

THE PRATTLER



The Dystopia/Utopia Issue | Fall 2023

Behind the Cover

There's one rule I follow when making any illustration: I must have fun. And lots of it. I start out each drawing by scribbling on scrap paper and cutting and gluing different shapes to create texture. After that, I'll scan the textures into Photoshop and Procreate and digitally collage them, making sure there is a wide range of hues and saturations. Giving myself a starting ground other than a blank canvas or a sketch is essential to making sure everything goes smoothly, and that the bumps along the road add to the mess of the fun (well worded, I know). For the cover of Utopia/Dystopia, the perfection and imperfection of my process played a vital role in the end result. Finding a balance between having something that is informative and enjoyable to look at is the most challenging part. I had the best time creating this cover. Now go see and digest the beautiful writing and art Dystopia/Utopia has to offer!

Ryan Nelsen
@ryanimate

Prattler Staff

Ingrid Jones
Editor-in-Chief

Jocelyn Li
Co-Creative Director

Naomi Desai
Production Manager

Madeline Langan
Managing Editor

Yoo Young Chun
Co-Creative Director

Christina Park
Social Media Manager



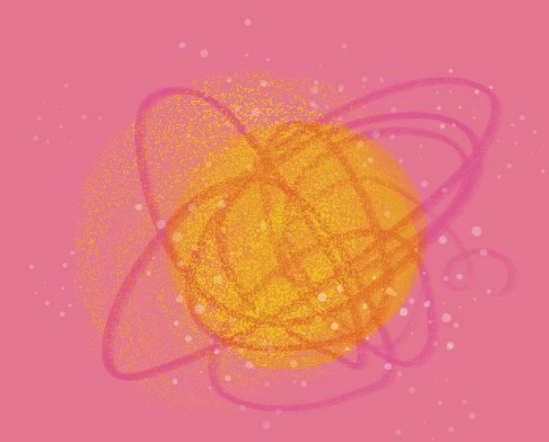
Dearest Prattlers,

We asked our contributors to examine a dichotomy in this issue: dystopia and utopia. Commonly thought of as opposites, the truth is that these concepts exist inseparably on two sides of the same coin. We gave them the freedom to explore this in the realm of our modern world, a world they wished existed, or one they were glad didn't.

Our contributors responded with vigor, and within the pages of this issue you will find an essay on architects attempting to replicate Heaven on earth, an investigation into how growing up on dystopian literature helped form our generation's politics, and a short story that involves milk raining from the sky, alongside much, much more. Some of what was penned may shock you; other pieces will take you to a place far away, or too close to home.

It is very apparent that this theme could not be more timely, as history is unfolding before our very eyes. Even in the midst of our personal chaoses, we cannot ignore the changing landscape of society. As the next generation, we have the power and responsibility to address the disparities in our lives and act out against those that don't serve us.

