

FALL 2023

THE
JOE



FROM PALESTINE, WITH LOVE
AN 'AVERAGE JOE'
NEW MUSIC FROM BROOKLYN ARTISTS
UNDERDOGS OF THE SKYLINE

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MASTHEAD

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FROM PALESTINE, WITH LOVE

Yashal Jalil

In 1962, two young people met at a political rally in the town of Shfaram, near Haifa, Israel. He was a poet, while she was a dancer. He was a Palestinian by heart, while she identified as an Israeli. They fell in love: an Arab and a Jew. It wasn't allowed.

I was introduced to Mahmoud Darwish's poetry at an early age, earlier than I could comprehend the depth of his love and loss. When my father read me couplets from *The Butterfly's Burden*—published in 2007—I was captivated by the prosaic beauty of the images of olive trees and clouds whimpering over the wheat fields where a lady strolls. Darwish's poetry has a form of sympathetic magic, a melancholy surrounding magnificence, that creates a healing experience for the readers.

While in my father's study, over the summer, I stumbled upon the same blue-linen-covered book pressed tightly between the spines of his new acquisitions. As I revisited the poems after seven years with a deeper understanding of the background, their meaning took me by surprise.

Recently, the decades-old Israel-Palestine crisis became the focus of global attention due to the ongoing terrible massacres on both sides of the border. Amid the harrowing situation of the Middle East, I am reminded of Darwish's works again—the poems about olive trees, wheat farms, love, and longing. “If the olive trees knew the hands that planted them/
Their oil would become tears,” he writes in *Butterfly's Burden*.

With the typical appearance of a European intellectual, Mahmoud Darwish—sporting straight black hair, wire-rim glasses, and blazers of varying styles—was a Palestinian poet and a literary giant in the Arab world. Born in 1941 in the village of al-Birwa in Palestine, his birthplace was occupied and later razed by Israeli forces.



Mahmoud Darwish (via Creative Commons)

At the age of seven, he found himself in a Lebanese refugee camp, marking the beginning of a lifetime of displacement and wandering. As a young man, he skipped from Haifa to Egypt, Lebanon, France, Jordan, before finally settling in Ramallah in the occupied West Bank in the 1990s.

These wanderings and exile were an emotional rather than political dilemma that Darwish explores in his poetry. In another poem from *The Butterfly's Burden*, he writes:

*What will I do? What
will I do without exile, and a long night
that stares at the water?*

Despite using classical Arabic in his poetry, his works were not just flowers but rather a fiery exposition of the agony of the Palestinians and a longing for the love they had lost. He was a strong supporter of the secular Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) led by Yasser Arafat and drafted the Palestinian Declaration of Independence in 1988 while also serving as a member of the executive committee of PLO and Arafat's speechwriter. However, he resigned from his position in the early 1990s due to his reservations about the rising influence of Hamas, the Gaza-based Islamist organization that launched the deadly October 7 attacks on Israel.

Darwish spent a decade of his youth on the streets of Haifa in Israel. He published his first collection of poems called *Asafir bila ajniha* (Birds Without Wings) in 1960 when he was only nineteen. Due to his sharp, penetrating poems, which struck a raw nerve for many when read aloud at political and social gatherings, he was banned from leaving the city and later placed under house arrest from 1967 to 1970. This was by no means his last detention.

But politics and poetry were not his only fixations; it was in Haifa that Darwish fell in love with the Jewish dancer Tamar Ben-Ami, his “Rita” in several poems he dedicated to her, including *Rita and a Rifle* (1966). “Between Rita and my eyes/There is a rifle,” Darwish writes.

Though Darwish and “Rita”'s passionate romance lasted only two years, she became a leitmotif in his poetry, but her identity remained unknown. She was the first woman he gave his heart to, and in return, he received hers. But, even in each others' arms, they were separated by nationalities, identities, and shared enmity.

*Between us, there are a million sparrows and images/
And many a rendezvous/
Fired at by a rifle.
 (“Rita and a Rifle”)*

In 2014, when Palestinian-Israeli filmmaker Ibtisam Mara'ana produced a documentary about Mahmoud Darwish and Tamar Ben-Ami's forbidden love, she tried to legitimize this long-lost relationship and several others like it.

Mara'ana herself is married to a Jewish-Israeli man, however, the marriage is not officially recognized in Israel. The documentary, *Write Down, I am an Arab*, premiered at the DocAviv film festival in Tel Aviv. It finally revealed the identity of Rita, seven years after Darwish's death.

Ben-Ami, currently seventy-five years old, resides in Berlin. Although the years and experiences have greyed her hair and wrinkled her pale skin, in the documentary she is still as beautiful as she was in the pictures from the time she and Darwish were together. Her hazel eyes tear up as she reads the letters Darwish wrote to her, even after the break-up. She has saved the letters, memorizing them as holy words.

"Tamari, I am not writing; rather, I'm whispering in your ear. You are still with me. I hear your voice, I swim in the light of your eyes, I lean on your shoulder, I eat with you. I press your hand, which lies like a bird in my hand, a bird which has no desire to fly. Where will it go? From me ... to me. Yours, Mahmoud."

In *Write Down, I am an Arab*, Ben-Ami reveals that even though she had broken social conventions by dating an Arab man, she was scared to death to let the world know about this relationship. The night her parents found out about the true nature of her relationship with Darwish, a scandal broke out. Darwish deeply regretted the stain on his beloved's character and decided to leave Haifa to try and make peace with her parents and their social circle in Jerusalem. Unfortunately, he was denied a travel permit by the military governor. Soon after, for a third time, Darwish was arrested, and despite his several letters to Ben-Ami, asking her to visit one last time, she never came. This marked the end of their story. "I blame myself," she candidly admits in the documentary, "I wasn't strong enough to confront the hardships."

