort, disgust, and embarrassment goes deeper than anything a bar of chocolate wrapped in tissue paper can fix. And, in some ways, the private online purchase of products actually perpetuates the secrecy—no one will ever see you buying period products again! But the dialogue is certainly worthwhile. The more we talk about it, the less we'll resent our ovulating bodies each month, and the more comfortable we'll feel asking friends and strangers for an extra tampon. By sharing our experiences—the products we like and dislike, the teas and stomachache remedies, tampons and pads—we'll remember that this bizarre thing our bodies do is actually natural. Instead of hiding away, we'll feel less alone every time it comes. And who knows—maybe one day, men will join the conversation, too. ●

COOKIE-CUTTER FICTION

BY NICK MCKENNA

Just what we've all been waiting for: another young-adult dystopian trilogy. In *Seeker*, Arwen Elys Dayton's debut novel, Random House has already hedged its bets on the angst-ridden synthesis of *Game of Thrones* and (surprise surprise) *The Hunger Games*. The plot of book one revolves around Quin Kincaid, a girl training to become an assassin-like non-assassin called a "seeker." Spoiler alert: It turns out she's been training to become an assassin all along! Columbia Pictures has already acquired the film rights, and the first installment is set to release in 2015.

So maybe I'm a little skeptical that *Seeker's* premise lays the foundation for a great work of literature, but what really has me concerned is that big-money contracts have already been signed when the project is far from fully formed. With Hollywood looming over her, how much power can Dayton really retain over

her work? I understand that outside influences have always helped shape literature. Clearly, Sherlock Holmes would be dead but for public outrage, and Dickens' works might have been shorter if he weren't paid by the word.

Still, even in these cases the relationship between originator and finished product was a more intimate one, or at least one that was first nurtured within publishing houses. If an author wrote for herself, awesome. Well-executed expression of an uncompromised vision is truly a sight to behold. If an author wrote for her audience, great. Everyone loves to feel loved. But if literary endeavors now aim to fit a model statistically proven to make the most money, for whom is the work actually being written? The focus of a literary work is at risk of shifting from actual people to our ghastly, hollow future-selves, forged in the depths of the R&D department at National Amusements, Inc. We

are not people, after all, but only meat puppets that can spend money.

By trying to anticipate the next big book-to-film fad, everyone in this deal may look like money-grubbing pigs. But the blame is not completely theirs. Demand also partially accounts for the mind-numbing, blockbusting adaptations with which we are constantly bombarded. Let me be clear: I am by no means pointing fingers. I sat through every minute of the abomination that was the *Transformers* trilogy, my eyes moving from Megan Fox to the Chevrolet emblem and then back again to Megan Fox. It's perfectly fine to have guilty pleasures, but we're the ones sending the message that, if authors and studios follow their business model and create something with action, surface-level intrigue, and a chance of full-frontal nudity, we'll be there every time. ●



PEACE OF MIND

LIVING WITH THE EVERYDAY UNKNOWN

BY SHELBY BRODY
ILLUSTRATION BY HANNAH SOTNICK

I get a headache while boarding the bus that promises to take me away from New York to visit one of my best friends in Pennsylvania. I guess you could say that I booked the bus ticket because I needed a break, and I hoped that a quick trip to Swarthmore, Pa., would provide an adequate respite.

I board the bus exactly a week after returning to New York from spring break, having spent the intervening seven days planning my escape. I know that everyone probably has difficulty returning to Columbia from spring break, but I like to think that my experience was unique. You see, this year's return coincided perfectly with my first-ever trip to the psychiatrist. The following Monday, a fear I'd been carrying around for months was realized: I was diagnosed with general anxiety disorder with panic attacks and subsequently prescribed 50 milligrams of Zoloft.