Urgently Yours,
Ingrid Jones





08

**Guess Which: Real Event
or Dystopian Media?**
K. B. Bonslater

10

Sweeet Milk!
Gaia Saravan

12

Building Utopia
Henry Christensen

14

**How Dystopian Young Adult
Literature Shaped a Generation**
Reace Dedon

16

The G Train to Eden
Anna Avent

18

**The Hell of a Real
New York Winter**
Caroline Owen

20

**Bladee, Worldbuilding, and the
Dilemma of Changing Direction**
Darla Warlick

22

**Carl Grimes and the
Requiem Flesh Wall**
Sam Tuck

24

Accidental Utopia
Weston Tybor

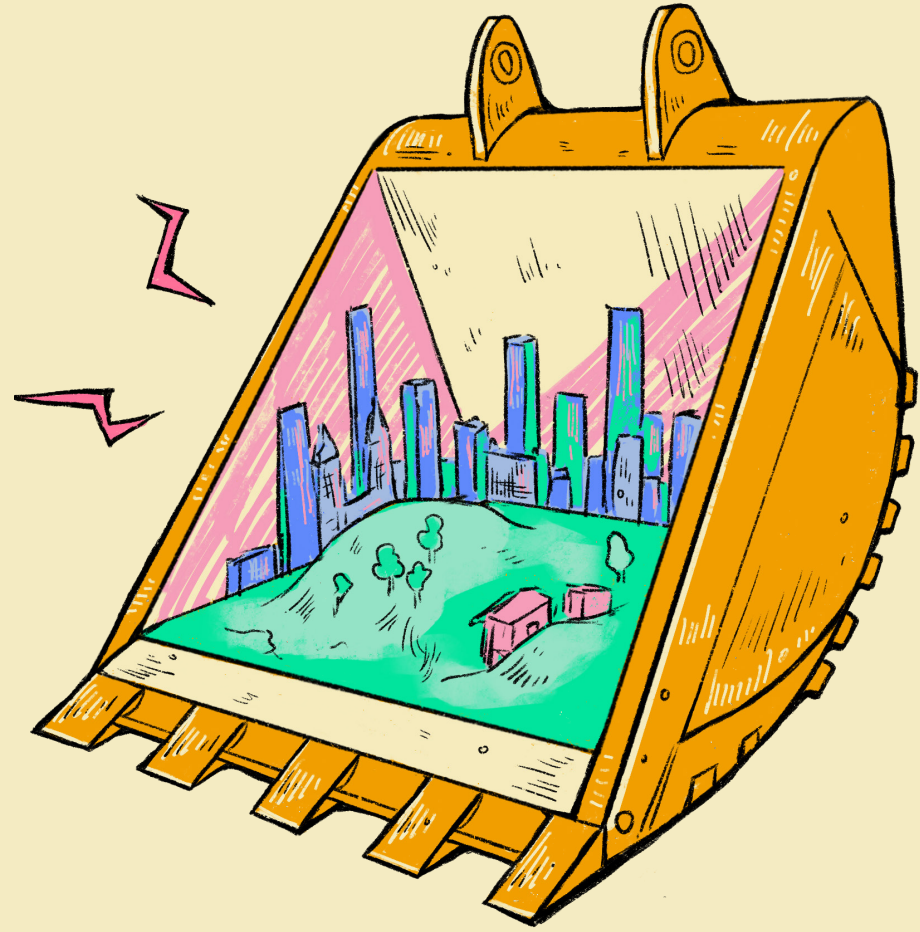
26

A Safe Haven For Writers
Sarina Greene

Guess Which: Real Event or Dystopian Media?

K. B. Bonslater

Think you know your history? Think our world is more good than bad? Test out your knowledge by reading the following descriptions and determining whether they are from a real life event or dystopian media.



Art by Ashely Yu

1 The government uses an isolated black community as the testing grounds for a new sociological theory for lowering crime. When the results are not what they had hoped for, they send in soldiers to skew and change the data while murdering hundreds of black people in their efforts.

Answer: Dystopian Media! "The First Purge" is a prequel to "The Purge" that finally answers the question: how did the Purge start? The New Found Fathers of America, the main antagonist of the franchise, attempted to use an impoverished black community in Staten Island to prove the theory that humans were naturally violent and needed a chance to vent that aggression in order to reduce crime during the rest of the year. But when the only crimes the black residents committed were petty theft and illegal block parties, they... well you know the rest.

2 Wealthy residents beg their local government to build a park for the city. When it is revealed that the city planners want to build the park in the neighborhood that wealthy residents live in they are appalled. After much protest from the wealthy residents, the local government instead builds the park over a working class black neighborhood, using their power to force residents out of their homes.

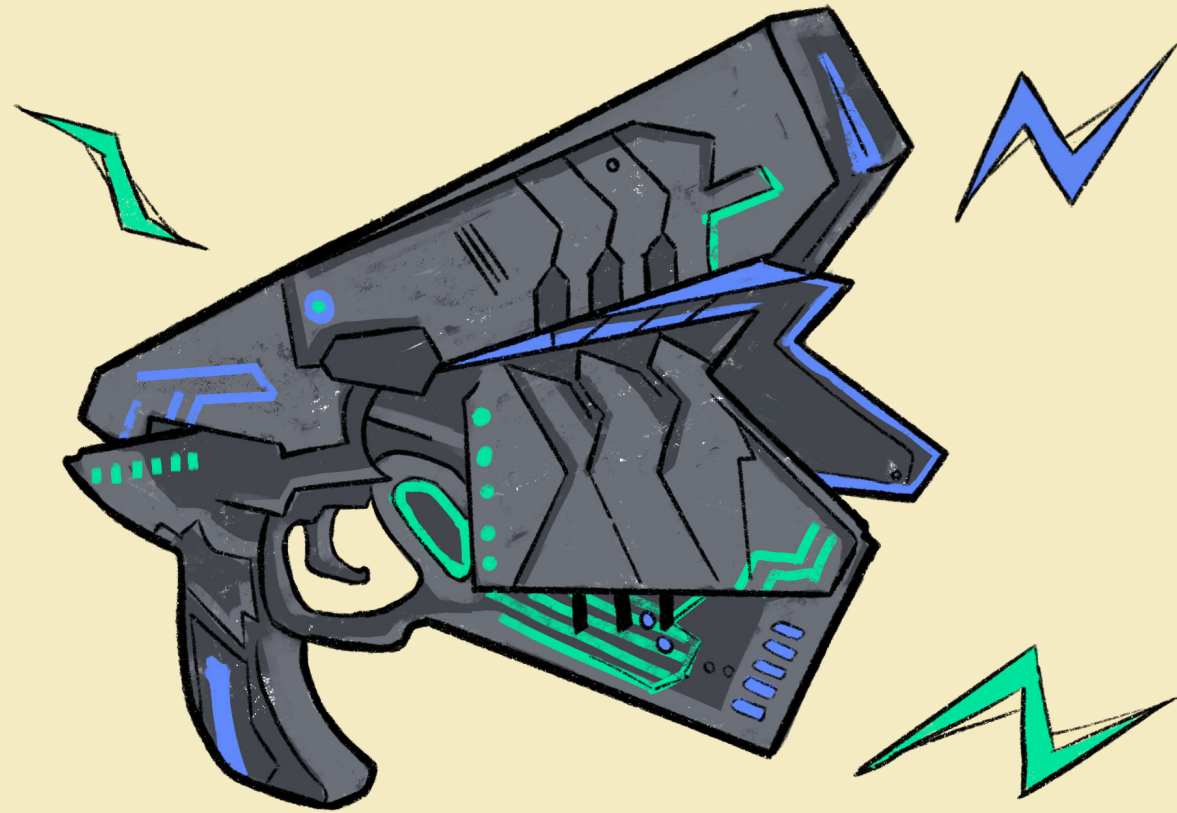
Answer: Real Event! In 1857, the city of New York created what we now know as Central Park by destroying the black community formerly known as Seneca Village. Seneca Village was not the first idea or choice for where the city would put the park, but after the wealthier Upper East Side residents complained and disagreed with the notion of their relocation, the city turned on the black working class community. The residents of Seneca Village protested their displacement, but the local government employed eminent domain and forced the residents out of their homes.