Mahmoud Darwish

The Butterfly's Burden



Translated by Fady Joudah

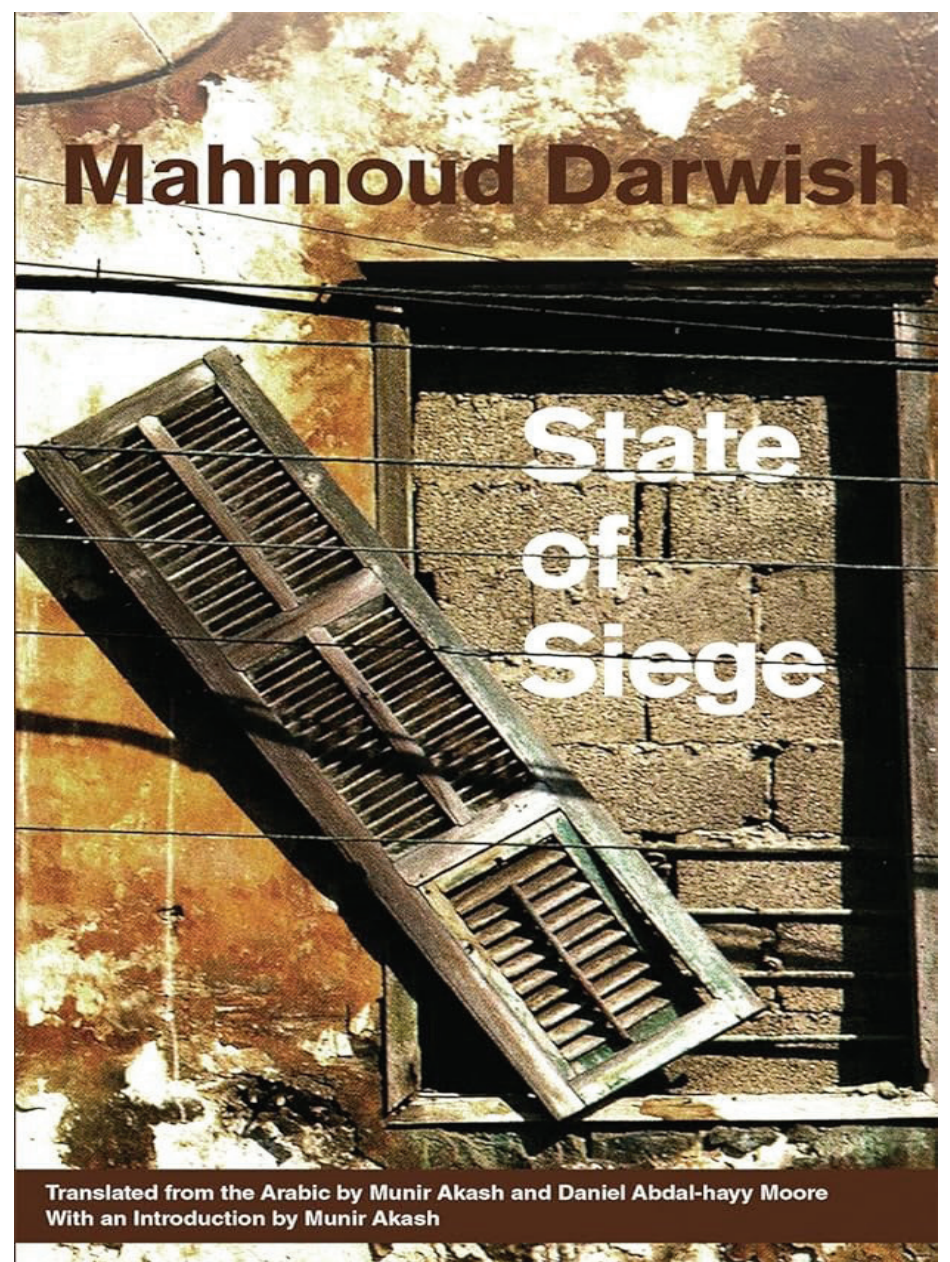
Subsequently, Darwish immersed himself in poetry and went on to write often about their love story. During his exile in Beirut, he was devastated to learn that Ben-Ami had joined the Israeli naval forces; the shock was too big for him to handle both as a lover of Rita and a lover of Palestine. As a result, Rita, Palestine, and love became an

all-in-one metaphor in Darwish's poetry. When he wrote about Rita, he was actually writing about his homeland. Similarly, when he wrote about his homeland, he was truly speaking about his Rita.

Darwish used Rita as a way to humanize his enemies, tracing their struggles and experiences to give his readers a glimpse into the lives of the people living on both sides of the conflict beyond the political tensions. While in collective Palestinian memory, Israelis are the trespassers of their land, to Darwish, they were simply humans, no more or less deserving of compassion and Arabic hospitality:

*You there, by the threshold of our door!
Come in, and sip with us our Arabic coffee!
You may even feel that you are human, just as we are!
You there, by the threshold of our door!
Take your rockets away from our mornings!
We may then feel secure!
and almost human.*
("State of Siege," 2002)

Darwish's two loves—Rita and his homeland—were unrequited. Before he died in 2008 in a Texas hospital (from complications of major heart surgery), he had come to terms with his pain by writing about it. Poetry, like always, became his refuge. In March 2000, Israel's then-education minister, Yossi Sarid, suggested teaching Darwish's poems in Israeli high schools but had to back off when right-wing politicians threatened a vote of no-confidence. As Darwish said in a *New York Times* interview, "The Israelis do not want to teach students that there is a love story between an Arab poet and this land...I just wish they'd read me to enjoy my poetry, not as a representative of the enemy."



Translated from the Arabic by Munir Akash and Daniel Abdal-hayy Moore
With an Introduction by Munir Akash

CAMPUS

ST. JOSEPH'S UNIVERSITY SGA ATTENDS ANNUAL ESSE NON VIDERI GALA

Julia Marin

On November 3, St. Joseph's University held its annual Esse non Videri Gala at the Garden City Hotel. The Student Government Associations from both the Brooklyn and Patchogue campuses joined numerous faculty members, alums, and donors.

The Joe spoke with Brooklyn SGA President Nick Tapio about his experience attending his first Esse non Videri Gala.

The SGA typically relays the interests and concerns of students to the university administration and advocates for change. Additionally, they oversee certain aspects of student life such as clubs and organizations.

"The gala was a good opportunity to speak with fellow students from the Long Island campus and connect over our shared college experiences at St. Joe's," Tapio said.

Tapio also had the opportunity to speak with various alums and donors, answering several questions about his time at St. Joseph's.

The SGA president discussed his journey across the country from Sacramento, California, to pursue both an academic and athletic career at St. Joseph's. Like many of the alums who spoke at the gathering, Tapio explained that the university has provided him with extensive opportunities to grow as a leader, via both student government and baseball.

Amid the elegant catered dinner, several alums stepped to the podium to highlight their accomplishments and reflect on how their college education and experience aided them in their career success.

One of the more notable speakers was Elyse Deublein Harney, a graduate from the Class of '52. A leading figure in the business world, Harney is the founder of both Harney and Sons Fine Teas and Elyse Harney Real Estate.

Harney found attending St. Joseph's during a time when it was still an all-women's college to be very inspiring. She told the attendees that this environment showed her that "it is not a disability to be a woman in business." This mindset propelled her many successful endeavors. Harney also fondly recalled the impact of Sister Mary Florence Burns, who taught Shakespeare.

The current student representatives who attended the gala were able to learn from these noteworthy speakers and become inspired for life after graduation.

"St. Joseph's clearly has a tradition of setting up students and alumni to succeed in life after their time at this institution," said Tapio. "Listening to these speakers has evidently reassured a bright future for me."

WHERE TO GRAB SOME CHEAP GRUB NEAR CAMPUS

John Oliveras



YAMASHIRO

This Japanese restaurant is an eight-minute walk from campus, on Myrtle near Washington. If you want to get your fix of Japanese foods like sushi and takoyaki, this is the spot for you. Not only do they serve lunch box combos, but they also do lunch specials. On average, a lunch box combo is around \$13, and they have many options that range from sashimi to beef negimaki. The lunch specials are around \$14, and are always served with either miso soup or a salad. Definitely check out the Any Three Rolls Lunch Combo.

MYRTLE THAI

The lunch specials at this place on Myrtle near Waverly give you the most bang for your buck. They serve authentic Thai food and drinks, cuisine that's hard to find near campus. They have \$11 dollar lunch specials that cover mainly every regular dinner dish on the menu. My personal favorite is their Pad See Ew lunch special, which is stir-fried flat rice noodles mixed with egg and Asian broccoli in a black soy sauce. Their Thai iced tea for \$5 is delicious. All in all, you get an amazing meal for just \$16.

BROOKLYN PUBLIC HOUSE

This sports bar is located on Dekalb Avenue, near The Hill Center. The menu features hardy American comfort meals, such as a fried chicken sandwich with cabbage slaw. One of the standout dishes was their house burger for \$16, which comes with bacon mayo, arugula, bacon relish, cheddar cheese, and tomato chili, with the option of either fries or a salad.

This burger hit all the right marks, with a buttery soft brioche bun, tasty toppings and tender beef that made it one of the most flavorful burgers I've had in Brooklyn. Along with the convenient location, the burger should definitely put the Public House on your radar.

THE HUMANITY OF DR. DAVE SIEGEL

Dustin Bailey

The professor finds that what you don't know is rarely a thing to fear, but rather, a thing to learn about.