The bus leaves at 10 a.m., and my headache grows with the passing blocks. Headaches are a side effect of Zoloft (along with dry mouth, exhaustion, and the inability to achieve orgasm), and I usually get a pretty debilitating one around an hour and a half after taking about 25 milligrams, or half a pill. I'm especially sensitive to the side effects today, my first day back on 25 milligrams after upping my dosage to 50 milligrams at my doctor's recommendation. The idea is to ease me into the full dosage, but my attempts at doing so resulted in shallow breathing, chest pain, and two and a half panic attacks—all of which inspired my seemingly spontaneous journey to Philadelphia. The switch from 25 milligrams to 50 milligrams and back again provided an unwelcome realization that these pills are in fact affecting me on some basic, chemical level, and the headaches are my daily reminder of that reality. The arrival of the headache is the time of day when my breath becomes most

difficult to catch, the time when I begin to question my sanity—an anxious tendency my psychiatrist calls “self-monitoring.”

Thinking about panic precipitates panic and, like most people who suffer from panic attacks, I'm constantly thinking about whether or not I'm having one. My day-to-day experience is a series of questions. Am I panicking? Am I about to panic? Is my breathing the same as it was five minutes ago? Is my vision? The anticipation of an attack, the uncertainty, sends me into a veritable maze of unanswerable questions: Will I have children? Will I have plans on the Fourth of July? Will I die tomorrow? Questions function like fluid, filling my lungs until my head spins and my heart works overtime. Next thing I know, I'm 100 pages deep in apartment listings, beating myself up about hypothetically not being able to afford a room in the East Village because I don't know yet if I will have a job after I graduate. I have no answers. There is no knowing.

Ironically, starting antianxiety medication usually worsens the situation, because medication—bear with me here—makes you astoundingly aware of your own consciousness. It distances you from your immediate surroundings. Imagine that you're stoned, and now imagine not knowing if you'll ever experience sobriety again, wondering if you'll ever feel “the same” as before, feeling unsure that “before” even existed. Throw in difficulty breathing and a serious case of apathy and you'll have some idea of what the first week of medication is like.

These are my thoughts for the first hour of my bus trip (I sleep for the second). Swarthmore College is \$6 and a regional rail ride away. It's on the train that I notice that I'm having difficulty swallowing. My throat feels like it's closing up, and the familiar questions announce themselves as I roll into the suburbs: What happens if I get sick? Where do I go? What if I miss my train home tomorrow?

Arriving at the Swarthmore train station, though, seeing my best friend and his room-

mate waiting for me across the tracks, it hits me that I've escaped. There is nothing to do and nowhere to go. It might be the simple fact that Swarthmore smells better than New York does, or maybe it's just that there's room for me on the sidewalk, but here, my throat expands. I am breathing again. I'm looking forward to the 24 hours ahead. Outside of the city, there is room for change.

I'm writing this from the top of a hill in suburban Pennsylvania, soaking up the idyllic campus with its Quidditch game and steeples and unabashed weed smell. I alternate between lying on my back with my knees in the air and sitting cross-legged, just kind of taking it in. While I battle with an unfamiliar desire to skip class tomorrow in order to spend one more night here, I recall what my psychiatrist said during my first session: “What we're doing here is changing your brain chemistry.” Something intrinsic about me is changing, and as terrifying as I should find that information, the fact is that I haven't cried in two weeks. I'm spending time alone in the suburbs without fearing the thoughts that might materialize in the silence. For the first time in a while, I recognize the value of leaving Manhattan, of fresh air and solitude and old friendships and just slowing down.

It's beautiful on this hill with its pick-up soccer games and giant white lawn chairs. Maybe I *do* think too much, and maybe I *am* scared of death and of tomorrow. But here I am, sitting on a hill in a town without a McDonald's, not thinking about either of those things. I'm not concerned about my schedule for next semester or whether or not I'll get married. And the mere fact that I just thought about the future and didn't stop writing in order to Google apartment listings in Brooklyn or job openings in Chicago? It really is a miracle. Yes, I know—it's just science, but at least I'm not thinking about my breathing. I'm not planning my breakfast. No, I'm just sort of sitting here, and for the first time in a while, that's good enough for me. ●

the eye