3 In the name of beautification and the preservation of residents' quality of life, local governments create laws that make it illegal for anyone with "unsightly or disfiguring" disabilities or diseases to be seen in public. Anyone caught breaking these laws are either fined or thrown in jail and eventually shipped off to a work camp.

Answer: Real Event! From the 1860s to the 1970s many cities in the U.S. like San Francisco and Chicago enforced "Ugly Laws" which made it illegal for physically disabled people to appear in public. This meant disabled people needn't do more than exist outside to be considered breaking the law. These laws were only enforced as a way of keeping disabled people from mingling with the general public, however they did not restrict the exploitation of disabled folks in "freak shows."

4 The government develops a way to quantify mental soundness and apply it to likelihood of criminality. Using this system, people are assigned jobs or locked away before they can become a "danger to society." Police officers are equipped with guns and the authority to execute any person determined to have a "dangerous" or "criminal-like" mentality.

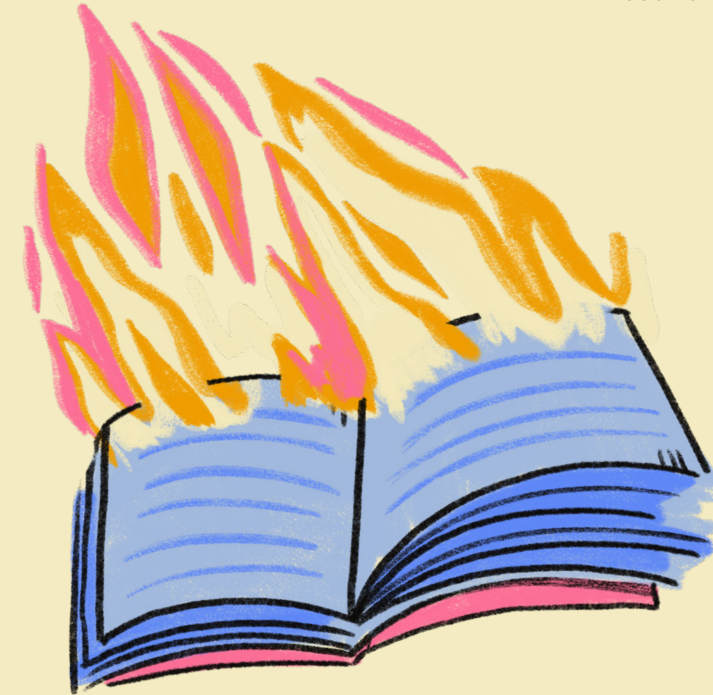
Answer: Dystopian Media! In the animated show "Psycho-Pass," the Japanese government develops a way to evaluate people's temperaments and mental soundness in order to categorize people into roles in society, like teacher or potential criminal. The police officers in this world have guns that can read a person's brain waves. They use these to determine how much of a threat an individual is and, depending on the reading, the gun will allow for a complete execution or nonlethal subduing of said person.



Art by Ashely Yu

5 In order to build a dam, the government floods and submerges a black community underwater, creating a lake. Locals refuse to swim at or even go near the lake due to feeling it is cursed.

Answer: Real Event! Lake Lanier was created in the 1950s after Georgia's government flooded the predominantly black town of Oscarville, Georgia. Locals still do not swim, fish, or even approach Lake Lanier due to the belief that the lake is cursed. Since 1994 approximately six people have drowned each year, which is twice as many as Lake Allatoona (40 acres away) despite having similar rates of tourism.



Art by Yoo Young Chun

6 After a tyrannical dictator takes control, a wave of anti-intellectualism spreads across the country. To show solidarity to the new dictator and contempt towards those who opposed said dictator, college students across the country burn books written by anyone the new dictator would not approve of.

Answer: Real Event! On May 10, 1933, university students across Germany burned the books of Jewish and blacklisted American authors that were sympathetic towards Jewish people during the Holocaust. On that same day in Berlin, the German Minister of Propaganda gave a speech where he declared "the era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end...The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character."

7 After the government makes it illegal for families to have more than one child, a set of septuplets attempt to stay hidden by pretending to be the same person. However they struggle to keep their existence a secret after one of them goes missing.

Answer: Real Event! On May 10, 1933, university students across Germany burned the books of Jewish and blacklisted American authors that were sympathetic towards Jewish people during the Holocaust. On that same day in Berlin, the German Minister of Propaganda gave a speech where he declared "the era of extreme Jewish intellectualism is now at an end...The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character."

So how many did you get right? What level of violence did you find too unbelievable to be real? What level of violence did you find to be completely believable? Can you tell what separates real life from a dystopia? Do you see a problem with that?



SWEET MILK!