Dr. Dave Siegel is interested in people. This, understandably, might not be a shocking thing to learn about a professor at a liberal arts university who specializes in political science—perhaps no more shocking than discovering they are a lifelong learner, an accomplished musician, or that they've spent significant amounts of time doing ethnographic research in Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, during his studies, the professor spent some time surveying the whole humanities landscape, initially double-majoring in philosophy and psychology (he dropped the philosophy major before graduation, though he admits its where most of his interest was) before a Master's degree in Global Affairs and, finally, a PhD in Political Science. Outside of the pedestrian observation that all humanities majors study, well, humanity, the real common thread here is that his selected fields all focus on the “why” of humanity: why people are the way they are and why they do the things they do.

Within the realm of political theory, there's a desire to categorize, often predicated on abstract ideas of who people are, unhealthy and unhelpful generalizations about groups, coalitions, regimes, and entire nations. Dr. Siegel tends to prefer cutting through the noise, even when it's at a fever pitch, “A lot of the idea of what a place is, is very... it's an abstraction. And the way that most people live their lives has nothing to do with those kinds of ideas.” For instance, many could put a Long Island suburban native from a predominantly Italian neighborhood into a number of boxes if they were so inclined, but there's little chance Siegel would fit that mold.

He looks just as likely to recommend a deep-cut vinyl from an obscure 70's punk outfit than to hand you a strong refutation of democratic peace theory. Not that he doesn't look like he would teach political science, mind you. He cuts the figure of a political theorist (or even a radical activist) in many ways: his unkempt long hair and bushy beard hearken back to an Abbie Hoffman-type while his youthfulness remains in tact, currently clad in a simple gray button-up (tattoos peering out from the bottom of the sleeve), jeans, and red-black pumas. He maintains a casual demeanor with comfortable ease and doesn't seem uptight enough to teach politics. It might be why he does it well. As Quaison Simon, a political science major at St. Joseph's, relates, “He always calmly explains the topic down to, like, its base, and makes everything relatable on a personal level.” Root word, here: person.

In an empty classroom, the professor and I spend some time talking about his disinterest in the world of politics during his undergraduate years and how the Iraq War signified a major shift into international studies. “At the time I didn't know that much about politics, but something about it [the war] just seemed like it wasn't right. I was still in my early twenties...something about it just stank,” he speaks softly and quickly, calm and measured, continuing, “...I think I felt like I was being sold something. And so, as time passed, and it became more clear that's exactly what did happen...

I was like, wow, these people in power, they just basically depend on the population knowing absolutely nothing.” Thus began an obsession. No doubt the cynicism of high-ranking politicians has been the call to action for more than one political theorist, but not all of them subsequently spend a large chunk of time in the highlands of post-Soviet Central Asia eating horse yogurt.

But that's where Siegel's research led him, to the “overlooked by the western world” country of Kyrgyzstan, nestled between the Tian Shan and Pamir mountain ranges. It's immediately clear that this is where he gets the most out of his work, and the question arises of why post-Soviet states as a concentration? “I suppose instead of being scared by a lot of Cold War-era propaganda—and I was only a child at the time—I was kind of intrigued instead, like I was interested in learning about something that you were supposed to be scared of and I guess that felt kind of cool.”

“So that's one thing that brought me out to these remote regions, which is to actually look at the extent to which people actually had to answer to anybody, or there were laws that actually mattered...what local officials in these places actually did and who they were...the ability of shepherds to graze their animals is a major question of how land gets used and who gets to use it...” His interest is palpable, almost present in the room, and it's clear he could talk about this for days. There is an obvious, insatiable curiosity that drives Dr. Siegel, one that seems to always originate in forbidden, forgotten, concealed, suppressed, or even just ignored bits of knowledge. “I've always loved doing research—and I might love it more now than ever before—but, in the end, I see my main job today as being a teacher and I love it. The research is necessary professionally, but I'm mainly motivated to do it out of personal interest and curiosity.”

It's when we get into specifics about his time among the shepherds that his enthusiasm grows even further, “For me, half the point of the research was to live in a place I had never been for an extended period of time, study language, and just find out how other people lived.” It's a refreshing take, in a world dominated by the proliferation of western influence. He excitedly recounts yurt living, migratory traditions, and eating the whole animal during his time with the shepherds, letting it slip that he almost considered a radical transition to food anthropology and that he maybe should have been an anthropologist all along. That may have been a shame, though, as political theory probably benefits from as many anthropological practitioners it can stand, if for no other reason than the perspective it provides. “I like to get along so I didn't turn down the kumis (fermented mare's milk), and while I might have found it a little offputting—there was no refrigeration out here, for one...they had a similar response to a lot of American, more processed food...

they would say that what they ate was, you know, at least it was natural and not full of chemicals and all that.” It’s experiences like this which inform the philosophy that there is often no right answer to cultural questions, only political ones.

It’s a philosophy Dr. Siegel believes in, himself, and finds pertinent when teaching. “When you’re studying these topics in an academic environment, you’re not, like, learning the answer to anything. It’s like there’s always debates happening. And so you’re learning about debates, and you’re thinking through and making your own decisions. So there is no ultimate answer.” There’s a lack of condescension to this mindset and methodology, one that comes from an understanding and assertion that on the most basic level, we all have more in common than we have differences, and that our differences need not separate us any more than we allow, even when powerful forces would have us think differently. We’re just people, after all—a state of being that the professor spends a great deal of time considering.

DO ‘REAL MEN’ GO TO THERAPY? AN ‘AVERAGE JOE’

Manas Bhandari

The emotional growth of a male is stunted from the moment he is told not to cry as a young boy. I am a man who has struggled to keep my mind healthy, and after much hesitation, I finally attended a personal counseling session offered on the Brooklyn campus. At the end of it, my counselor asked me to join the Men’s Process Group that met in mid-October.

The gathering offered free lunch so, of course, I went. I was the only one who did. The sandwiches were not particularly to my taste, but I sat down to nibble on them as the two counselors, Thomas Giardini and Johnny Hamilton, sat in silence with me. I asked them about the weather to fill the void in conversation.

The group then shut down. “We did not want to continue conducting an event that yielded no attendance,” Giardini explains.

The failure of the group has three potential explanations: it was either not marketed enough to the students, unnecessary, or, perhaps, male students in school did not want to attend. Elvis, a junior, says, “I would have gone but sharing personal issues with your classmates is uncomfortable. They should have rather conducted a workshop.”

The marketing of this event was the same as it is for any other campus events. I asked a few male students if they knew the event ever took place, and they said no. Fliers at the designated spots rarely make a significant mark. “Highlight the ‘free lunch’ so more people come,” I even facetiously suggested during the session.

The lack of attendance highlights a larger issue regarding men’s mental health: a widespread aversion to therapy. This suggests that many men equate vulnerability with femininity.

Women are an integral part of this conversation as well. Ever since the #MeToo movement, women have come forward with accusations of countless instances of injustice. Even though this has served well for women and posed questions about their safety in workspaces, men have tried to undermine those claims.

When women come forward with their sexual assault stories, some men say, “men get assaulted too.” This issue is never brought up independently, but only when women are discussing their problems so as to minimize the conflict.

“Men’s rights matter too,” others say. Well, yes, but when have they not? Many of the men who say this are alpha male podcasters and their audiences. So when a door is finally opened to have a healthy discussion about the impacts of toxic masculinity on men’s mental health, where are all the alpha males?

Manas Bhandari

What is your full name?