Gaia Saravan

Art by Dizzy Starfie

The rain was turning acid and Oat took several weeks to understand the gravity of the situation. Mara, however, never understood the consequences of satellite crashes and corrupt governments. She spent her days tending to her aunt's bad knee and illegally growing vegetables in the rooftop greenhouse she had created at the top of her 300-floor complex—thus, heading into the city was a rare occurrence for her. Oat, who Mara met on the roof every night, lived on the 90th floor and falsely proclaimed herself a 'prodigy' in the city bazaar.

The recent satellite crashes gave her an influx of resources; crashes usually occurred every two weeks, she found. At eight p.m. that night, when the protesters and journalists got bored and trickled away, she jumped the yellow tape and rummaged through the colossal wreckage to find useful metals for her inventions (getting caught resulted in a hefty fine).

On her way back, she bought two cartons of sweet milk as usual—strawberry for Mara and blueberry for herself—before flying up to the roof with jetpack shoes. Today, she found Mara tending to the tomato vines, something Mara learned from the towns up north where she was from. Oat didn't know much about Mara—they only briefly talked on the roof every day, where they would drink milk before going their separate ways. She heard that Mara had come from a dazzling childhood of blue water and green grass before relocating into the city, and that filled Oat with a bitter taste in her mouth that she never spoke of.

"Look." Oat showed Mara the new piece she found at the crash site that morning.

Mara looked away from the plants at Oat, who could count the number of times they'd spoken verbally on one hand;

that's also the only time Mara got to speak to another person during the day.

"What is that?" Mara replied.

The console was glass, fragile, and unearthly, and Mara touched it. That was a mistake.

Swimming pools. Wet grass. An intense blue light of computer games and after what felt like a whole lifetime away, Mara pulled her hand away from the globe console and fell backward, amongst the dirt of tomatoes and pumpkins.

Oat had never seen death before— if Mara was dead, even. Was she? She poured the sweet milk on her friend's face, hoping to jolt her up; a slap to the face later and Oat was pulled along with Mara into a psychedelic upside-down from the skin-to-skin contact.

The apartments collapsed. Sweet Milk. Lots of it, washing over the city. Flooding? (The Nuclear Waste Flooding of 2710 destroyed many homes, including Oat's old town.) The Milk washed over and drained away. The dirt: warm and permeable.

But she wasn't dead. Oat awoke again, this time in a grassy field and blue atmosphere that went on for miles. Behind her, was Mara.

"I never thought I'd be back home."

The bodies— leftovers of their escaped minds— decomposed on the roof into the dirt of the garden, eyes open and all-seeing. They had made it out.

BUILDING UTOPIA

Henry Christensen

Art by Jade Law

Perhaps New York City's most physical sign of a utopia-turned-dystopia, its most dramatic architectural fall from grace, is its public built environment. Beginning in the 1930s, the newly progressive city government sought to use its powers and New Deal funds to measurably improve the lives of the citizens, and building projects for the public was a clear place to start. By this time, the tenements which millions of New Yorkers called home had brought the city international embarrassment for their subpar living conditions, despite having improved considerably since a low point around 1900. Although early zoning laws had lowered density and required access to air and light, tenements were seen by many as a blight in need of renewal.

The end of World War II served as a worldwide impetus to rebuild, and New York took this opportunity in stride. It was at this point that Robert Moses came to the fore, having established himself as the gatekeeper of the city's access to New Deal funds as well as the tyrannical head of the city's Planning Commission and Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. Equipped with these broad powers Moses began to inflict his vision of a car-centric New York on the city's residents. He championed the construction of the Cross-Bronx and Brooklyn-Queens Expressways, which cut across the existing urban fabric and displaced over 60,000 residents for the dubious benefit of reducing traffic for drivers from the

then-segregated suburbs. These projects promised a bright, automobile-centric future of speed and efficiency but pointedly did not serve those from the areas they were actually built in. This brought with it pollution and separated the residents of these primarily minority neighborhoods.

"The car-centric future of towers in the park and endless bands of highway imagined by Robert Moses came to pass, and New York is still living with the utopia-turned-dystopia this wrought."

Discontent with the city's housing also continued after the war, with large areas considered blighted due to their older architectural styles or higher densities. Moses' solution was the wholesale replacement of these areas with something entirely new, residential projects following the "tower in the park" typology. This idea had been introduced by architect Le Corbusier in the 1920s to densify cities by building upward while freeing up the land around the resulting towers for use by the people. This was meant to replace the dense, unplanned urban fabric which defined cities of the time and which many blamed for disease and social ills. It is probably clear to any reader today that these issues could not be solved solely by rebuilding cities in this mold, but to the average mid century tenement dweller the gleaming white towers surrounded by lush parkland shown in architectural drawings of that era would have seemed like a perfect society, a utopia.

Over 300 public housing projects were along these lines in New York, but cost-cutting by the government and unethical developers curtailed their built quality. The promised verdant utopias between the towers ended up as concrete parks, or often as car parking. The car-centric future of towers in the park and endless bands of highway imagined by Robert Moses came to pass, and New York is still living with the utopia-turned-dystopia this wrought.

How Dystopian Young Adult Literature Shaped a Generation

Reace Dedon

Art by Lorraine Yang



From the early noughties to the late twenty-teens, the publishing world exploded with a demand for dystopian young-adult literature. Some of the most popular book series, most notably “The Hunger Games,” “The Maze Runner,” and “Divergent,” were centered around themes of industrialization, capitalism, and how younger generations had the power to defy those systems. In their formative years, teens were being informed of the political power they held as fresh, active members of society and that it was possible to change the systems that worked against them. Now, those same teens are working and voting adults. But how exactly did these narratives affect our current social climate?