Joe: My name is Joseph D. Ross III. *What happened to the previous two Joes?*

Joe: My dad is Joseph D. Ross, Jr. He passed away a few years ago. My grandfather was

Joseph D. Ross, Sr. and he was a Vaudeville acrobat. He came over from Italy and he didn’t even speak English. My dad was a wonderful guy and he is still my hero. I am Joseph D. Ross III and my son is Joseph D. Ross IV.

What do you do?

Joe: I am an associate professor of communication studies here at St. Joe’s.

How many people that you interact with on a daily basis are also named Joe?

Joe: Oh, boy... Off the top of my head, I can only think of two or three.

Do you think people have stopped naming their kids “Joe” and we should continue the trend?

Joe: Whatever makes them happy. It’s okay with me if we don’t have any more Joes.

Have you recently made a bad financial purchase?

Joe: Have I recently made a bad financial purchase? Yes.

Joe: Not that I know of. Hopefully not. Okay.

Joe: Why did you ask me if I have made a bad financial purchase? Have you been investigating my finances? (Laughs.) *It’s okay. What is an average Joe to you?*

Joe: I don’t know. I try not to stereotype.

How would you like to be remembered as a Joe or a person or a professor?

Joe: Wow. (An abnormally long pause.) As a person who took care of his family and did his best.

What is your favorite soda?

Joe: I am a Diet Coke guy but actually the Zero Sugar Diet Coke is better.

I heard of a 107-year-old lady who was told not to drink Diet Coke but the doctors who told her that died before her. What do you think of Joe Mama jokes?

Joe: I’m not a big fan of mama jokes because mothers are special.

Who in the Joe community is the biggest achiever?

Joe: Joe DiMaggio is a tremendous Joe. The other Joe is my son Joe IV who I am very proud of because he just graduated from Syracuse Law School with an accepted position at a Manhattan firm. So he is another great Joe to me.

Who would you want the next Joe we interview to be?

Joe: If you want someone who is smarter, more charming and better looking than me—

I think we have run out of options.

Joe: Then, you go to Joe Pasarella, who is an amazing person.

Last question. All the Joes are put in a room together and only one comes out alive. Who is it?

Joe: Me without a doubt.



ARTS & CULTURE

WHO DO WE BECOME AT THE EDGE OF FEAR AND HOPELESSNESS?

Barbare Sturua

The movie Citizen Saint reminds us that in the world of cruelty there always is a spark of kindness.

Citizen Saint, directed by Georgian filmmaker Tinatin Kajrishvili and produced by Lasha Khalvashi, with co-writer Basa Janikashvili, explores themes of faith, belief in miracles, and the core of human existence. The movie premiered in the United States on November 1 at the Consulate of Georgia in New York and will continue its journey in San Francisco and Los Angeles.

Following its success in Europe and Asia at festivals such as the Karlovy Vary Film Festival, Asian Pacific Screen Awards, and CinEast Festival, members of the Academy Awards will review the film for consideration on the 2024 Oscars shortlist. *Citizen Saint* is a collaboration between Georgian, French, and Bulgarian filmmakers.

The story is set in the small, ancient city of Chiatura in the Republic of Georgia, portrayed as a realm of abstract realism. The audience is transported into black and white fields and mountainous landscapes reminiscent of Andrei Tarkovsky. This story could occur anywhere and at any time.

The universality of the narrative is further achieved by exploring how far humans will go in their search for hope and miracles. Chiatura, with a population of just 12,803 people, has limited contact with the outside world. The miners, uninterested in material goods or social status, behave at an almost primal level, revealing humanity unmasked, without layers and filters.

Miners in this small city discover a crucified saint (played by George Babluani), has disappeared after being turned into stone three days after crucifixion. Subsequently, they find out that he has been raised from the dead. As he walks around the town, he performs miracles, cures people, and reunites families. However, the fear of the public, which has lost its objects of worship and prayer, leads to chaos, and the town decides to crucify the man once again.

The savagery of the crowd and the fear of the unknown make the city cruel. In a way, the movie can be seen as a contemporary reimagining of Christ's crucifixion, with clear biblical references throughout the film.

One of the key elements of the movie is the performance of Berdo (played by Georgian actor Levan Berikashvili), who portrays a grandfather-like figure. He is a man who lost his young son in a mine and has been digging for ten years with the hope of finding him. Berdo's frailness makes it impossible not to sympathize with him.

Berdo's wife (played by Lia Abuladze), and Mari (played by Mari Kitia) are portrayed as symbols of strength. Once Berdo is crucified, his wife goes to him and kneels, creating an image reminiscent of Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary. Mari, who takes care of the monastery, is a reference to Mary Magdalene, who traveled with Jesus as one of his followers and witnessed his crucifixion.

The sound design by Emmanuel Soland and Thomaes Jaeger creates a mysterious world. The sounds accompanying the miners as they venture into the darkness, unsure if they will return, resemble the eerie sounds of a ship in the middle of an ocean. The music delves into the sounds of national Georgian folklore, revealing the country's ancient history to the audience's senses.

The movie prompts the audience to question their own values, and it ends on a positive note. After the saint disappears in the morning, following his second crucifixion, the elderly Berdo is blamed for helping the saint escape. He is then crucified in place of the saint because the town needs someone to pray to. At the end of the film, we gather that in a cruel world, there is always a spark of kindness.

ON THE BIG STAGE: MELISSA BECRAFT'S JOURNEY TO STARDOM

Yashal Jalil

At age 18, Melissa Becraft followed the city lights and came to New York. She was a dreamer who wanted to make it big, and when she got her shot, she blossomed.

Becraft, now 28, started dancing when she was thirteen years old. Although she played an array of sports in her school in Greenville, South Carolina (population 75k), Becraft found her real passion when she binge-watched *So You Think You Can Dance*, in which Allison Holker swayed and mesmerized the audience. Thirteen, however, was considered to be too old to start learning to dance.

Becraft's passion, hard work, and support from her parents, who would take her to dance classes regularly, made it possible to continue on her path.

At eighteen, she was ready to leave small-town Greenville for New York City, the dance capital of the world. "I was absolutely insane for doing that," says Becraft. "I don't know what possessed me to want to do that. But I'm really glad I took that leap."

I recently sat down with Melissa in a clangorous coffee shop in Downtown Brooklyn. We chatted about her former life as the captain of the Brooklynettes dance team and now as a content creator with over one million social media followers.

Melissa Becraft: So I came from South Carolina, I grew up training and dancing there. In New York, I had a rocky start to my career with a back injury, then years of auditioning and training and not securing any work. I was about to leave New York when finally I got a dream job with the Brooklynettes that kept me in the city.

Yashal Jalil: Tell us about your experience with them.

Yashal Jalil: Tell us about your experience with them.

MB: I was with the Brooklyn Nets for a few years. It's a steady year-round job. You have a support team of women pursuing the same thing as you. And for me, that was everything because I didn't have that; I didn't have a place to be. I was dancing, training, and working with choreographers, but I got to perform in front of thousands and thousands of people multiple times a week, which, as a performer, is really all you want. There are 41 home games ranging from October through typically April or May, depending on what the NBA schedule is. So you're just dancing, and then you get like one or two months off in the summer. So, I pretty much danced year-round.

YJ: How do you maintain physical and mental health as a dancer?

MB: It can be hard to find the motivation to do anything outside of rehearsals because you're so exhausted. But two years ago, I had a pretty serious hip injury. I had to get X-rays and MRI and had to do physical therapy. And it was the first time I asked myself why I haven't been utilizing these tools this whole time. But it's a full-time job to maintain your physique as a dancer because if you don't, you're gonna get injured and not gonna be able to keep up. Luckily, having a support group of people doing the same thing really helps with mental preparation and remembering that we're human and we can make mistakes too.