The main thread of many of these narratives: Katniss versus the Capital in “The Hunger Games,” Thomas versus WICKED in “The Maze Runner,” and Tris versus the Fac-tions in “Divergent,” is the seemingly powerless, under-represented majority against the powerful minority. For

emerging teens who are evaluating their identities and understanding the ways in which the world works against them, these stories depicting said “powerless” successful-ly rebelling are empowering.

In an increasingly volatile political climate that often debates social justice issues concerning queer and trans legisla-tion, systemic racism, and class division, a freshly politi-cized youth group entering adulthood through the scope of revolution feels empowered, obliged even, to address these disparities. This rings especially true considering the most recent discussions regarding term limits on members of congress. Eighty-one-year-old Mitch McConnell, Sen-ate Minority Leader of the GOP, froze unexpectedly during televised events on two occasions. The late Diane Fein-stein, Democratic Congresswoman from California, was ninety prior to her passing, and she was asked by mem-bers of her own party to resign after halting progress in her committees due to absences brought on by her declining

“Being cognizant of these parallels has made younger generations a more politically active group.”

health. These instances, for example, are major concerns for young voters who do not see themselves or their val-ues accurately represented in government.

The efforts of current right-wing law makers is eerily reminiscent of fictional regimes like the Capital from the “The Hunger Games” which preyed on the underrepres-ented and impoverished for their own gain. In “Diver-gent,” those who did not align with predetermined fac-

tions, otherwise known as “divergent,” were murdered. The “Maze Runner” series explores the consequences of a sun-scorched Earth and the ability of the human race to survive on a destroyed planet. While these are seem-ingly dystopian scenarios, younger generations more easily recognize them in their own reality, and they are most recognizable in the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the restrictions of gender-affirming care, and a disregard for climate change.

Being cognizant of these parallels has made younger generations a more politically active group. Tufts Uni-versity gauged that midterm elections in 2022 held the second highest youth vote in three generations. It’s easy to imagine oneself as a Thomas, Katniss Everdeen, or Tris Prior when their conflicts so clearly align with your own, albeit through a more modern lens. We are, simply, young people thrust into the sphere of change, but how we react is most important.



The G Train to Eden

Anna Avent

Art by Mackenzie Thomson

I find it ironic that Clinton-Washington Station sits at the corner of a church. Descending the steps, I see the sign signifying, "G TRAIN." It covers the church's angelically white spire with its blackened ceiling, signifying that I may be entering a place I soon will learn I can't escape. Through the vocal "whoosh" of the subway car, heat washes through my body.

"The train's here," I think, jumping the turnstile – a world where getting from one place to another is free, how nice would that be? Yet another descent leads me to walls covered in adverts, most of which are graffitied. The first one I notice is an ad for lingerie where the woman modeling has the word "SLUT" written above her. The mocking of capitalism lurks everywhere I go, station to station.

Waiting for the train, I see a rat rummaging through a pile of trash on the tracks – a home of cigarette butts, plastic water bottles, and potato chip bags. As the train approaches, a triumphant hum courses my ear drum before the train eventually squeaks to a skittish stop. From the dim cave of plastered advertisements and unwarranted heat, I enter a capsule of effervescent blue. I look around to see most people sitting, some people standing. I contemplate the places they may be headed toward: work, home, school,

a date. It's the vastness of a space like this that leads me towards the purpose of the place we call New York City.

The sharp sound of a door slamming interrupts the conversation in my mind. At the end of the car, a man conjures from the subway's end door. I'm never quite sure of what will happen once I see that door open and slam. Before I can even begin to think, he takes out a boombox and announces that we subway travelers are, "In for a show!" Through the rattling of the car's maneuvers, hip hop music blasts off the scribbled walls. The man contorts his body into unfathomable shapes, disjuncting his limbs to the beat of the music. He shuffles himself down the aisle holding a cup for change between his hovering toes. I reach into my purse, rummaging for a spare dollar. As he approaches, I drop the dollar into the cup and he gives me an appreciative wink. Once he makes it towards the end of the car, I hear the all-telling slam of the door before the muffled announcement of, "You're in for a show!" yet again. As I approach my stop, I stand to balance myself on the silver pole by my seat. With the two chimed bells of the doors opening, I step onto the platform of waiting passengers. There they stand: the combination of tourists and NYC natives waiting to board the train of their dreams or possibly their nightmares, all the way to Eden.



The Hell of a Real New York Winter

Caroline Owen

Art by Iza Fernandes

The concept of a “New York winter” has fascinated me for as long as my consciousness has run wild. As a child, I remember being captivated by the snowy Manhattan depicted in “Home Alone 2,” and imagining myself drinking warm apple cider alongside Kevin McCallister in Times Square. The winter I always wanted to experience in the Big Apple involved making snow angels in Central Park, feeding pigeons bread crumbs and frozen peanuts, and laughing jubilantly underneath the glowing Times Square billboards telling me to do this, buy that.

I was fortunate enough to experience such a phenomenon in the flesh during my first winter in NYC. Snow trickled lightly from the clouds, it was chilly, but not too cold, and the streets were covered in string lights on every tree, lamppost, and unsuspecting traffic sign imaginable. Inspired by my Pinterest boards, I over-indulged in Christmas shopping at Columbus Circle, marveled at the beauty of the (mediocre) Rockettes Show, and excitedly took pictures for tourists in front of Rockefeller center.