YJ: Do you remember any particular performance that was challenging for you?

MB: I had one performance for the Nets where we had to do a head spring and like you flip over, and then land on your feet, and because I was injured, I fell. I had to fake it and do a spin move, and stand back up. And I recovered. But obviously, everybody knew that I fell; that's always like a dagger to the heart. You never want that to happen. But I always say that if I was perfect every time I went out and performed, then I should do something else because I'm not learning anything. So I've had difficult performances, but they make the good ones better.

YJ: After the Nets, you've been making content for social media. How did that start?

MB: So when the pandemic hit, obviously, the NBA shut down. And there was nothing to do for dancers in New York. So I was unemployed and went home to my family in South Carolina. But as a creative person, I felt like I needed to be doing something to fuel my creativity. I started making TikTok videos. I'd put together three dances, and three outfits, choose three songs, and just film myself dancing in these outfits on my in-laws' driveway. Eventually, my videos ended up taking off.

YJ: Tell us about your first viral video.

MB: When my first viral video hit one million views, my father-in-law asked, "Melissa, how many Barclays Centers are one million people?"

It's like 56 arenas packed to the brim. I had never had an audience that big. So it's a huge number of people seeing something I created and really cared about. It has given me visibility and exposure—and it's like, man, we get so much credit now because we do work hard to put out our ideas, and it's cool that people are seeing them.



YJ: Are you also being offered projects because of your social media fame?

MB: Yes. A job that I would maybe book once every six months, now I'm booking once a month. People will request me by name because they've seen me on social media, and people seek me out. It's a really cool and special thing. I feel like it's such a gift.

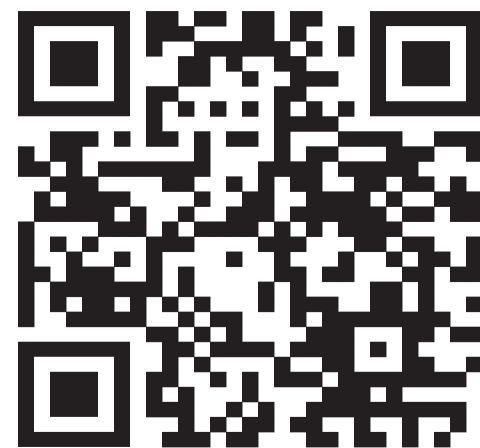
YJ: What are the three things that anyone starting in this industry needs to know?

MB: Number one, it's going to be harder than you think it is. So be prepared for that. Two, there's a stage for everybody if you're willing to work hard enough to find it. And three, rely on your community and your network and they will carry you far.

YJ: One quote you can remember right now.

MB: If you're not the hardest-working person in the room, ask yourself why.

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WHY 'GUTS' SHOULD BE IN YOUR TEENAGE YEARS SURVIVAL KIT

Arianna Cubero

"I stumbled over all my words. I made it weird, I made it worse," Olivia Rodrigo sings, summing up the experience of surviving your teenage years, only to find the struggles continuing into your early twenties. Rodrigo's sophomore effort, *GUTS*, debuted last month. On the new album, the twenty-year-old opens up about the experiences of impulsively making the wrong choices, wanting to get revenge while having lingering feelings for someone who hurt her, getting stuck in awkward situations, and wanting nothing else but to "curl up and die." *GUTS*, in its angst, adds a rock-punk feel to the pop-singer's young discography.

The album opens with "all-american b-", a song where Rodrigo claims to be just what the title implies. "I got class and integrity just like a goddamn Kennedy, I swear," sings Rodrigo, listing attributes about herself that make her desirable by society's standards, including her physical appearance and social elegance. She sings, "I'm a perfect all-american b- with perfect all-american lips and perfect all-american hips," followed by, "I'm grateful all the time. I'm sexy and I'm kind. I'm pretty when I cry." But as the song comes to a close, she loudly shouts, "I scream inside to deal with it like, ahhh," and for the next fifteen seconds, with background instrumentals, Rodrigo screams into the mic. The tonal shift of the song enables the listener to recognize the pressure Rodrigo feels, the expectation that exists in maintaining the image of the perfect all-American girl.

Moving halfway down the tracklist, we reach the song, "ballad of a homeschooled girl." Rodrigo discusses the self-consciousness and anxiety of simply existing as a young woman, "when I'm alone I'm fine, but don't let me out at night, it's social suicide." This is the kind of song one blasts in the car after a bad experience out on the town, the kind of song that makes rejection and embarrassment feel common. "ballad" is relatable, and distinguishes the feelings that arise in the socially awkward scenarios we all find ourselves in from time to time.

GUTS is concise, showcasing that Rodrigo knows her listeners—predominately young women—and that she has a unique ability to connect to their shared experiences. She covers many aspects of what goes through the mind of a woman in her late teens/early twenties. *GUTS* both opens and closes with a topic of significance: the idea of the perfect, all-American woman. Rodrigo ends the album by asking society, "when will it be alright to be *imperfect*?"

The eleventh track, "pretty isn't pretty", was the song that provoked me to empathize and connect with Rodrigo. The bridge discusses exactly what so many other women feel at this stage in their lives: that no matter how hard you try to change yourself, you will never escape society's meaning of pretty, as it is ever-changing.

GUTS will continue to be streamed by its loyal listeners, as feelings of teenage angst will (unfortunately) never die, even as we get older. It's nice to have a soundtrack, at least.



NEW MUSIC FROM BROOKLYN ARTISTS

Dustin Bailey

YAYA BEY

Reggae-infused neo-soul artist, Yaya Bey, is having a year. The Brooklyn-based singer and songwriter garnered plenty of hype from 2021's EP *The Things I Can't Take With Me*, but her 2022 release *Remember Your North Star* has sent her soaring. The gut-punch brevity with which she explores themes of heartache, womanhood, grief, and finding personal joy in the face of disappointing reality is truly remarkable. Her new EP *Exodus the North Star* acts as companion piece to her 2022 release and introduces a bit more lightheartedness, perfectly matching the breezy, jazzy, synth-drenched backtracks and satin-smooth vocals.

GEESE

GEESE are definitely taking off. They've already been hailed by *Rolling Stone* as "indie rock prodigies," which is apt considering most members of the band can just barely legally drink at the venues in which they play. With the acclaim that their 2023 release *3D Country* has already received, their days of simply being hometown heroes may be coming to a close. They've since been kind enough to supplement that full-length effort with an EP-addendum, *4D Country*, offering five new tracks. The band's post-punk sound is infused with funk and a distinct jangly jamminess. Frontman Cameron Winter showcases some of the most unique vocal phrasing the genre has to offer, alternating between playfully manic shouting, buttery-smooth gospel crooning, and Julian Casablancas-style lethargy. Nothing here should work, but GEESE blend it together smoothly, and might just deserve all the praise.

SKYZOO

If you've never listened to Skyzoo, chances are you've still heard Skyzoo. An unabashed and top-billed ghost-writer in the rap and hip-hop scene for over a decade, the Crown Heights-born lyricist has been called up by heavy hitters across genres for his skills with the pen. Meanwhile, he's had a number of solo releases of his own along the way. This year's release, *The Mind of a Saint*, is a concept album in which he assumes the character of Franklin Saint, the main character from *Snowfall*, the John Singleton series. Within that framing, Skyzoo shows his immense talent and attention to detail across a landscape of jazz-rap and boom-bap à la Jay Z's *American Gangster*. This is the sort of nerdy, craft-intensive project that may prohibit mainstream exposure, but at the same time, earns an artist the respect of their peers.

YAEJI

Brooklyn-by-way-of-Queens-by-way-of-Seoul electronic artist Yaeji is another act on the list to successfully transcend the underground since the explosive popularity of her single "Raingurl" from 2017's *EP2*. Since then, over two more full-length albums, she has refined her mellow-house style with laser focus, weaving introspective lyrics (in English and Korean) sung with a soft-spoken nonchalance around hypnotic dancefloor synth and pulsing drum and bass. It's a truly unique sound, deserving of all the attention Yaeji has continued to build exponentially since stepping onto the scene. She's already headlining world tours and collaborating with the likes of Dua Lipa and OHHYUK, but 2023's *With A Hammer* feels like yet another exciting step forward for the New York native.

DEAD TOOTH

As the band that "truly broke out" at this year's SXSW in Austin, according to *SPIN* magazine, the Brooklyn quintet has the feel of a "next big thing" after lurking around the borough's post-punk underground for years. Dead Tooth have had many sounds and lineups but the one constant has been charismatic frontman, Zach James. As of late, the group has seemingly settled into a cohesive identity, one that is noisy, groove-driven, and full of attitude. This year sees the release of their live Audiotree Sessions—essentially the fanfare trumpet of arrival in the world of indie rock. And following the trend of single releases, their songs "Cool For The Summer" and "Electric Earth" come detached from any EP or album. All of these taken as a whole cement the end of an identity crisis, ushering in a more grounded, yet still characteristically frantic and energetic era for Dead Tooth, importantly, with more saxophone.

HOTLINE TNT

Helmed by intrepid indie scene veteran, Will Anderson, Hotline TNT marries east coast crunch with midwestern melody. Based in Brooklyn for several years now, this newest project still carries the hallmarks of the Twin/Tone, Minneapolis ethos. His blend of shoegaze and powerpop harmonies remain decidedly muted and meld

sonic tidal waves. Their latest full-length release, *Cartwheel*, comes hotly anticipated after the warm reception to 2021's *Nineteen In Love*. The group is not afraid to get cheeky or experimental within the confines of the self-skepticism their genre demands. There are acoustic jaunts like "Stump", bits of drum and bass in "Spot Me 100", and fragments of Hüsker Dü influence poking through in tracks like "Son In Law" and "Out of Town".

COMBUST

New York and New Jersey have a long standing tradition of churning out consistently brutal hardcore outfits. The genre has had its ebbs and flows in mainstream consciousness—not that it cares—but it seems to be in the middle of a resurgence. Bands with variations on the classic beatdown sound like Knocked Loose, Code Orange, and Turnstile finding commercial success has the spotlight shining its light once more on the torchbearers of the classic sound in the fanatical underground. Combust are true-to-form New York City Hardcore stalwarts. The group boasts an incredibly rigid hammer-to-the-skull sound that's every bit as punchy, riffy, and unforgiving as any of their predecessors or contemporaries in the scene. They dropped a full-length, *Another Life*, last year, but have supplemented it with this year's *BBB Promo*. The EP features two new blistering tracks with an accompanying foreword by rapper, Rome Streetz—a ringing endorsement from one of the city's most respected lyricists.

youbet

Davie, Florida transplant Nick Llobet arrived in Brooklyn some years ago with a treasure trove of bandcamp tunes. Noticed by Ava Luna alum Julian Fader and a few of his frequent collaborators, no time was wasted in polishing the songs into 2020's breakout LP *Compare & Despair*. Reception was overwhelmingly positive as Llobet build up a following for the past three years playing frequent shows. youbet's saccharine vocal performances mingle with playfully sardonic, yet sometimes searingly intimate lyrical themes that lilt along like an anthemic soundtrack to playground conquest. Instrumentation oscillates between noisy crunch and hypnotic ambience, a maniacal landscape of cartoon-core sound effects floating along in the background, capturing what the diminishing returns of growing up must sound like. It's been quiet on the studio release front until recently, when youbet released the new single, "Carsick", apparently hot off of a signing to indie label Hardly Art. All of the important elements are still here, only with a slight jump in production value and the promise of new goodies.



SPORTS

UNDERDOGS OF THE SKYLINE

Hayden Reis

St. Joseph's University-Brooklyn men's and women's soccer teams both experienced grueling campaigns. The fall season of sports has come to an end and the resilience of both teams needs to be commended.

At the outset of the season, the men's soccer team had a total of 16 players on their roster. In a soccer match, there are a total of ten players on the field and one in goal. Soccer is a physically demanding sport, and in a three-month long season, injuries are bound to deplete a smaller roster.

Both teams compete in the Division III Skyline Conference against worthy and challenging competition. Each team's goal in the beginning of the season was to make it to the playoffs because unfortunately both came up short the previous year.

Although determined to improve as a team, the guys experienced an early setback. In a preseason game in the 70th minute, senior Leonel Bravo, starting goalkeeper, broke his leg in two different places. The team soon suffered more injuries. There were many games during the season in which the team had to accommodate the lack of positions. They often had few to no substitutes.

"The size of our roster impacted us mentally and physically," says Jesus Cano, junior midfielder for the Bears. "It was a burden at times but inspired us to keep pushing through." Cano adds that "Being able to get as far as we did was a blessing. This taught us the lesson that hardships are going to come but it was up to us to get through them."

Every game they showed up and played with resilience and respect for each other. The Bears finished the season with five wins, nine losses and one draw.



The men's team finished 7th in the conference. Junior forward Victor Naci and junior defender Matthew Kieblesz were selected for the Men's Soccer All-Skyline Conference First Team Honor.

The women's soccer team had an even smaller roster than the men. With only 13 players able to compete in the matches, they knew it was very important to keep everyone healthy. The team had to pull from softball and other sports at the beginning of the season just to play a match.

Many of the games they played short-handed, due to injuries and lack of numbers, but they still fought through the toughest of seasons.

"Regardless of the adversity our team faced, we always showed up for one another in different ways and we lifted each other after each match," says sophomore goalkeeper Julia Marin. "I'm certainly both grateful for and proud of my teammates who took the obstacles head-on and ultimately survived through a very tough season."

Although they faced rosters of 25 to 30 players compared to a small but scrappy 13, the Bears never gave up. While there are many downsides to a small roster, there are some positives. As junior midfielder Bethany Perez says, "Being on a small team gives me a chance at a closer and tight community. It also reassures me that I would play the game I love consistently and spend time on the pitch with the girls I know and care about."

The girls played a total of 14 games over three months and recorded three wins, ten losses, and one draw, finishing 11th in the Skyline Conference. Sophomore midfielder Katherine Barrios was awarded and selected to be on the Women's Soccer All-Skyline Conference Second Team.

Both teams poured their hearts into every game for all 90 minutes, regardless of the small rosters. The St. Joe's men's and women's soccer teams fought through the adversity and should be an inspiration to all student athletes.



WHY DOES NEW YORK BASKETBALL SUCK?

Kristopher Vinski

This past spring marked the 50th anniversary of the Knicks' second, and most recent, NBA title. In 1974 and 1976, the Nets won two ABA titles, but have never won an NBA Finals. Will New Yorkers have to wait another half-century before a local team wins the crown?

The Knicks are one of the oldest NBA teams but haven't reached the Finals since they lost to the San Antonio Spurs in 1999. That was the same year current owner James Dolan took over the organization from his father, Charles. Ever since, the Knicks have struggled to attract superstars to the Big Apple.