However, my experience, as magical as it was, is nothing more than a commercialized utopia the city is thrust into as soon as November first hits (thank you, Starbucks, for signifying the beginning of winter a month and a half early). If you remove the jingle bell soundtracks, peppermint and cocoa spice, and obnoxious sales at department stores, the ‘real’ New York winter is far less glamorous.

This is because New York rarely gets ‘movie snow.’ The weather’s a fifty-fifty coin toss between steaming, torrential rain and sludge so thick you have to bust out the Timbs to get to work on time. Don’t forget to mention trudging through three layers of frozen ice-sludge on the sidewalks and keeping your feet off of the puddles of melted goo on the subway floor. But hey, if this isn’t enough to piss you off, maybe the continuous delays on the subway will.

Imagine this: you’re thirty minutes late to a job interview because the train tracks were frozen over. Your coffee is knocked out of your hand by someone clambering into the A train, and when you finally get to the office nearly two hours later, you’re fighting people with broken umbrellas and crooked attitudes to get in the door. Those who prefer to avoid public transit are also out of luck, making the mistake of hailing a yellow cab in movie-style appearance before realizing it costs sixty dollars to get back home.

Despite its ugliness (and minus the people on the train huddling together, bonding over their hatred of the MTA and being harassed for money by creeps in Elmo costumes), the Big Apple wintertime has a particularly tantalizing charm. Whether you’re a Brooklyn native or grew up in a place where New York winters only existed in Hallmark movies, be sure to appreciate the beauty of our city in the colder seasons before it’s long gone.

Bladee, Worldbuilding, and the Dilemma of Changing Direction

Darla Warlick

Art by Andrea Lastimosa

It's August. I'm lying in my childhood bedroom listening to Bladee lightly rhyme over a sparse yet beautiful piano track alongside Yung Lean. "Victorious" dropped as a surprise, making its way to my ears by way of an Instagram post. The song is an understated celebration, a melodic humble brag about how far each of them have come.

I think about how far Bladee has come, too, how much his music has evolved from projects like "Eversince" to now. The Swedish rapper began making music in 2011 at age 17, founded Drain Gang with Ecco2k and Thaiboy Digital in 2013, and worked alongside a freshly viral Yung Lean. Bladee, or Benjamin Reichwald, has since been a staple innovator in experimental hiphop, pioneering his own category of genre-defying "drain" music.

Bladee's early work favored vampy, esoteric lyricism and melancholically spacey, synth-heavy beats. His sonic aesthetic was mirrored visually through his album art, music videos, and social media presence, altogether creating his own dystopian world. However, his newer releases have shown a shift. His delivery is lighter, his production more whimsical and upbeat, his lyrics happier. God and light are referenced more often than death and cut wrists. Bladee's visual aesthetic has also shifted, now more closely resembling something out of a fairytale than a found-footage horror film.

Characteristically elusive and generally interview-avoidant, Bladee has never explained what inspired this change. I can only venture to guess that developments in his personal life

had something to do with it. Being a teen in quiet, gloomy Stockholm is worlds away from being a globally successful (albeit niche) musician, selling out tours, and partnering with Marc Jacobs.

Whatever the case, not all are pleased with Bladee's change in aesthetic. Many early followers of Bladee have expressed their disappointment in his newer releases.

"The old shit was hard when he was actually rapping. For years it's just sounded like fairy twink meme music for 15 year olds in oversized Minecraft shirts and girls in new rock boots," a ktt2 music forum user posted in August. Most criticism from self-proclaimed "OG fans" turned critics is similar – Bladee was cool back then, but now he's cringe.

Those who criticize Bladee's turn to utopian whimsy are the ones who originally fell in love with his dystopia; and I can't fully blame them. Listening to tracks from "Eversince" is cathartic in an indescribable way. I can see why fans of Bladee's early work feel betrayed by his new sound; there's a certain sense of abandonment when watching someone outgrow their suffering while you're still in the thick of it.

While there's no doubt that Bladee's early work is seminal, the iconicness of his past work shouldn't overshadow the value of his current work. Bladee has never conformed to standards, and that still hasn't changed. Although he has completed an almost full 180-degree change throughout his career, worldbuilding is still his strong suit. Bladee's shift from dystopia to utopia is not a betrayal of his past art, it's a renaissance.





Carl Grimes and the Requiem Flesh Wall

Sam Tuck
Art by Michelle Cao

A new, bloodier style of live action role play has entered New York, creating a chance to escape the living. The name, fittingly, is "Dystopia Rising." Their catch phrase, "Welcome to the Family," is quite unsettling once you meet the characters participating in this zombie apocalypse. For a forty-five-dollar general admission fee, you can reimagine yourself to be a convict, cowboy, or anything in between as you and hundreds of other zombie-enthusiasts work to rebuild civilization and fight off paid zombie actors. The LARP, or "live action role play," lasts ten weeks, and you can choose to step away from your former self and camp out in the cabins deep in grizzly country for a week or a few days. If you choose neither - responsibly - stay in the comforts of a hotel, arriving at only to participate in scheduled events.

This fictional town being racked by the onslaught of zombies is called The Fold, and each activity it offers sounds stranger and more illegal than the last. "Be part of a massive multi-part Morgue Build!" This was a little strange, but every

town needs a morgue, right? "Experience the return of the Zodiac Torture Shack!" This one got me a little bit. "Leave a little piece of yourself on our new morgue props! Will you survive the dive into the Hellmaw or will you become part of the Requiem Flesh Wall?" At this I had to stop. For only forty-five bucks, you would seem to be getting the full package deal, the finale including becoming one with the flesh wall as a bonafide dead person. But why is this appealing to everyday New Yorkers?

Max Forest is a zombie LARPing enthusiast who attends this outdoor gathering every year. I found him after a very quick Instagram search and a tagged photo of him holding a (hopefully fake) beating heart in his fist, sending him a DM wondering if he would be willing to share his experiences.

"Something about the chaos, it creates community," he tells me, "I get to build rudimentary homes and make flint fires all while living up a high school fantasy of mine." I asked him

if he had ever read the Dystopian comic books with similar plotlines to that of "Dystopia Rising." He had never read "Marvel Zombies" to my surprise, but was sporting a cowboy hat in the post, similar to Carl Grimes from "The Walking Dead." I asked why he sought out an escape like this, to which he replied: "I work at a desk job, dude. I need to kill a zombie once and a while."

To leave the city for a weekend is an escape. To walk from one dystopia to another - though this one exchanges rats and crime for mud and flesh-eaters - is a vacation. To some New Yorkers, leaving the troubles of the city includes a relaxing drive upstate and taking on a different set of much scarier and bloodier issues. The sense of pride one will feel after finishing a session at the Torture Shack and relaxing on the Flesh Wall should lead "Dystopia Rising" to be NYC's next hot spot, and I for one am certainly hoping to see the most popular food stand, "Broken Tooth," rated on Yelp later this year.

ACCIDENTAL UTOPIA

Weston Tybor

Art by Jos Bronner

I'm not a chick, but I am an avid consumer of their flicks. Nora Ephron is an especially noteworthy creator – she's responsible for writing "When Harry Met Sally (WHMS)," "You've Got Mail (YGM)," and "Sleepless in Seattle (SIS)." Although it may not have been her intention, her films are, to me, the closest pieces of media to capture utopia through simplistic conflict, character relationships, and sharp humor.

Ephron's movies are regarded as classics, often referenced in other media. Her movies have this impact because Ephron doesn't worry about anything outside of the characters' relationship. Her characters are wealthy, despite living in expensive areas (usually Manhattan). It's comforting because of the escapism it brings; the audience can vicariously live through the characters. Their clothes, apartments, and quality of dining are high-end with concerns about finances being unheard of. They never take the subway, no one gets harassed, love triangles end mutually. Including these issues would distract from the romance. By removing all problems, save for romantic conflict, Ephron creates an engaging movie with just enough friction captured in a utopian setting. Media needs to include some complications – there can never be true utopia, but Ephron creates the closest version of it by removing as much conflict as possible.

If her movies have an inclusion of genuine dilemmas, it only furthers the utopia. "YGM"'s plot surrounds employment, but it's inherently tied to romance. The main characters own competing book stores while messaging online without knowing who the other is. The rivalry layers the romance: when they realize the person they've been falling for online is someone they hate in real life, it adds necessary conflict. It makes the characters question if their romantic feelings are

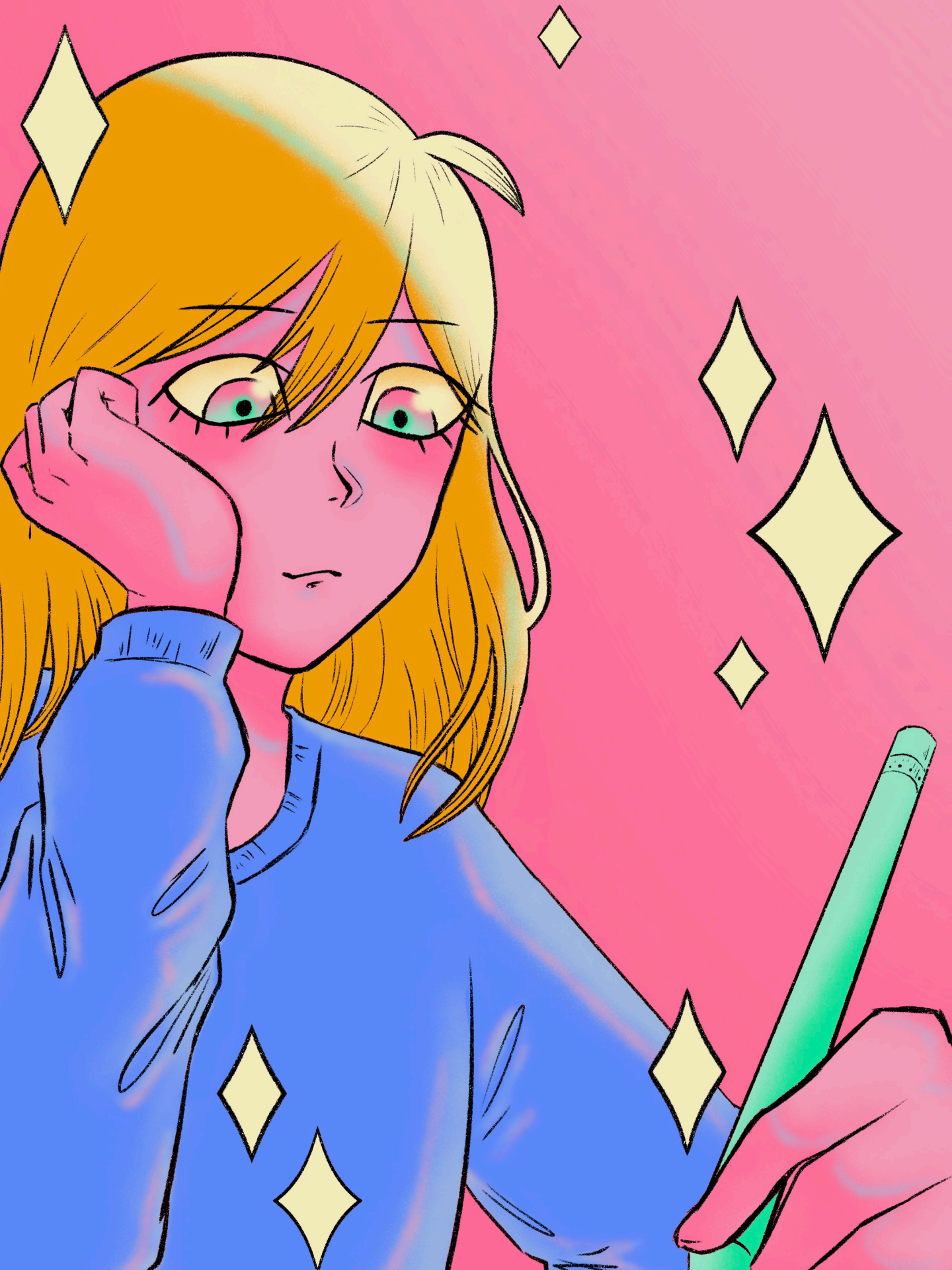
enough to trump their disdain. It eventually does, illustrating that love is stronger than hate – something that advances the utopic sensation.