Every year during free agency, it seems as if the Knicks are in contention for some of the top players in the league but ultimately end up missing out. Carmelo Anthony, the biggest superstar the Knicks have had since Patrick Ewing, was traded for, not signed as a free agent. While the Knicks have struggled to lure in big-name athletes, their crosstown rivals, the Brooklyn Nets, have had a different problem—keeping those superstars on the court.

While in New Jersey, the Nets had more recent success, making back-to-back NBA Finals appearances in 2002 and 2003. In Brooklyn, the Nets made a huge splash in the 2019 free agency market by signing superstars Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving and even traded for James Harden in 2021.

By the middle of last season, all three superstars had been shipped out after playing just 16 games together. Durant and Irving only played 74 games together. Since moving to Brooklyn in 2012, the Nets have made the playoffs eight times. However, they have only made it out of the first round twice, compiling a playoff record of 18-36.

Meanwhile, New York City's lone top-tier college team, the St. John's Red Storm, have experienced their own struggles. The Men's basketball program has not won an NCAA Tournament game since 2000, reaching March Madness just four times since then. The Women's team has experienced more recent success, although it has been almost ten years since they won a tournament game.

While there isn't a sole reason for the decline in success for New York's basketball teams, the general consensus among fans is they are fed up with watching teams that don't go deep into the playoffs. It's time New York reestablishes itself as the basketball mecca.

THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY OF THE 2023 YANKEES

Arianna Cubero

The New York Yankees have yet again fallen short of bringing another championship back to the Bronx. The Bombers missed the playoffs for the first time in seven seasons and finished fourth in the American League East. Fans are demanding major offseason adjustments.

Veteran manager Aaron Boone and longtime general manager Brian Cashman oversaw the team's worst full season since 1992. In 2022, the Bombers won 99 games, and lost to the eventual World Series champion Houston Astros in the playoffs. Throughout 2023, the expectation was certainly much higher than the execution on the field.

Injuries plagued the roster in 2023. Aaron Judge, Anthony Rizzo, Giancarlo Stanton and the entire starting rotation aside from Gerrit Cole all missed significant time. Heading into last season, fans were excited following the re-acquisition of Aaron Judge and the signing of all-star southpaw Carlos Rodón. Judge, however, missed nearly 60 games and Rodón struggled following his mid-season return from the IL.

The one positive takeaway from this season was Cole's absolute dominance every time he took the mound. Showing what it truly looks like to be the ace of the New York Yankees, Cole finished the season with a 15-4 record, a 2.63 ERA, 222 strikeouts, and a 0.98 WHIP, earning him his first Cy Young Award.

Veteran bench coach Carlos Mendoza moved across town, taking the helm of the Mets. After Sean Casey's departure, the Yanks recently named James Rowson as their new hitting coach.

The Yankees have been in the market for an everyday left fielder, with Juan Soto and Cody Bellinger as their main targets. Both players are young and in their prime, and either one could contribute greatly to the team's mix of both young and veteran talent.



Bellinger, 28, spent last season with the Chicago Cubs and won NL Comeback Player of the Year as well as a Silver Slugger award. He finished the season batting .307 with 26 home runs and an .881 OPS.

Soto, 25, has a similar resume. After getting traded by the Washington Nationals to the San Diego Padres in 2022, he is again in trade rumors following the conclusion of the Padres disappointing 2023 campaign. After winning the fourth Silver Slugger award of his career, Soto seems unstoppable, smashing 35 home runs while driving in 109 runs.

Japanese superstar Yoshinobu Yamamoto, 25, has also been on the Yankees radar as they try to deepen their pitching staff. In addition to the Yankees, big-market teams including the Mets, Red Sox, and Dodgers are serious contenders for acquiring the phenom. Yamamoto finished the 2023 season in the Nippon Baseball League with a 16-6 record, 1.21 ERA and 169 strikeouts for the Orix Buffaloes.

Anthony Volpe, Austin Wells, Everson Pereira, and Jasson Domínguez made their major-league debuts this season, giving fans a preview of this generation's Baby Bombers. Volpe, 22, won his first Gold Glove and became just the second Yankee shortstop to win this award. After finishing the season with 20 homers and 24 stolen bases, Volpe still has much to achieve in his young career.

Dominguez, Wells, and Pereira all debuted after the All-Star Break. Domínguez came to the majors fully fired up, hitting his first big-league home run during his first ever at-bat, something a Yankee hasn't done since Aaron Judge in 2016. Dominguez, 20, played just eight games this season before having to undergo Tommy John surgery. The centerfielder won't be able to return until the middle of the 2024 season.

It is also possible that free-agent superstar Shohei Ohtani could end up in the Bronx next season. Although it does not seem that the Yankees may be as interested as other clubs, they do stand as top contenders and should not be taken out of the conversation just yet.

There is still much time remaining for the Yanks to make changes in order to succeed in 2024. Are the Yankees willing to trade their young talent for Soto? Could Yamamoto end up in pinstripes? There are many exciting possibilities to ponder as we approach the upcoming season.

IT'S BACK TO SQUARE ONE FOR THE METS

Tommy Gamba-Ellis

Entering the 2023 MLB season, the New York Mets were projected to be one of the league's top teams, finishing the 2022 season with a 101-61 record and narrowly missing out on first place in the National League East. Taking the top honors was the Atlanta Braves, who won due to a tiebreaker. Despite having the second best winning season in the team's history, the Mets lost in the Wild Card round to the San Diego Padres.

In the offseason following, the Mets re-signed key pieces in closer Edwin Diaz, outfielder Brandon Nimmo, and utility player Jeff McNeil to multi-year contracts. However, they lost a generational arm in Jacob deGrom, who ultimately signed with the Texas Rangers early in free agency.

New York bounced back by signing future hall-of-fame pitcher Justin Verlander and Nippon Baseball League star Kodai Senga. In addition, the Mets picked up southpaw Jose Quintana and veteran reliever David Robertson to bolster the pitching staff.

On paper, the moves the Mets made appeared to put them into an optimal spot going into this year. However, the season started to go downhill early, with Diaz tearing

his achilles in the World Baseball Classic, causing him to miss the entire year. Even Verlander struggled to get on the field at the start of the season, missing the entire month of April due to minor injuries.

The team appeared stagnant over the first two months of the season with a record two games over .500 by May 31. However, a 7-19 record in June put New York in the rearview mirror of the Atlanta Braves and Philadelphia Phillies. Standing at six games under .500 by the All-Star Break, the Mets decided to sell at the trade deadline, thus sealing the fate for the Mets' playoff chances this season.

Despite starting only 16 games with the team, Verlander was traded back to the Houston Astros. Number two starter Max Scherzer was shipped off to the Texas Rangers after spending just two seasons with the Mets. David Robinson was also a victim of the trade deadline, being



sent to the division-rival Miami Marlins.

A silver lining of the deals made at the deadline are the promising future talent New York got in return. In exchange for Verlander, the Mets got outfielder Drew Gilbert. Gilbert, 22, was one of Houston's most touted prospects, and hit .325 with a .984 OPS with New York's Double-A affiliate to finish out the season.

In return for Scherzer, New York landed second baseman Luisangel Acuna, who is the younger brother of reigning NL MVP Ronald Acuna Jr. Acuna has showcased his raw talents through his four seasons in the minor leagues, but has a way to go until he is ready for the big leagues.

One of the few shining lights for the Mets this season was Senga proving he is ace-material in just his rookie year. Senga finished with a record of 12-7 with a 2.98 ERA and 202 strikeouts across 166.1 innings pitched. His efforts earned him his first All-Star appearance, second in NL Rookie of the Year voting, and seventh in Cy Young voting.