There are plot points that in other contexts would create dystopia, but Ephron maintains idealism. In "SIS," the lead, Sam, is widowed and left as a single father. His romantic interest, Annie, hears his story on the radio and believes they're meant to be. Annie writes him letters but Sam never reciprocates. So, she travels from Manhattan to Seattle, just for Sam to see her (a woman he's never met). The plot sounds unsettling, with Annie seeming borderline stalkerish. But the beautiful Meg Ryan plays the character as quirky and adorable, making everything she does romantic, not creepy.

Ephron's witty writing enhances the utopia she constructs. The characters stay playful despite conflict. When Harry confesses his love for Sally, it's done through inside jokes – "I love that it takes you an hour and a half to order a sandwich." The humor doesn't feel cheap because it's been developed throughout the film, making the writing sharp. The movie is light because the characters maintain well-written humor. The uncomfortable situations are also funny which minimizes conflict – despite issues, the tone is upbeat.

Ephron didn't intend to comment on utopia, only to tell love stories. However, from her romantic ambience, well-meaning characters, and witty dialogue, it's obvious why her films are classics – they remind the audience of utopia, of a life they want to live. Movies that make us think, "I'll have what she's having."





A Safe Haven For Writers

Sarina Greene

Art by Serena Y Cheng

A safe haven is a place of solace, an escape from reality, a means of transcendence. The average writer consumes gallons of caffeine a day, types mystifying phrases in their notes app, and sits down in a dimly lit room to create their next best work of art. Imagine being able to create a world that soars past what people think they know about the physical world. At its best writing is a transformation of both reality and ourselves.

Of course not everyone feels the act of creating changes them as a person the way I do, but the emotional connection most artists have with their work is undeniable. Personally, I feel safe inside the craft of writing itself because it feels like a privilege and a gift to be able to share the knowledge I've unlocked. The journey into my safe haven leads me to gain more understanding about myself and the world.

When I write, I go through three stages of transformation. The first is to figure out what environment I want to sit in when crafting. Then, dissociation consumes me in a way where I am no longer aware of my surroundings, only of the words on the page. And lastly, I become my own safe haven no longer restrained by real life. This last stage can be very flexible to however a person sees the endgame of their haven. From talking with other writers disassociation could be like entering a dystopian world or similarly to how I feel, "entering a space inside flesh and letting it sing."

I wanted to know more specifically what writing was like for other writers. So I asked a singular question that does not have a definite answer: "When you're writing, how does your creative process break worldly boundaries?"

*Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

"I enter the world of whatever I'm writing during the process. Since it's usually dystopic or fantasy, it's definitely breaking 'normal world' boundaries. I never stay in the present when I write. Always the past or the future. I see the scenes I write unfold in front of me."

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

"Whenever I write, mainly fiction, I envision everything playing out as if it were a movie. I view everything through the eyes of a camera. I noticed when it comes to poetry, I come back to certain experiences and relive them. I find myself analyzing the emotions of it and trying to make it digestible somehow."

It was interesting hearing the writers I spoke with having different experiences with their writing. Transformation may help rationalize uncomfortable emotions that someone wants to express or help them embody a future that hasn't been written yet.

I believe transcendence in relation to transformation is effortless with time, almost like a spiritual untethering from the known universe. There's a cinematic glamor of the idea of finding a safe haven, a process everyone deserves to experience.