Fan-favorites Pete Alonso and Francisco Lindor also had solid seasons for New York. Alonso finished the season with 46 home runs and 118 RBI's. Lindor is starting to prove he is worth the large contract, finishing with 31 home runs, 33 doubles, and 31 stolen bases, earning him his third Silver Slugger award of his career.

Following the season, the Mets were quick to get rid of manager Buck Showalter, replacing him with Yankees bench coach Carlos Mendoza. Many believed that Showalter's time at the helm was disappointing and were ready for a change.

Perhaps the largest target for the Mets this offseason is pitching phenom Yoshinobu Yamamoto, who is also a product of the Nippon Baseball League. The 25-year-old is one of the most coveted free agents this season, receiving heavy interest from the New York Yankees, Boston Red Sox, and Los Angeles Dodgers.

The team could also use another outfielder, with Jorge Soler being the most realistic option to sign in free agency. Soler experienced a comeback season for the Miami Marlins in 2023, hitting 36 home runs and reaching the All-Star Game for the first time in his career.

There are also many rumors around Pete Alonso, who is set to face arbitration in February if he and the Mets fail to reach a contract extension. If this is the case, Alonso would be an unrestricted free agent following next season, which is why there is speculation that New York could move him if they do not reach a deal.

The Mets can take this team in many different directions depending on how they conduct free agency. After winning just 75 games last season, it can only be up from here.



SUN AND MOON

Nyaja Nalley

SUN

The beautiful fires of Sun ignite brightly. Her light and warmth heaped down upon the Earth and its people. Her flames constantly worked throughout the day. Only resting at night. The humans of Earth are ever so grateful for the devoted star for always providing her strength of loving warmth and shimmering light during the day. While the praise from Earth's people is appreciated, the uncertain pessimist luminary never trusts their words.

Inside the burning star lies a soul devoid of life. She feels nothing from the humans when she receives their praise for her shining light and radiant warmth. She feels emptiness and apathy. While she's obligated to the humans of Earth, her conscience feels it's a burden unfairly placed upon her. Her heart aches to be more. Yearning for more than just sadness and unfulfillment. She thirsts to live a life of freedom. To choose what she prefers rather than always bolster the Earth and its inhabitants. Sadly, she's just a giant star destined to shine her rays upon the Earth and its creatures.

MOON

As the sun sets upon Earth, the daylight ends, and the night sky begins looming over the Earth. Millions of tiny stars brighten the dull heavens of the night. Among the millions of stars stands the lonesome Moon. Under the night sky, not many people can see the white Moon's brilliance. While some humans look up at the night sky, no one ever praises Moon. Sometimes, the moon is visible to people. But there are times when people don't see Moon at all.

Within Moon lies a soul with a benevolent mind. He's always engrossed in logic and speculation while yearning to understand life. Being Earth's satellite, he's used to rotating around Sun and Earth to keep them balanced. Although he watches over Earth, his thoughts always drift away. He struggles to determine why the universe has fated him with an inescapable consequence: his future. Uncertainty enters his consciousness as his thoughts wander to many questions. Can I be more? Am I the only one who feels this way? Am I destined to be alone forever? These questions constantly perturb him. For he desires to express his ideas and feelings. Someone he could call a friend. Or more.

CROSSING PATHS

It was just another dull day for the celestial beings. The reserved Sun floats silently above the planet as she watches the people below her. Her heart feels apathy once again. Another day of Earth's inhabitants worshiping the elemental being. Yet she still feels nothing. Unbeknownst to the illuminating star, another being watches her.

The orbital Moon observes the radiant sun. From a distance, he watches flames burn brightly from her being. Yet, the benevolent moon senses a strange feeling radiating from her. Something that he understands very well. He's always viewed the sun from a distance.

Regardless, he never paid attention to Sun beyond a surface level. For he believed that the sun is the luckiest of celestial beings. To feel needed, wanted, and praised by humans. He longs for that appreciation for his merits. However, the empathetic moon senses that his fellow celestial being hides a deep lingering of nothingness. As if her soul is just a black hole.

He begins to wonder what is compelling her to feel this way. He wished to speak with her. Even if it were only for a few minutes. She needs a friend. I can provide that to her.

And soon enough, his wish was granted. Gradually, he moved from behind the looming star. Hours passed, and the moon soon moved in front of Sun. For the first time, Moon and Sun are face to face. But neither utter a word. Until Moon broke the silence.

"How does it feel to be praised by them?" Moon asked. But Sun stayed silent. Moon was unsure of what to say next. He thinks, and then a perfect notion comes to his head.

"Sun, if you could be any creature on Earth, what would it be and why?" Once again, she didn't respond, so he decided to answer instead.

"Of all the Earth's creatures," Moon said, "I'd want to be a dog or

a duck. Dogs can give companionship to and from humans and other animals. And ducks can go anywhere they want in the world. They could fly, swim, and live a fulfilling life. No hesitation or barriers holding them back."

Moon hears a slight chuckle. Which erupts into lighthearted laughter. Sun's flames glowed as she laughed. Moon felt a warm embrace from Sun. For a moment, he sensed her real emotions. He got her to laugh. He brought her a joyful moment. And for Moon, that was enough.

Soon, her laughter quieted down, and she softly spoke.

"If I had to choose one, I'd have to say a butterfly or a turtle."

Moon was intrigued.

"Butterflies are magical creatures," Sun continued. "Even though they're so small. They go through the most incredible changes. I want to know what it's like to change. To learn, to grow, to live. Butterflies represent a transformation in oneself. I yearn for that."

"As for turtles," Sun said, "I especially enjoy their way of living. They're content with living slowly. Enjoying every day of their lives in serenity. If I could have a life like that, I'd take it in a heartbeat."

As Moon listened to her words attentively, Sun continued voicing her thoughts to him. "Sometimes, I find myself envious of them—if you can believe it?" She said solemnly. Sun waited for a response from him. Moon gave her a mixed expression. Part of him can understand why she'd feel this way. Yet a little portion of him thought. "How could the sun, a burning star, be jealous?"

Sun emitted his thoughts into existence. She delivers a lighthearted chuckle, posing the same inquiry Moon presumed. "Yes, how could the illustrious Sun be so envious of humans and animals? There's a simple answer. They undergo transformation. They can mature, learn, and adapt. Explore diverse environments. In short, every sentient life form on that world lives. Yet I can't. I'm condemned here to look down on every single being on that planet."

Moon hears bitterness as Sun speaks to him. He understands her grievances. He calmly says, "I've had similar thoughts myself. You see, you and I aren't so different. My mind constantly imagines why you and I were placed in these positions?"

Before Moon can finish his thought, Sun interrupts him. "Because whatever gods created us determined we aren't suitable as life-forms," she said.

"Maybe it's that?" Moon pensively replies. "Or perhaps it's something else? That's what infuriates me. Are we not worth enough to live freely? Can we not be more than this? We'll never have answers."

The rays from Sun glow more illuminated as she listens. "And here I thought I was the only one who felt such affliction over those contemplations," she replies. "I'm glad you understand my reservations about my feelings."

There's a smile coming from the luminous Sun. Moon sensed a shift in Sun's demeanor. She's filled with a semblance of delight. His heartache pivoted to sanguinity.

"I'm happy we shared this conversation. It genuinely brightens my spirits, Moon. Thank you." Sun observes Moon being pulled away from her as he is beginning to gradually leave her.

Moon was touched by this. His own heart ached as he left her. Yet, Moon was content with the discussion. He not only helped Sun but also himself. Sun validated him. He's not isolated in his emotions. Not anymore. He doesn't know when he will speak with Sun again, but he's looking forward to it. As is Sun.



Nyaja Nalley

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